Tread Softly
by natashawitch

Summary

AU - Dean and Sam grew up on the road with their travelling mechanic father. Dean took care of Sammy and Sam in turn was the voice of his selective mute brother. Until the fateful day that CPS caught up with them and Dean disappeared from Sam's life.

The memory of his deceased brother drove Sam to achieve the best in his name, until another fateful day during Winter Break when Sam discovered John had lied. Dean wasn't dead.

Notes

Supernatural and its characters are not mine.
I claim nothing except the plot.
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I'm not American so apologies in advance for any honourables instead of honorables etc. that escape editing.

Story Title from WB Yeats- He Wishes For The Cloths of Heaven
"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."
Prologue

Sam Winchester’s first memory was of his brother’s voice. It was accompanied by a small hand stroking his cheek, the smell of chamomile lotion, a burning itchiness, and soothing whispers that he was a good boy not to cry and wake Daddy. There were earlier vague impressions of Dean and all the goodness and warmth associated with his brother, but it was that humming comfort offered by his big brother that Sam cherished close to his heart.

Later Sam learned that the winter when he was 3 and Dean was 7 they both came down with measles. The night Sam’s fever spiked and Dean ran stumbling with his own illness over two blocks from their motel to an emergency room wasn’t the first time they came to the attention of the CPS nor would it be the last. Sam knew this because John drilled it into Dean that hospitals were the last resort. After the measles incident and their flight from the children’s ward, fevers meant ice baths and Tylenol, fractures meant splints, and there was never any hope that Dean would receive treatment for his selective mutism.

It was almost ironic that Sam’s last memory of his brother also involved Dean’s sparingly used voice. They roared for each other in unison as Sam was restrained by an officer and Dean was forcibly taken away. They told Sam they were taking him to the hospital, to treat his suspected concussion, said they’d be reunited at the foster home. They’d lied. Everyone lied.

Sam Winchester sat in his comfortable spot. He was surprised that the dirt didn’t hold Sam-shaped grooves from all the times he’d escaped from John’s wrathful drunken raving finding haven in between the junkers in Bobby’s yard. The current pair of door-less sedans were a perfect distance apart for his back to rest against the side panel of one while his feet were braced against a tire of the other. The angle of the overhanging crushed vehicle meant his History and Culture of Egypt text book was shaded from Sioux Falls’ slanting winter light. He had found the perfect sawn off end of a plank to use a lap table for his notes. He was supposedly doing his pre-course work in advance of the next quarter of his sophomore year at Stanford. Actually he was thinking about how he was going to make up all his lost wages. He’d secured extra shifts at the restaurant over the holidays. He was damned lucky that his boss was a considerate employer and was keeping his job open for him, after Sam had up and deserted them at the last second. Brady, whose waiter service involved mixing up orders and dropping glasses, had stepped up to cover a few of Sam’s shifts. Jess said if she hadn’t been going home to her folks, she would have gone down to one of the scary floor managers and tried to pick some of Sam’s absence too. The student appreciated his friends rallying around him. He sighed long and tried to concentrate again on getting a heads up on one of his new course selections.

Huddling down inside his warm ski-jacket style coat, Sam enjoyed the respite from his father’s grouchy temper. He was doing his best to stay silent, slowly turning pages with his mitten-free fingers, and scratching rare words or underlining with his mechanical pencil. He had left his Discman in his repacked duffel, wanting to hear any noise of John limping on his crutches or Bobby letting Rumsfield out for a run. He needed a break from the tension in Uncle Bobby’s house.
Sam rolled his eyes purely for his own benefit. He should be at The Gates helping clean up the leavings of New Year’s Eve, joking with Meg, maybe having a coffee with the boss on his break, trying to avoid Alastair’s drill sergeant mode of management, and planning what to do with extra Christmas bucks beyond rent, student loans and topping up his scholarship. But John had to break his leg.

To be fair it wasn’t his father’s fault some jerk newbie had left the jack fall during a pit stop. The team had paid all his medical bills and bought John an automatic truck. Sam had inherited the Impala, so something good had come from having his holidays ruined. As soon as John could get around on crutches, they were off to Bobby’s junk yard to recuperate. Although Sam grudgingly conceded that Bobby had done his best on Christmas Day with a huge side of roast beef. Later there was a beer, snacks and game watching get together for the Winchesters, the Mills and Bobby’s buddies from the roadhouse.

Sam didn’t get why Bobby put up with John. Sure they were old friends but John was insufferable with his injury. In Sam’s experience most of the time John and Bobby couldn’t stand the sight of each other, yet when Bobby’s wife died they had spent two months in Sioux Falls, and when Sam got pneumonia they had gone to Bobby, and when Dean died...

Sam bit his lip. He clicked his tongue and tried to look at the text book, but now that he had thought of Dean the print swam on the page. Being here, it brought back memories. Hide and Seek with Dean between the cars, his own high pitched childish giggles and Dean pouncing silently on him. Being here, allowing Dean to be a child and not Sam’s caregiver. On the road with Dad, as they travelled from stock car circuit to NASCAR to drag racing and private collectors, in motels and cheap rentals, Dean took care of Sam. John was busy, working, drinking with other mechanics, attending races if he wasn’t in the pits. Sometimes they were left alone for days, even weeks but Dean always managed.

Just when things were good it was all taken away. It was Sam’s fault. He squeezed his eyes tight not wanting to relive it again but unable to prevent the memory from surfacing. Stupid prick of a kid, he was. Shouting at Dean, drawing attention to them, Sam had known better, knew it was a bad idea, but he’d lost his temper…

… Then came the motel owner, paramedics and cops and it was all a mess. Sam stayed at his school principal’s house until the following Monday when John Winchester breezed back into town, high on adrenalin and his bonus for a team win. Sam never knew the details, even when over the years he had tried to prize them out of his father. He knew Dean’s injuries extended to a bruised rib and a concussion. There was talk of Dean’s mutism, his anger, ADHD, broad spectrum Aspergers. It was bullshit. Sam tried to tell them but no one would listen.

Then the kicker, John hadn’t known his son was a carrier. Dean hadn’t had the tests. They had moved schools and districts too often. Dean wasn’t just a member of the one in three thousand men who had a vestigial womb, they had done a full medical, he was one of the one in ten thousand who could carry a child. From a crack in the open door, Sam saw a look a horror and disgust pass over his father’s face. The social worker and teacher took sips of their iced teas while they discussed homes and options for Dean... unsuitable lifestyle for a disabled carrier... wouldn’t your younger clever son thrive in foster care? Two hours later John and Sam were on the road, heading for a new job in a new state, leaving Dean in the hospital in Arkansas.

On Thanksgiving Sam pestered his Dad to go visit Dean. He pleaded, refused to eat, stood in front of the TV during the game, cussed out Pastor Jim when he tried to calm him, finally his father had roared that they couldn’t see Dean because Dean was dead.
Sam’s world stopped. The planet no longer turned. It tilted on its axis. He didn’t speak. He knew that his silence hurt his father. He wanted him to hurt. Not a word passed his lips until John left him in Blue Earth with Pastor Jim.

Sam decided to live. He would do it for Dean. His brother had always made him do his studies, now Sam threw himself into them. When John uprooted him and took him to Bobby’s place, Sam quickly became known as the new guy who would do your homework for a fee. Later when they hit the road again, John left him on his own in motels and apartments. Sam survived on his wits and brain, bartering trig quizzes for school lunches and history papers for actual cash. He skipped a grade when they’d landed back in Sioux Falls for a season, taken AP classes, bugged teachers so that his credits transferred from school to school, state to state. Getting the scholarship to Stanford was the best moment of his life. He could leave John and the travelling existence behind, be normal, show the world he could be someone, just like Dean would have wanted.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow morning he could load up his Impala. A smile broke across Sam’s face, at the thought of bringing her to California. He would drive his car back to college and forget about the last few weeks of stifling parental disapproval.

He heard John’s crutches and Bobby’s firm steps coming down from the front porch. He checked again that he was hidden from sight, hoping they weren’t looking for him.

“John, you gotta tell the boy.” Bobby’s gruff voice urged.

“Don’t think so Bobby, he is better off this way. It's easier.”

“Easier for you, you mean you idjit. It has been anything but for him.”

If Sam was a dog his ear would have cocked. He waited for his father to respond but Bobby spoke again with a break in his angry voice.

“Balls, Winchester, I can’t believe you kept it from me for nigh on seven years.”

“Wouldn’t have told you at all if you weren’t such a nosy so and so.” John's crutches tapped on the wooden steps.

“Hey, it is my damned house. I thought the letter was for me.”

“Huh. Well you know now. You gonna disrespect my wishes and tell Sammy?”

Sam cringed at the pet-name.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.” Bobby challenged.

“He's going back to Stanford tomorrow. You don’t want to ruin it for him. Seeing Dean could throw him off the rails.”

The world narrowed. It shrank down to a single pinprick.

“You ever even visit the boy?” Bobby accused.

“No. It was better this way. They said in the letter that he is very well adjusted. It was a clean break for us all.”

His father’s voice seemed to come from a distance, traveling through a long tunnel of years of deception.
“Balls, John. I know you got a problem with gays but not all carriers are homo.”

“I will not have a queer for a son and I was proved right. He was a fairy.”

Sam cringed at the language. He curved a hand over his own stomach, thanking every god and angel that his father had never questioned him, happy to presume his younger son was growing up to be a red-blooded straight hulk of manliness, even if leaving for Stanford meant he wasn’t rednecked enough to make John proud.

“That's some spew of crap coming out of your mouth about your own boy.” Bobby growled.

“Facts, Bobby. How else do you imagine Dean got himself up the duff back then?”

“I don’t know John, and you never took the trouble to find out, did you ya dumb sonvabitch?” Bobby’s voice rose further, “The whole thing sounds off to me. Why did they write to you to ask if they should press charges?”

“I’m still his next of kin. Suppose there were some rules about it, seeing as he's a ward of the place.”

Sam felt sick. His mind was spinning. Bobby and John were talking as if Dean was alive. Alive and had been pregnant and was in some kind of trouble. He jerked the plank and book onto the ground and stood up. The two older men’s faces fell when they saw Sam’s tall figure appear behind the car.

“Where is Dean?” Sam demanded through gritted teeth. His hands curled into fists by his side.

“Sammy?” John’s face collapsed, paling under his salt and pepper beard.

“No you don’t. Don’t you 'Sammy' me! Where is Dean? He is alive. I heard you. Where is he?”

“Arkansas.”

“What is he doing in Arkansas? Where does he live? Did CPS put him in to foster care? Why did you tell me he was dead?”

“Hospital.”

“What?”

“Dean never left hospital.” John sighed.

“Since I was twelve? For nearly half my life Dean has been in a hospital? Why? Did he get ill? Is that why you told me he was dead?”

“The day we left, when I took you from that teacher’s house, I signed the papers for Dean to go into adolescent psychiatric care. They said it was for the best Sam. And you were old enough not to need Dean to take care of you.”

Sam growled like an animal. He wanted to rip John’s head off his shoulders, but he waited.

“You don’t understand Sam. He’s a carrier. I always thanked the angels that I had two boys, you couldn’t travel like I do with a girl. It would only be a matter of time before Dean got into trouble, and with his silence and his shyness, and those perverts looking for pretty boys who hang around roadhouses and motels. You know, he was better off in the system.”
“Don’t you dare...” Sam fumed, nostrils flaring, "Don't you dare justify your actions by saying they were better for Dean. Easier for you.”

“And you Sam." John said in a pleading tone, "You didn’t have to cope with having a mute faggot carrier for a brother. Look at you, how well you are doing, how good you have turned out.”

“That is because of Dean, Dad. Everything is in his memory.” Sam cried with tears of anger. “Where the fuck is he?”

“Arkansas Care for Indigent Carriers. They transferred him there.”

“Why? Dad? Why didn’t you get him?”

John shrugged.

Sam seethed. There were no words that could have explained this, no rational John could have given to satisfy his raging nineteen year old. The fact that John didn’t even try coiled battery acid in Sam’s gut. He couldn’t look at his father. Sam huffed with shoulders hunched, trying to wrap his head around everything. “What letter? Bobby mentioned a letter?”

“Dean got himself a boyfriend somehow, some sick pansy fuck working in the hospital. The perv has been fired but they wanted to know if I’d like charges pressed.”

Sam didn’t listen. He never wanted to hear another word from his father’s lips. He took Bobby’s stairs two at a time. His bags were packed for the morning. He swept up his last personal belongings and was in the Impala in less than ten minutes.

Bobby and Rumsfield stood in his way under the salvage yard sign.

Sam pulled up.

“You can’t stop me Uncle Bobby. I’m going for Dean.”

“I know you are, son.” The older mechanic bent down to lean on the window jam, tipping his cap, “Here something for the journey.”

Sam took a proffered canvas bag and placed it on the shotgun seat.

“Thanks.” He muttered.

“You take care now, Sam, of yourself and your brother. Be good to Dean and prepare yourself son. The man you'll find may not be the boy you remember. And you know, you can always come back here if you need somewhere.”

“Thanks.” Sam repeated, “You’re one of the good ones Uncle Bobby.”

He tore out of the yard before John could make an appearance. A few miles down the road he pulled over to check his father’s truck wasn’t following. It wasn’t. He opened the door and barfed his breakfast all over the asphalt. Pressing his head against his hand, Sam took long shallow breaths. He didn’t have a long term plan, only the goal of getting to Dean. After a pause, Sam glanced at the lunch Bobby had packed, finding a thermos, a hipflask, some sandwiches and two thousand dollars in a money clip with a post-it saying “for a new start boys.”
Chapter Summary

Sam makes it to Arkansas. He discovers details of Dean's life there.
Warning for brief reference to previous suicide attempts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam leaped over fallen branches. New bright verdant leaves shot across his field of vision. He had Sydney in his sights as his shorter Little League star best friend crested the rise and made it to the hiking trail. Sam was gaining on him. He could hear Sydney laughing a taunt that gangly Sam would never catch him. Lungs burning in the best way, Sam’s chest burst with joy. He loved it in Speedway and wished that they could stay there forever. Back in August on Sam’s first day in 6th Grade, Sydney Bass had knocked him to the floor with a welcome back mauling. Sam took a moment longer to recognize his playmate from second grade, the last time John had a stint with a different Indy Car team as a factory mechanic. Sam’n’Syd had been inseparable since. What was mega brilliant was that Dean and Aaron had hit it off big time, making sibling supervised sleepovers possible. Sam even thought he’d caught sight of Dean whispering to Aaron on the sofa in their ratty apartment but it looked like Dean was licking Aaron’s ear, which was just gross. Not that they would have done anything like that if John was home. Then Dean and Aaron were ‘just friends’.

Sydney skidded to a halt at the picnic table where his Dads and their older brothers were waiting for the younger boys to burn off energy. Sam tagged him anyway, getting an eye roll in response. He was glad to stop, bent double to catch his breath and ease a dull ache in his lower belly. He’d had the deep twinges for a couple of days off and on. It was two aches really, above the centre of each thigh. Sam didn’t know much about the onset of male carrier puberty but other kids had whispered about The Twinges. Rick, back in Biloxi, had told Sam that The Twinges were the first egg being left out and that those small boys with huge bellies with their pictures in his Momma’s True Life magazine got pregnant and didn’t even know it. Sam was scared to ask anyone, even Dean. He could maybe ask Eli, but it was still hard for him to imagine the tall broad shouldered dentist as a birth parent. Sam decided on denial until his school testing in a couple of years. He wasn’t planning on having an icky boyfriend or anything and maybe the pain was just a slow brewing belly-bug.

David was stretching across their picnic bench laying out Tupperware containers, while his Rabbi father, Isaac, took drinks from their cooler. Under the wooden table, Dean had his fingers wrapped around Aaron’s and his arm placed on Aaron’s sweater vest at the small of his back. Neither teenager was talking. Eli was twisted round, chatting with the family at the next spot about the warm weather. Sam could see a poster for an Easter Egg Hunt in Eagle Creek Park the following Sunday, but Dean poked Sam hard with his elbow to shut him up when he wanted to hint to David that they could come back for it. Sam supposed Dean meant it would have been rude to ask because the Bass Dads included them so much already and they were Jewish and all. He hoped it wasn’t because their Dad would be out of work on March 31st and they might have to
move again. John was covering the extended paternity leave for another mechanic and he was sore as hell that he had give it up when the guy came back. With drink taken, John’s favorite scapegoat was ‘sissy-dads’. Sam saw how badly John’s ravings affected Dean. Each gutter worded insult evident as a blow on Dean’s face, but Sam’s brother kept stoic, handed John another beer and made sure Sam was in bed before John was in danger of breaking what little furniture they had. Sam admired Dean’s loyalty to Aaron and his family and Dean clearly did not share their Dad’s bigoted opinions. Sam wondered, late at night with his walkman ear buds in, if those twinges were his sign, and maybe if they were, then even if John looked at him in horror, Dean would understand and still care for him.

The memory of that Spring in Indiana swirled around Sam’s head like a swarm of insects as he drove. Despite Sam’s worries about his developing body, those had been idyllic blissful days, unappreciated at the time. He huffed to himself as he overtook a flatbed truck, letting the Impala’s engine roar. Days after the picnic in Eagle Creek Park, John had word of work in Batesville Arkansas. They’d packed up and blown out of Speedway, with only an hour at the arcade as a farewell to their friends. Dean kept wiping his cheeks with the back of his hand, but Sam was too upset at being uprooted to offer his brother any comfort. Their motel in Batesville wasn’t equipped for a long stay but Dean did his best with the microwave and dinky drinks fridge and the school was good with great teachers and a place on the soccer team for Sam. He remembered Dean came down with a stomach flu he couldn’t shake and developed a bitch-mood that riled Sam up so much that they were barely communicating when John took off for a race weekend. Looking back, Sam considered how naïve he had been. Was Dean’s stomach flu really a baby? Was Dean pregnant with Aaron’s child when they’d been separated? Was that how the doctors knew so quickly that Dean was a carrier, because he was carrying then? What had happened to the baby? Did Sam have a six year old niece or nephew out there somewhere?

Pulling over for gas Sam searched through the Impala’s map books for his route to Arkansas. Two things struck him. First that John was going to be mightily peeved when he realized the maps hadn’t moved across to his new truck. Secondly said maps didn’t have a big Where’s Waldo figure pointing out each state’s care homes. Being in Bum Fuck Nowhere the gas station didn’t have a coin operated internet terminal, nor did the hay blown main street have an internet café or library according to Cletus the Slack Jawed Yokel who took Sam’s fifty and paid him back in slowly counted dollar bills.

Wondering if he’d get cooties from the cardboard cup he’d filled at the self-dispensing coffee machine, Sam slurped back the foamy white vanilla cappuccino. He fumbled with his phone, considering where each of his circle of friends could be; work, library, traveling back to Palo Alto? The possibilities made his head hurt, so he rang their landline.

“Blake, Winchester, Brady, Moore and Gallagher, How may I help you?”

“Sarah, Jesus Christ, stop pretending we’re a law firm, would’ya?” Sam laughed, “What if your Dad calls? Or even scarier Jess’s Mom?”

“Stops the cold callers, Sammy-baby.” Sarah chuckled back at him. “What’s cooking? Still nursery-maid to laid up lame Papa Winchester?”

“No.” Sam’s good humor evaporated, “I’ve a favor to ask.”

“Sounds grave. Shoot gun-boy.”

Sam eye rolled. He adored Sarah but her puns could use work. “Can you go to the library or
somewhere and find out where Arkansas Care for Indigent Carrier’s is? And do they have visiting hours?"

“Geez, don’t tell me you knocked up a country boy?” Sarah tittered.

“No I did not.” Sam replied through gritted teeth. Some things weren’t for joking about.

Sarah picked up on it and apologized. Then Sam heard her voice at distance, as if she was shouting with the handset held away from her face, “Andy, Andy Gallagher, wake the fuck up!”

The last words were said in the same cadence as ‘come on down’.

“Sorry Sam. He’s had a good new year.”

Sam opened his mouth to reply but Sarah was shouting, “Andy? Where is the Arkansas Daddy and Baby Home?”

“Does he know?” Sam asked.

“Freaking douche hit me with a cushion,” Sarah muttered, “I know he’s from Missouri but seriously, West Plains isn’t that far from Arkansas. Sam, Mr. Grouchy Beer Keg Head says it’s in Eureka Springs.”

“Good,” Sam spread the wide map across his knees, “Any clue about how to get an in? Open hours for visitors at these places?”

“A what? What are you doing, Sam?”

“I’m going to spring my brother.” Sam said with firm determination.

“But you don’t have… wait… Your brother?” Sarah gasped as she added two and two together, “Give me an hour. I’ll call you back.”

Sam didn’t get a chance to thank his house mate, as she was already gone. He was confident in her research and planning abilities. There would be a complete and fool proof plan to get Sam into the care home, if Sarah tackled his problem with as much gusto as her assignments (which Sam inherited as non-plagiarizing inspiration due to taking some of the same classes a year behind the junior Art History and Classics major).

Sam was in a diner in Omaha, trying to soothe his anxiety heartburn with food, when Sarah returned his call. He put down a forkful of his barely touched chicken Caesar salad to answer. The waitress gave him a stink eye for having his cell turned on and pointed to an inane poster with a brick style cartoon phone behind a forbidden sign. Sam ignored her while he mentally calculated the minimum tip percentage.

“You have an appointment at 11 tomorrow morning with the Director.” Sarah informed him.

“How…whoa?” Sam managed in response. His previous plan of pulling up in his Impala and demanding to see Dean seemed like a piss poor one now.

“I told them I was calling on behalf of Sam Winchester and it was imperative that he meet with someone in authority regarding his concerns about his brother’s care.” Sarah put on her professional and quite intimidating voice.

“That’s… wow,” Sam said in appreciation. Sarah didn’t have the facts about the jerk who’d been
fired for doing things to Dean that Sam didn’t want to think all the way through. “That was
perfect.”

“I expect a full report and the full story in compensation.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Sam grinned, “You are a lifesaver Sarah.”

“I know,” Sarah laughed, “I keep telling all you sophomores I’m awesome.”

Sam made it back to his car without melting into goo from the death glare of the surly waitress. He
patted the passenger seat absently, imagining he’d need to sweep the sheet map and his folded coat
out of the way so that Dean could slip in beside him. Or maybe that Sam would take his usual
shotgun seat but instead of Dad behind the wheel it would be back to the days of Dean thumping
his fist to the music, reveling in his new driver’s permit.

Sam pulled his phone out of his pocket to lay it on the map. Fingering the buttons on his cell so
that his contacts list scrolled down the small screen, he bit his lip and pressed Nick Private. He
almost disconnected as the ringing tone continued.

“Happy New Year, Sam.” Nick’s simple wish allowed Sam to resume breathing.

“You too, boss.” Sam sighed.

“Missed you for the party, we kept going after we shoved the guests out into the night. I have
photographic evidence of Fergus shirtless and comatose under a table. He might be still there.”
Nick chuckled.

Sam smiled finding it impossible to picture their evening shift manager without his ever present
dark suit jacket. “Nick?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?” The older man’s voice dropped all levity, “You OK Sam?”

Gulping back his emotions Sam didn’t want to lay it all out for his employer, even if he was a
friend too, “I’ve gotta go to Arkansas, and I’ll be back, I have to be back for the start of the
semester, but…” Sam’s voice broke, “I won’t make my Saturday shift.”

“Fuck the shift, I’ll waiter myself, or risk sending Brady out of the kitchen again. What’s going on?
Tell me.” Nick’s firm voice steadied Sam’s nerve.

“My brother…” Sam closed his eyes, “He’s alive, all this time, and our father stuck him in one of
those homes for carriers and told me he was dead, and I mourned him, everyday every minute, it
ripped me apart, and all this time he was there, alone, maybe thinking I had forgotten him…”

Sam was sobbing. Shock and grief for the lost years poured out of him. It was ugly messy crying
that subsided with an awareness of Nick making soothing noises and simple words at the other end
of the line.

“It will be alright, you’re a good brother, you’ll see.”

“That’s very optimistic,” Sam choked.

“Anything you need Sam, you call me, OK?”

“Yeah.”

“Serious here. Promise you’ll ask?”
“Yeah I promise,” Sam blew a long breath, “Thanks and sorry for losing my… I dunno… my composure I guess.”

“You’ve had a shock. Are you driving?” Nick asked.

“Not now.” Sam was ready to get back on the road.

“Well, take care. Take rest stops and stay safe. I need you back here in one piece, so I can afford to roast Brady over hot coals.”

Sam laughed at the attempt to joke about his clumsy friend and vowed to drive carefully. He felt better and lighter after talking with Nick. The older man had a way of making every problem seem more manageable. A coffee with Nick made nasty customers fade into the background and his affectionate back claps or hugs of greeting made Sam feel more important, special even.

Reinvigorated by their conversation, Sam drove on, down I-29 into Iowa and Missouri. A black moonless night fell. Temperatures plummeted and ice threatened on damp roads. He took Nick’s advice, stopping for gas and caffeine, a quick taco in a drive-thru, and once for a simple half hour of rest at the side of the road. It was better when he was driving, concentrating on white lines and mile markers. He had no point of reference for Dean’s life. Any imaginings were based on horror flicks, urban myths, and salacious stories of uncovered abuses at institutions. Sam knew he was torturing himself and tried instead to fathom the magnitude of knowing Dean was alive, or to focus on his new college schedule. There were text messages of support as he travelled from his housemates who had shared the news and one from Nick advising him to find a motel if he was still driving.

It was pushing midnight when Sam pulled into the parking lot of Eureka Springs' Super 8. Dipping into Bobby’s gift he paid up for a queen room and collapsed into the bed, only removing his boots and setting his cell phone alarm for the morning.

A clear crisp dawn brought a blissfully hot shower and butterflies flipping so powerfully that breakfast was not a consideration. At check out the matronly receptionist hand wrote directions to the care home on a local attractions map. She patted his hand and asked if he had a boyfriend out there. Sam realized she might have been trying to stop his hands from trembling. He shook his head and thanked her.

He was early for his appointment, driving slow and taking in the idyllic forest scenery as he made his way west three miles to his destination. He took the first left turn after the baseball park and headed up hill until he saw the beginning of a dauntingly high wall on his right. Huge gates with Arkansas CIC painted on them soon greeted Sam. He found a buzzer and pressed it. A tinny voice asked his business and Sam rattled off his name and appointment while noticing the high security camera. The gates slung open at a leisurely pace while the voice told him to check in at the main building.

Inside was nothing like Sam had been expecting. A long sweeping drive curved around sparse trees and lawn with patches of unmelted snow. To the left individual log cabins dotted the property. Sam counted five that he could see, one with a stroller at the door. At another a young black man carrying an infant was exiting. He took the first left turn after the baseball park and headed up hill until he saw the beginning of a dauntingly high wall on his right. Huge gates with Arkansas CIC painted on them soon greeted Sam. He found a buzzer and pressed it. A tinny voice asked his business and Sam rattled off his name and appointment while noticing the high security camera. The gates slung open at a leisurely pace while the voice told him to check in at the main building.

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Sam stretched his legs and rolled his shoulders when he emerged. A teenager with a visible bump under his winter coat emerged from the ominous building and made his way to the front of the main one. When he saw Sam staring he smiled and waved. Sam raised his hand limply in response. He didn’t know what to make of the mixed signals this place was giving him.

Inside the reception was bright and warm with tinsel lining the edge of a high desk and comfortable wide chairs for waiting under another Christmas tree. A Perspex stand held pamphlets titled Adoption For You and Choosing Your Life. Sam cleared his throat to attract the attention of the young man behind the desk who was engaged in trying to wrestle his pen from a determined two year old.

“Sorry Sir,” The guy said, abandoning his pen battle, and straightening his button down, “Harry’s not used to having to sit still. It’s our first week helping out at reception. My name’s Aiden.”

“Right,” Sam cleared his throat, “I’ve an appointment with the Director.”

“Oh, I see, yes, well Ms Godwin is with the Social Committee now,” Aiden pulled a huge diary out from under a clean toddler diaper, “Are you Mr. Winchester, her eleven o’clock?”

“That’s me,” Sam couldn’t help a smile despite his own nerves.

“Can you sign in please?” The guy tapped a log book to Sam’s right, “And can I see your ID?”

Sam handed over his driver’s permit and wrote his name. Under purpose of visit he pressed hard onto the paper distorting his normal students’ scrawl into a message to the world that he was here for Dean Winchester.

“You’re here to see Dean?” Aiden gasped with his head contorted to read Sam’s writing, “I’m sorry. It’s just that Father Moriarty and the volunteers are Dean’s only visitors. Sorry, sorry, ahem, do you want a coffee while you wait, or a juice? I have juice.”

“Wait, you know Dean.” Sam pleaded.

“Yeah, I was, when I came here I had a problem,” He unbuttoned his sleeve and showed Sam old track marks, “I’m clean and sober now, all for Harry, but I was in the psych ward. I know Dean. He doesn’t talk you know?”

Sam chuffed a laugh, “I know. I’m his brother. Is he? Is he alright?”

Aiden clammed up. He flicked a glance back at his son. “Ms Godwin will tell you, I’m sure. She won’t be long.”

Sam could see the young father wasn’t going to break any rules and tell him about Dean. Along with the anxiety of speculating that Aiden’s reluctance came from Dean being not OK at all, there also was a wonder that Sam had just spoken with someone who knew Dean.

Sam was leafing through a pamphlet on carrier contraception methods when Aiden called to him. Then a petite red-haired woman in a dark blue power suit was marching towards him with her hand extended, “Mr. Winchester?”

“Sam, please,” he said as he towered over her and took the offered hand. Her grip could break iron.

“Please call me Naomi. My office is this way.” She said as she beckoned for him to follow. “Aiden, why don’t you call Terry to relieve you and Harry for a break?”
Sam heard Aiden thank the Director as they entered a long green carpeted hallway of closed doors.

“Offices,” Naomi answered his unspoken question, “The upper storey is a shared apartment for our pregnant residents who do not need medical supervision. There is a lodge for our onsite staff members. The cabins, I presume you saw, are for our new Dads until they are ready to re-enter the world outside. We have a small school and vocational program. Our hospital serves the local community as the carrier center of excellence, and it is where our babies are born and those needing special care reside.”

“It isn’t what I imagined.” Sam said as they entered a bright yellow walled corner office. He took the offered chair in front of a large dark wood desk covered in files and a desktop Dell. The wall was filled with framed photographs of guys with kids, a few of groups of pregnant boys in the sun and of guys shooting hoops on a court surrounded by trees. He failed to pick Dean out in any of them.

“I am sure you wish to hear about your brother.”

Sam nodded, “I am here to see him.”

Naomi tapped on her desktop keyboard for a moment, then spoke as if reciting from the file, “Dean Michael Winchester was transferred from Batesville General Hospital in May 1996. He was seventeen. He had been admitted with a fractured rib and skull consistent with a fall due to being kicked.”

Sam flushed with shame. Luckily the Director was not looking in his direction. “They tested him there and found he was a carrier?”

“No Mr. Winchester…”

“Sam, please.”

“No. It is recorded here that Dean spoke to a paramedic about his baby and the pains he had been experiencing. The miscarriage occurred in his second week at the hospital.”

Sam swallowed down a ball of guilt, “Did he lose the baby from his injury?”

“The cause and the medical team’s interventions are not recorded but as Dean had been experiencing pain previously and he was not injured in a critical area, it is more probable that was a slow miscarriage, perhaps an ectopic pregnancy.”

Sam found a modicum of relief in that. He couldn’t have coped if his twelve year old raging temper had killed Dean’s baby.

“Attempts were made to contact Dean’s father and to extract the name of the baby’s father from Dean, but neither were successful. Mr. Winchester Senior had signed the committal papers for his vulnerable son before he disappeared. Dean’s file records that he reacted violently and was aggressive in the wake of the miscarriage and as he came to terms with his father’s departure. He was in the general hospital population recovering from his D&C. During a shift changeover he stole a scalpel and was found bleeding out in a disabled toilet. After that he was placed on a 72 hour hold in their closed ward. After assessment the small Batesville hospital was considered unsuitable for his long term needs and Dean came here. Unfortunately almost immediately Dean was labeled as uncommunicative and uncooperative, He lost any ward privileges and was subject to restraint and time outs. In July he is recorded as changing his attitude. His co-operation increased and his watch-status was relaxed. It was not discovered how Dean accessed the maintenance
stairwell. He suffered a fractured tibia, elbow and eye socket in his fall from the hospital roof. From that point he was considered a patient-at-risk."

“What does that mean?” Sam whispered. He had barely dared to breath during Naomi’s account, his mind filling in around the dry account how desperate, hopeless and wretched his trapped grieving brother must have been to attempt suicide twice.

“What does that mean?”

The question and shift of subject startled Sam. He hadn’t known that prep work was expected for his interview.

“I do not mean how we were founded in 1897 to provide shelter for disowned and distressed male carriers in need, a tradition built from the time when small refuges provided these young men escape from persecution as witches or condemned them to destitution, or scapegoated boys as Different.” Naomi pinned Sam with her eyes and departed from the gender studies textbook speech, “Our recent history? How we reacted to the exposé of Alabama’s State Home on the infamous showing of 60 Minutes?”

Sam shook his head. He had a vague recollection of an outcry during his spring break of 11th Grade. Sam hadn’t seen the news reports but there had been a nationwide alert after the scandal. Many states had ordered investigations into standards and abuse allegations at all sorts of residential care facilities.

“My predecessor and the predecessors of almost all our current employees ran the home in a shameful and ultimately criminal manner.” Naomi clasped her hands together on the desk.

Sam gulped. He met the sincere gaze of the woman in front of him and nodded. He steeled his core and prepared to hear her out.

“It is my duty to inform you, Mr. Winchester, that your brother was with us during this malevolent period.” The Director moved to place a hand on a bound document. “My report into the institution is a matter of public record and you are welcome to a copy. Initially I came here as chief investigator but was privileged to be appointed as a new broom in the aftermath. I understand this is difficult to hear. Our findings resulted in prosecutions and there is a class action lawsuit trundling through the courts on behalf of the patients.”

“How long?” Sam managed to voice the hoarse words from his dry throat.

“My reign here began three years ago,” Naomi continued gravely, “Previously there was systematic over medication of our psychiatric residents. The staff kept any troublesome patient in a mannequin-type state, easier to deal with for them. I saw young men strapped to chairs, insensible, unable to feed themselves. It was profoundly shocking.”

“And Dean?” Sam choked.

“Yes, including Dean.” Naomi passed him a Kleenex.

“But now, is he? Where does Dean live?” Sam couldn’t phrase his question any clearer.

“Dean has his own room on the top floor of the psychiatric wing.”

Sam heard her, but all he could see in his mind’s eye were the bars on the windows of that storey. He stewed inside that Dean was still there, but he tried to let it sink in that this woman was the one who had stopped the abuse not inflicted it.
Naomi’s desk buzzer went off and she rose to greet an attractive woman with long pushed back hair and a white doctor’s coat.

“Sam, let me introduce Dean’s psychiatrist, Dr Layla Rourke.”

Sam stood on foal-like legs and took the small soft hand of the woman who he hoped was an advocate for his brother.

When they were seated again, Naomi filled Layla in on what she had stunned Sam with so far. The psychiatrist smoothed down her skirt and crossed her legs. She gifted Sam with a wan smile. “I am pleased to meet you, Sam. I feel I know you a little already from Dean.”

“Dean ‘talked’ to you?” Sam checked.

“Dean draws, sketches. He is quite talented. You feature in some of the memory pieces I asked him to submit during our sessions.” Dr Rourke leaned forward, “Dean will be overjoyed at your visit.”

Sam nodded, “How is he? Ms Godwin told me of the abuse he suffered here.” There was an accusing stab in his tone. Sam splayed his fingers on his thighs, feeling warm denim and pressing down to control his turmoil.

Dr Rourke held out her arm and the director placed a heavy manila folder in her hand. “Let me assure you that my tenure here commenced in the new regime. I oversaw the careful transition of our patients to an acceptable, appropriate and beneficial medication profile for their conditions. You must understand that most of our clients in the mental health ward are with us for post-partum depression, substance abuse and behavioral issues.” She could see Sam itching for her to get specific, “Your brother has improved vastly in the last three years. He achieved his GED last summer. He is more stable and happier now, I am confident to say. However, Mr. Winchester… Sam, Dean is institutionalized. He clings to routine and becomes distressed if it varies. Dean has his own personal schedule annotated in his own hand. He is a sweet kind man, well loved and popular with his fellow residents.”

Sam tried to reconcile this image with the shy but brave streetwise kid who had raised him.

“I am sorry for the breach of protocol that allowed the situation with Caleb Woodsman to develop under our noses. I assure you we do not tolerate any staff member forming an inappropriate attachment to our residents.”

Sam licked his lips, “Are you telling me this Caleb assaulted my brother?”

“No, Sam, not in the way you may be imagining,” Layla sighed, “There are issues of informed consent by psychiatric patients. Perhaps it could be said that a staff member could take advantage of a trusting patient.”

“Did he hurt Dean?” Sam had pondered this amid all his other anxieties since he overheard Bobby and John. His fingers dug into his thighs.

“There was a close attachment. Caleb Woodsman was a janitor who covered the psychiatric wing and had access to Dean’s room. I understand that he struck up a friendship with your brother. Mr. Woodsman claimed Dean spoke with him and wished to leave the hospital with him.” Dr Rourke paused to shuffle the papers, “It is our regret that their relationship took on a physical aspect.”

“Maybe Dean did want to leave here with someone who cared for him?” Sam challenged.

Both women nodded. Naomi answered, “We have considered Dean a candidate for our re-
integration program, but he would need a support network which has been unavailable up to now. Mr. Woodsman was not genuine in his promises to Dean. He is a married man with a family, a fact he did not share.”

Sam was glad the dickass was gone. He didn’t want to be arrested for assault.

“Would you like to see your brother?” Layla asked checking her notes, “He should be in the rec room. He had group earlier and will move to the dining room at twelve for lunch.”

Sam agreed enthusiastically. Naomi promised to speak with him again and passed him over to Layla. They walked side by side across to the hospital where Sam had to sign in again and cleanse his hands from a gel dispenser. Layla used her ID to enter the restricted area and led Sam into an elevator. “I think it would be best if you saw Dean before you reunite.”

“Why?” Sam furrowed his brow.

“My opinion is that you need to see your brother and have your own response before you meet.” Layla laid a hand on his lower arm and looked up at him, “I understand you are nineteen, and you were only a boy when your brother entered the care system.”

“I just want to see Dean,” Sam bit his lip. They were alone in the confined box. He admitted, “A part of me will not believe he is alive until I see him with my own eyes.”

“I understand,” Layla responded in a well practiced tone, but Sam believed she was genuine. “Follow me.”

They walked by a male nurse and two patients snickering about something in the corridor. Layla led him through a narrow door into a plain room barely wider than its entry. Two metal chairs sat under a shelf which ran below a plate glass window. A well-thumbed John Grisham novel sat splayed open on the surface. “Double mirror,” the psychiatrist explained redundantly.

Five guys occupied the recreation room. Two in jeans and soft sweatshirts played chess. Another two in casual gear watched a high mounted TV which was out of Sam’s range of view. Separate to the others, in the far corner at a table under the window, fiddling with the innards of a transistor radio, was Dean.

Sam’s mouth opened and closed of its own volition. His heart rose up as if trying to connect to his brain. A hand reached out and his finger pads tipped the two-way glass. Dean was concentrating, his pink tongue tipping between his parted lips. He had lost the teenage roundness to his features. Sam narrowed his eyes drinking in the sight of his long thought deceased brother. There was a thin white scar traversing Dean’s right cheekbone, where his freckles stood out against his pale skin. Dean’s short cropped hair was a definite brown, with no sign of the sun bleached streaks of a boy who reveled in the outdoors. His wrists were covered with wide black man-bracelet style cuffs, to hide his scars Sam supposed. He wore a plain white tee above green scrubs pants and hospital slippers. The sight was heart wrenching. It was heart breaking too, as Sam took in that Dean was almost twenty four, and this had been his life since he was only seventeen.

“Dr Rourke, why isn’t Dean in, you know, normal clothes?”

“Family and friends bring personal items for our residents.” She answered kindly, “Dean has some goodwill donated items for outdoor use but he rarely ventures from the ward.”

“He is confined here?” Sam growled.

“No you misunderstand. Dean has full privileges. He goes across to the school for classes and if a
volunteer visitor takes him for a turn around the grounds he will go, but he rarely takes the initiative to leave the ward.” The doctor sighed, “We are working on this reluctance, but I understand Dean was punished severely for attempted escapes.”

In the room a nurse entered and announced lunch. She approached Dean and patted him on the shoulder. Dean raised his head and smiled. He gathered together his project and put it and his tools into a cardboard box. Sam got another jolt when Dean began to leave the room. His brother’s head dropped and he shuffled his feet like an old man, slowly, careful with his box, making his way across the tiled floor. Sam staggered back, hitting the wall behind him. The impact of how profoundly different Dean was impacted him like a battering ram on his sternum.

“Come see our dining room,” Layla said. Taking pity on the blinking teenager she smiled encouragingly.

Sam muttered a question about there being spying mirrors in every room. Layla laughed and told him they would watch from the kitchen area. There was capacity for sixteen patients but they currently had twelve men in their care. Two were not well enough to come for meals. The dining room was another revelation. Instead of a slop-on-trays clinical bleak space, it had pink and beige walls, round tables with wipe down floral cloths, and a hofbrau style carvery station with a smiling chef-hatted server ready for the young men to arrive. Sam and Layla stood around the corner of the L-shaped room in the screened off food preparation area. She nudged him when Dean appeared following one of the men who had been snickering in the hall. The first guy loaded his tray with Mac’n’cheese over the other choice of the day.

“Usual Dean?” The server asked.

Dean smiled shyly and nodded.

The man leaned under the counter and produced a tray covered in shrink wrap with DEAN clearly written on a large sticker.

Dean winked his thanks and proceeded to the vacant table closest to the window.

“Dean has a white bread sandwich with butter, chicken and a scrape of mayo. A portion of applesauce and a sweetened yogurt with a plain cookie.”

“Huh?”

“Every day.” Layla expanded, “He eats oatmeal, wholegrain toast, strawberry jelly and a decaffeinated coffee at breakfast. On Sunday he takes the pancakes. We attempt to balance Dean’s diet with his evening meal, but we supplement daily with vitamins.”

The enormity of Dean’s issues versus his miniscule world of routines and confined spaces clashed in Sam’s understanding. He looked wordlessly at Layla. She chuckled in response, “Expressive faces must be a familial inheritance. It is overwhelming. You are not the first family member to seek out one of our residents. Come with me, I’ll treat you to your own sandwich at the staff and visitor café. Our boys on the integration program run it as a business. I’d like you to meet with Deacon, our resident social worker. Dean likes to read in the afternoons. I suggest we visit him in his own room.”

Sam agreed. The continued wait until he touched Dean and held him and spoke to him seemed endless, but he knew he needed a minute. Layla patted his arm again as they left the psychiatric ward. She smiled tenderly, “Dean is special. He needs and deserves to have you back in his life, and we are here to support that.”
Sam muttered his thanks as the gravel crunched under his boots. The reminder of soft thin slippers on his brother’s feet jarred his equilibrium and clenched his solar plexus with a jumble of feelings. Layla stopped to speak with a scruffy guy holding a well wrapped baby. Chuck introduced himself and baby girl Gossamer. Sam sucked a breath at the awful baby name and complemented the infant for her cuteness. While Chuck asked Layla about changing his attendance at an out-patient group, Sam whipped out his phone and texted Nick.

_I found him. It’s hard._

His phone beeped almost straight away. *Call me when you can. Stay strong. I believe in you. N.*

Sam expelled a long visible breath into the icy air and took the offered reassurance to heart as he trailed behind Layla, Chuck and his baby.

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Chapter End Notes

Reunion in next chapter.
I have a heavy RL work schedule coming up but am aiming for a midweek update.
Thank you guys for reading.
Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A chair was wedged under the bedroom door handle. Sam was not coming out or letting his stupid father in. By default this was Sam’s room but to the teenager it still felt like his and Dean’s reserved space at Uncle Bobby’s. Sam removed a now slushy frozen peas’ bag from his cheek. He hated his Dad, hated being dragged from state to state, hated his dumb life. Sam had his only photos of Dean spread across his lap. He didn’t have many. John wasn’t sentimental like that. Sam supposed the all day drinking session was John’s way of coping with Dean’s 21st birthday. He lifted one photo that had caught Dean’s grin side-face. It was a group shot, one of a rare few Sam possessed from when the boys had quickly formed friendships in scattered towns and Sam would plead with their new acquaintances for copies. He skimmed over one taken by Sydney of Dean, Aaron and Sam on the steps of the Bass front porch. He tilted his head with a tender smile, pawing the one of little Dean posed with a small green satchel on his first day of pre-school. The final print had untrimmed edges, as if it was a rough copy or a sample for a larger family portrait that would have hung above the mantelpiece or greeted visitors in the hall of the house in Lawrence. Mary sat on a blue velvet photographer’s sofa with a cloud of hair around her shoulders. Dean stood in front with his hand touching his mother’s lap and the hem of baby Sam’s christening robes. John was suited and rigid behind the seat, his hand resting on Mary’s shoulder. Both parents looked proudly at the lens. Sam hissed a feline disgust noise at the representation of his younger father. But his heart softened as he took in how charming Dean was as a four year old.

"Happy birthday bro," Sam whispered.

“Sam?” Bobby’s shout ascended from the base of the stairs. “Your Dad has gone out, the damned fool. Will you come down for stew?”

Sam slammed the door and then felt guilty for taking his frustrations out on Bobby’s house. He thumped down the stairs like a morose elephant and slouched into the kitchen. Bobby was leaning against the refrigerator. He uncapped a beer and offered it to Sam.

“You know I’m 16, right?” Sam checked, too suspicious to grab hold of the cold bottle for fear it was a game and it would be jerked out of his reach.

“You deserve one darned beer,” Bobby rumbled and pressed the condensation coated Miller into Sam’s hand, “I bet Dean woulda sneaked you one tonight.”

“I only asked if there was a grave in Batesville,” Sam sucked back a quiver in his voice and tightened his hold on the bottle, “I know there’s one in Lawrence for Mom. Shouldn’t there be one for Dean, Uncle Bobby? Somewhere I could leave flowers or a rock?”

“I dunno, son,” Bobby pulled out a chair and gestured for Sam to join him. He doled out ladles of juicy beef stew as Sam sagged into the seat, “How about we go down to the park tomorrow and release one of those birthday balloons?”

Sam chuckled despite his ill humor. He tried to picture Bobby with a shiny helium balloon. “We could put a birthday message in a bottle, head over to Falls Park and send it down stream?”
“I like it. Why don’t ya use your first beer bottle? That’s a milestone too.” Bobby was hit by a full steam hugging Sam, “Hey, watch it, don’t dislodge the cap.”

“Sorry.” Sam grinned as he retook his seat. He filled his mouth with a huge spoon of stew. His cheek ached when he chewed but he didn’t think he had anything worse than a contusion.

“I have another question.”

“Yep,” Sam said swallowing quickly.

“You know your brother was a carrier. That sort of thing can run in families. You’ve been tested right?”

Sam chewed his bottom lip and gave a barely there headshake.

“Uh-huh, figures. What do you think Sam? Will we take a ride to the medical centre tomorrow, in Dean’s memory?”

Sam nodded. Luckily Bobby thought to change the subject. They drank their beers, watched TV, and listened in vain for John’s return. Stories were told about the boys’ antics when they stayed at the salvage yard down through the years.

Probing by a motherly family physician, an excruciating questionnaire about cyclical lower stomach aches, discharges, and nipple sensitivity, followed by a pee-on-a-stick hormone test produced the result Sam was expecting. He was a carrier. The blood test results and a follow-up ultrasound would later confirm he was a viable carrier like Dean. When they left the clinic Bobby clapped a hand on his shoulder and promised without prompting that John would not hear it from him. They went to the mall where Sam bought a slim 21st birthday card with a rock guitar front. He kept his message of loss, love and memory short but was proud to add his news. Bobby sealed the bottle with a cork and string. Sam held it to his chest for a heartbeat before releasing it into the white water of the Big Sioux River.

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“Are you a carrier Sam? It runs in families.” Deacon asked across the table of the care home’s café.

Sam could hear an echo of Bobby’s voice behind the social worker’s words. It took him back to the day he had been so proud to have it officially confirmed that he was the same as Dean had been, and how very scared he was that if John found out he’d dump his ass in some skivvy motel in Nowheresville.

“Yes I am,” Sam said meeting the brown haired older man’s eye.

“A viable one?”

Sam winced at the blunt question but didn’t lower his gaze, “Yes.”

“And you are attending university?”

Sam bristled but Deacon didn’t project an old-fashioned tied-to-the-kitchen-sink attitude about carriers, rather he seemed focused on extracting information from the student.

“Stanford,” Sam said before biting a sizeable chunk off his sandwich.
“A great college,” Layla commented.

Deacon took a long drink of his coffee. Sam followed suit, burning the roof of his mouth with the hot beverage. While he topped up the mug with cold milk, Deacon asked a further question, “Do you live in campus accommodation?”

Sam shook his head and took one of the salted chips that came with his lunch choice, “A house share, real close by. I share with two girls and two guys. We were all totally allergic to dorm life and found a real sweet place together.”

The older man hummed, “And what about your income, Sam?”

Sam raised his brows. Was the guy serious? Was he trying to be cool with his worn plaid and frayed jeans? Trying to fit in with the young residents? Why the interrogation? Sam wanted to tell him to put a sock in it, but the dude was Dean’s social worker. Playing nice, Sam answered, “I have a scholarship and I wait tables at a restaurant in Menlo Park. I get by.”

That elicited another hum. “What about your father? Where does he fit in?”

That was enough. Sam dropped all pretence of being affable. “He doesn’t.”

Layla picked up on the sub-zero temperature drop. “Well, I think Dean should be back in his room. Why don’t we head in that direction, Sam?”

Sam wiped his mouth with a napkin and nodded his assent, while Deacon cleared their leavings onto one tray. “You know,” The social worker said as if he had just thought of it. “I think I’ll come with.”

“Are you free?” Layla asked surprised.

“My family group isn’t until later.” The man shrugged.

A brisk walk in the chill wind took them back to the hospital building. Sam’s clothes felt scratchy and ill-fitting. He went so far as a subtle downward glance to make sure he hadn’t done up his coat in the wrong button holes. Deacon trailed behind making Sam’s skin shift around him, like a snake molt. Layla had to repeat a statement before it penetrated Sam’s glazed over mind.

“Normally Dean spends Thursday afternoon in the school art room, but the building is closed until classes recommence next week.”

Sam made a noise of acknowledgment as they reached the reception desk. He rubbed his hands together for warmth while Layla spoke with a nurse on duty. In the elevator Sam discovered that being weak at the knees was an actual physical and unpleasant sensation. His breath caught and he thought for an instant that his chips and sandwich might make a reappearance, when his brain unhelpfully supplied him with the image of Dean turning his back on him, unforgiving and sore with betrayal. It didn’t matter. Even if Dean pushed him bodily out of his room, he wasn’t retreating now.

This time the elevator terminated on the top floor, opening out to a vacant nurses’ station. Layla slipped her ID card out of its lanyard and used it to access a white and silver grey tiled corridor. Some doors were closed. Open ones revealed lived in spaces. The final door on the left was ajar. It was on the side of the wing which looked over the woods beyond rather than faced back towards the driveway and gates. Layla tipped Sam’s elbow and gave him a smile. Sam blew a long exhalation and gave a shaky nod in reply. She raised her fist and rapped on the door.
“Dean? I’ve brought you a visitor.”

There was the sound of metal chair legs being scraped back.

Layla’s gentle pressure swung the door inwards. Deacon hovered in the hall outside. Sam’s eyes tracked along the tiled floor, along the length of Dean’s bed, to a desk that slotted under the barred window. The disassembled radio, a low pile of sketch pads, and a variegated spider plant sat on the pine desk. A foldaway metal chair had been pushed to the side. Dean stood to attention, wary and suspicious.

Every word that ever existed dried up on Sam’s tongue. He didn’t know what to say to his brother. Hey Dean, just didn’t seem to cut it. He stepped into the room while Layla made her way to Dean’s side, as if the smaller doctor was there to catch her patient if he fainted or went catatonic with shock.

The two Winchesters stared at each other. Sam appreciated being closer to Dean, taking in the individual freckles, the way he unconsciously rubbed his left thumb and pointer finger together in circles, and the uncertain smile of greeting. Another pace took Sam into the centre of the small room. He simultaneously comprehended two facts; he had an inch on Dean’s height, and his brother had no idea who he was. However there was hesitancy in Dean’s gaze, as if he felt he should be able to place this newcomer.

Sam gulped and gave a ragged breath. Layla opened her mouth but Sam shot her a look. It would be wrong, as in a paradigm shift of reality level of wrongness, if a doctor had to introduce him to his big brother. Sam chewed on the fleshy inside of his bottom lip. He shifted his eyes to the walls of Dean’s room. There was not a slither of the paintwork showing. Every available inch was covered with sketches, cards, and postcards. Sam turned from his hip to get a better view. Pencil sketches depicted leaves, trees, small wildflowers, and bark rubbings but there were some faces and memory pieces. Sam reached out to touch a rear perspective of two boys bearing school bags on a sidewalk. Sam guessed it was either Kennewick or Aberdeen when he was six and Dean was ten.

A deep grunt of protest issued from Dean.

Without turning, Sam grinned and automatically teased, “Don’t you make the ‘last bowl of Frosted Flakes’ noise at me Dee. I’m only admiring is all.”

Suddenly Sam’s shoulder and chest were impacted by a full body diving Dean. Arms wrapped around him, rubbed down his back, squeezed his ribs with a death grip and all the time Dean’s hoarse gasps of “Sam, Sammy” caused his younger brother’s waterworks to open the floodgates.

When some unquantifiable portion of time later they pulled apart, Dean raised his fingers to Sam’s cheek. Sam thought his tears were to be wiped away but a single finger pressed in near his nose, on his small mole, Sam realized.

“’S you,” Dean blinked slowly then caught Sam’s arm tight.

“Yeah,” Sam pulled Dean in for his own initiated hug. Over Dean’s shoulder he could see Layla’s wide eyes, no doubt due to the speaking thing, but Dean had always saved a few utterances for his trusted family and friends, but especially, sometimes exclusively more lengthy speech for Sam.

“’S Dad?” Dean made a throat slitting gesture with his finger.

“God no.” Sam huffed, “Though I coulda done him in when I found out. I mean, he told me…” It was difficult to say it now to his living breathing warm and real brother, “Told me you were dead,
Dean. I thought you’d died, way back, in Batesville.”

This time Dean did find a tissue and reached up to wipe Sam’s cheeks, like all those times when he’d cried over bullies or being moved again.

“I didn’t know you were here. I would have come. I would have done anything, but I didn’t know.” Sam prayed that Dean believed him. “I missed you, so bad Dean.”

Dean double tapped over his own heart.

Sam sniffled and nodded his understanding that Dean had mourned the loss of Sam too. Dean took his hand and guided him over to sit on the bed with him. He raised his eyes in a piercing dare to Layla.

“We don’t allow visitors on the beds,” She explained, “or in the bedrooms normally, but I think we’ll make an exception.”

Dean quirked a half smile at her, then stroked Sam’s hair before rubbing at his own scalp.

“What Dee? My hair is too long? Or are you pissed that I’m taller and still growing?” Sam laughed.

Dean nodded to both suggestions.

“The mane stays,” Sam chuckled, “We could get you those platform shoes that Tom Cruise wears.”

That one earned him an elbow in the gut. No pain was sweeter.

“You’re looking great, bro. I mean it. They told me, y’know, before they’d let me up here, that you had it rough.” Sam bit his lip.

Dean set his face to impenetrable but gave a short nod of confirmation. He self-consciously wrapped his right hand around the scar covering band on his left wrist. Sam wasn’t going to probe him for details. Breathing in and out and having his brother beside him doing the same thing didn’t seem real. Sam had dreamed of this moment, maybe not in a care home psychiatric unit but this simple reality of being in Dean’s presence.

“Huh,” Sam knocked their shoulders together, “What you doing to the radio? Alien contact receiver?”

Dean gave a wheezing laugh. He went to the desk with short steps and brought back the outer casing. A nail picked white sticker had Chuck Shurley written on it.

“Oh, you’re fixing it. How’s that working out?”

Dean rolled his eyes. Then his expression changed into a grin. He extended a hand and Sam took it. Layla moved out of the way as Dean showed him his desk with a variety of artists’ pencils and open drawing pads. He began to close the books and put them into the box that had held the radio. Then the pencils went in. He crouched down and picked up another couple from beneath the desk.

“What are you doing Dean?” Layla asked, “If you give all that to Sam, you’ll have nothing to work on.”

Dean snorted at her, “I’m going.”
Sam did a double blink. His stomach dropped. Did Dean really just say that?

“Going with Sammy.”

Sam guessed that clarified it.

“Wait,” Layla pleaded, “Sam has come to visit you. He is not here to collect you.”

“Blowing this joint, right Sammy,” Dean hissed at his brother, his infrequently used voice box warming up nicely, becoming less hoarse with each utterance.

“Yeah, right.” Sam immediately agreed. If Dean wanted to leave, and who would blame him, then Sam would do everything in his power to make that happen. He just wasn’t sure what he could do about it. He should have thought of this. Of course Dean would presume that Sam was here to collect him. The way they grew up, blowing out of towns when John’s work ended or he ran up debts, being scooped out of hospitals and the reach of the CPS, no wonder Dean thought he was being released or, Sam cringed to think, rescued.

Dean pulled a single sheet of blank paper that had a corner held down by the spider plant’s drainage saucer. He produced a pen.

01.02.2003

*Dear Director Godwin,*

*I want to leave ACIC now.*

*Dean Winchester*

He handed the paper to Layla, who cleared her throat, “I don’t think now, as meaning this current hour will be possible Dean, I’m sorry.”

She was faced with an arms crossed glaring Dean.

“I will take your discharge request to the director,” She promised.

Dean made a dismissive sweeping gesture telling her to get to it. Layla’s professional mask slipped, “I am very happy for you, Dean. Your brother has come a long way to see you. And you have spoken more than….” She sighed, “I promise we will do everything to help you both.”

With that she was gone but Deacon lounged against the door frame. Sam supposed they were being cautious of Dean’s mental state.

“Dean’s entitled to private time with you,” Deacon said as if he had read Sam’s mind, “and the note he wrote qualifies as a request for discharge.”

“What does that actually mean?” Sam asked.

Dean plunked back down on the bed and pointed at the social worker with a smug look.

“Yes Bright Spark,” Deacon curled his lip wryly, “My social interaction and patients’ rights groups are where you learned about the right to apply in writing to leave as a voluntary resident under Dr Rourke’s care.”

“So Dean can leave?” Sam was trying to keep up with the pace of everything. “He could walk out of here with me.”

Dean trembled as if ready to jump up and shoot out of the room. Sam sat as close as he could to his
brother, their thighs meeting, and then placed a hand over his to steady him.

“Officially the Director has 72 hours to find a judge for a court order to remand Dean here as an involuntary patient.” At Dean’s growl Deacon raised a hand, “But she would have to show he is a danger to others, to himself, or incapable of maintaining a standard of living outside of care. The first two are not under consideration, and the last with a family member back on the scene…” Deacon did not finish the sentence.

Sam sucked a breath. He looked at the hopeful light in Dean’s forest green eyes. He couldn’t think of his brother as a burden, but he had a feeling his life was about to profoundly change. Leaving Dean behind was not an option, even if a 72 hour wait meant he would be late back at college, there was no way he was driving away from Eureka Springs without Dean in the shotgun seat. That reminded him, “Remember the Impala, Dean?”

His brother beamed and pointed a few pictures that featured the beloved vehicle. In one a cartoon Impala had eyes for headlights and a toothy grin for the fender and seemed to be facing down or hanging with one of Bobby’s beat up Ford sedans.

“I was at Bobby’s when I found out, yesterday.” Sam imparted, “Bobby’s just about fit to flay Dad alive. There was a letter from here for Dad,” Sam didn’t want to upset Dean at their reunion by mentioning the janitor, “Y’know how we use Bobby’s for a mailing address. Bobby says if we need anything to call him, and I know he’d love to see you, even if he wouldn’t say.”

Dean licked his lips in preparation for speech. Sam shut up.

Dean cleared his throat and spoke low for Sam’s ears only, in a way that brought Sam back seven years, “You work with Dad or Bobby?”

“Naw, me a mechanic?” Sam roared with laughter making Dean huff in amusement. Sam was filled with gooey warm cookie dough. “Geez Dean remember when he had all three of us work all night on that vintage Cadillac and I almost blew up the engine?”

Dean wrinkled his nose and held up two hands with his thumbs turned in.

“Yeah, I know I was eight perched on the standing steps with my head in the engine and my tushy in the air.” Both brothers shared a smile at the image. “I’m at college. Stanford in Cali.”

Dean blinked and gaped. He rubbed his fingers together in a money gesture.

“Scholarship. I kept doing my schoolwork. Did it for you, y’know. ‘cause you always made me. I don’t think Dad knew if I had a 2.0 grade average or a 4.0. Cali is great. I like it there. Might want to stay after, but I’m only a sophomore.”

Dean furrowed his brow and made a mental calculation.

“I skipped a grade.” Sam supplied. “In Sioux Falls. Jumped from 9th to 10th. Hey, I heard you got your GED.”

Dean’s cheeks flushed as he nodded.

“Well done. Geez if I was in hospital for years I don’t know if I could have done that.” Sam said full of admiration for what his brother had overcome.

Dean shook his head, “Not you. No. Couldn’t if you. No.”
“Oh crap Dean, my big mouth.” Sam pulled his brother by the shoulders so he could hold on to him. Dean quaked under his embrace. “I’m sorry Dee. I know you had it rough. Feel free to hit me if I fuck up like that.”

Dean slapped his back lightly, making Sam snort.

Deacon tapped on the door gaining their attention. “I need to get to my group. You can stay Sam but perhaps you would like come to Naomi about Dean’s request.”

The tone of the suggestion implied Sam should do that. Dean nodded his agreement. “Tell her I’m going.” He whispered with Big Brother authority into Sam’s ear.

Sam promised he’d be back. Dean gripped him in a final hug. The younger Winchester didn’t like leaving his brother in the room but a glance over his shoulder caught Dean easing one of his pieces off the wall. He guessed Dean was packing up.

Aiden wasn’t at the front desk when Sam returned. There was a slim woman in her forties who looked like she’d never leave a diaper in her workspace. She asked him to wait, so Sam retook his chair from the morning and continued his exploration of male-carrier contraceptives, STDs, and adoption pamphlets. The wait was beneficial as it gave him time to process. He was on a high. Endorphins and serotonin from being in his brother’s presence made him buoyant with optimism and plain honest-to-pie joy. That dastardly small voice in his head was piping up with questions on the practicalities of bringing his damaged brother back to Palo Alto. But now that Sam had spoken, truly conversed with Dean, he didn’t think his problems seemed that insurmountable. It was true that they had been in Dean’s own private space, but Sam could cater for oatmeal breakfasts, sketch pads and helping his brother out with strangers. A small voice supplied that everyone Sam knew would be a stranger to Dean, that Sam was a full time student, and that Dean needed more support than that. However along with rising dread of how he could fuck everything up, came another sweeter disbelief that after all the intervening years Dean had instinctively trusted him with his life and wanted to be taken home by a baby brother who had only been a snot-nosed 6th grader when they were forced apart. It made something glow inside and helped feed both a resolve not to let Dean down and a fierce need to protect his brother. He would make this happen. If they said Dean couldn’t go today then Sam would wait during the 72 hour decision period and be damned late for the new semester. If they went to a judge and forced Dean to stay, Sam would travel to Stanford, get his shit sorted and a gender-rights lawyer and come back to challenge the decision.

“Mr. Winchester?”

This time Naomi’s smile of greeting did not reach her eyes. She spoke with him to the side of the reception desk.

“Dean has requested discharge,” Her voice was grim with a side of accusation, “Have you thought this through?”

Sam thought her question was ridiculous. How could he have thought through a possibility that he had not considered until Dean decided it? “No but can you blame him, after what you told me?”

Naomi squared her shoulders, “This is a good place and a safe one. Ultimately we wish all our residents to find a stable and fulfilling life beyond their time here.”

“Well, Ms Godwin, Dean wants to leave,” Sam said with a determination that didn’t match his inner turmoil.

“Here,” Naomi passed over two slim books and a copy of her report. Sam flipped them round,
reading the titles; ACIC residents’ handbook and Caring for your Relative at Home. “Read those. Have you a motel?”

“No, I, huh, checked out.” Sam had intended on getting miles under his belt once he left Eureka Springs.

“Michelle, please the key to cabin seven, is it back?” Naomi passed the Yale key with its heavy wooden toggle to Sam, “You may stay tonight. Evening meal is served at the café from six until seven, after the hospital meal hour. Dean’s Petition of Discharge Meeting is at 8.30AM. If Dean does not object, you are expected to attend.”

“Can I head back to Dean now?” Sam asked a little stunned at the pace of events.

Naomi gave him a regretful eye, “Visitors are not permitted on weekday evenings and my dear, I think you would both benefit from space to reflect.”

Sam chaffed at the rule but gave a curt nod of agreement. He collected his duffel from the Impala and jogged down the tree lined footpath that wound circuitously along the curved line of cabins. After the third log cabin footsteps crunched behind him. Sam swung round.

Chuck, minus baby, took a pace back and held up his hands in surrender. “Hey dude? So you met Dean?”

Sam squinted in the low light unable to read if the question was curiosity, snooping or concern.

“I roomed next to him.” Chuck spoke at a rapid pace, “He is fixing my radio. Gossie sleeps better with music.”

“The radio is still broken.” Sam supplied suspiciously.

“Hell Man, I wasn’t looking for an update,” Chuck leaned forward, “Aiden said that Dean wants to leave?”

Sam nodded wondering if they were the gossip of the hour but he charitably considered that there might be little else to brighten the residents’ days.

“Wowser.” Chuck huffed and blew a raspberry, “Never thought I’d see the day. I mean I got stuck in psych with my OCD and couldn’t take my meds with Gossie on board, but Dean leaving? Wow.”

“You don’t approve?” Sam challenged.

“No Man, I approve. Hell every religious guy here prays for Dean and every atheist hopes for him. He’s cool is Dean, y’know. I wasn’t here back then,” Chuck’s voice dropped, “but Aiden was and Tom and Yannick who left before Thanksgiving, and Dean is a fighter, a survivor. He’ll make it.”

“Thanks,” Sam clapped the smaller guy on the shoulder, “We have to get the higher ups to let him go first.”

Chuck snorted, “I’d like to see them try to stop him.”

Sam agreed remembering times when Dean stood up to bigger and prejudiced bullies who mocked him for his mutism or targeted Sam for his nerdiness.

Chuck left him at the steps to Cabin Seven with an offer to knock on his place two doors back if he
Someone had turned the heating on in the cabin, probably in the previous hour as the compact home was not chilled but hadn’t reached a snug room temperature yet. The furnishings were utilitarian but Sam could visualize how with personal touches the log cabins would make cozy homes. The main living area had three doors in the far wall. Pushing Goldilocks similarities out of his head, Sam explored a reasonably sized bathroom, a tiny nursery with a bare cot and changing table, and a queen bedroom overlooking the sloping down treetops. The person who’d switched on the heat had left folded bed linens and towels for Sam. With an ingrained routine from living on the road with a Vietnam vet, Sam dressed the bed with military corners. That done he checked out the kitchen cupboards which were empty save for a powdered creamer and coffee can. He sank into the flock patterned sofa and watched Dick Van Dyke reveal that Community General’s new mailman was a murderer. He tuned out and stared at the wooden slated ceiling, tilting his head back to rest his neck on the sofa frame. He indulged in a long sigh. His phone buzzed.

**U OK, Jess**

Sam hit the call button. “Hey Jessie-bear.”

“How’s my favorite beanpole?”

“Okey dokey,” Sam lied with false cheer.

“For real? Sam?” Jess laid on the skepticism.

Words poured out, “Dean wants to come home with me, like to our house, like to live, like permanently.”

“I’ll move the airbed we picked up in IKEA for my sis’s visit into your room.”

Sam sucked a breath at the sudden and complete acceptance of his and Dean’s situation. “The others…?” He began.

“I’ll crack their heads together if they say a word, but honestly Sam, we are your friends and Dean is your blood, your family who was dead yesterday. We are all rooting for you guys.”

Tears threatened to brim over, “God Jess, I won’t be able to scrape enough for two parts of a six way rent split.”

“Are you trying to find reasons to object?” Jess sounded insulted.

“No Ma’am.” Sam gasped a sole chuckle.

“Can’t wait to meet him.” Jess added before they ended the call.

With the phone in his hand Sam contacted Nick, who was full of questions about how Sam was handling the pressure and the stress. After reassuring him, perhaps not completely successfully, Sam filled Nick in on his conversation with Jess and the scheduled discharge meeting.

“You know Luther?”

“The long faced poor tipping misery gut who hovers over Ruby’s table?” Sam checked.

Nick laughed, “That’s him. He’s actually not a bad guy. He’s a gender rights lawyer.”

“Him?” Sam couldn’t picture the dour customer standing up for anyone’s rights.
“And a good one. If you have any queries, let me know and we’ll reap all the unvolunteered tips in legal advice.”

“Karma.” Sam huffed.

“Instant karma, the best kind.” Nick joked.

Left alone with the KARK newscast Sam eschewed the walk back to the main building, instead he consumed his driving snacks and made coffee. He tried to watch some Van Damme movie but gave up. Then he opened Naomi’s report but couldn’t get beyond the preamble which recommended prosecutions for assault, abuse and negligence. He skimmed the caring in your home brochure but much of it was about newborn baby needs and accessibility for the physically disabled. He did take note of information on welfare entitlements and wondered what Dean qualified for. The final booklet made him snort in disgust. The resident’s charter must have been packed in a box and stored in a dusty attic during Dean’s early years there. It outlined rights to clothing, safety, nutrition, religious freedom, high standard of care, hygiene, personal belongings, privacy, visitors, communication including phone calls and free mail, medical, dental, education, vocational training, and to raise a grievance. There was also the right to refuse to participate in work and to be paid union rates for any work/training undertaken. There was a single page on the procedure for leaving ACIC and within that a paragraph on psychiatric discharge. Sam was dismayed to find that 72 hours was in fact three working days, excluding Saturday and Sunday, so they could hold Dean until Tuesday while they decided on his petition. The home could release him ASAP, let the 72 hours run out and Dean could walk, or apply for an involuntary hold. In addition if Dean was to leave, ACIC committed to liaising with social services and federal agencies.

The sound of a phone ringing jerked Sam’s nose out of the handbook. He located an old style black house phone. There was breathing on the other end of the line. Sam waited knowing for sure this was no prank call.

“Night Sammy.”

“Goodnight Dean. Sleep well.” Sam responded before a click signaled the end of that conversation. He floated through his nightly routine and as soon as his head hit the pillow he was out.

Sam was showered, shaved, and at the vacant front desk at 8.15AM. Deacon appeared from an office with a morning greeting. “Will we go get Dean?”

Ten minutes later Sam stood in a cleared down hospital room. Dean had removed every memento from his walls. He had purloined two corrugated cardboard vegetable crates from the kitchen and they were filled with the sum of his belongings. The spider plant occupied the box that previously held Chuck’s radio. He was ready to go. Sam took in that Dean was wearing all the clothes. He had desert boots, jeans, a brown Henley with a black tee peaking behind the buttons, a grey overshirt, a denim jacket, navy scarf and matching beanie. A glance into a crate revealed a single heavy sweater with a paint splash, some underclothes and pajamas.

At Sam’s pursed lips and wide eyes Dean protested a mumbled, “‘S cold.”

Sam was abashed. Of course Dean would be cold after the unnatural heat of an enclosed ward when outside the paths were fringed with ice.

The meeting took place in an adjunct to Naomi’s office. The Director, Layla, Deacon, Michelle, and an imposing senior nurse by the name of Donnie Finnerman took their seats at a conference table that still held jotted sheets from the previous morning’s social committee meeting. Dean shot
Donnie dirty looks. The nurse remained blank faced but Sam wasn’t comfortable.

“Why is Nurse Finnerman here?” Sam asked on his brother’s behalf.

“Donnie is a valued member of the mental health team.” Naomi supplied.

Dean wrinkled his nose as if he smelled dog crap.

“Dean doesn’t seem to rate you,” Sam said pointedly to the straight backed man with his shaved head glowing under the strip lighting.

Naomi sighed, “Donnie has been with ACIC for a decade. He was one of the whistleblowers, who railed against the old regime.”

Dean shot Sam a significant look of derision. Sam pushed his chair closer to Dean partially blocking his view of the nurse. Dean’s muscle tension relaxed back a notch.

“Shall we commence?” Naomi did not wait for an answer. “Present are Naomi Godwin Director, Layla Rourke, Resident Psychiatrist, Richard Deacon, Senior social worker, Donald Finnerman, Senior nurse, Dean Winchester, petitioner, Sam Winchester, family member and Michelle Hussein, notetaker.

Deacon spoke next, “Dean has been a patient at ACIC since May 1996. Until eighteen he was a ward of state and involuntary admission due to his suicide risk. At his status review in the year 2000 Dean was reclassified as a voluntary resident indigent regarding insurance. The hospital is in receipt of his supplemental security income. Dean has submitted a 3-day letter requesting immediate discharge.”

Throughout Dean’s face remained blank but his eyelid twitched. Sam turned his attention to Layla who outlined Dean’s confused initial diagnosis and her assessment of his generalized anxiety disorder with selective mutism. She described him as sheltered and naive and was concerned about his vulnerability outside the care home.

That earned a loud snort from the petitioner.

“Dean,” Naomi placed her clasped hands on the table, “We have many concerns for your wellbeing. For instance, Sam, we are apprehensive about how will Dean cope with house sharing and not having the privacy of his own bedroom?”

Dean swung his finger between him and Sam and made a sleeping pose with his palms pressed together under his tilted ear. Sam was quick to interpret verbally about how they always shared until Dean was taken away. Dean picked up on the forced tinge to the words ‘taken away’ and leaned over to pat Sam’s leg with a sad smile that asked if he was OK.

“I’m good, Dean. It’s fine.” He answered.

Layla was the one who spoke for the others’ stunned expressions, “I think you could say that Sam is fluent in Dean.”

Both Winchesters beamed at her.

She fixed Dean with narrow eyes, “You know if you go, then there won’t be a thrice daily medication distribution. You’d have to commit to continuing your scripts.”

“What meds?” Sam asked as Dean nodded his agreement.
“20mg of Citalopram taken in the morning. Blue band Penandrocol also before breakfast. A multivitamin and mineral with lunch. A light sleeping pill at evening call and Dean is administered Xanax when necessary.” Donnie answered. “We dispense a month’s supply to those discharged into the care of a family member and give a letter for the patient’s new physician and case worker.”

“What is Citaloprommie and I think I heard of Xanax?” Sam asked.

“Citalopram is for Dean’s anxiety.” Layla responded, “Xanax is for acute anxiety attacks. Penandrocol…”

“Yeah, I know. That’s my brand of oral pill too,” Sam cut in.

Dean gasped and pointed at his brother.

“Yeah, me too, bro.” Sam huffed, “meant to tell you in different circumstances but we are two carrier peas in a pod.”

Dean made a silent wow shape with his lips.

“I’ll help Dean with his meds, we’ll find a family physician in Palo Alto. Are you going to stop him from leaving?” Sam challenged.

Naomi answered, “Our concerns are valid. You are nineteen years old, a full time student, and I do not believe you have comprehended how much assistance and time you will need to provide to your brother. Previously institutionalized people are an ‘at risk’ group in society. Dean must be able to survive and thrive or be assisted to do so.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll do anything.” Sam wiped his nose with his arm. He hadn’t realized he was becoming emotional.

“Sammy,” Dean’s voice steadied him.

Naomi continued with a smile, “I got in touch with Santa Clara county yesterday before their San Jose office closed. Michelle faxed Dean’s applications for his food stamps entitlement and the release of his full SSI supplemental security income from February 1st. The ticket to work program will have an operational support manager or job coach to help him find his required minimum 12 hours gainful employment. Dean will keep his SSI money on sliding scale and his Medi-cal until he is at a sustainable gainful wage. A lot of this would have been done in ACIC if he was on our re-integration program. Santa Clara’s carrier-at-risk case worker also runs the safe baby surrender program, he tells me Dean is entitled to Medi-Cal. The clinic is in San Jose but there is an outreach program linked to Stanford Teaching Hospital and we have faxed a request for Dean to be registered there. He will need to meet with his case worker and there will be a home visit to ensure Dean has a stable place of residence.”

“I can go?” Dean checked.

“Yes Dean, you may go.” Naomi’s stern expression softened as she added, “but you will be missed.”

Dean pulled Sam up into a celebratory hug. Sam’s heart burst in his chest. Dean could leave. And they had helped set up all the stuff Sam had no clue about. He rounded the table shaking each person’s hand. Michelle looked startled to be included.

“You stay in touch now Dean,” Deacon said with a back clap for the older Winchester, “You know
we don’t like to lose track of our guys.”

Dean nodded with a grin. Sam remembered the cards on Dean’s wall and the pictures in Naomi’s office.

Layla pulled Dean’s outer sleeve, “No running straight for your brother’s muscle car. There’s folks here who’d like to wish you well.” She added for Sam’s ear, “I need to sign out Dean’s meds for you and give you a copy of his normal routine to help you as Dean adjusts to his new life.”

“You’ll get good karma for this,” Sam replied giving the slight blonde a squeeze.

Dean eye rolled him.

“Get used to the hippy dippy Dee, we are North Cali bound.” Sam winked.

Dean’s laughter was like a tonic. It filled Sam’s soul and made his insides warm and toasty. The Winchester brothers were back together. Sam vowed nothing was going to beat them. He was finally and incredibly taking his big brother home.

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Chapter End Notes

My carrier social security entitlements are founded in internet research on California's system but obviously AU regarding details.

Next chapter will be posted on Sunday and will be from Dean's POV.

Thanks for all your comments, bookmarks and kudos, and for reading.
<3
Dean hunched his shoulders and shuffled closer to the wall. He’d left the rec room after Kit had slammed his hand onto the table and scattered pieces of Chuck’s obsessively arranged jigsaw. Kit was new, a street kid picked up by cops in Pine Bluff, high on a cocktail of methamphetamines. Nurse Brownlee confided her knowledge to Dean saying the new patient was going through severe withdrawal. The skinny blond had screamed about demons and evil eyed wookies until Brownlee and Finnerman came to restrain him. Dean slipped slowly and silently out of the room while the newer boys watched Finnerman get to exercise his moves and others focused on six-month-pregnant Chuck’s distress. Dean fought back remembered feelings of Donnie Finnerman’s cruel fingers tightening his old belt-to-chair restraint too much or administering tranqs to his butt via syringe. He had to retreat before he landed in Xanax territory, but now his room was being mopped out by the cute singing janitor.

"Yo, Dean." The buzz haired guy paused in his humming to gift a suggestive wink. "Still not a word of greeting for old Caleb?"

Dean felt a blush rise. The guy wasn’t old, only a couple of years on Dean, he estimated. He fumbled with his fingers. This wasn’t the distraction he’d sought but Caleb was chatty, friendly and kind of hot. He often joked with Dean and filled him in on events outside and happenings with the staff and residents inside.

"Not even if I sneaked you a sachet of plant food for that blade leafed monstrosity that you keep as a pet?"

Dean huffed and made his head incline of gratitude.

"De nada, man," Caleb wrung out the mop and gave the floor a final sweep, "So how come you vacated the party venue?"

Dean snapped his fingers with a grave look.

"Uh huh. Someone went down. I see. Some dude’s getting tough lovin’"

This time Dean’s huff was one of derision. Caleb had no idea. He wasn’t there long, hadn’t been employed when Dean’s mind was kept like fudge, they controlled every move he made and his body betrayed him in the simplest of tasks. He shook out his shoulders and arms like a dog emerging from a lake swim. Dr Rourke told him to shake off the negative weight of his befuddled memories.

Caleb had resumed his solo performance with an off key rendition of Pink Floyd. At "We don’t need no thought control" Dean snorted and croaked out "Really Dude?"

Caleb dropped the mop. It clattered to the floor startling Dean almost as much as the janitor was taken aback by Dean’s rusty voice.

"Shit yeah, poor song choice, my bad," Caleb smiled gingerly, "Hey now that we are on speaking terms and all, would you tell me something?"
“Sh-sh-shoot,” Dean forced out. He liked it when the other man smiled.

Caleb pointed to the well rubbed charcoal and pencil mixed A5 piece of Halloween 1991 with Dean and Sam as Starfleet officers. The reality had been Sam in a tight blue long sleeved tee and Dean in a deep red version. Dean had found some shiny silver iron-on patches in an ‘any for a quarter’ basket at the goodwill store and had cut them into Starfleet combadge shapes. He was proud of that drawing. It was monochrome but it captured Sam’s awe at their simple costumes. Mr Donohue, the ACIC art teacher, gave him an A+ for it.

Caleb’s question made Dean laugh so much he grasped the janitor’s bicep for support.

"Kirk or Picard?"

"Kirk," Dean rasped.

Caleb’s dry calloused hand squeezed over Dean’s affectionately, shooting thrills down the touch starved patient’s nerves. "A man of taste with a sexy voice and killer eyes," Caleb grinned, "See you tomorrow, Winchester."

In Dean’s head he replied that it was a date. It was cool to have something to look forward to. As he mixed the plant food granules into water and tended to Spider, shining her leaves and monitoring the progress of her dangling offspring, he pondered if Caleb would like a baby spider plant and what the smiling man’s chapped lips would taste and feel like if Dean got the opportunity to kiss them.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++

A kaleidoscope of images from the morning blended and mingled with the wonder of driving out ACIC’s gates with his brother. Dean understood this high was the rush of excitement and his reaction to the teary goodbyes he had received and the pounding back claps he had administered in response. Dean could feel the ghost of the Impala’s cool black metal exterior when he had removed his gloves to stroke her bodywork with his fingers. He was tempted to blow a raspberry out the rear window at the retreating gates but he didn’t for fear of boggling Sam’s mind. As they made their way west Dean sneaked furtive glances at his grown up brother. Floppy haired, tanned, earnest and tall, but still fundamentally his Sammy. They were going to California. Sam could have taken him to Mecca or Mars and he’d have left with the same enthusiasm.

Sam filled the silence with his edited highlights of the discharge meeting, making comments about Naomi’s expressions, Layla’s smiles and how Michelle’s hand had flown across her notepad, compared to the pace of his note taking skills at lectures. Dean added intermittent huffs and nods of agreement as he allowed Sam to crow as if they had achieved a victory over tyranny.

Dean began to feel peckish not long into their journey. He poked Sam and pointed at his wrist to ask the time.

Sam wrinkled his brow, “What Dean? Oh, it’s almost twelve.”

Dean didn’t want to be any trouble. Sam was already taking him away. But it was time. He didn’t want to ask Sam to pause but he was too jittery. He rubbed his belly and licked dry lips.

“Oh you’re hungry? I guess we can stop, we’re just coming up on Fayetteville.” Sam said airily.

At Subway, Dean snagged two stools at the bar running along the window. He liked to eat with a view. Having a perspective on the world was important. Two mothers, with kids in strollers, eyed him quite blatantly but not a ‘wanting to jump his bones’ way, rather a ‘do I need to protect my
children from this strange man’ way. He willed his feet to move faster and made sure his back was to all the strangers in the restaurant. Sam, oblivious, went to order and came back with a 6 inch Italian bread sub of chicken breast and mayo with a bottle of water and a choc chip cookie. He perched next to Dean with his own 6 inch subway melt with chips. It wasn’t his regular lunch from the hospital kitchen, but it was time to put into practice all Layla’s advice about being flexible. The sub was good, lip-smacking open-mouthed-chew better than hospital food. Sam eye rolled and muttered about Dean’s disgusting eating habits not having changed. It made something tingle inside and he bumped Sam’s shoulder making him spill a mini-wave of soda.

When Dean had helped his brother mop up his soda lake with their pile of napkins, he turned round. The moms were gone. He needed the restroom before they got back on the road. He kept a keen eye out for creeper dudes. Nervous of urinals he took the only cubicle. Dudes were filthy creatures. Last guy hadn’t flushed. Dean scrubbed his hands thrice with soap before leaving. He knew he was slow at his task and in his motion but he knew too that Sam would wait. He remembered chasing Sam, zipping around cars in Bobby’s or in motel parking lots. He’d made the track team in a couple of schools they had attended. He tried his best not to shuffle but his feet seemed to drag as he emerged onto the restaurant floor. Sam looked discretely away. Dean knew Sam couldn’t understand. His slow movement began with the times that he was heavily drugged, a combination of overmedication and side effects on his co-ordination, but when weaned off the old dark days’ regime, Dean still shuffled. He’d ‘discussed’ it with Layla, who told him with practice, effort and willpower he could overcome it. It wasn’t physical damage, but psychological or psychosomatic, learned behavior or some other spouted shrink-theory. Time didn’t matter so much on the ward. Why speed up when there was nowhere to go? It was also protective – Go unnoticed and stay quiet. If Dean gave no trouble, then trouble did not seek him out.

"I know you ate at five back in the hospital. We could stop for diner food about then and drive on, if that’s ok with you Dean?" Sam asked as they belted up.

Dean nodded. He was fine with that. It was close to his schedule and he reminded himself that he would find a new routine in Sam’s home. Travelling was a little like the holidays, with school closed for Christmas or how at Easter Father Moriarty gave extra masses. Also Dean had not forgotten his life before, on the road pulled from place to place by their father. Appreciating Sam’s driving skills and imagining one day getting back behind the wheel made for a more pleasurable journey.

"'s like a vacation." Dean spoke aloud without realizing it.

Sam laughed, "An unplanned one. I work Friday nights."

Raised eyebrows asked for more details. Dean wanted to know all about Sam’s life. He liked it when Sam filled the miles with his voice. It lifted Dean like wings. He could feel the bright Cali sunshine as they left the Ozarks behind.

"Where do I start?" Sam shrugged, "My scholarship pays tuition and a small stipend towards accommodation, but Dee I’d have been wanted for murder if I had to spend another year in dorms, rooming with a party animal whose chief claim to fame was his aversion to personal hygiene."

Dean winced. He made a back of the throat hum in sympathy.

"So I suppose great minds think alike. My friends Brady and Jessica wanted out. Sarah was in the same Psychology of Art class as Jess. Andy seemed to just find us as we decided to find our own place. I summered in Palo Alto and Jessica had summer electives. Together we found a rambling five bed stand alone with this sweet wraparound porch. Plus it’s close to campus." There was a sigh. It began to rain. Sam switched on the wipers.
Dean wondered what Sam’s buddies really thought about him bringing his older brother to live with them all. He hoped they wouldn’t be all over him like a rash or be jerks about it. If they were Sam’s friends, there was a good shot that they were decent folks.

"A few hours cataloguing in the library wasn’t going to cut it for the rent. I knew I’d need a vacation job that would keep me on reduced hours once my Fall semester started up. Jobs like that are gold in a student town."

"You got one?" Dean asked, already proud of his brother before hearing any details.

"Condensed version? Yes. Brady was headed home to Chicago. His job as dishwasher was open. I didn’t want to steal his part time gig but maybe they would take on a second college kid. Off I went brim full of gusto to The Gates of Hell."

The feeling of his eyes widening at the choice of business name linked in with Sam’s snicker at his reaction.

"Tagline ‘Have your Devil’s Food Cake and Eat It’. I near choked from laughing at the cheesiness when I first read it on a matchstrike at the bar." Sam paused for breath, "It’s not a club or an exclusive venue, but it’s popular in the gay community and is one of those places that carriers can hook up in a relaxed zone."

Dean huffed at the notion. He’d heard plenty of stories from other residents about places to hook up. Sam was working at one. Being a kid when he was sent away, he’d never frequented any of the places other guys talked about at group or mentioned wanting to visit.

"So this British guy, Fergus, call-me-Crowley, interviewed me. I was kinda distracted by the black, red and purple demonic décor and there’s this mirrored wall behind a bar fitted with thin lacquered shelves of liquor bottles. Turned out I was up for the role of combined food server, host, busboy and general dogsbody. Crowley talked, mostly about himself and his hate for the day manager Alastair who robbed the other half of his pseudonym. When I was told to wear black trousers and a button down and handed a white waist apron embossed with Hell’s Helper in red thread, it sunk in that I’d been hired. So then he tells me I’d need my own tacky stage name. I was trying to think one up while I got a lecture on the confidentiality of working there. Some diners don't want it known that they're carriers, not to mention those who are in the closet about their sexuality."

They lapsed into a brief silence. Sam seemed far away. Dean prompted him to continue.

"A warm hand pressed against my shoulder and under my ear was breathed ‘Welcome to Hell. Good choice Fergus, his name is fine.’ A hand placed a white post-it with Samael written in red sharpie onto the counter. I twisted round and saw the back of a departing blond headed man in a grey pinstripe jacket. It was freaking weird but, I dunno, touching." Sam’s voice had softened.

"Who was it?" Dean asked absorbed in the story.

“Nick, the owner, during working hours he’s Lucifer.” Sam grinned across, “yep really committed to the hell theme. We’re a gang of demons working in Hell but actually just a bunch of employees who’ve become like another family. They’re a bit more clique-ish and older on day shifts, with Alastair ruling from the bar and an old queen, alias of Vepar, in charge of the floor. The evening crew are my usual bunch. There’s Crowley, who wore his suit even in the hottest weather, Lilith, who might be trans, the chef who may really be a knife throwing demon, and my sarcastic relief from obnoxious customers Paimonia, but that’s such a mouthful everyone uses her real name Meg. Friday night’s the busiest one, with the attendance of Ruby. Dunno if Ruby’s employed by Lucifer or has created a tradition of holding court at a high round table under a red chandelier. Ruby’s a
matchmaker, or a maker of introductions she prefers."

It sounded like a whole different world to Dean, like on some TV show. He knew people worked at themed restaurants but Dean hadn’t thought about the details of much any kind of work except fixing up cars.

"Nick thinks Ruby is teasing me, trying to break through my so called ‘veil of secrecy.’" Sam chuckled, "She likes to try and link me up with eye-batting twink carriers. Before break she introduced me to this high flying executive looking for a submissive, not knowing the suit had been in my section for dinner service. I knocked her petite ass off her high stool for that one."

"Go Sammy," Dean blurted in support. He didn’t like the sound of this Ruby. Sammy was working. How dare she try and push him into dates with strange guys.

"Hmm, I caught Lucifer giving her a piece of his mind on that occasion. I hope she’ll tone it down now. It’s kinda hard to wait tables when she sets an effeminate masseuse trailing after me."

"Should quit." Dean hissed, offended on his brother’s behalf.

"Crap, Dee. I’ve given you the wrong impression. Ruby’s only there Fridays and she’s kept busy with networking. I need to lighten up, y’know. I just don’t want it broadcast that I’m a carrier, it’s my private business." Sam sucked his lip. "Now I do Monday and Friday evenings and a double on Saturday. Mondays are like a morgue. Lucifer serves bar tallying his weekend receipts in the corner while I serve our few regulars. Fits around my college commitments."

Dean grunted for Sam to continue. He needed to settle Sam’s routine around him like a cloak over his shoulders.

"I’m in classes all day, but there’s gaps for library, gym and stuff. I’m late with tutorials on Tuesday. I guess we can switch things up. I usually study and hang out with the guys on Thursday and Sunday and there’s a campus comedy club I get dragged kicking and screaming to on a Wednesday. Some of Andy’s buds take to the stage and have delusions of being comedians. But none of that is set in stone. Hey! The miles have flown by. You must be sick of hearing my voice."

Dean nodded with a faux serious expression, until Sam twigged that he was being mocked and guffawed loudly.

Over two shared pizzas in Clinton Oklahoma, Sam filled Dean in about Jess, Brady, Sarah and Andy; what each of them studied and sports they played. He didn’t retain much of it with divine cheesy goodness in his mouth, but he picked up that Brady was on the lacrosse team and was pre-law like Sam had put in his scholarship application but Sam wasn’t all that sure now that he had taken lots of new classes that he wanted to be a lawyer. Back on the road Dean learned that Bobby was the same old ornery gruff stalwart and he perked his ears about Bobby’s role in Sam coming to take him away from Arkansas.

“You know the guy, the one they said …” Sam spoke hesitantly and didn’t glance over to meet Dean’s eyes, “...took advantage of you. That’s what the letter was about.”

“Didn’t” Dean insisted. “Caleb was my friend and wanted to help me live outside.”

“Did he tell you that?” Sam probed.

Dean thought he’d make a great cross examiner of recalcitrant witnesses.

“Yeah but guess I wasn’t worth the hassle cos he never came back when they sacked his ass,”
Dean grunted out. The taint of his presumed friend’s betrayal made his shoulders slump.

“Or maybe he was a dick.” Sam pronounced.

“He had a very pretty dick,” Dean snorted.

Sam gaped, “Geez Dean, I’m fricking at the wheel here, man.”

“What about you, any cute chicks? Jess or Sarah?” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and made an obscene gesture with a tunnel of fingers and his other pointer finger thrusting in and out.

Sam cleared his throat and then gulped for good measure. “Not for me.” He licked his bottom lip, “I’m gay.”

Dean nodded in understanding. Many male carriers were biologically attracted to other men. Others weren’t and had very fulfilling heterosexual lives.

“Maybe one of my housemate ‘hotties’ will be captivated by your man-beauty. Gender never put a limit on you before.” Sam gave a single brow wiggle as his body posture relaxed. Dean wondered if Sam had held unfounded worries about telling him that he was gay. He presumed John was kept to thoughts of Batesville. A pinch of Aaron and their brief scrap of created life clenched his heart, but Dean bobbed his head at his younger brother’s comment. He doubted any privileged polished college chick would want a scarred and battered GED educated mute with only a promised welfare check, a spider plant and some sketches to his name.

The purr of the Impala in the dark evening, without the grease oil, sweated out beer, and harsh orders of his father, was comforting and lulled Dean into a half-dozing nap. Sam woke him in Amarillo. Their motel had a sameness that soothed Dean’s anxieties. It’s only nod to a change of millennium was the coin operated internet terminal at reception. It was later than locked down hour by the time they were checked in. Dean needed a shower after their day on the road. He plunked his jammies on top of the scratchy motel towel. Before heading into the tiled shower room he popped the stud fasteners on his wrist cuffs. He saw Sam watching with that puppy dog gaze of worry. Turning his palms up Dean looked at the crisscrossed ridged mess he had made of his lower arms.

Then Sam was sitting on the bed beside him, denim thighs and shoulders pressed together like yesterday. The younger brother took a hand in both of his and rubbed gently over the scars.

“I wish…” Sam’s voice trailed away.

Dean had wished a load bucket load of bullshit over the last few years and none of it had done him a scrap of good.

He took a long breath and felt all Sam’s love and worries seep through their skin. “I…I… they showed me the waiver D-dad signed… he fuck, fuckity fucking left me there and my baby… my baby died, Sam.”

Dean quivered and shook in his brother’s arms letting out years of held back grief for lives he had lost; his proto-baby and his own. Sam held him and let him sob. Dean gripped Sam’s shirt and fist into the thin cotton. He felt like Sam was holding him up like a life preserver in a sea of tears. Finally when every salty river had run down his face, he mumbled that he was good and Sam gingerly pulled back. Dean retreated into the shower and tried his best to banish his long forgotten foolish happy families first trimester daydreams.
When he came out of the shower, Sam was on the phone. His eyes were blotched as if he’d had his own fit of weeping. Dean tried to remain unobtrusive as he turned down the bed clothes.

“The airbed isn’t for Dean,” Sam protested. “Of course he can’t sleep long-term on an air mattress. I’m taking the narrow berth.”

Dean thought he’d have to thrash that one out with his baby brother before they reached Stanford.

“You can’t gift me the staff futon.”

Dean had his back turned to Sam but he still huffed in surprise. Was that Sam’s boss? The one who made him speak in a hushed soft tone and brought a flush to Sam’s cheeks.

“Redecorating our chubby hole is a likely story but you’ve trapped yourself now ‘Lucifer’. I’ll know you were telling porkies if we have nowhere new to sit when on breaks.” A beaming dimpled grin broke across his brother’s face. It was a sight that warmed Dean.

Sam gave an obligatory eye roll when he ended the call. “Guess you’ve inherited a bed, Dean. It’s actually real comfortable and a queen bed size. And it folds up if you want. Nick ‘claims’ he doesn’t want it and he already has a trailer hired for the weekend.”

The next morning was a bit more difficult for Dean. He didn’t feel like talking, but luckily Sam knew that sometimes no matter who he was with the words didn’t come. They switched from one local radio station to another as they travelled. Dean’s eyes ate in all the place-signs, billboards and scenery they past. The world seemed to be expanding in front of him. They’d shot through some strangely named town and continued through empty New Mexican land, with only the occasional bush to distract Dean from the minutes ticking past noon. He tried to be cool about it. There was nowhere for a rest stop in this barren land. His agitation wasn’t listening to his brain. His big toe curled and uncurled in his boot and the dreaded tremble of anxiety moved from his gut to his hands. He clasped his fingers together to hide it from Sammy. The dryness in his mouth wasn’t his normal Citalorpram side effect and the rawness in his belly wasn’t hunger. Hell he had gone days without a hot meal as a kid making sure that Sam was well fed. It was Saturday which was an odd day at ACIC too. It was an open day for visitors and Dean retreated to their boxy library room, never knowing if or when there would be a volunteer to see him. So really, he comforted himself, riding along in a Chevy wasn’t the problem. Their journey was an immutable fact and Dean could be fatalistic about any consequences and could trust Sam to lead the way. Stopping for lunch and his vitamin pill shouldn’t be an issue. He started to squeeze his left arm cuff and lick his lips to alleviate his dry mouth.

“You want one of those mini water bottles before we hit Santa Rosa for their best chicken sub?”

Dean closed his eyes and asked “And a Xanax?”

“Shit,” Sam swerved into the emergency lane. “I’m sorry. Sheez, I can’t even make a decent job of driving you home.”

Sam leaned over the bench seat and rooted in the black and white polka dot vanity case that flamboyant new dad Stevie had given Dean as a parting gift. He uncapped the tub of Xanax, “One, Dean?”

The heartfelt sincerity made Dean bite back a smart remark about Nurse Sam. He took the small pill with a gulp of water.

“Better?” Sam asked.
Dean snorted. They weren’t magic beans. The chemicals needed to get into his bloodstream. However the placebo effect of having taken the medication at least permitted his heart to slow down from racing to Prizefighter in Madison Square Gardens pace.

Sam pointed at a Route 66 tourism billboard advertising that it was 13 miles to Santa Rosa. Dean could deal. He even coped when they put ranch dressing on his sandwich and gave him a strange chocolaty treat called a Tim Tam as the cookie element in the Australian-native owned main street diner. Dean narrowed his eyes at a thin pastry encased apple pie that was entitled as an English Tart on the card in the glass display case.

“You want a slice?” Sam offered with a grin, “You need your applesauce fix?”

Dean wheezed a yes. His voice was lost in the prospect of trying a new type of pie. It came with a scoop of proper vanilla flecked ice-cream and was heated to perfection. He forgave the baker the whole clove he found in the luscious apple filling. When their bouncy teen waitress asked if they enjoyed their meal, Dean gave her a thumbs up and grinned all the way back to the car.

Sam clapped him on the arm, “That Xanax must be the good stuff.”

“Naw Sammy,” Dean got in the last word, “Was the pie.”

Satisfied, he got comfortable for the next stage of their journey. He wondered if he’d be able to drive the Impala one day, when he’d improved more. He knew his co-ordination wasn’t great since the dark days. He had decent finger control for drawing and writing but he tended to drop shit if he didn’t get a proper grip and he had his shuffling issue. And then there was the 15 hour driving ban after he’d taken his night time Ambien.

Things were looking up as the day progressed. They stopped at a wild west themed joint in Gallup for green chili burritos. It was so cool he snagged a beer mat and slotted it into his box of sketchpads. Sam wanted to know if he’d like one beer but alcohol and his meds didn’t mix. They got to Flagstaff early enough to watch a movie in their room. Dean was so wrecked he refused his sleeping pill. He was drowsy at the end credits and flopped face down into his bed.

Strong hands shook his shoulders jerking him awake. “Dean? Dean? Wake up dude, you were screaming.”

Lingering tendrils of fear made the older Winchester pant and reach out for his brother. The nightmare was fading but he could still feel cold tiles under his cheek, cruel hands on his head, neck and limbs, as they put him down and wrapped him up. He gulped and tried to breathe through the terror of being lifted onto a trolley and rolled down to the seclusion room, left staring at the ceiling in 5-point restraint until he soiled the plastic mattress and they’d built up his shots of tranqs so much he drooled and his tongue was swollen against the roof of his mouth.

“Sam.” He croaked.

“Yeah, I’m here.” A big warm hand wrapped around his.

“It was a bad place.”

“I know, I know Dean,” Sam soothed.

Sam didn’t know. He couldn’t know, but the words acted as a balm. Sam sat on the side of his bed holding his hand until Dean drifted back into a dreamless sleep. The following morning it was decided that they shouldn’t mess with his medication and there was a reason for the Ambien. Sam took him to IHOP. Dean was almost smug that he had a brother good enough to sit with him
through night terrors and take note of his scheduled breakfast choices. They had hot buttery stacks.

“After pancakes, I go to Mass.” Dean said as he dabbed his sticky mouth with a napkin.

“Huh, that might a problem.” Sam shifted in his seat. “I mean do you really want to go? You’re not all Jesus Freak are ya?”

“Father Moriarty…” Dean didn’t know how to explain. When everything is black and someone offers you hope in faith.

“Well God never answered any of my prayers. How was there a God when you were dead?”

“I’m not dead.” Dean gasped before his throat tightened up at the approach of a family taking the next table.

Outside, Dean stopped Sam, “You came and got me.”

Sam folded his arms, stubborn and unmoved. “You think that was God? Why’d he wait six and half years then?”

Dean shrugged. “Don’t mean to insult you, Sammy, Father Moriarty, he visited me, he talked to me like I was a person not a problem. When I couldn’t go on he’d take my confession.”

“Let’s just get on the road.” Sam huffed but Dean could tell his fairly innocuous recollection of the priest had upset his brother. He guessed maybe he shouldn't have implied that he had thought about ending it all. When Sam opened the door for him Dean complied.

They pushed on but Sam wanted a rest stop in Kingman. A church with open doors was across the street. They had missed the service but Sam didn’t protest when Dean entered the building and lit a candle for simple thanksgiving. Dean silently mouthed a few prayers in the shot gun seat. It was sort of good that he’d missed the service. He wasn’t sure how well he would have interacted with a congregation of normal people.

He tapped Sam on the elbow and said sorry.

Sam gave his own apology. “You were never big on the church, Dean. I mean you use to fidget at Pastor Jim’s and roll your eyes when he tried to entertain us with parables. I guess I get it though.”

As they travelled with some of Dean’s old metal favorites in the cassette player Dean had time for his thoughts to drift. He hoped he wouldn’t annoy Sammy with his needs. He’d tried to picture living in Sammy’s house. There’d be a window in their bedroom and a kitchen and a bathroom, and there might be a TV where he could choose his own viewing, if the other kinda scary sounding residents didn’t mind. He was a bit nervous of Jess and Sarah. He figured that he’ll figure out Brady and Andy soon enough. The guys at the hospital always fell into jerk, pothead, shitbag, snotnosed or good guy territory. He hoped Sammy’s judgment meant they’d fall into the last group. He imagined he’d get to meet Sam’s workmates too. He’d picked up on Sam subtle cues that he was crushing on his boss. He wondered if Sam knew or was in denial about the attraction. He was ashamed to admit that it made him a tad jealous. He envied Sam his friends and his admirer/object of desire. Loneliness was difficult in the hospital. Night after night alone in his room. He made friends with some of the others, like Chuck and Aiden, Robbie and George who had left, and even Kit in the end. But it was a lonesome existence. He missed the carefree unmonitored companionship of others. Sometimes he jerked off under the sheets with thoughts of chicks and boys, ones he had met, smokin’ ones on TV, and an imaginary one who would cherish him and hold him in the night.
They drove long into the evening, pausing only for gas, rest stops and the Golden Arches drive-in at Bakersfield. Dean thought that when he finally closed his peepers he’d see the road moving in front of him.

He refused to ask for a Xanax as they took the turn onto Cowper St in Palo Alto and the Impala rumbled to a stop beside a candy-pink vintage Volkswagen Beetle in the two car port of a picturesque Victorian era home.

Dean had not yet extracted his stiff legs from the vehicle when four bronzed and healthy looking people barreled out of the house. The chicks wore their pajamas, the dark haired guy had an Adidas track suit on and the tall blond dude wore tomato sauce splattered kitchen whites. They swamped Sam in hugs which were returned with enthusiasm. Dean leaned against the side panel and tried to shrink out of their curious gazes.

“Introduce us,” The peppy blond bouncing on her heels demanded as she linked Sam’s elbow and yanked him forward to Dean’s position.

Jessica kissed both his cheeks and told him Sam was family which meant Dean was too. Sarah was more reserved but smiled as she shook his hand. Andy smelled suspiciously of josh sticks and he was way too mellow as he asked Dean if he played Doom or Air Combat. Dean shook his head and pleaded to Sam with his eyes.

“Andy got a Playstation 2 for his birthday.” Sam huffed. “He thinks he is king of the gamers.”

“Cos I am.” Andy announced before taking Sam’s duffel and heading for the house.

The final greeter was Brady. “Nice to meet you Dean.” The student back clapped him, “Sam’s my best bud, you know, and we’re all happy as clams for him.”

Dean nodded. When he looked in the back seat all his belongings had gone, being carried into the house by the others. Only the eccentric vanity case remained for Dean to bear. He was grateful but blushed at the way Sam beckoned from the bottom of the porch steps for Dean to make his way. Brady had Spider. He admired the verdant plant tactfully ignoring how slow Dean was.

“Hey Sam. Nick was here.”

“What?” Sam blinked.

Sarah answered from where she was holding open the door, “He showed up this morning in his Lexus with a following delivery from Sullivans. The place was empty and they were waiting here when I came around the corner from my 3 mile run.”

“Dude’s got it bad for you Sam!” Andy shouted from inside.

Sam blushed and stammered that he was only taking the old futon from the staff room.

Jessica and Andy laughed. Brady clicked his tongue, “We got a new corner sofa in the break-pit, and you got Nick so wrapped around your innocent little pinkie that the boss was here for an hour supervising as they assembled his purchase and placed it as he saw fit.”

Sam bolted up the stairs.

Jessica held a hand out to Dean, and Sarah took his meds case. They walked up at a more leisurely pace, finding a stunned Sam in the large bedroom overlooking the street below.
There was a brand spanking new small-queen sized futon dressed in blue and white stripes. A rag-style rainbow floor mat was rolled up under the window. Sam pointed at it and blurted out that the mat used to live where the futon had appeared. On top of the new furniture piece was a stack of fluffy towels, and still packaged bed linen, topped with a plan-free Nokia in its box. Dean bent from the waist to squint at a post-it saying there was twenty dollars credit on it and Sam’s numbers programmed into it.

“Hell, how am I going to repay him for this.” Sam huffed and plunked onto his own bed.

Dean put down the box of his first ever cell phone. He jerked his head at the female audience, who waved as they retreated.

“He’s your friend.” Dean said when he was sure they were alone.

“If I had any doubts on that score they are gone, but wow, I mean, wow Dean.”

“You wanna call him?”

Sam laughed, “I almost expect you to ruffle my hair and teach me to say thank you. Yeah. I’ll call him.”

Dean explored the rest of the upper storey, finding an art print decorated bedroom and a josh stick stinky one, before the bathroom. He took his time giving his brother the chance to talk. When he approached their room (and those two words were blindingly glorious) Sam was still speaking. His tone was warm and sprinkled with brief chuckles. Dean guessed any embarrassment or sense of unworthiness had been dealt with. He raised a hand to tell Sam to ignore him as he took his blister pack of sleeping pills with him. He gripped the hand rail tight and stuck his courage to the wall. He ventured down to the housemates, but it was fine. Only Jess was in the kitchen making grilled cheese and supping on cherry cola. Dean took his sleeping pill with the fizzy soda and broke every rule about eating after mealtime. He beamed a mega watt grin when Jess asked him if his supper was okay.

Sam found them there leaning against the breakfast bar, licking melted cheese from their lips. The tender smile of relief that brought out Sam’s dimples kicked Dean into gear and he made sure his little brother had his own supper after their long journey. His meds were making him drowsy by the time Sam changed cola for beer. Dean nodded at Jessica and Sam before heading upstairs. Teeth brushed and face clean, Dean remembered that he hadn’t said ‘goodnight’ to Sammy and he knew he’d be in the Land of Nod as soon as his head hit the pillow. He padded back down in his socks. Not wearing hospital slippers gave him enormous pie-standard joy.

Sam’s voice with, Dean guessed, Sarah’s New York accent drifted out from the kitchen.

“…but how are you going to juggle everything Sam?”

“What Sare?”

“Your studies. You know your scholarship is contingent on a minimum 3.7 grade average.”

“So, spit it out.” Sam slammed his beer bottle on the table, making Dean jump but not advance from his frozen spot on the bottom step.

“Sam,” Sarah said with an exasperated sigh, “Your brother seems like a sweet cute guy but he didn’t open his mouth to us. He hunched against the car until you coaxed him to come into the house, and then he moved with his head down in that terrible sad gait.”
Dean’s breath got caught with a stabbing pain in his chest.

“I know.” Sam puffed audibly and his emotions leaked into his speech, “You should have seen him back in the hospital, and in diners, and going down the sidewalk. He flinches away from other people, doesn’t make eye contact, and the way some of those backwoods pigs looked at him on our way here…” Sam hissed, “like he was my retarded – I hate that word – disabled brother. And Sarah, am I just as bad? Because I couldn’t look, kept my eyes on the road, when he would twitch or tremble in the seat beside me.”

Dean backed up each step. Did he? Did he twitch and act like Sam’s mentally challenged brother? What had he done? Would he ruin Sam’s life? He berated himself for being so selfish and self-focused on getting out of ACIC. He never thought that Sam might have been better off if he stayed there. The walls closed in on him.

He couldn’t go back now.

In the bathroom he splashed his face and glared at his image in the mirrored cabinet.

*You are Dean Winchester. You are a survivor. You will not be a victim. They did not break you. They hurt you, damaged, beat and scarred you, but you will not be broken. You can be better. You can do better. You can make this work. You will make this work, with Sam, with Sam.*

Having given himself an internal pep talk, of the locker room last quarter type not the psychobabble affirmation type, Dean was chilled enough to let the call to sleep pour over him and find his way to his new, very comfortable, bed. He curled into a fetal position and shot off a quickie prayer that this new start would work out, not only for him but for Sammy too.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++

**Chapter End Notes**

Holds hands up..... I know 23K words and no Castiel... but he is in the next chapter. Midweek posting.
It was early when Dean got Sammy out of bed. It was important to be early in case Dad wanted them to run circles around the block or up and down the apartments’ stairwell. Dad said training built men, marines, heroes. But last night Dad had come home very very late, so late that Dean saw light between the curtains. He was making grunting snores and growling dreaming noises when Dean fixed their Frosted Flakes and they shared a banana. Then it was a matter of trying to keep five year old Sammy entertained without Saturday morning kids’ cartoons. Dad had busted the TV by throwing a bottle at it. He wasn’t getting another one because Mr. Ashton-Mellor’s vintage race cars had nearly all been serviced. Dad had been attached to the payphone in the lobby every night calling guys for leads on a new gig.

Sam jiggled and twirled in circles while Dean built a fort in the slender gap between their twin beds. There was a blanket and sheet roof and the doors were the stained sofa cushions. When it was constructed Dean hid inside until Sam had reached fever pitch and was stamping his feet demanding to be allowed in.

Dean waved a white pillowcase of surrender. Sam’s jaw hung as Dean tipped the drawbridge sofa pad from the top swinging it down to land at Sam’s big toe where it peeped out of his sock.

"Way cool. I win.” Sam chirped and squeezed in beside his brother. Dean was wedged against the bed frame with Sam’s legs slung over his. “Tell me a story Dee!”

Dean rolled his eyes knowing that if he made the effort to begin a story then Sam’s inventive imagination would take over.

"Pretty please, a story, pretty please with Cheez Whiz on top.” Sam curled into his chest and looked up with plaintive eyes.

Clearing his throat Dean began, “Th-there’s a dude. Lives in a cave…”

"Like Batman?"

"Yeah sure, but Bruce Wayne lives…”

"Like Batman and he’s got a car that flies and a little brother called Sam ‘cause he’s not Robin and he’s got a laser gun and a pet alien ALF and a klingon in the closet that he caught eating his cakes?” Sam asked in almost one continuous breath.

"Sure but the pet is a…” Dean said amid laughter.

"A dragon! They have a dragon don’t they? I mean they must have. They live in a cave. A big
scary dragon that eats old princesses and ogres.”

Dean snorted. He imagined all the Disney princesses getting eaten up by dragons. “Munch, munch, munch,” he growled as he attacked Sam with tickling fingers.

”Dee! Uncle.” Sam squealed and wriggled out of the fort backwards, “Can’t catch me Dean. I’m Batman.” Sam whipped the flat sheet from the fort and slung it over his shoulders as a ridiculously trailing cape.

Dean shot out of their play cave and followed for fear Sam would trip and fall. “Thought you were Robin.”

”Keep up Dee. I’m Bat-Sam.”

Dean hooted as they ended up in the worn out kitchen.

”Da-na-na-na-na-na-na Da-na-na-na-na-na-na-na” Sam shouted as he jumped on a chair and to the top of the rickety table, “Bat-Sam.”

During the second round of Da-na-na-nas, Dean spotted the upturned skillet and wooden stirring spoon by the sink. When the third rendition ended he beat the bottom of the skillet in time with Bat-Sam. The next time Dean hit his drum, he was faced with his enraged hung-over father. The pan and spoon were wrenched from his hands. He backtracked up against the pantry door as he watched Sam’s sheet-cape drift to the cracked linoleum in slow motion.

”Get down from that table, Samuel Winchester,” John roared.

Sam leaped to comply.

”As for you,” John snarled, “Pathetic excuse for an older son. I trust you to look out for Sam and where do I find him? On the edge of a motherfucking table with a sheet wrapped around his legs.”

Dean shrunk back. John’s sour breath and spittle flew into his face. His father was bug eyed and red faced in his wrath. Dean would not cry. He would not.

”Have you two brain cells to rub together boy? Can you not follow a simple instruction to keep your brother quiet?”

Dean was confused. He shook his head but then realized he should have nodded, maybe? He couldn’t tell John that he hadn’t told them to keep the noise down because that would be giving cheek and his voice had totally vanished.

”You are pathetic. What sort of boy plays with kitchen implements and bed linen?”

Dean shook under his looming father but Sam bravely piped up, “It was a game. Batman.”

John snapped round, “Am I speaking to you?”

”No sir.”

”Do you hear me Dean? Are you a good son?”

Dean nodded vigorously. He tried real hard all the time.

”That’s balls. You wake me up banging and clattering and you have the nerve to think that was good?” John shouted.
Dean wanted to tell his father that he was wrong but his throat had closed up. He opened his mouth but only a wheeze came out.

"Say it. Say what you are thinking. I hear you whispering and plotting with Sam, playing games and being disobedient. Just fucking answer me." John grabbed the wooden spoon, swung Dean round and whopped his butt with such force that it travelled up his spine and lifted him onto his toes. Dean could hear Sam sobbing with each strike. “Pathetic. Good for nothing. Have you learned your lesson?”

Eyes leaking and snot trailing over his top lip, Dean nodded, praying that had been enough, that his father would stop. Sam grabbed onto John’s pajama sleeve and tugged. “Dean knows Dad. Look he is nodding.”

As John pushed Dean away, the boy hung his head with shame at how disappointed his father was in him and that Sam had to have his day ruined. He should have remembered that his Dad was sleeping off his liquor. John rounded on Sam. “You’re not going to grow up to be some pussy. Are you Sam?”

Sam stared and gave an exaggerated headshake.

"Clean up this mess Dean,” John straightened his back, “Brew me up some coffee and get my Advil. Get dressed. We are heading for the woods. A good hike will blow off the cobwebs. You boys need to man up.”

There was no point in reminding his Dad that he was the relay team substitute for the elementary schools’ meet. Dean’s hands shook. His butt and upper thighs burned as he bent to pick up the skillet and sheet. Sam caught him around the waist and hugged him tight. His face had visible tear tracks. “I’m sorry Dee. It was my fault.”

Dean wouldn’t hear that. It wasn’t Sam’s fault. Dean was the older brother. Sam stuck to him like a sideways walking hermit crab as he dampened the edge of the dish towel to wipe their faces.

"I hate him.” Sam claimed.

Dean clicked his tongue, “He’s not well.”

Sam huffed, “Don’t care. I’ve got you Dee, and you’re the best.”

The first week at Sam’s place was different, but mostly in a good way. Monday they had both been wrecked, lounging around the house until after lunch. Sam had to wait his turn for their laundry machines. It seemed the other students also wanted clean clothes for the new semester. They went grocery shopping in the afternoon, and to the animal welfare goodwill store for some denims and warm hooded sweatshirts for Dean. It might have been California but it was still January. At the huge supermarket Dean’s eyes boggled at the choices. Sam had a list that included gallons of passata, and tons of ground meat and pastas. He filled their cart with greens and toilet paper. Dean admired the pop tarts and Sam threw three different varieties in for him. That earned Sam an elbow squeeze. Back on Cowper Street, Dean was concentrating on the two paper bags balanced in his arms when a bicycle zipped past in the corner of his vision. He swung his head, causing the bags to totter. On the opposite street corner the speeding bike pulled up and a bed-head haired dude dashed indoors. Dean wondered if there was an emergency, but when he came back out to pick up the
remaining bag from the Impala’s trunk, the guy taking off at pace in the opposite direction. Dean got a better look this time. He was easy on the eye, mid twenties, and maybe living across the street. He shrugged his shoulders and put aside the mini-mystery.

That evening Sam had to work. Dean considered remaining in their bedroom but Jess called him down. She was baking cookies to take into her classmates. Boy was she, tray after tray of sugary warm goodness. Dean was covered in confectioners’ sugar with a distended uncomfortably bloated stomach when Sam collapsed into a kitchen chair after eleven. Sam had brought home aluminum trays of restaurant leftovers including half of a giant lasagna and a takeout box of dolmades which he warned he was taking into college as his lunch. Dean knew his face must have dropped, when Sam explained that Tuesdays were his fullest day of classes. The other days he had a decent gap and would pop home for lunch, which was cheaper than eating on campus.

Mostly the house was a relaxed place. The housemates didn’t live in each other’s pockets. They crossed paths when their free time coincided, keeping different meal times, activities and class schedules. Most nights someone cooked a large pot or casserole that could be portioned out when needed or eaten for lunch as leftovers. Dean fell in line, often offering a helping hand, but he didn’t like the cracked plates and chipped mugs the students used. He thought that he might buy some brand new cheap crockery from his first welfare check. He was wary of Sarah. After the overheard reservations she had expressed about his presence in Sam’s life, he was cautious around her, trying not to draw her attention. However it was Andy who brusquely addressed his past. Dean came down for a breakfast of toast and a pop tart on Sam’s early start morning. Andy was chewing granola. He gestured at Dean with a spoon.

“So Dude, you were locked away? What was that like?”

Dean dropped his hot pocket onto the counter. There was no cruel glint in the student’s eye. Dean licked his lips and answered, “I-it w-was Hell.”

“Figures. Involuntary committal was covered in my ethics class.” Andy said casually scratching at his morning stubble, “I’m pre-Med, did Sam tell you? Doesn’t freak you out? Having a future doctor in the house?”

Dean shook his head and stared at the stoner guy. He was pre-med? Dean was more freaked out at the thought of the guy ever getting his hands on a live patient.

The days were long without Sam around. Dean kept his side of their room tidy. He arranged his few belongings to his liking. He sat at Sam’s desk under the bedroom window and sketched the view of the leafless tree between the sidewalk and the tarmac. In the afternoon mystery guy would appear coming from the North. Then disappear into the house for a short while before reappearing and heading South. He’d made an assumption that the street was full of students, but the cute neighbor spent most of the day in the opposite direction to the campus. There was one variation when a tall older curly blond haired dude in a v-necked tie dyed caftan over ragged black denims chased down the street. Dean quickly opened the window latch hoping to hear their names, but the handsome one stopped and laughed as he took a held aloft cell phone.

Dean caught up on his daytime TV and made sure he took his meds and vitamins. However as the week progressed he began to explore the surrounding streets. He reveled in the freedom of deciding where he wanted to go and when he wanted to do it. Sam was cool as long as Dean remembered to leave a note on the kitchen corkboard and bring his cell aka ‘Be 110% sure to take your cell’. Dean made the discovery of a tree filled park at the end of their street and chose one bench as his favorite spot to rest and sketch. There was an angle in late afternoon when the light dappled through the trees and shrubs that was quite unique. He thought Dr Rourke would be proud of him. He was
getting out, exercising his legs, and ignoring any rude stares that came his way.

He found other gems too. There was a coffee shop on Lytton Ave where they didn’t bat an eye when Dean ordered by pointing at the menu board. It was called Light Up Your Beans and had a curly script painted on the plate glass window announcing they were ‘Purveyors of fine coffees, organic smoothies, and home baked goods.’ There was a table for two but sort of wedged in the corner near the door so it was awkward for the second person to fit. Dean claimed it as his own and decided he would treat himself to a strong smooth blend whenever he could.

Sam had topped up Dean’s money for his wallet. He had felt bad taking it when he knew his brother struggled to make ends meet. He’d vowed to pay him back the next month, but Sam had huffed and told him not to worry about it. Rubbing greenbacks between his finger and thumb made the dollars seem real. He hadn’t felt cash since before ACIC. The ward rules were that the remainder of Dean’s social security income belonged to him, but they didn’t give him the money, rather there was a ledger where the costs of Dean’s art materials, small gifts for new Dads, and occasional book purchases were offset against his balance. He had been twenty six dollars in credit when he was discharged. He’d had to sign the ledger before they handed him the cash. The same day he’d found Light Up Your Beans (or Beans as he was calling it in his head), Dean found a blessedly small local grocery store on Webster. It reminded him of 7/11s and mini-marts where he had shopped with tiny Sam trailing along holding his hand and pointing at the boxes of cereal he wanted. He bought Frosted Flakes, Oreos, eggs and maple syrup. He was going to make pancakes from scratch for Sam.

Sam was busy a lot but Dean was used to solitude amongst other people. He knew Sam was adjusting and trying to be at home more. Dean gathered that Sam used to dip into the library or go to the gym during the times he re-appeared at the house. Brady claimed his team had tackled him about the whereabouts of their tallest cheerleader when Sam failed to attend their practice. Sam and Brady were pretty tight. They took some of the same pre-law suitable classes, and Sam shared his Cultural Anthropology class with Jess. Back on Tuesday night the rest of the house had mocked Sam and Brady’s way of snorting laughs at the same time. There had been a leftover lasagna party. Jess’s friend Becca was included due to the lack of MTV in her dorms and her nose for The Gates’ delicious surplus food. Sam and Brady groused and moaned about their World History professor who wanted assignments on an unreasonably soon due date. Then Andy was kicked off his playstation. Everyone was shushed and hushed even Dean who hadn’t said a word. The volume was set to blast level on the TV. Sarah whispered that it was a new episode of The Osbournes and she simply adored Sharon. Dean was simultaneously fascinated and horrified as the whole family of one of his musical idols seemed to get drunk or high and in the middle of the chaos Ozzy became a grandfather. Sam promised to check the schedule for reruns so Dean could catch up.

The following morning mail came with Dean’s name on it. It was a thin windowed manila envelope. He chewed his lip and considered waiting until Sam came home to open it but told himself to man up. It was very unlikely to be ruling that he had to go back to Arkansas. Then he freaked himself out even more imagining dog-catcher style caricatures of EMT’s coming with a straight jacket to seize him as a runaway psych-patient. His breath was catching and his hands trembling as he chastised himself for permitting such dumb outlandish fears to surface. He heard the back door bang, announcing Andy’s departure. The kitchen was vacant. Dean found a steak knife and slit open the official letter. His bum collapsed into a chair as the simple message read that he had an appointment at 2.30pm on Monday with his case worker, a Mr. Fitzgerald, at the Santa Clara Social Services Agency. That wasn’t so bad and Sam had promised to take him. Dean left the letter on Sam’s bed before pulling on one of his new soft sweatshirts and heading down to the park. It stung when a passing father jerked his three year old pigtailed daughter’s hand to swing her round, placing his body between Dean and the little girl. He tried not to scuff his feet on the sidewalk but that made him slower and he wanted to get to his bench. Sam came and found him,
full of his arrangements for Brady to take notes for him in his humanities class on Monday afternoon and how he had called to confirm their appointment and get directions. Dean was happy that Sam seemed satisfied with nodding and grunts of acknowledgment as his little brother linked their arms for the walk back.

Thursday afternoon Dean was preparing to sit at the window and not at all, not really, wait and see if his favorite biker turned up at his usual time. Instead he saw Sam coming home.

“Dean? Hey Dean?” Sam stomped around the ground level.

“Up here.” Dean called.

“Good. My Statistics tutor’s got mono. I’m free until my Ancient Egypt class.” Sam danced from foot to foot on and off the bottom step, “You wanna see campus?”

Dean beamed. He’d love to see where Sam went to college. He knew he’s get to visit the Stanford campus at some stage but to get a guided tour by his brother as a surprise treat was awesome. He ducked back into their room to grab his denim jacket before Sam might change his mind. Dean was amazed how familiar Sam was with everywhere and had to remind himself that his brother had been there for over a year. Outside the Hoover Tower Dean saw their attractive neighbor wearing a rumpled dark suit and a blue backwards tied necktie hurrying across the grass.

He nudged Sam and pointed as discreetly as he could.

“Huh Dean?” Sam raised his brows.

“Who’s that?” Dean hissed.

“Who?” Sam looked around, partially up in the air as if the object of Dean’s attention was randomly floating by.

Dean huffed in exasperation. “Cute guy?”

“Where?” This time Sam’s fruitless searching was more urgent.

“Gone now, you… lump. The guy with the bike, lives opposite?”

Sam laughed, “I have no idea who you are crushing on Dean.”

“Am not.”

“The only one I know opposite us is kooky Balthazar, the astrologer.”

Dean jerked his head, taken aback. The tie dyed guy could have such a weird profession.

“Works out of the New Age store where Andy bought his bong.” Sam added.

“Is that so?” Dean mused. He strained his neck in the direction the guy had gone but he didn’t reappear. He wondered where the New Age store was.

Sam took Dean for coffee at an on campus spot. It was crowded and the windows were fogged up. Dean found it uncomfortable. The tables were too close together. The air was filled with raised voices and radio pop songs. Sam waved at a few people and smiled with dimples as they returned his greetings. Dean tried to hunch his shoulders and make his body smaller but the only vacant table was in the middle of the melee. A huge jock with a tiny dreadlocked brunette took up the whole space to Dean’s right. The guy clapped Sam on the shoulder and ribbed him about Brady’s
lack of performance on the Lacrosse team. Then he stuck his meaty paw in Dean’s face.

“Uriel Cox and my girl Sally.”

Sally quirked a half smile but didn’t let go of Uriel’s shirt. Dean gulped and nodded to both of them. He couldn’t speak but the snarky part of his brain wanted to ask if the monster truck sized dude’s parents had really hated their baby so much they’d named him You’re A Real Cock.

“My brother Dean,” Sam supplied helpfully.

“Well, Dean,” Uriel drawled, “You transferring in? Or just visiting?”

“Dean’s moved in with us.” Sam added.

Uriel gave a barking laugh, “Hey Winchester, can he answer?”

Dean shot daggers at Sam. He was not to tell this jerk that he was mute. Dean could see Sam biting back those very words.

“So Uriel,” Sam diverted, “What are the Cardinals’ chances?”

That led to a rounding defense of the team’s play by Uriel. Two other guys turned their chairs and joined in. Dean supped his tall black brew and listened. He made a note to ask Sam if he had tried out for any of the teams. Sally caught his eye and gave him an appreciative sweeping look. She was pretty and Dean was flattered but categorized her as ‘don’t touch’. She had a boyfriend who could crush Dean’s goolies by thought alone, and she was giving come hither eyes from under said boyfriend’s arm.

Sam apologized for Uriel’s dickish behavior on the way home, but Dean shrugged it off, he was experiencing a certain glow from Sally’s attraction to him.

On Friday nights at ACIC there was a movie on a pull down screen in the largest school classroom. In Palo Alto Dean waved a box of microwave popcorn at Sam and asked “Movie Night?”

“Awh crap Dean. It’s Friday. I have to work.” Sam’s brow made a sympathetic frown. Dean noticed he was dressed in black. He’d forgotten Sam’s work shift.

“It’s only after four,” Dean looked at the cheap elastic strapped watch that Sam had picked up for him. It fitted easily over his arm cuff.

“I know. I have work from five same as Monday.” Sam sighed, “I’ll make it up to you. Let’s do movies on Sunday, yeah?”

Dean fixed the top button of his little brother’s shirt and sent him on his way with the instruction not to work too hard and to watch that Ruby person.

Saturday could have been as bleak as Friday night. Everyone worked. Well, except Andy who it seemed had a trust fund. Sarah was at an art gallery in San Francisco. Sam and Brady had gone in for their double shifts at The Gates. Jessica was at a bookstore in the Stanford Shopping Centre. Dean had a lazy morning but took Jess up on her invitation to visit her workplace. The mall was crazy busy but thankfully the bookstore was a haven of peace. He noticed some wandering dudes, perhaps parked their by wives and partners while their significant others made dents in their credit cards. Jessica took him to Starbucks on her break and he walked her back to her post. He was almost sure he saw their neighbor reading the back of a hardcover in the science section but when
he looked again he was gone and he missed the opportunity to point him out to Jessica.

As he walked home he thought of a discussion that had come up at group. How when you spot someone, or something new, that attracts you then you start to see them everywhere. Dean remembered it had this nerd-cool name, the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon.

Sunday morning Dean made pancakes which were so good that he had to make a second batch of batter to feed the housemates’ voracious appetites. He muttered a thanks at their compliments which earned him a backslap from Brady. Instead of mass, Sam suggested they take advantage of a day in the low seventies and blue skies and go to the beach. Dean was chilled about it. Mass had offered him a crutch back when he needed the support. He figured that God, if He was watching, didn’t care if Dean knelt at a pew or offered prayers into the great expansive sky over the Pacific waves of Half Moon Bay. The wide expanse of sand was postcard picturesque and downright gorgeous. He thought he might try and find a postcard of the strand and mail it back to the guys in Arkansas. It was nicely warm but a light breeze came in off the water when the tide changed. The Winchesters tied their hoodies around their belts and let the winter sun warm their arms below. There were other walkers and runners but it was not crowded. Sandpipers danced at the foamy edge of the shallow waves. Sam pointed out the direction to a famous surfing spot but Dean was content to enjoy the long expanse of the bay. In lieu of lunch they ate M&Ms on the sand and Sam told him a bit about his teenage years.

“I wished Dad would leave me with Bobby.” Sam sighed as Dean laid back on his elbows tilting his face to the sun. “I mean I got to skip 9th grade in Sioux Falls and when I got to finish 11th grade there it was like a reunion at school. And I could talk to Bobby, y’know. And I don’t mean all ‘touchy feely chick flick’ like you hate. I mean…. I wasn’t allowed to mention you around Dad. Looking back now I guess Dad mighta been cut up with guilt or just determined to cut you out of our stinking lives.”

Dean could hear his brother’s emotions rolling through the words. He tapped him on the arm to remind him that they were back together and all that was in the past.

Sam huffed, “I get it. And you know it wasn’t all bad. I won a divisional soccer medal in Sioux Falls, a mathlete award in Pensacola, and I got shortlisted for a national essay competition when Dad got a gig at the new speedway circuit in Irwindale. God, Dee, you have no idea how much I loved Irwindale. It’s down near LA and a real small city. It felt like I got to know everybody and it was normal and settled. We had a two-bed rental and there was a teen center where everyone met up. I made friends, got to meet up with William Paxman behind the library.”

Sam’s voice had got dreamy. Dean tried to suppress a laugh, only his little studious brother would have a make out zone behind a library.

“I was applying for college scholarships behind Dad’s back, pushing ever ounce of my being into the ones for Cali; Berkeley, UCLA, CSU, and Stanford. Of course the dream ended with Dad’s contract being terminated. But I got my acceptance letters there.” Sam lifted his eyes to the sky. “There were other good places too. In Daytona Beach I was up for soccer team captain. You were always more of an individual competitor, weren’t you? I remember cheerleading for you at the 400m and the hurdles.”

Dean snorted, “I was like a race horse.”

“Yeah, all sweaty and galloping across the line.” Sam chortled.

Unprompted the old movie title rose in Dean’s mind: The Shoot Horses Don’t They. He shook it off. Sam hadn’t mentioned any sporting activities in his current routine. Dean prompted him about
his involvement now. Turned out, Sam and Brady both tried out for freshman lacrosse and soccer but Sam had to concentrate on his studies. Stanford was supportive of athletics but he wasn’t on a sports scholarship and with work and keeping up his grade average, he didn’t pursue a team place. Sam enthused about the gym and promised to get Dean an in so he could use the equipment with him.

As Sam expanded on the idealistic view of the law he had held when applying and his current doubts, Dean’s admiration for his brother grew. He was so put together and mature. Who cared if he picked a different major? Sam explained he could take the LSAT in his senior year no matter what his major was, but he was tempted by anthropology. He enthused about the fascination he had with people, society, history, psychology, culture, biology and gender studies. The subject spanned them all. He’d had this vision when in high school of a small law practice or the achievement of a partnership, and a family, and a home. Coming to Stanford had opened his eyes to all the different ‘normal’ lifestyles out there and also the downside of a life of corporate law or small town practice full of wills and torts. He could go into criminal or civil rights law but the competition was fierce.

On the way home Sam complimented Dean on his improved walk. Dean straightened his back in his seat. He was almost teary eyed that Sam had noticed his efforts. He had been exercising and walking and it obviously was working. He concentrated on lengthening his stride another fraction on the short distance from the car port to the door.

Andy was shoving a copy of The Matrix into the VCR. Sam asked him and Sarah to pause the viewing. Brady had gone to The Gates and Jess was out with Becca and Zach. Dean made popcorn drenched in salty butter. He dragged the beanbag next to Sam’s spot on the sofa and they settled in for the movie. Dean was rapt. It was so cool. He wondered if he could find a long dark coat in a goodwill store.

“Haven’t you seen it before?” Andy asked as the credits rolled.

Dean shook his head while Sam punched Andy’s arm and called him a jackass.

“No, Sam.” Dean cleared his throat to educate his brother, “We had a movie night, but I think the mindfuck in his one didn’t pass the censor.”

“It is a mindfuck, dead on.” Andy whooped. “I went five times when it was in theatres.”

“We discussed it in Film last semester, so if you keep an Art History class next year, there is a heads up for your early assignments Sam.” Sarah said as she stood up, “I bought beer for you underage douches. Any takers?”

Sam and Andy raised their arms. Dean asked her for a cola and they sat around watching a Buffy rerun until Brady arrived and planted three quarters of a pear and pecan pie on the low black tiled coffee table. There was a sword fight of forks to consume it, but Dean was confident he scored the largest portion. He gave an unapologetic haughty shrug when everyone else groaned at his mega-decibel burp.

On Monday 13th, Dean sat on the end of his bed looking out the window. He was waiting for Sam. He had been nervous all morning. His brain pricked him with superstitions about the number thirteen and the probability that he would seize up completely with the social worker and not be able to utter a word.

Dean picked the damp towel off his bed and hung it to dry over the open door of the closet. It was one of the new luxurious bath sheets that had been included in his Welcome to California gift from Sam’s boss. He’d worked up a sweat moving the furniture around the bedroom. He hoped his
brother wouldn’t be pissed with him about the rearrangement. It was just that with his bed parallel to Sam’s on the side of the room that caught less of the single wide window, all Dean could see were the walls and ceiling. He had begun to hang a few of his favorite sketches and cards, with Sam’s permission. The walls weren’t bare and stark like back in the psych ward. There was already a Franz Marc poster that Sarah had donated from her collection. Sam’s room had been wallpapered by a previous leaseholder in a dark cream with a fleur-de-lys pattern. Dean had switched their beds round so that his was in the right corner ending where he had the chest of drawers. This way Dean could look out if he sat against his pillows and he had a great view from the end of his futon. The door opened against the bottom of Sam’s moved bed which was right angled to Dean’s. The desk and their shared closet took the other side of the window up to the wooden stool Sam used as a table for his bedside reading lamp.

All this meant that Dean caught a great view of the dark haired cute guy returning home. Dean checked the time. Sam was late. It was almost 1.45pm. As he watched his neighbor fumbled to detach his book bag from his bike. He turned round, not aware he was giving Dean a full frontal view. His blue-grey hoodie was unzipped and Dean could see a peek of a white shirt. Dean felt a sense of contentment at the way his and the stranger’s schedules matched up neatly, allowing him to catch all these glimpses. It was weird, and possibly bordering on the whole insanity thing, that he felt companionship with a dude he had never met. The maybe-astrologer seemed to have a totally random existence. Dean kind of hoped they weren’t lovers but maybe were related or housemates. He huffed at the vain hope that he might meet up with his neighbor and that the dude would want to get to know Dean.

After another few minutes Dean was pacing back and forth.

Sam finally made his stomping run up the stairs. His hair was askew and he panted, “Are you ready?”

Dean eye rolled.

Sam did a double blink and stood agog taking in his rearranged furniture. “What have you done Dean?”

“M-moved shit.”

“We don’t have time. Come on.” Sam led the way to the car.

On the road south Sam asked him why.

Dean moistened his lips and sent a quickie plea heavenwards for fraternal understanding, “I need to see the window.”

“OK.” Sam said with a slight nodding motion.

“OK?” Dean checked.

“Yeah. Fine Dean.” Sam shrugged one shoulder.

“You OK?”

“Yeah I’m good. Brady’s taking notes for me. Like he’ll photocopy his notes. I’ve warned him on pain of death to be legible.” Sam twisted his lip.

Dean wasn’t sure how to interpret Sam’s mood. He seemed annoyed but not necessarily with Dean. It didn’t help disperse the horrible jittery sensation under his ribs. As their short journey came to an
end, Dean made puffs of air like the guys who would practice their Lamaze breathing. Once they came off the highway Sam wrapped a hand around his arm and promised everything would be alright. He offered him a Xanax but Dean had left the tub on their dresser.

There was a convenient spot for the Impala in the parking lot of the imposing glass fronted Social Security Agency building. The efficiency of the staff impressed Dean as they were directed initially to the third storey and then directly to Mr. Fitzgerald’s office. There was no waiting. Dean plucked up his nerve and knocked with confidence on the social worker’s door.

“Come in,” A cheerful voice sounded.

The office was tiny, more of a cubby hole. There was barely enough room for the paper strewn desk and three chairs on the client side. Dean noticed a pile of comics and a blue glove puppet for the kiddies.

“Call me Garth,” The case worker extended his hand, “Mr. Fitzgerald is my Dad. And you must be Dean.”

Dean’s heart still thumped against his ribs as he nodded and Sam introduced himself. The guy did not look threatening with his slight frame, wide eyes and welcoming smile, but Dean knew that looks could deceive.

“Take a seat, please dudes.”

“So are you the county’s carrier social worker?” Sam asked.

Garth chuckled and replied, “I wish. There aren’t enough carriers in Santa Clara to warrant it. Maybe in the big cities. My official role covers single and teen parents but I’m glad to take on any carriers in need of assistance.”

Dean tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. The guy either had a serious hand waving habit or he was making a presumption that had frustrated Dean since he was a boy.

“I’m not deaf.” Dean grunted.

“But you know ASL?” Garth said unfazed by Dean’s protest.

Dean glared and left it to Sam to run through the Winchester family history. Peripatetic upbringing combined with a father who preferred to ignore Dean’s problem rather than seek treatment or assistance for his son. Garth scribbled as Sam talked. They’d offered him ASL classes at ACIC too, but Dean had refused.

“Down to business.” Garth passed across a form for Dean to sign to confirm his residence in Santa Clara County. ACIC had forwarded all his relevant documentation. Garth gave Dean his birth certificate and his expired North Dakota driver’s license. He gave him the location of the nearest DMV offices so he could renew it as a Californian one.

“Would next Wednesday, the 22nd, be suitable for a home visit?” Garth looked up at Sam.

“Yeah, sure.” Sam confirmed hastily, “What time? I’d like to be home.”

“I have a family conference in Los Altos but I should be with you by noon.” Garth leaned forward, “I’m not the hotel inspector.”

“Huh?” Sam shifted uncomfortably in his seat.
“I’m not looking for cobwebs or if you have degreased your oven.” Garth grinned, “I need to check off my list that Dean has a safe, solid, and steady place to live. I will need to see a copy of your lease and evidence that you are not in rent arrears.”

Sam nodded and whispered to Dean that there was no problem there.

“We are all about done here. I’m registering you for the Ticket to Work program, Dean.”

Dean chewed his lip, “Do I… Do I get a choice about where I work?”

Garth rolled his chair back, “We match the candidate to the role, but yes within that structure you will get to pick from the available positions, and let me reassure you now that we will support you, most likely I will be assigned as your job coach.” Garth stood up. “My 2.45 is due, guys.”

The Winchesters stood in unison. Dean huffed. He hadn’t realized the meeting would be Wham Bam Thank You Man.

“Oh Dean, I almost forgot, your appointment with Dr Henricksen is at the Stanford Medical Center on Friday at 5pm.”

Dean exhaled slowly. He knew he was obliged to see a psychiatrist, and he’d promised Layla that he would go, but a part of him was shouting that he didn’t need the hassle now that he was living with Sam. However the way the news made him wish he hadn’t forgotten his Xanax told him that seeing this new doctor could possibly be a good idea.

Garth wished them farewell with a few lines about having a positive outlook and hope for the future. It was well rehearsed but not jaded and Dean believed the sincere little dude meant every word.

“Sammy?” Dean said as they approached the turn onto Cowper Street.

“Yeah Dean?”

“Can we go for coffee?”

Sam looked like he was about to refuse. Dean knew his little brother had work but they were back way earlier than expected. He was feeling wacked and craved the relaxed atmosphere and smooth coffee from Beans.

“You wanna go to the one on campus?” Sam asked.

Dean cringed, “Ah-ahem, you been to the place on Lytton?”

Sam grinned as he swung the car round, “You’ve been exploring.”

For once, Dean was Sam’s tour guide in Palo Alto. His preferred table was too confined for sasquatches. Dean eyed the free tables as they approached the counter. He pointed for a tall skinny latte. Sam ribbed him about the skinny. Dean patted his belly and stuck it out as if he was watching his figure. Sam was snorting so much he was almost as incapable of verbalizing his order. “I’ll have a mocaccino and Dean will have a tall skinny latte.”

The barista turned from his machine to face them. It was Cute Guy. Dean’s jaw dropped. He thought he might have to push his chin up with his finger. Cute guy was smiling and his eyes were so blue. Then blue eyes made contact with his and crinkled into smiling peepers. Dean broke out his own awe filled beam in response. Sam caught his wrist to get him moving towards a table for
four within spitting distance of the window, then scooted for the restroom. Dean waited in a state of suspension. Before he knew it, the barista was placing their beverages on the table, which was weird because Beans normally shouted them from the counter and patrons collected them.

“Thank you.” Dean said rapidly so the words would be spoken before his anxiety could catch up with his voice. He could read the small narrow nametag on the guy’s polo shirt. Castiel. Dean wound it around his tongue and tried it out silently.

“You’re welcome Dean,” Castiel hovered, “I saw you in the bookstore. I seem to be seeing you everywhere, the beach, in the park, walking by the house.”

“Baader Meinhof,” Dean blurted. He closed his eyes and winced, believing he had announced he was a crazy person. He did not just say Baader Meinhof as virtually his first words to Castiel.

However the other guy nodded sagely “Yeah, the Baader Meinhof phenomenon. I had not considered that. “

Castiel looked at Dean as if he was the smarter one present. “My cousin would say it is fate. I never do Mondays but Tamara’s ill and my Monday afternoon class hasn’t commenced for the semester. Are you a Monday regular?”

Dean shook his head. He could feel a flush rising at the deep sexy voice of his crush.

Castiel pulled a small ordering pad from his waist apron and wrote a string of numbers.

“Here’s my cell. Hope you’ll call, Dean. I’d like to take you for a coffee some time and discuss sociological phenomena.”

Dean blinked and grabbed the note with his fist. Castiel was being called back to the counter. He gave a sad smile of apology. Dean nodded his understanding and pocketed the cell number. If Castiel had meant call and speak to him over the phone, that was fairly daunting, but Dean might text, maybe, and then he might have a date, maybe.

On the way to the Impala some middle school boys were lounging outside a candy store. They elbowed each other as Dean and Sam walked by. Dean had taken Sam’s elbow. He was on a high from getting Castiel’s number which was secreted in his jeans pocket.

“Freak fag.”

“Dumb retard.”

Dean straightened his spine and dragged his brother to the car. Steam was almost coming out Sam’s flared nostrils. His fists clenched and unclenched. Dean was afraid Sam was going to turn round and vent his temper on the kids.

“How dare they? How dare they Dean? I should go back and give them a piece of my mind.”

“Are you calm enough?”

Sam pinned him with his laser eyes.

Dean took a pause, “Someone should set them straight but you are pissed.”

“Damn right.”

“And what will strangers see? A big guy roaring at some young kids, or worse, chasing them.”
“Punks.” Sam growled.

Dean patted his brother’s arm to calm him. He was able to ignore the slurs. He focused on Castiel’s smile, the way he had seen through Dean’s outward symptoms, his deep gravelled voice, his piercing eyes. He admitted that he had it bad, but he also had the guy’s number.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone reading, commenting and those who have left kudos. I am aiming for a Monday update but will post Sunday if complete.
Sam bent double on his canteen chair. His hair flopped over his eyes and his forehead hovered above open knees. The stomach cramp was brutal. He had woken up with a deep ache, taken two Tylenol, and cursed his father for leaving only leftover, probably spoiled, pizza. As the Geek Scoobies of Irwindale flocked around their fallen comrade, Sam concluded that he did not have food poisoning. He tried to analyze if the gripping ache was concentrated on his right. It would just be his life if his appendix burst on the same morning as Mr. Kingston’s class gave him a round of whooping applause for gaining a place on the shortlist for the Roman Industries Inspirational Essay contest.

“Sam?” William’s whisper of his name was soaked in concern.

“I’m good,” Sam wheezed a downright lie to his fellow mathlete and maybe boyfriend.

William ignored his protest pulling him to his feet. Sam groaned and made an ineffectual feeble effort to push the well meaning slim dark-curly-haired boy away. William bamboozled the substitute teacher monitoring their break with a meticulous description of the symptoms he had observed. The result was a sanctioned visit to the nurse’s office and a seed of suspicion planted in Sam’s pain addled mind that he could possibly have a burst peptic ulcer or a septic kidney stone.

“I bet it’s gas,” He moaned as William half dragged half carried him down the hall through stares of horrified younger students.

Laying flat on his back and rubbing circles into his belly helped. Having William be shooed away didn’t.

“Sam dear?” The almost retirement age nurse pulled a chair over so she could sit at eye level to Sam’s prone figure on the day bed. “Are you cycling?”

“Huh?”

“Ovulating, my dear.” She patted his damp hand with her wrinkled one.

“Maybe?” Sam considered, “But it’s never been this bad. How... how did you know? It’s not in my records.”

The nurse clicked her tongue and tapped her nose, “Decades of teenagers.” She smiled at him, “Now how come you are not on the andro-pill if you are suffering? It is proven to help.”

“My Dad...” Sam looked ceiling-wards for inspiration, “He doesn’t know. He wouldn’t approve. You won’t tell him will you Nurse? Please.”

“No my dear. You are eighteen soon?”

“Six weeks.” Sam held his breath. He had proverbially been holding it for months waiting for his university application decisions and his eighteenth birthday. If he got any sort of manageable scholarship then John could stick his roving lifestyle, his mean drunkardness, and his idea of
training Sam to fix race cars so far up his fucking asshole they would never see the light of day.

“Once you are eighteen, son, you get yourself a script for a good oral contraceptive. Do you keep a cycle diary?”

Sam shook his head. He tried to remember when he got twinges and the traces of discharge that made him glad his father never considered doing their laundry. Sometimes he’d mark it in his study diary with a black cross, but then he’d forget the next time.

“Here I always have spares.” She offered him a tiny black book that fitted into the palm of his hand. “And this is what will help you today.”

She handed over a cup of water and two pills. He took them with long sips. He pocketed the mini-diary but knew it would have to go in a trash can before he left the school grounds. The nurse told him to rest until the cramps died down and covered him with a fleecy blanket to keep him warm.

“You’re a good student Sam. I hear in the colleague room that you are a joy to teach.” Her sympathetic words were comforting as she dimmed the lights. “We all read your essay, son. You deserve to win the contest. Let me tell you something.”

Sam perked his ears up. He hoped she wasn’t going to run through the essay into which he had poured his grief and loss.

“I have three brothers and an older sister. And they are distant and cold hearted, every solitary one of them. You were blessed with twelve years of your inspirational brother, and you deserve to take care of yourself like he would have wanted you to.”

With that she was gone. Tears stained Sam’s cheeks as he curled under the blanket, but with them his resolve hardened to make something of himself, and a promise to Dean if he was listening up in Heaven, that he would take care of his health and once he was out from under John’s thumb he would be his own man.

Sam gripped the bar towel with white knuckles, scrubbing at a table that only required a wipe down. Baldur had gone home. Sam had helped the chef clean down the kitchen while the last table finished their post meal Armagnac.

The next table also received attempted varnish removal treatment. Muscles between his shoulders bunched and threatened to spasm. He was holding on by a thread and he knew it. Once the tables were done he would help Nick lock up and he could go home. Dean would be waiting up for him. And Goddamn him for thinking it but he didn’t want to deal or chat or make nice tonight. He longed to flop into his bed and sleep. The bed Dean had moved into the back corner of the room.

Lost in his thoughts Sam only noticed Nick when he pulled the bar towel out from between his fingers.

“Talk to me Sam.”

“About what?” Sam’s chest tightened as he was guided with a gentle hand at his lower back to the corner booth.

“You have the weight of the world on your shoulders. Can I help? Is there something I can do?” Nick’s blue eyes bled how perturbed he was.
Sam sagged over the table. His thumb scrubbed a finger mark he had missed. “No.” He sighed. The muscles eased out of his shoulders until it was too much effort to hold them up, “It’s just... I used to lie in bed torturing myself by imagining Dean hadn’t died. But in those fantasies we were still teenagers. Dean would be snarky and cheeky but the responsible one. Tapping on my school books for me to complete my homework. Collecting me from my friends’ places or from high school, and they’d all stare and be envious cos my brother was so cool and handsome.”

Sam stopped. Nick remained a silent presence.

“But he is quiet and nervous. Sometimes I can’t believe he is nearly twenty four and other times he looks like he has lived a lifetime. And Jesus Christ he is trying. He is battling back from everything that was inflicted on him, by the abuse in the hospital, by our Dad, by life... and he needs me. He needs me, Nick,” Sam sobbed, “He needs me but I want my big brother back.”

Nick patted his shoulder.

Sam looked down at the table, “And I have no answers. I’m winging it here.”

“Has your brother met his case worker and therapist yet?” Nick’s voice was soft and calm.

“We met the social worker today. A quick introduction. Dean’s got an appointment with his new psychiatrist later in the week.” Sam gulped back all his crazy emotions zipping around.

“Maybe they will be of help.”

“Maybe,” Sam wrung his hands, “But I feel lost.”

Nick moved over to wrap his arms around him. Sam stood and pulled the older man in close.

“I’ve got you.” Nick promised into the air over Sam’s shoulder.

Sam felt the words settle the tossed waves of the maelstrom. Nick raised a hand to push a strand of hair behind Sam’s ear, then rested his warm palm on his neck, “You are a beautiful person.”

“Stop,” Sam said with an embarrassed huff. He would have batted Nick’s hand away if that didn’t mean he would have had to let go of his hold around Nick’s waist.

“You are. Inside and out.” Nick tilted his head so that their eyes could meet.

Sam read the intensity, the sincerity and the desire there. His heart fluttered. Nick was so close and it felt like he was being held up, held together by the contact between them.

“May I?” Nick’s finger traced his bottom lip with a feather light touch asking permission for the kiss.

Sam knew he could refuse. He could fly off on one and accuse Lucifer of sexual harassment in the workplace. He knew that wasn’t what this was. He felt something in his solar plexus drawing him towards his boss. He leaned forward and parted his lips.

The kiss was softer than Sam expected, almost tentative. When Sam kissed back in return, he sought to prove that he did want this and it was messier, wetter, more urgent and possessive as he pushed his tongue against Nick’s teeth, opening him up until they joined and aligned their bodies. Sam only realized they had moved a few paces when his back was pressed against the claret colored wall and Nick’s erection strained against his hip. Sam could feel the uncoiling heat and knew he was half hard as he ground their bodies together. Nick’s knee pushed between his legs.
Sam parted them. Kisses turned to panting and holding to clinging. Sweat broke across Nick’s brow. Sam lifted his neck to taste it, then his fingers fumbled with Nick’s tie knot, loosening it so he could nuzzle into the skin at the hollow of his throat. Nick’s knee worked circles against Sam’s groin. Small moans lifted into the air.

“Sam,” Nick breathed. “What are you doing to me?”

Sam preened and burst with self-satisfaction that he could make a guy hard just from kissing and grinding. Nick pressed his hand onto the wall above Sam’s shoulder, bracing his body, while exploring the length of Sam’s throat with his lips. Sam let his head hit the wall behind as his chest heaved and his hips rose seeking Nick’s body. After a beat the blond reverently began to undo Sam’s button down. Sam threaded his fingers through Nick’s hair and pressed their foreheads together. He closed his eyes feeling the loss of contact but then the last button flew off his shirt. Nick’s soft lips tipped his nipple. Then there was firm sucking and teeth grazing over his nubs that caused Sam to grit his teeth and vocalize Nick’s name in long gasps. He ran his hands across Nick’s chest under his shirt, digging his fingers into his shoulders.

“God” Sam gasped. Then Nick’s lips met his again in short kisses and flicks of his tongue. Nick’s whole body shuddered and he hissed Sam’s name. Sam gave one huge audible breath and sagged down the wall until his butt hit the tiles.

“That was…” Nick’s chest rose and fell in recovery heaves.

“Pretty awesome.” Sam gave a single laugh.

Nick threaded his fingers into Sam’s right hand to help him up. He leaned over to kiss the rip he had made in Sam’s shirt.

“You’re paying for a new one.” Sam teased.

Nick chuffed his agreement and parted the black material further to kiss over Sam’s navel.

“Are you?” Nick focused on his belly, the hushed question almost inaudible, “Are you Sam?”

The spell was broken. Sam wrenched their hands apart. He slammed the brakes on all the gooey feels that had been melting his core. He stumbled to his feet, knocking over a stool, and willing his lust to disappear.

“Bastard.” He cried with real tears, “How dare you! This why I never… with anyone… all my life… yes… you pervert I can carry. Fuck you Nick. Fuck you and your job. I will not be a prize won for my breeding ability. You can stick your fucking restaurant and your concern and your pity.”

Sam wanted to flounce out of the joint, maybe backhand all the colorful bottles behind the bar so they came clashing down in a rain of shattered glass, but instead he hunched over a high table and sobbed his eyes out.

“Please, Sam, please listen.”

It was the quiet resignation in Nick’s plea that stopped Sam from turning his back on him forever. With shuddering breaths he turned round and folded his arms.

“I apologize.” Nick gulped and dropped his head. “I don’t think kissing you was a mistake, and I am your friend. If you insist I won’t see you again. I can have Crowley take Tuesday night off
instead. I’ll stay away during your shifts, but your job is secure. You need it, Sam. Please don’t cut everything out if I disgust you.”

Sam’s heart burned. He looked at the devastated expression on the other man’s face. Nick didn’t disgust him. He chewed his lip, sorry now for his sudden outburst. He’d used mean words and insults, but he intended the central message. He was a product of his upbringing and his past. His status was his private business. He could not allow Nick to see him as some sort of baby-machine. However he knew he had flown off the handle. He lowered his eyes and shook his head. He didn’t want to never see Nick again. He would miss him too much. He would hear him out. “Go on.”

“Sam,” there was gravity to Nick’s tone, “I’m in my thirties. I’ve played the field. I’ve had one failed committed relationship. I’m done with fickle. I’ve wanted you since you walked in here last summer, nervous and desperate for work. But I also want to settle down with a carrier. In the future I’d like my own family. Not today or tomorrow but down the road. And I want that road to be with you. You are the one for me, Sam. I know this is heavy and I’m coming on too strong, but I’m here for you. I’ll wait for you. I’ll support you and I’ll respect your choices. I mean it.”

Sam huffed, “I need a minute.”

He took a moment to steady himself. Nick hung his head and turned away. Sam tried to work out how he was meant to respond to a declaration of love, more precisely of love at first sight. He had to admit he had felt it, the attraction, the desire for Nick to notice him, to see him as more than an employee, a friend, or a kid.

“Can we sit?” Sam asked.

Nick looked at him with a spark of hope and gestured to the bar stools, neutral territory away from the scene of their intimacy.

“I will not be defined by my biology,” Sam linked his fingers palm up on his lap and rolled his thumbs around each other. This time he was calm and rational. “I will not be labeled, put down, segregated or forgotten.”

“Sam I would never,” Nick made a breathy plea.

“I believe you. You mean it.” Sam swallowed. “In my experience… my whole life… being a carrier was being a pussy, a weakling, pathetic.”

“Who told you that?” Nick’s eyes flashed with anger.

“My Dad,” Sam whispered.

“He was wrong.”

“I know that.” Sam emphasized the personal pronoun. “I know, but I can’t wave the rainbow flag, can’t walk in here as a carrier seeking Ruby’s ministrations.”

Nick huffed, “I certainly hope you don’t.”

Sam gave a weak smile in response to Nick’s effort at humorous indignation. “My life is a mess.”

“I want to share that.”

“You want me to spread my crap all over your perfect set-up.”
Nick snorted, “I run a restaurant Sam. I go home late to an empty house. I schmooze the patrons. I see my accountant. I offer a bartender’s ear to lonely dudes and regular locals. And some nights this wonderful handsome young man works the floor for me. He makes me laugh. He listens to my moans on deserted Mondays. His dimpled smiles warm my icy dried up heart.”

Sam blushed.

“Let me help. Pour it all on me.” Nick leaned back with his arms open wide.

Sam snickered. “Pour my crap on you? That’s filthy dude.”

Nick wrinkled his nose and laughed. “Go on, hit me.”

“I had a crap day.” Sam began. Already his chest was lightening. “Stressed and tired, I lashed out at you. I’m sorry, Nick.”

Nick reached across and stroked the side of his hand.

“Dean had the appointment to meet his case worker. I had to skip my humanities class. Brady’s notes aren’t worth shit. He writes in gobbledygook. I don’t know how he passes anything. I was almost late for Dean because out of the blue Prof Clancy announced he expected everyone to have read Le Morte d’Arthur by next week. I hit the library too late and every book for loan was gone. I couldn’t look at the reference copies because I had to collect Dean. I was pissed when I got home. I had no lunch. Meanwhile Dean had turned into Ty Pennington and renovated our bedroom. “

Nick snorted a laugh but raised his hands in apology.

“The case worker was fine. He seems a nice guy, working in the system but genuine, not jaded or going through the motions. He’s coming to see our pad next week, make sure Dean isn’t living in a doss house.”

“But?” Nick prompted.

“Dean was wound tight through the whole thing. He was on the verge of a panic attack and I tried to soothe his fears, but I hadn’t a clue what would go down. He didn’t relax until we went to this chilled little coffee house he’d found. And then we were leaving and he linked my arm. It was real sweet, y’know. He was saying thanks and that he knew I had his back. And these punk aholes shouted abusive names after us. And I wanted to crush them like roaches. Dean had to stop me and remind me they were only stupid kids.”

“Sheez Sam. You had the day from hell.”

Sam shook his head wearily. “But that’s just it Nick. It wasn’t so special a day. Sure we met with Garth, the case worker. But on Friday Dean has his appointment at Stanford’s mental health clinic. Wednesday last, I don’t think he said an actual word all day.” Sam reached up and massaged his forehead with his fingertips, “Don’t get me wrong. I’d do anything. Any Thing. For Dean.”

When he looked up Nick was planting a shot of Jameson on the counter. “Drink it. I’ll give you a ride home.”

“I have the Impala and class in the morning.”

“I’ll drop you to campus in the morning and pick you up later to collect your car.”

Sam blinked. Nick lived in Moss Beach, at least 25 miles from the restaurant. “I can’t ask you to do

“Why Mr. Alighieri I do believe you are serving liquor to a minor.” Sam laughed and downed the whiskey in one. It burned in a good way.

“Bar’s closed Sam.” Nick laughed. “Come on, you can road test the shotgun seat of my Lexus. I promise no funny business.”

Sam got the lights while Nick set the alarm. “I might be OK with a little funny business.”

“You sure, Sam?” Nick checked, “I’m not only attracted to your body.”

Sam snorted in disbelief, “I have such a beautiful mind.”

“Much hotter than Russell Crowe.” Nick crowded in next to Sam and slung an arm around his shoulders as he flicked the Lexus’ central locking.

On the short ride to Palo Alto, Nick asked Sam to tell him about Dean.

“I mourned him for so long. It’s like a dream every minute I spend with him. He is a wonderful amazing person. I mean, he could be bitter and twisted and angry but he’s plain not. I know he’s had years of therapy back in that place, but sometimes I feel that he is, I don’t know, sad I suppose. But he has such strength Nick. He never let Dad knock him down. He could beat on him or scream at us and Dean would pick himself up, dust himself off and keep going. Always. And I’m like a leaf blowing in the wind next to him. How am I going to do this?”

“You’re amazing Sam. Plenty of other siblings would have declined to take him with them in lieu of regular visits to Arkansas.”

“That was Never an option once Dean wanted to leave.” Sam shook his head. “You don’t understand. Me and Dean we are all each other have, all we ever had.”

Nick sneaked a glance across and caught Sam’s eye, nodding for him to continue.

“It was the two of us against the world. And then he was gone and my world collapsed. Yesterday we went to the beach and Dean asked me about the years he missed out of my life. I dressed them up all pretty for him. Garnished to the hilt like the plates Baldur sends out when you do a tasting menu night. I told him about Mathletes and the Roman prize shortlist, about soccer and my scholarship and fumbling under William Paxman’s shirts. But not about the loss and fear, being cold and hungry, scared that Dad would die in a DUI car wreck or in a drunk tank, or having to hide who I am from Dad for fear he would beat me to death or lock me away.”

They had pulled into an empty space across the street from the house.

“Sam?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I can’t change the past. But I’ll change the future with you if you’ll let me.”

Sam nodded. He gave Nick’s hand a squeeze before climbing out. He was surprised when the Lexus didn’t pull away but Nick wrapped his arms around his waist on the sidewalk. “Will you let me?”
“I’d like that. But you know Dean comes first, and my plate is pretty full to over flowing.” Sam gave a sigh.

Nick stroked his cheek bone with the back of his curved fingers. “I know, Sweetie.”

“OK, Nick, not Sweetie. Sweetheart maybe, but not Sweetie.” Sam protested in horror.

Nick silenced him with a firm kiss. “Noted. No fluffy pet names.”

Sam planted a peck to Nick’s cheek. “See you tomorrow. No need to come for my 9am class. Brady and I are capable of a twenty minute walk. Had to do it until I got the car. Will you pick me up on campus at 2 O’clock?”

“I’ll see you then.” Nick’s fingers brushed his as they parted.

“Goodnight, Nick.”

The Lexus did not pull away until Sam was safely inside the house. It was close to midnight and Sam had no restaurant surplus. He tip toed to the bedroom. Dean was sitting in a bathrobe on the end of his futon looking out the window, which over looked the street, and the Lexus, and the sidewalk beside the Lexus.

“Where the ‘pala?”

“Nick gave me a ride home. I’ll get it tomorrow.” Sam opened the top buttons of his work shirt and pulled it over his head, with his back turned so Dean wouldn’t see the ripped button hole. “Don’t fret. It’s safe behind the restaurant.”

“That was Nick?” Dean gasped. “Exploring your tonsils?”

Sam rounded on him. “Yes. That was Nick. So?”

“I thought… I guess… What age is he?”

“Thirty seven.” Sam could see the cogs turning in Dean’s brain.

Dean wet his lips.

“Don’t Dean. Just don’t. I know blah blah blah, I’ll be 39 and he’ll be 57. I’ll be fifty and he’ll be on a Zimmer.”

To Sam’s surprise Dean chuckled. “Didn’t say you were marrying him. Was gonna say he’s smitten.”

Sam puffed and quirked a smile. “Yeah. I guess he is. Did you take your Ambien?”

Dean grunted. He stretched his body to reach over to the dresser. He waved the pill at Sam and then dry swallowed it.

Sam eye rolled. “I know, you were waiting for me. But I was OK, Dean. And if I wasn’t coming home I’d have called, I promise. Hey, you’d be good, wouldn’t you, if I did stay over at friends’ or whatever?”

Dean blew a raspberry and pointed out the window.

“Yeah, maybe Nick’s place, or Zach’s or if Brady wanted me to travel with the Lacrosse team?”
Dean shrugged. “Yeah, Sammy. I’m a big boy. I’m cool.”

Sam saw the repeated lip moistening. He thought he’d have to take it slow. Make sure that Dean was comfortable to stay in the house without Sam and be able to reassure him that Sam would be fine wherever he stayed. Maybe not for a few more weeks, but it was important that they could both live their lives. As he tried to get comfortable in his wrong-way-facing bed, Sam hoped that when Dean started work and began to get to know people outside of Sam’s circle, his big brother would develop his own interests. He loved spending his free time (and stolen free time) with Dean. Being with him would never get stale but he wanted more for Dean. He wanted him to find the life and the future he desired. As sleep stole over him, Sam thought of the future Nick desired, he heard the sound of the waves crashing outside Sam’s imagined version of Nick’s home and the feel of Nick’s hand curled around his.

On Wednesday evening, Andy was holding Ash’s hand, or his roll-up, over at the comedy club. The housemates had been told there would be consequences if they didn’t turn up to support Ash’s fifteen minute stand-up debut. In the meantime Dean was in the family room educating himself with a Buffy boxset, complementary commentary by Sarah Blake. Jess had gone to some party at Pi Beta Phi. Sam had his nose stuck in his huge illustrated Modernist Art text, trying to decide between a list of equally sucky essay choices. The pressure of maintaining his grade average caused his shoulders to slump. His cell did a dance across a Mondrian. He grabbed for it, thinking it might be Nick. His heart gave a skip at the idea that his boyfriend could be calling because he was now in a relationship. The maturity of the whole scenario drew a nervy titter from him as he flipped open the cell.

BOBBY

“Oh crap.” Sam hadn’t called Bobby in over a week. There’d been the briefest of ‘hello, we’re safe, Dean is in California’ exchanges because John was working in the shed with Bobby at the time. He pressed the call answer button with a flick of guilt and trepidation. “Hey Bobby.”

“Don’t you ‘hey Bobby’ me after your extended radio silence left me stewing in my own fricking juices.”

Sam winced. He knew he was going to get chewed out.

Bobby huffed, “Your Daddy’s gone. Took off with the rising sun. Elkins down in Manning has won some sort of contract and he needs an extra man. Even with his gimp leg seems it’s all Semper Fi. Don’t know how Elkins won a contract. He wouldn’t win a pissing contest.”

Sam choked a laugh. He remembered the chaos of Elkins Auto. “Daniel’s called Dad in before when he’s had extra work.”

“Well the old fool is outta my hair.” Bobby grunted. “Well? Give it to me.”

“Huh?”

“How are my two best idjits?”

“Good, Uncle Bobby. Things are good.” Sam propped his elbow onto the desk.
Bobby hummed, “You can’t kid a kidder, Boy.”

“Dean's going great, considering. He has a visit with a psychiatrist Friday.” Sam paused.

“And you Son?”

“I have good friends.” He meant it. The way Jess, Brady, Sarah and Andy had taken Dean into their lives was something he would never forget.

“Good enough to lay your troubles across their shoulders to distribute the load?”

“I have someone.” Sam’s mechanical pencil lightly traced four letters beginning with N on the margin of his textbook.

“Glad to hear it. What about the cash flow?”

“Geez Bobby. You’ve given me too much already.”

“Shut your mouth and answer the question.”

Sam laughed out loud at the paradox. “I used a portion on our road trip home. The rest is put aside for any medical expenses that Dean’s Medi-cal excludes.”

“Any chance you putting the uncommunicative brat on the line?”

Sam chuckled knowing Bobby’s gruff sense of humor. He shouted for Dean from the top of the stairs. His brother came rushing out to see what Sam wanted. Waving the cell in the air Sam called down that Bobby wanted to talk to him. Sam swapped rooms with Dean. If Dean did speak with Bobby, rather than listen to him, and Dean wanted to grouse about Sam, then his younger brother was going to give him his privacy.

He was surprised to see Jessica on the sofa.

“Thought you were over at the Greek House party?”

“Becca ran off with a Kappa Sigma upperclassman.” Jess swung her legs across the arm of the sofa. “She can be true bitch when she’s on the prowl.”

“Awh poor Jessie-wessie.” Sam teased as he pushed her ankles back and took the warm seat his brother had vacated. Sarah warned them they needed to get moving to catch Ash’s act, before she disappeared to make up her face.

Sam bumped shoulders with his friend. “Hey Jess. You heard of this Doc Henricksen that Dean’s gotta see?”

Jessica stood and planted a hand on her hip, pursing her lips as if he was a hopeless case, “Psych-o-l-o-g-y. Psych-ci-at-ry.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, I know. I take classes.”

“Huh,” Jessica tutted at him, “only ones that compliment your supposedly pre-law Anthropology Major. But I’ll dig around. I’ll ask Jamie the clinical psychology TA.”

“Thanks Jess. You’re the best.”

“Glad to hear you know it.” Jessica punched his arm.
When Dean came down he was smiling, which Sam knew meant Bobby had done his magic. He wasn’t going to pry, but he could guess that their surrogate uncle had reminded Dean that he was family and reassured him that not everyone shared John’s blinkered views. Dean threw Sam’s cell for him to catch. Then he headed for the kitchen and returned with three uncapped beers. Sam raised an eyebrow but Dean raised one finger to let Sam know he knew his limits. Dean clinked bottle necks with him with a smirking wink. Jess was speculating about whether Ash would phase out during his stint on stage when Sam got a text message from Bobby.

Open invite 4 you boys. Dean accepted. 1 of them happy grunts. Expect U when U got a break.

Sam shot back a thank you. He didn’t know if he’d be able to take the time during spring break but he imagined that Dean and he would take a trip to Sioux Falls during the summer. Then he had an idea and texted back that Bobby was welcome in Cali too. It felt good to know that Bobby was there for them, even if it was support from afar. It was like having an ultimate fallback plan. If everything blew up in his face they could drive to Sioux Falls and start over.

“We are taking my car to the comedy gig?” Jess asked as she reapplied her gloss with this miniscule little brush that Sam had to squint to see properly.

Dean Uh-huh-ed.

Sam grinned at them both. “Dean’s very faithful to the Impala.”

That earned him as firm nod as Dean picked up their empties.

“And you were drinking over at Greek House.”

Jessica flushed at being caught out, “I forgot your alcohol-radar. Fine, we’ll take the muscle machine.”

Sam moved to get their jackets. He heard a clatter of bottles and cans and then the rear door. Jackets in hand, Sam moved to let down the family room window blinds. Outside Dean was putting out the recycling and a guy was talking to Dean. Under the street light Sam thought it was the barista from the coffee shop. He watched as the dark haired guy pointed to the south and Dean freaking posed at the garbage bins. Only Dean could work a trash can like a centerfold model. Then Dean nodded before ducking his head. The barista beamed at him. Sam took a pace back so he wouldn’t be spotted but he watched the other man walk across the street to the astrologer’s house. The barista and the neighbor and therefore ‘cute guy’ were the one and the same person. Sam was glad to see his brother interacting with a stranger in such a natural way, even if the flirting was making his eyes burn. The guy waved goodbye from his lawn and Dean lifted a hand to salute him. Sam shut his mouth before he caught flies. He schooled his features so Dean wouldn’t know he had been spying. Jessica threw her hands up at the two of them and got her coat, before hustling both brothers out of the house. At the comedy club Sam was surprised at how funny Andy's best friend could be while relatively wasted.

Friday night, Sam’s place of work felt like it was living up to its name. Sam had been a sanctioned 15 minutes late. They had left Brady waiting in the engine idling Impala, while Sam accompanied Dean to the out patients clinic of Stanford Mental Health. There was enough time to make sure
Dean had all the correct forms and would be called in to see Dr Henricksen on the hour. His brother was stoic and shooed Sam off to work. Sam supposed that seeing a psychiatrist was one of the more familiar tasks Dean had undertaken since he arrived in Palo Alto. He still wished he could have sat outside until Dean came out, but he had taken so much time off work already, and Dean wouldn’t hear of it. Jess would collect Dean at 6.15pm after his appointment, so he didn’t have to make his way back to the house alone. She had been good as her word too and sought out the intel on Henricksen. He was some bigwig on mood disorders and took on a limited number of clients. Jessica suggested someone had pulled strings to get Dean on his list. Sam thought he might have to send a Thank You card to Layla Rourke or Richard Deacon if everything worked out well. Sam had taken a minute to press his head against the Impala’s wheel, hit by the horribleness and suckiness of leaving his brother at a shrink’s office. Brady could be trusted not to rat Sam out for his moment of weakness. His worried friend offered to drive to Menlo Park but Sam had patted his forearm, put on his game face and promised he was good to go.

The night only got worse as it was completely, totally and craptastically hectic at The Gates of Hell. There was a queue for tables and people waiting at the bar for the first sitting to finish their meals. Lilith had called in sick with a migraine. Sam felt like he was chasing his tail. Every time he ventured into the steaming hot kitchen Baldur was blue in the face and swearing in Norwegian at Brady and the part-time sous chef. Brady kept making stabbing in the back gestures when the chef wasn’t looking. It was so manic that Lucifer relegated Ruby to the end of the bar and he took over the hosting and table clearing duties from Sam and Meg. Every spare pica of a second Sam got he fretted about Dean’s appointment. As final orders went to the kitchen, Nick pulled Sam by the hand down the corridor, beyond the customer restrooms and into the staff room. They didn’t sit. There wasn’t time before Meg would explode at being left on her own. Sam was wrapped in strong arms and then the back of his head was cradled and a soft kiss pressed to his lips. Sam marveled that his icky and gross shirt, that was stuck to his back with perspiration, hadn’t put Nick off.

“What was that for?” He whispered as Nick eased into a more casual hug.

“You needed it.”

It was true. Sam planted a quick caress on Nick’s cheekbone. “Thanks.”

“Don’t worry. I am sure your brother will be fine, and as soon as the desserts are out, you can rescue Brady from the wrath of Chef and head home.”

There was a scream for “Lucifer” from outside the door. Nick reluctantly pulled away to put his hand on the doorknob. Sam felt the loss of contact.

“And there blows Mount St Helena.”

Sam chuckled at the description of Meg’s lung capacity which was miraculous for such a pixie sized person. He got through the last hour of the night focused on how despite the craziness, he would not be late home. He placated Meg’s daggered pout by promising to be in early in the morning to get the place ready for lunch service. Meg gave grudging thanks, knowing that she didn’t have to stay to fill salt shakers or origami the napkins.

The lights were off in their bedroom. Sam had presumed Dean would be awake but his brother was making gurgling snores face down on his futon. There was a note on his pillow. Sam snagged it and his towels to take to the bathroom. With the shower running Sam unfolded the sheet of paper. There was a pornographic sketch of two male anatomies and a note that read –

*Off to never never land. Hope you got some action.*

Sam didn’t know whether to burn the note or save it. He did make sure not to leave it in the
communal bathroom for Brady or Andy to find, or even worse one of the girls. Jess and Sarah had a Jack and Jill bathroom between their bedrooms, but they were known to grace the main one for a soak in the tub.

On Saturday Sam woke before his alarm. His bleary eyes took in the open closet door, the bright morning sun and his brother’s half naked form. As he came to awareness he observed that Dean was trying on all the clothes.

“Hey Zoolander?” Sam croaked from under his comforter.

Dean swung round with a shit faced grin, “Morning Sammy. I saw that movie, Bitch.”

“Well Jerk-ette, why is our room like Alicia Sliverstone’s walk-in-closet?”

“Got a date.” Dean beamed and examined Sam’s Cardinals hoodie.

Sam shot up in the bed. “A what?”

“D-A-T-E.” Dean spelled out before pulling the zip hoodie on over his brown Henley and new thrift store black denims.

“With the cute guy?” Sam gaped.

Dean clicked his fingers and tongue. He stuck his fingers into a pot of gel that he must have bought without Sam noticing and proceeded to spike up his hair.

“Wait. Dean,” Sam swung his legs out of bed and ran a hand through his scarecrow like bed-hair. “Tonight? Like going out for drinks? Like to a club?”

Dean looked at him as if he had grown a second head.

“What? Isn’t that you over twenty-ones do?” Sam pressed his palms together and took a breath. It was too early for this. He wanted to sit down with his brother over breakfast and hear about the psychiatrist. He didn’t want to have to deal with this feeling of protectiveness. He remembered what Naomi and Layla had said about institutionalized patients being vulnerable and at risk. He pictured Dean having a panic attack in some San Francisco club with a thumping DJ set, while Sam was in Menlo Park pulling out chairs for coiffured ladies and manicured twinks. Sam imagined the barista shouting at Dean when he became impatient with his silence. He visualized crossing the street and beating on the corner house door until the dude appeared and he could threaten him with extreme violence if he hurt Dean. Sam gulped. He was working himself up into his own panic attack.

Dean sat on the edge of Sam’s mattress and waited for him to breathe.

“A coffee date.” Dean soothed, speaking slowly which Sam suspected was deliberately for his benefit, “In the middle of the day. Cas’s gotta work at six.”

“Cas?” Sam asked, “Like Casper?”

Dean grinned and carefully pronounced, “Cas-ti-el.”

“Dude better not be as weird as his name.” Sam grumbled. His morning alarm began but he hit the button on his cell to stop the blaring noise. “You’ll have your cell with you all day? Turned on?”

“Yes, Sam.” Dean drawled in a mocking tone.
“And if you can’t get me, call Andy, and he’ll pick you up in his van, or you can call the restaurant, or maybe the bookstore will let Jess take a call…”

“Coff-Eee.” Dean threw his eyes up to heaven.

“Sure Dean. “ Sam said as he went on a search for clean boxer briefs. “I bet that’s what Ted Bundy said too.”

This time Dean roared with laughter and bent double. “Good one. Sammy.”

Sam wasn’t sure that he had been joking. His brother was nearly twenty four years old. He could go out for coffee with a man if he wanted. All the same, he thought he’d ask Nick if he could keep his cell in his pocket on silent mode.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be in Dean's POV and will include his appointment with Victor and his date with Castiel
Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Sam wanted to twist his panties into fat knots too big for his gigantor fingers to undo, then Dean was not enabling his behavior. Dean rolled his eyes again, wondering if he did it much more would he chance losing his corneas into his brain. Sam had fussed like bee over a pollen-fest, checking Dean was ‘good’ and that he knew Jessica would be there to collect him after his appointment. Dean had to practically wrestle him out the door of the waiting area. He would have given Sam a shove only the beady eyed secretary was watching his every move. Maybe she was one of those spying types who reported everything you did back to the doctors. He was glad he had palmed a Xanax into his mouth under the cover of a cough while Brady distracted Sam with a tale from the restaurant. Brady worked Thursdays and had witnessed some epic spat between Lilith and Crowley which he said sang with unresolved sexual tension.

All the same when Sam did leave Dean behind, on his own, in the outer office, under the bright lights, with the hatchet faced secretary, Dean’s palms dampened and he fiddled with his watch strap and the studs of his cuffs. This room smelled of Glade, but the pervasive hospital odor of the clinic irritated Dean’s nostrils. At precisely 5 O’clock, just as Dean was contemplating relieving his dry mouth with one of the cone shaped paper cups stacked beside the water cooler, the office door opened. A tall black guy with a blue shirt, red striped tie and a goatee beard strode across the space with his hand extended. Dean gulped and stood. His hand was taken with a firm shake.

“Victor Henricksen. And you must be Dean. Come on in.”

Dean nodded. His feet dragged. All the progress he had made fled. He cringed as he shuffled behind the psychiatrist, detesting his walk but unable to make his legs move any faster. He could feel the secretary's eyes burning his skin. Victor held the door open for him. Dean sneaked a glance but the doctor’s face was professional and impassive.

“Please.” Victor gestured towards an actual couch. Dean almost snorted. He had always sat in a chair with a desk between he and Layla unless they were in a circle at group. Dean chewed on his lip once his back was to the psychiatrist. He sat rigidly on the edge. He thought the leather was raw sienna, or maybe closer to the tubes of burnt yellow ochre in the art materials locker of his old ACIC classroom. Either way was the color was fugly. He took in a wall of shelves to his left that sagged from the weight of books. Long windows spilled sunlight into a room that could have been dark and claustrophobic. There was a heavy rich wood desk closer to those windows. Dr Henricksen sat on an ergonomic leather swivel chair between it and Dean. He had access to pens, notepad and files on a side table that matched the height of the chair arms. He seemed to be waiting for Dean to settle. If he was waiting for Dean to speak it was going to be a long 75 minutes.

“Dean?”

Looking up, Dean saw the doctor pick up his A4 sized pad and a heavy chrome pen that possibly cost the amount of Dean’s monthly welfare check. He held a better examination of the man across from him. Dean thought he could benefit from losing a few pounds, but maybe he was all muscle. He noticed the goatee had these wings that ran along the jaw line up to his ears. He bit down on his lip stifling a laugh at his own inventive thought that all the dude’s hair had migrated from his head to the bottom of his face.
“I’d like it if you would call me Victor. May I call you Dean, rather than Mr. Winchester?”

Dean moistened his lips and nodded. Informality meant bupkiss, didn’t make someone any more trustworthy.

“Dr Rourke has forwarded your files to me and we have spoken of your case.”

Dean smiled at the memory of Layla’s joy when he left the hospital. This seemed to encourage Victor to continue.

“I hope that we will be able to build a therapeutic relationship. During our sessions I am open to any issues or difficulties you wish to share. I am not reporting to anyone.” Victor leaned forward a touch, “There is no director monitoring your file. I have no obligation to your case worker. My only obligation is to you, my client. I would like you to think about what you hope to gain from our time together. There is no need to answer today.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. He was listening but suspending judgment. He wrapped his left hand around his right cuff. Victor’s eyes tracked his movement.

“In the interest of openness and honesty, I will tell you that I have studied the Godwin Report. As a matter of fact I utilize the report in classes with my senior interns. I know you are the patient referred to as D.W.”

Oxygen was sucked out of Dean’s lungs. He had never read the report but he knew he had a starring role. Victor knew all his humiliating history. He lifted his chin. Although his returning breath shuddered, he did not break eye contact.

“I wish to say that it is a pleasure to see you in my office. Your recovery is quite remarkable.”

Dean double blinked.

“You must have great reserves of strength and character.”

Dean turned a snort into a nasal sniff. He was all parts broken glass and nightmares inside, not a well of strength and character. His Dad used to try and build his character with a cracking belt and a strong fist. If he was back in ACIC he’d go to his room now and look out the window, stroking Spider’s leaves.

“I would like to begin with closed questions.”

Dean gave a head nod of assent. On the surface it was safe and easy for Dean to nod, headshake or make a non-committal hand gesture. Layla had been supreme with her closed questions, getting through layers of Dean’s defenses with carefully worded probing.

“I have your medication profile. Did you take your anxiolytic this morning, your Ambien CR last night?”

That was too easy. Dean wondered if he was being lulled into a false sense of security.

“I see you have Xanax to take at your own discretion. Did you take any today?”

Dean nodded.

“How many?”

Dean raised one finger. The stern gaze of the psychiatrist softened. Dean felt like he had passed
some sort of test.

“I would like to order a range of blood work. Not today. If you could come early to our next appointment one of the clinic nurses will take samples. Long term use of SSRIs can affect kidney function, so we will be monitoring that.”

Dean used to have his blood taken by the ‘vampires’ back at ACIC but they never bothered to explain why. He listened attentively to Victor’s plans for them to have an hour long session every second week, a description of out-patient facilities available to him, and a mood disorder group that Victor would put his name down for if Dean was interested.

“I will renew your scripts. How would you feel about an adjustment to your sleeping pills?”

Dean shrugged.

“Controlled release Ambien CR aids you to fall into sleep but adds a sedative effect to keep you under during the night. It is not recommended for prolonged use. Would you be prepared to try a medication without this effect?”

Dean looked down. He wasn’t sure. The night he had skipped his Ambien on the journey to California he had experienced a night terror. However the CR part of the meds was a reason he couldn’t drive. The feel of the Impala’s wheel under his hands helped him to decide. He could always ask for the other meds if he had trouble. Then he thought of waking Sammy with his nightmares, but if he didn’t try he’d never get to be a normal person. Finally he nodded.

“Good. We’ll stick with Ambien, as you are not recorded as suffering from any side effects. I’m writing you a low dose, 5mg.” Victor eased back into his seat. He tapped his pen on the side of his pad. “Your last psychiatrist used Art Therapy.”

Dean bobbed his head, although that had not been a question.

“It is not my area of expertise, however if you wish to bring any drawings to our sessions, I would be interested in seeing them. I would like you to keep a journal for me.”

Dean huffed at the notion of keeping a diary. Layla had given him notebooks but he filled them with doodles and dried leaves.

“Not to record each moment of your life.” Victor explained, “I don’t need your brand of breakfast cereal or if it rained on a Tuesday. I’d like you to record significant incidents.”

Dean furrowed his brow wondering what that meant.

“Significant to you. When you need Xanax, if you achieve a personal milestone, or had a bad day or a great one…. There is no incorrect answer as to what to write.” Victor got up. Dean craned his neck to see what the doctor was doing. He offered Dean an A5 size slim black book with a sky-blue elastic attachment to keep it closed.

“I see you developed selective mutism aged four following the death of your mother.”

Dean settled into the sofa. They were on standard territory here. Every shrink had wanted to know about his Momma.

“Your grandfathers filed a complaint with Kansas CPS.”

Dean shot up in his seat. His jaw dropped.
Victor tilted his head, “You didn’t know?” He checked the file, “Samuel and Dean Campbell, in respect of suspected neglect by their son-in-law John Winchester of their five year old and eight month old grandsons. CPS case worker appointed. Treatment recommended for Dean Winchester. The family moved to Blue Earth, Minnesota in March 1984 where Mr. Winchester had secured employment.”

His Pawpaw and Granddaddy had tried to help him. He remembered after the fire when Sammy had to stay in the hospital because of all the black stuff in his lungs. Dean had stayed with his Momma’s daddies. There had been a terrible fight. The words had faded from Dean’s memory but Granddaddy and Dad had come to blows. Pawpaw had cried when he had packed Dean’s school bag with his new clothes and a few family photographs. They didn’t leave Lawrence for some time after that but it was the last time he’d seen his grandfathers.

“Mr. Fitzgerald pointed out that you had never learned ASL. He can arrange a tutor.”

Dean held up his palm. He wasn’t going there. Hand wagging was for pathetic losers, his father had taught him that, and he had gotten on just fine without it.

“Your father raised you on his own?”

That produced a snort.

“Would you say you had a fractious relationship with your father?”

Dean glared at the shrink. If he had his files then he knew that John had signed him away.

“What about your brother Samuel? You are living with him.”

“Sam.” Dean corrected and wet his lips.

“Sam then.” Victor gave him a blinding smile. “Tell me about Sam.”

There was silence. Dean didn’t know where to start. He didn’t know if the words would come. “I carried him out of the fire.”

Start at the beginning was a good strategy. Victor nodded encouragingly.

“He’s a great kid. He’s clever and kind and tall. He’s on a scholarship here.” Dean rubbed circles with his thumb on the back of his other hand. There was no trembling. He could see Sam’s supportive concerned look and his dimpled smile when Dean made him laugh. “He’s a carrier, like me. He’s gay, but our Dad doesn’t know. Don’t think he knows Sam can carry.”

“Have you the same sexual preference?”

“I like people, y’know, like the person.”

“I know you were hospitalized at a young age, but had you formed any serious relationships?”

The name dried up on his tongue. He opened his mouth to say Aaron, but his stomach clenched and he gulped air.

“Let’s put that question aside, shall we?”

Dean nodded gratefully.

“You were telling me about Sam. Do you think you have been relying on him?”
What did that mean? Was it a criticism or checking that Dean had someone to rely on? He stayed silent.

“You left Eureka Springs with him two weeks ago.” The psychiatrist stated.

“He saved me.” Dean whispered. He knew Victor’s ears had caught his words when the pen flew across his paper.

“Did you consider that you needed saving? That you would not have left ACIC without his intervention?”

Dean considered his answer. He chewed on his lip. “No one came to save me in the Bad Days.” The shake returned to his hands. He grabbed his left fingers with his right hand and willed them steady. “I lived in the ward, not the c-cabins. They said I needed support. I had no f-family. Too damaged for a half-way house.”

“I think they may have underestimated you.” Victor commented. “Tell me about your PTSD nightmares. Are they focused on the conditions of your initial years in the hospital?”

With a hard swallow Dean nodded, “And before.”

There was the heart ripping one which was a distorted memory of his Dad leaving him behind in Batesville hospital. In reality there had been a harsh shoulder pat and a ‘behave yourself boy’ before John left Dean at the mercy of the system. In the dream John’s face was transformed into disgust. He would spit on Dean’s so slightly rounded pregnancy bump. His shoulder pat became a clawed tearing off of his skin. The rib bruise from where Sam had Karate Kid high-kicked him blossomed, swelled, and joined up with the old faded marks of his father’s fingers on his upper arms. The discoloration grew until Dean’s whole body was yellowed and purpled. John screamed into his face how worthless and dumb he was. He spat vile insults and said that he was baggage and it was high time he was discarded in favor of his favorite son. And all the time the dream provided a sensory amplification of the body rocking cramps that had meant his baby was checking out too.

Dean became aware that he must have vocalized at least some of that particular nightmare when Victor passed him a Kleenex.

“You’re good, Man.” Dean muttered then huffed his bewilderment at his unintentional opening up.

“Pardon?”

“Got me to mention the kid.” Dean puffed his chest out. His scars tingled. He drew his lips into a thin line. “I don’t wanna talk about it. It’s private.”

Victor nodded. “Would I be correct in presuming that you did not receive bereavement counseling after your miscarriage?”

“Not going there, but yeah, ya’would.” Dean gave a harsh laugh, “Too busy locking up the dangerous crazy person.”

“Do you label yourself as crazy?”

Dean dropped his head and shook it. The last two and a half years with Layla as his therapist, and his sessions with Deacon, and getting his GED, had overwritten all the malicious words of those who had abused him. “No Doc, but it’s not all peaches and pies in here.”
Victor hummed, “We are almost done for today. Can I ask how things are at home? With your brother’s friends?”

“Fine.”

“It takes an effort of will to adapt to new situations, especially for those who have lived in a structured environment. What do you do when your brother is at classes? And he works, yes?”

With another nod Dean described how he was exercising his freaking dumb legs and attempting to find his bearings in Palo Alto. Victor explained that he had been briefed on Dean’s psychosomatic legacy and the improvements he had made. He asked if regular walks helped.

“It’s better. I draw too, and…” Dean looked beyond Victor through the windows to the darkening sky. “I met a guy.”

The whites of Victor’s eyes grew large. Dean quirked the corner of his lip. That had caught the major league psychiatrist by surprise.

“A friend of your brother?”

Dean gave a proud headshake. He had met Castiel all by himself.

“Have you commenced relations with him?”

Dean flushed. His chest tightened. He didn’t want Victor to form the wrong idea. He wasn’t one of those ACIC guys who ended up with a string of differently fathered kids living on welfare. “I… I’m not a sl… a slut.”

“Please Dean. Take a moment.” Victor stood to pour Dean a tumbler of water from a pitcher on his desk. “I do not jump to conclusions. Why would you think that I would presume you are promiscuous?”

That comment earned an A-grade snort. Dean wondered who Victor thought he was kidding talking to a guy freshly released from a Daddy and Baby home. “Some people think carriers are…”

“I see.” Victor steepled his fingers. “Be assured that I do not share such preconceptions. This man? Are you dating?”

“He wants to meet me for coffee. He’s seen me walking and heard me stutter, and he still wants to.” Dean marveled.

Victor smiled. “Well our time is up. I’d like very much to hear about your date at our next session.”

When Victor shook his hand in farewell, Dean responded with a warm smile. The dude wasn’t so bad. He hadn’t poked too deeply for gruesome details of the bad days in ACIC, nor prodded for particulars of the suicide attempts, nor tried to dissect Dean’s miscarriage, nor drilled into John’s homophobic and abusive regime of child-rearing. Dean wasn’t so naïve to think that Victor wouldn’t want to address those issues in more detail later. Layla had shown him how his anxiety and low self-esteem linked back to the events of his life. However it was a good start and he was able to give Jessica a nonchalant wink with good humor. His buoyant mood endured having to ride shotgun in a cotton candy pink VW Beetle.

Ash and Andy were holding a tribute to Wayne’s World with a bong and a plaid and denim wearing chick called Tracy who looked like the female version of Ash. Jessica offered to keep
Dean company in the kitchen but he knew she had an assignment due. Sarah had cooked up a chili before heading out. There were soft tortillas and a pot of soured cream. After they had eaten he retreated to the bedroom. There was no movement from the corner house across the street. He sketched his spider plant on the inside of the front cover of his new journal. Victor had never said he couldn’t illustrate it. He didn’t write anything. What was the point in writing about the session? He wondered how Sam was getting on at work. Maybe he’d stay later and steal some time with Nick. Dean flicked his fingers against his arm cuff. Nick was a lot older than Sammy, a helluva lot older. Sam had mentioned that he wanted to show Dean his place of work. Perhaps he could make sure that they went when the boss would be there. Dean wanted to meet him and look him straight in the eye. He needed to see more of Nick than a glimpsed kiss from the window. Then he would discover if Nick Alighieri was a user and a creep, or maybe that the older man was infatuated and adoring of his little brother. If there was anyone in the western hemisphere who knew better than Dean not to judge a book by its cover, he’d like to shake their hand. Dean had experienced Nurse White with her pretty face and baby-doll smile, who had a penchant for hissed threats, and her main target Ronald, huge and fumbling with an alien abduction delusion, who had defied expectations to take his beloved twin daughters home soon into the new regime at ACIC.

Dean sat yoga style on his futon and read some of the book Brady had loaned to him. Being Dead was a weird story about bodies decomposing but it was riveting. It made him slightly worried about Brady’s choice in literature. He put the book aside to check an incoming text message.

*Dean would you like 2 meet for that coffee tomoro?*

The cell bleeped again.

*This is Castiel btw.*

Dean chuckled. On Wednesday when he had run into Castiel as he put out the bottles and cans, Dean had been propositioned for a ‘date that was mutably suitable’. He had given a blushing nod in response. Since then there had been a fluttering of exchanged texts. Castiel had informed him that his cousin Balthazar wanted Dean’s star sign. When the Aquarius responded Castiel sent back *Virgo* and an apology. Dean had texted for Castiel’s opinion on Dr Sexy MD, but had to wait several hours for a querying response as to whether Dean recommended the show for Castiel’s enjoyment. There had also been a terse expletive followed by a comment on the lack of road manners that drivers showed to cyclists. In response to that one Dean promised to follow full road user etiquette when he got behind the wheel.

His fingers tingled as he tapped out his response, *What time? At Beans?*

*Beans?*

*I truncated it*

*Oh. Not there. A special place. Collect U at 11? If you wish.*

*S sure Cas*

*You truncated me*

Dean feared he had offended Castiel. His hand hovered over the keypad to type out an apology.

*Another text alert … I like it*

Dean fist pumped. He had a date. Cas liked the nickname.
He scooted to the kitchen for a celebratory soda. The wasted crew had gone. Dean took possession of the sofa and watched some flash cop show with undercover burgling lesbians. He was swamped by a wave of tiredness at the end of his long day. Maybe attending Dr Henricksen had hit him harder than he thought. He’d planned to stay awake for Sam, but gave up trying to read some more of the dead couple in the sand dunes. His mind was powering down. He did a quick rude but prank level brilliant sketch of two swollen dicks and left it as a gift with a goodnight message on Sammy’s pillow. He popped his Ambien CR with only a flicker of speculation about how he would get on with plain Ambien when he began is new scripts. Under his face his pillow was soft and inviting. The last image behind his eyelids was of Castiel knocking on the door to take him out.

When the event happened the following morning, there was a firm triple rap of their door knocker. There was also a hovering younger brother in the kitchen. Dean hissed that he didn’t need a send off. It was a first (hopefully meaning there would be more) date.

“Well whatever you do don’t arrange a second date for Friday.” Sam grumbled with his mouth full of his late breakfast bacon and eggs.

Dean shot a querying look over his shoulder.

“Your birthday, dumbass.” Sam glared.

Dean took a step closer to the hallway but his jaw dropped.

“I’ve swapped with Meg,” Sam called after him, “I’m working Thursday instead and I have plans.”

Dean blurted his surprised thanks while donning his jacket and pulling the hood out from under his denim collar. He hoped Sam meant grabbing a burger and maybe a beer, not some sort of hoopla.

When he opened the door he found Castiel waiting with an awkward stance, hands in pockets. He wore tight blue jeans, a plain grey pullover and an old black leather jacket. Dean ran his eyes over the apparel with appreciation. Castiel’s weekday suit and his barista polo shirt did not do him justice.

“Hello Dean,” came with a blinding smile.

Dean could feel his eyes crinkle as he mirrored the expression.

“Are you ready?” Castiel asked.

Dean nodded and closed the door. He was good to go.

The day was pleasant. Not too cold with a few high wispy clouds. Castiel expressed his hope that Dean would enjoy their destination. As they walked past Beans’ steamed up window Dean caught Castiel’s eye.

“We are going by Caltrain.” Castiel supplied.

It wasn’t much further to the station but Dean worried that he was slowing down their progress. He mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

Castiel’s step faltered, “Why are you apologizing?”

“I’m delaying you,” Dean scuffed his boots on the sidewalk.

Castiel’s head tilted like a bird perched on a twig, “Do you have somewhere else to be today?”
“No. Nowhere.” Dean rushed to answer. He hoped he was misreading the taint of feared rejection in Castiel’s eyes.

“I have no other plans, save for my commitment to my evening shift at the coffee shop. There is no urgency. I am happy to walk beside you. OK?”

Dean nodded. He stepped a little closer to his companion. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere unique. I hope you will like it.”

Castiel purchased their tickets and guided Dean to adjoining seats. Dean offered to reimburse Castiel but was refused in lieu of his date promising that Dean could pay for the tickets for a short bus journey that lay ahead.

“I had hoped to be able to take my cousin’s battered Aspire. He is inexplicably attached to the horrible example of automotive engineering. Unfortunately he has to attend one of his ‘ladies’ this afternoon.” Castiel caught Dean’s brow wrinkle, “Yeah, right. It’s weird but I feel I know you already and I forget we haven’t learned much about one another. It’s illogical and irrational and just the sort of ‘meeting of souls’ spiel that Balthazar panders.”

Dean grinned. He was enjoying the way Cas had not presumed he was slow or hard of hearing. He was straight and honest in his speech, awkward and sort of geeky in his presence and clothing, and all round cute. Dean especially liked the dark shadow of barely there stubble on his jaw and upper lip. He watched those pink lips move as he spoke.

“You know my cousin owns Harmonies in the mall. He has a ‘readings’ room in the back that he rents out to touring tarot readers and psychics, but mostly he uses it to see those whose astrological charts he has cast. He also has a few select clients who prefer private consultations in their grand homes.” Castiel sighed heavily and took his eyes from Dean to head shake at the passing scenery. “You must think I live with a charlatan and an opportunist.”

Dean patted Castiel’s knee to regain his attention. He shook his head. Astrology, crystals, herbs, and whatever weren’t things he had any faith in, but he held an ‘each to their own’ philosophy. If it got someone through the day then what harm was there.

Castiel shrugged. “I have made numerous attempts to convince Balthazar that the position of distant celestial bodies cannot influence a person’s destiny. We have come close to falling out about it. He will laugh, call me Cassie, and tell me that Science teacher is an excellent profession for a Virgo.”

“Teacher huh?” Dean pouted his bottom lip in consideration.

“Not yet. I need to graduate. Now I bet you are trying to puzzle out why a twenty-five year old has not qualified yet.”

Dean wasn’t, but before he could comment Castiel had continued.

“I had family troubles back East. I transferred to Stanford after my sophomore year. Balthazar offered me a place to live. It is long rather depressing story. It took me another four years to complete my degree while working full time at Light Up Your Beans and covering shifts at Harmonies. My teen dreams of discovering the Castiel Fletcher particle or solving the mysteries of dark matter morphed into hopes for a career inspiring the next Stephen Hawking or Carl Sagan. I love teaching. Every day brings a new challenge but an exciting one. The reluctant students fade when an enthusiastic young mind displays an interest and a desire for discovery.”
Watching Castiel’s fire burn, Dean could see how he had the ability to inspire a love of science in teenagers receptive to his message. It was an admirable job to undertake.

“The program is intense. I teach mornings in Menlo Park. Afternoons there are seminars on campus. There are papers to be graded, lesson plans to be built, and I help run the school drama club. But it is my calling, I think.” Castiel smiled with such self-assurance that Dean wanted to grab a little piece of that energy and hoard it for himself. “What about you Dean? I did not see you at the students’ house during Fall semester. Have you moved to Palo Alto recently?”

“After the holidays. I was in Arkansas.” Dean’s tongue traced his bottom lip, “I came to live with Sam.”

Castiel made a comment about never having been to Arkansas as the train pulled into Tamien. His organized approach to their bus transfer impressed Dean, who could have figured it out but found that some of these everyday interactions were foreign to him after so many years. They exchanged few words as they sat behind two women bemoaning the rising cost of groceries. Soon there was a short walk to their final destination. Castiel had been reluctantly forced to reveal it when a fellow passenger had asked if they were alighting for the History Park. The student teacher explained he had found the tourist attraction during his initial job hunt in California. He had failed to be called back for a second interview, but had returned to view the exhibits.

Castiel had some sort of frequent flyer admission and once more Dean was not permitted to open his wallet. He resolved to settle their check for the promised coffees. The history park was in fact awesome. Being a Saturday there were plenty of other visitors, many among them families enjoying a day out. However the park was spacious and well planned so Dean did not feel confined or overwhelmed. The exhibits were reconstructed originals or copies of late 1800s and early twentieth century buildings. Dean felt he had seen examples in many small towns and cities during his childhood. There was a bank, post office, doctor’s and dentist’s surgeries, and a pristine steam locomotive. Castiel enthused about the one-roomed school and Dean lingered in the fire house and gas station. They walked the narrow street with the cool three globed street lights. There was a Truman Show vibe as they took a turn down a row of period houses. Amongst the other tourists who strolled along moving slowly reading the exhibits’ educational panels, Dean felt like they fitted in. He sneaked his fingers between Castiel’s and found his hand gripped tightly. Their arms swung as Castiel walked at Dean’s pace. He pointed out little details on the houses and the fake streets. Dean learned about pioneer architecture and the genetic breeding of modern roses. The way Castiel shared knowledge was endearing. Dean listened closely to the deeply spoken words. Victor had mentioned being adaptable. Today proved that breaking new ground was doable. Sam was back in Menlo Park, possibly freaking about Cas being a serial killer. Dean’s heart was calm, relaxed and even. He had no anxiety palpitations amid all the new places, strangers and running children. Castiel felt like a pillar of strength at his side. The attractive intelligent man holding his hand had allowed a brief hinted glimpse at his own pain and history but there was an aura of solid resilience that inspired Dean to stand taller and not falter.

Back on the main street, Castiel led Dean into a reconstructed hotel and ice-cream parlor. It was like something out of a 1950s movie set. Kids jumped up and down asking for treats but few families took a table. Most wanted take out and to enjoy their cones and cups as they walked. Castiel and Dean took a red checkered table for two, between a long haired teen brunette with turquoise nails who tapped on her phone, and a ginger receding haired bespectacled man finishing his coffee. Dean wondered if they were both refugees from family parties. Two ladies took the corner table talking about a mutual friend’s affair while their two overtly well behaved little girls hung on every word. In the background Ella Fitzgerald sang about blue skies.
Dean’s hot fudge sundae had been consumed and Castiel hadn’t run screaming at what Sam dubbed his brother’s disgusting eating habits. Castiel had made short work of his own malted milkshake. On his date’s recommendation they were adding café mochas to their significant sugar and chocolate intake, when Castiel cleared his throat.

“Can I ask you something Dean?”

Dean gave him a querying hum.

Castiel moistened his lips before he asked, “Did you have a stroke?”

Dean knew his eyes must have widened to saucers because Castiel’s hands fluttered as he backtracked with an apology. “I’m sorry, Dean. That was presumptuous of me. My Father suffered a stroke. He was affected down his left side. I see you walking to the park and I wondered if it was part of your physiotherapy program.”

Dean reached across the table and touched Castiel’s slender fingers. “I… huh…” He gulped. Castiel waited patiently his eyes trained on Dean’s face, “I… have an anxiety disorder and have trouble speaking. Sometimes I don’t, at all, Cas.”

Castiel smiled his pearly whites. “So all these words we’ve exchanged. They’ve been like rare? Special?”

Dean felt a blush rising and shrugged a yes.

“Well I’m privileged and honored.”

Dean checked if he was being mocked but there wasn’t a trace of sarcasm. Castiel looked almost smug. Dean grinned at him. Their server came with their powdered chocolate sprinkled drinks. It was a great mocha. Dean moaned around the caffeine and chocolate combination.

“I see you are a fellow connoisseur. I like a man who can appreciate a good coffee.”

“Me too, Cas.” Dean smirked.

On the way home they discussed nostalgia for things lost and why people like to be reminded of times past. There was the academic and historical interest but the park had been aimed at the personal and social history of its visitors. Castiel confessed that the scent of Lily of The Valley in the hotel had reminded him of his mother. Dean closed his eyes and was back in a kitchen in Lawrence that was filled with baking aromas.

“My Mom smelled of apple pie. Even her hair was apple-scented, but I guess that was her shampoo.” Dean smiled.

“Is she no longer with us?” Castiel asked gently, his voice deep but soft.

“I was four.”

“I am sorry Dean.” Castiel shifted closer on his train seat. “Losing a parent is a devastating loss.”

“Are yours?” Dean felt that perhaps he should have asked when Castiel had mentioned his father’s stroke.

“My parents are no longer in my life.” Castiel answered with a shuttered expression.

Dean didn’t press. He understood being reluctant to talk. Instead he took possession of Castiel’s
arm again. He laid his head on Castiel’s shoulder for the final few stops before Palo Alto. They hadn’t kissed. It hadn’t been that kind of date. Dean remembered fumbled frantic first date embraces in the back row of small town cinemas. Dean imagined their carriage devoid of other passengers and Castiel twisting in his seat, taking Dean’s jaw in his hand and opening up his mouth with a determined and passionate caress.

Their hands found each other on the short walk back to Cowper Street. Castiel expressed a wish that he did not have to go to work, and asked if Dean would be amenable to meeting again, perhaps for a meal.

“So Dean Vs. Ice Cream did not discourage you.” Dean snickered.

Castiel narrowed his eyes as if he was trying to parse the humor in Dean’s joking comment. “Not at all. I am afraid I work on Sundays. Monday is a holiday. Lunch?”

“Sam has commanded a House Scrubbing Day.” It was in anticipation of Garth’s visit, but Castiel didn’t know about that. “But I might be able to slip out for an hour.”

“Sandwiches at mine then? Text me. I’ll be home with my lesson plans.”

Dean surprised Castiel with a hearty goodbye hug. Castiel stiffened before wrapping his arms around Dean’s neck.

“I’m not used to such affection.” Castiel muttered apologetically.

Dean snorted, “Get used to it. I’m a hugger.”

Communication was partially by touch, and Castiel had not objected to Dean’s knee pats and arm linking. Dean pushed his luck and pecked Castiel’s pink lips as he pulled out of the hug. Huge eyes met his before Castiel returned the compliment adding a second tender feather light touch to the corner of Dean’s lips.

Dean floated to his room. He gave Spider a spritz, twirled onto his futon, crossed his legs at the ankle and spent uncounted time sketching Castiel’s face from memory.

================================SPNSPNSPN===============================================

Chapter End Notes

Thanks you guys for the great response to this story. I am really enjoying writing it and I hope you are getting as much pleasure from reading it and will continue to do so over future chapters.
Dean’s birthday in next chapter.
Chapter Notes

Influenced by the profoundness of Supernatural sandwiches. Who? Me?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel made the best sandwiches. There was thick sliced bread, still faintly warm, baked using a bread-maker but Dean didn’t count that as cheating. The turkey was fresh off the bone, cut away from their Sunday evening leftovers. There was just the right scrape of mayo and thickly spread organic creamery butter. Castiel planted a second offering in front of Dean without being asked. That led Dean to contemplate the awesomeness of the man occupying the paper strewn end of the small dining table, which was pushed lengthways against the wall, as if they rarely entertained visitors in this home. Dean peered at the assignments that Castiel was grading. They appeared to be scientific drawings of a bisected flower with the parts labeled. Dean reckoned that Cas had several artistically talented students in his class. He craned his neck to see a few that had picked a specific species of flowering plant, rather than a generic daisy-petal head. One partially covered example had been richly colored in.

Waves of some high brow music choice played softly in the background. Castiel’s pen scratched notes on a much erased and redrawn submission. A sated and comfortable silence settled over Dean.

“Would you like another?”

When Dean looked up Castiel was leaning back in his chair, rolling his shoulders to ease out his muscles, then cracking his neck. A hinted glimpse of skin, that revealed and subsided from Castiel’s unbuttoned black Henley, made Dean’s mouth water.

“No, thanks Cas, I’m good.” Dean pressed the pad of his finger to the plate to pick up the last shredded morsel of turkey, then popped his digit into his mouth and sucked it off.

Castiel watched in fascination, licking his lips and focusing on Dean, who grinned and said “Great sandwiches.”

A smile like rays of sun breaking through clouds spread across Castiel’s face. “I’m glad you liked them. You don’t have to go yet, do you? Would you like me to change the CD?”

Across the street it was all hands on deck. Sam and Sarah had pulled the kitchen apart, while Jessica had a demonic vacuum cleaner on the go, and Andy was attempting to air out his bedroom. Only Brady had escaped due to a Lacrosse team meeting. Dean had been granted respite on condition that he take toilet scrubbing duty on his return. Sam had made a suggestion of a rock/paper/scissors tournament to decide on the dud jobs, but that had resulted in an outcry, because Sam always won. It was how he had secured the master bedroom. The idea of lingering a little longer with Castiel was much more appealing.

“Another orchestra?” Dean checked.
Castiel chuckled, “That was a string quartet. Bartók. I do have the Vienna Philharmonic or the Philadelphia Orchestra’s recent release of Mendelssohn under Ormandy.”

“Any ELO?” Dean tried with a breathy laugh and was faced with a blank that matched his own knowledge of the classic classics. “Mr. Blue Sky?”

“I don’t know of a Bleuski.”

Dean guffawed but stopped his mirth when Castiel narrowed his eyes and squinted at him.

“ELO, Electric Light Orchestra, y’know Xanadu?”

“No, Dean.”

“Just classic as in pianos and violins and stuff, not rock? AC/DC, Hendrix or The Zep?”

“My preference would be Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky.” Castiel spread his hands and pouted his bottom lip, yet obviously amused at their different musical tastes.

Dean grinned. He couldn’t tell Mozart from Moses. But then maybe Castiel couldn’t tell Plant from Osbourne. “No Stairway to Heaven then Cas?”

“I do have Holst’s The Planets.” Castiel offered.

“Gotta be better than Sammy’s emo and indie crap.” Dean made a put upon expression, “but then he was out from under my influence.”

“I’m afraid my influences were out of their time.” Castiel gave a sad reflective smile. “I was raised without access to popular music.”

“So was I, Cas. Classic rock ain’t exactly ‘N Sync or Mariah Carey.”

Castiel replied “I may have heard those artists on the radio at work, but they did not impress me.”

While Dean contemplated exposing Castiel to rock music of the finest vintages, he glanced at the clock on the wall and saw how long he had been gone. “Oh Hell, I’ve gotta get back to Sam and The Borax Identity.”

“I think it is the Bourne Identity.” Castiel corrected.

“How come,” Dean laughed, “You know Jason Bourne but not modern music?”

“I saw that movie.” Castiel explained simply then licked his lips, “My parents believed that modern culture, movies, music, television are inherently evil. I was homeschooled to 7th grade and we did not possess a TV.”

“Whoa,” Dean puffed. He thought of all the beloved TV shows of his childhood. Had Cas ever seen MacGyver, Buck Rodgers or re-runs of Bonanza? Maybe his life had been devoid of Star Trek and Batman. He didn’t know what to say.

“May I ask what the grand cleaning is for?” Castiel asked changing the subject, “Are you having family visit?”

“No Man,” Dean scrubbed the back of his neck, suddenly awkward, “Y’know… I said I’ve an anxiety disorder.”
Castiel nodded, “I made the point of looking it up in the library.”

“You did?” Dean’s jaw dropped.

“Yes. I haven’t overstepped?” Castiel’s body was rigid with tension as he waited the fraction of a second for Dean’s reply.

“No. God, Cas. I’m not offended. That’s kinda sweet of you.” Dean sucked a breath. That meant when they weren’t together that Castiel thought about him, about them, just like Dean did. Now there was a faint tint of scarlet rising to Castiel’s cheeks. It made Dean want to trace his cheekbones but he refrained. If Castiel had looked up some psychology textbooks or medical references then he deserved to know more. If Dean wanted more between them he could hardly hide the last years of his life behind shuttered eyes and silent pauses. “So… I was… was in a psych ward.”

“Oh Dean.” Castiel said in a deep distressed tone. He reached a hand across the table.

Blue eyes glistened and met Dean’s liquid green. Somehow their connecting gazes gave Dean strength to continue. He turned his palm up for Castiel to take his hand. A golf ball threatened to compress his vocal cords, but Dean ground his teeth determined to finish. He didn’t unlock their gazes when he coughed and began again, “So that’s where I was. Arkansas. I’ve a social worker and a shrink, a GED and a bed in my brother’s room. I’m no graduate. I’m an unskilled ex-psych patient on welfare.”

Dean dropped his eyes to the polished wood table. He set his shoulders ready for any manner of rejection or a cringing sympathetic partings of ways.

Instead Castiel removed his hand and offered it again to be shaken, “Hello Dean. My name is Castiel Fletcher, unqualified teacher, disowned gay son, with a bedroom in my cousin’s house, a mountain of student debt and an addiction to caffeine. Pleased to meet you.”

Their eyes met again, this time in self depreciating mirth. They both collapsed into snorting laughter.

“We’re hopeless.” Dean chuffed.

“Equally so,” Castiel grinned, “So no fighting over who is in the worst boat?”

“No fighting.” Dean promised with feeling.

In the end Garth’s visit went without a hitch. Sam had to skip a class. He told Dean not to feel bad about it, but it was still his fault that Sam would have to catch up on his statistics course at his tutorial. Andy had been told to get out of the house, but had not been the least bit insulted. There was a very basic checklist of things like hot running water, locks on doors, number of bathrooms per head, adequate heat and ventilation that Garth checked off. The minor factors that Sam had freaked over, like there only being the kitchen and family room as communal space because the Brady’s downstairs bedroom was originally the designated dining room, didn’t matter at all. Garth opened Andy’s bedroom door and Dean was sure he saw the ‘house plant’ on the windowsill, but the social worker ignored it. Dean was very tempted to point out to Samantha The House Cleaning Princess that Garth didn’t inspect the oven for grease nor underneath the toilet seat for grime. However he kept his mouth shut, because Sam looked like he might literally explode in a mess of body goo from the tension.
Over coffee, Dean brewed decaf for the sake of Sam’s nerves, Garth gave his approval. He refused the offer of one of Jess’s muffins, instead pulling a Tupperware container of some sort of dried seaweed out of his bag. While he munched and Dean watched the black stuff disappear into his mouth, Garth explained he was on a Japanese detox. He was happy Dean had attended Dr Henricksen and that he had standing appointment. He promised to be in touch soon about Dean’s work program and shook each brother’s hand on his way out. Sam sagged against the door when he had departed.

Dean punched him in the arm.

“Ouch, what was that for?” Sam rubbed his bicep.

“Toilets, Sammy,” Dean huffed. He wondered if he could fiddle with the toilet lid so it would snap closed on Sam, but then Andy or Brady might end up victim of the prank. Maybe there was some other trick he could pull to pay back Sam for the toothbrush toilet scrubbing.

With Garth’s visit over, Dean took the rest of Wednesday easy. He went to the park for a while and wrote his first entry into the journal for Victor about how he had been the least stressed person in the house. He detoured through the closer smaller park on the way home and found a Californian Buckwheat in flower. A spider had spun its web across the spindly branches. Dean clipped one of the white flowering stems with the small knife he carried in his inner pocket. He didn’t disturb the web. He thought he might try and recreate the picture back at home.

Thursday it seemed the theme of mellow Dean and frantic Sam continued. Sam rushed back from campus to get to his swapped work shift. In the few minutes gap Brady made Sam eat a bowl of Cheerios. Sam protected his black work shirt from milk splashes with a napkin tucked in the collar, much to Dean’s undisguised amusement. Then Jessica and Sarah thumped down the stairs with their luggage ready to head for Jessica’s birthday weekend skiing at Lake Tahoe with Scott, Becca and Zach. There had been an open but regretfully unaccepted invitation for the other housemates to join them. There was a flurry of chick kisses into the air over Dean’s cheeks. Brady checked the girls had Jessica’s gifts in their cases. Dean had been rather stumped about having to get a last minute present for Sam’s friend who shared his birthday, but he had spotted a long primrose yellow wool scarf in the window one of the small stores he walked by. If she didn’t like it, Jessica could wrap it around the neck of a ski-lodge snowman.

With all the hectic comings and leavings, half of a red velvet cake, that had held early candles for Jess, remained uneaten on the table. Once Dean had tidied up around the kitchen he figured Cas might be home from his afternoon class. He covered the cake plate with a clean dish towel and made his way to knock on Castiel’s door.

It was opened by the other resident of the house. Dean gaped at the older blond with his deeply v-necked metallic blue top, darker blue lounge pants, and Birkenstock sandals. Instead of a greeting the dude twisted around and shouted, “Cassie Darling! Where are my car keys?” Then faced him again with a huge smile plastered on his face, “You must be the Dean. Pleasure.”

Dean shook his hand.

Castiel appeared behind Balthazar with the keys held aloft.

“Gotta bolt, fellows.” Balthazar said by way of apology as he side stepped around Dean, “He’s cute Cassie, you could do worse.”

Once the door was closed Dean asked with hushed confusion, “Cas is your cousin British?”
Castiel guided him through the house to the rear facing small galley kitchen. “My Aunt married a British doctor and Balthazar is her son. Most people’s next question is about our age difference. My parents had me late in life. Do you know your old testament?”

Dean was surprised by the question. He nodded as he placed the cake on the counter.

“The story of Abraham and Sarah. How an angel came and told her that she would bear a son many years beyond her natural fertility?” Castiel waited for Dean’s nod, “My father was in his late fifties when I was born and my mother, ten years his junior, almost through her menopause. I was a blessing from God.” Castiel gave a minor huff, “My father wished to name me Isaac but my mother was uncomfortable with the ‘sacrifice your son’ part of the Bible story. She found out she was pregnant on a Thursday, the angel Castiel’s weekday.”

As Castiel moved to the coffee maker, Dean uncovered his offering. Castiel snagged a broken piece immediately, “So good. Did your baking housemate make it?”

“Jess? No. I think Sarah bought it.”

Castiel returned to his explanation, “Balthazar’s twenty years older than me, but we are first cousins. I am sorry I’ve been up the walls the last few days. We had an emergency drama club meet on Tuesday, trying to decide if we are putting on a spring production. How did the house inspection go yesterday?”

“Peachy,” Dean smirked, “Sam was shitting himself but it was a cinch.”

“Good,” Castiel poured two mugs. He gestured for the family room so they could sit on the sofa together with the cake on the low glass table.

Dean hummed at the decent coffee. “Y’know, I only had decaf in the hospital.”

“Sacrilege.” Castiel growled.

Dean cupped his hands around the warm mug, let his eyelids fall and scented the quality brew.

“You know, you are stunning,” Castiel breathed.

Dean lowered his head, sure Cas was being overly kind. His chin was lifted by Cas’s fingertips.

“I mean it.”

“Stop, Cas. Please don’t. I know I am scarred.” Dean muttered and tried to turn his head away.

“You mean this?” Castiel’s other hand touched his cheek scar, “Guys, and I presume ladies too, find scars very appealing.”

Dean made a wan smile but couldn’t believe such a blatant mark would be seen as attractive. “It’s all the way across my face.”

Castiel huffed making Dean look up. His eyes almost glowed in neon blue. “It’s a slender new moon on its back in a thin white curving line. It’s sexy.” He quirked his lips and lowered his voice an octave, “Exchanging scar stories can be a bonding milestone.”

Dean blinked. That voice made his pulse flutter. He slipped things round and asked “Do you have any?”

“I have a flecked pattern across my chest. Old stitches from a branch that caught me when I fell out
of a tree.”

Dean raised one eyebrow.

“What?” Castiel protested, “I was six and convinced I could fly. How did you get such a perfectly lunar scar?”

Dean choked up. He lifted his eyes and spoke to the ceiling, “It happened on the ward.”

“Oh Dean. Oh Lord. I’m sorry.” Castiel bit his lip.

Dean checked for sickly sympathy, but Castiel apologized for bringing up the whole discussion.

“’s OK. I … Fo-fought them off and a buckle slashed my face. It was a long time ago.” Dean gave a long purifying exhale of the kind recommended to fight off a panic attack.

Castiel squeezed his hand. “How long ago?”

“I dunno exactly. Days blurred together. Maybe four years.”

Castiel touched the scar again with tips of his fingers. “Good God it must have been bad to leave that mark.”

“I’ve had worse.” Dean took a deep fortifying breath. Prepared to cut his losses and get out of this thing developing between them or dive right in depending on Castiel’s reaction. He popped the studs on his cuffs and exposed his wrists. He chanced a glance up. Castiel was silently crying.

“Oh Dean.” Castiel took his closer hand palm up onto his lap and cradled it.

“I’ve a chip out of my elbow from another attempt.” Dean watched in stunned fascination as Castiel traced his warm soft finger along the warped ridges on Dean’s pale lower forearm and across the thick blue veins of his inner wrist. “I didn’t think I could fly.”

“Such pain.” Castiel’s breath seemed to alight in a fine mist and settle as a caress on Dean’s skin. “I wish you had never experienced any of that.”

“You and me both, Cas.” Dean exhaled and went all in. There was no point in concealing crap when he had gone this far. It came out lower than Dean intended, almost ethereal, a whisper, “I miscarried. First trimester… a lost tiny scrap of life.”

Castiel pressed his hand over his own heart as if everything Dean was telling him was giving him angina or physical heart pains. “What can I say? When?”

“I was seventeen. I lost my baby and my family in one fell swoop. I didn’t want to live. Thought I couldn’t go on. I was in hell but I wouldn’t let them win.” Dean spoke from between gritted teeth, “I survived Cas.”

“I for one am very happy that you did.” Castiel moved across and pressed a kiss to the scar on Dean’s cheek.

Dean curled into Castiel. They shared forks of cake, wrapped together on the sofa. Cas stroked his arm. Dean twirled their fingers together. They didn’t dwell on Dean’s revelations, which he was thankful for. It had taken lot out of him to bring the past up, and sitting together without judgment, comment or chick flick emoting was what he needed.

Castiel’s phone bleeped but they ignored it. Until Balthazar texted a second time to say he would
be late. After a while Castiel apologized that he had to finish some papers for the next morning’s classes. He turned on The Discovery Channel. Dean twisted his legs up on the seat. He was happy to sit next to Cas while he worked. After a while Castiel put aside his papers and made himself comfortable. There was no space between their bodies. Dean could feel the heat from Castiel’s skin. They were almost snuggling, which Dean corrected to snuggling by wrapping an arm around Cas’s shoulders. The next show on TV was a new one about busting myths. Dean began to see that science had a cool side. He imagined Cas wearing nerdy goggles in the school lab debunking myths for his pupils.

“Geez, I don’t know if that’s awesome or a tragedy.” Dean huffed. The TV guys were going to attach jets to an Impala and destroy it. He grabbed Castiel’s hand. At the raised brows Dean chirped, “Our car.”

“I’m sure your car is safe,” Cas grinned.

Dean relaxed when the Mythbusters found a 66 Impala that had already been mutated by a previous owner. Once he didn’t have to watch a version of his beloved vehicle blown to pieces he began to enjoy the show. It brought back a lot of his knowledge from fixing up cars with his Dad and more so at Bobby’s yard.

“Science has a cool side.” Dean declared at the end.

“I doubt I’d get permission to make stomach bombs or add jets to cars on school property,” Castiel huffed a laugh, “But I imagine I’ll get questions in physics tomorrow.”

When Dean finally rose to go home, Castiel planted a few sweet and chaste kisses to his lips. Dean caught him by the waist on the front porch and gained a decent kiss, deep and warm, which ended in a squeezing hug.

“Are you OK?” Castiel checked.

“Sure,” Dean nodded.

“After what we talked about earlier, you know I was sincere.”

Dean’s heart quivered. “You too, Cas. I mean, you are a handsome guy.” He reached up and cupped Castiel’s cheek, “I’ll see you tomorrow maybe?”

“Goodnight Dean.” Castiel gave him a final kiss before letting him go.

All night Castiel send a stream of text messages to check on Dean. It was cute and even better the repetitive text alerts got Sam all huffy and glary when he got home. Dean almost asked Castiel to keep texting just to see Sam’s bitchface. Although maybe it was a cruel and unusual pranking for a little brother who was trying his best, and it was getting late for Castiel and Sam who had school and class in the morning.

On Friday Sam brought him coffee and pop tarts in bed. While teasing that he shouldn’t get used to it, Sam handed over a badly wrapped birthday gift, which was obviously a CD-walkman. There was a moment of mourning for Dean’s lost cassette tape collection but Sam broke through it with CD versions of The Zep, Black Sabbath and Asia’s Then & Now album. Dean got ever so slightly misty eyed and forgave Sam for his plans to replace the Impala’s cassette player with a CD version.

Dean took his walkman to the park during the morning. It was kind of awesome to have Ramble On in his ear buds while a chickadee pecked at a nut near his boots. He reflected that maybe he
should cut Sam some slack and be a bit more charitable in his thoughts. Sam was trying his best and he wasn’t the whiny, if adorable, twelve year old Dean had lost. Dean had the very best start to 2003 when he was found by Sam. His whole life, his world, had been transformed. The missing phantom limb that was Sam had been reconnected. Faced with a young adult version of his brother, it was easy to forget that he was still a teenager. Dean made a birthday vow that he would be there for his little brother. He’d always taken care of Sammy growing up. He’d tried his level best to protect Sam, provide him with the best home life possible, encourage his studious big brain and be there when he fell and scraped his knees. There might be a version of role reversal going on at the moment but Dean could step back up to the big brother plate and he vowed that he would.

It clouded over before lunch and the temperature dropped into the fifties. Dean didn’t push his speed on the way home but his walk seemed to take on the rhythm of his music. He snorted to himself that maybe he’d be a dancer when he finally kicked all his issues to the curb.

The mailman had been while Dean was out. His face lit up when he saw a packet with Bobby’s address in the corner. In the bundle of mail was also a card from Arkansas. Dean made his way into the kitchen and put a microwave burrito in for his lunch. He used his finger to slit open the card first. It depicted a crazy looking teddy bear and was for a four year old complete with a pin declaring he was four. Someone, read Chuck, had used a permanent marker to write a 2 before the 4 on the card and pin. Dean beamed when he opened it to see many signatures and good wishes. He had forgotten his idea of sending a postcard of the beach to ACIC but resolved to write back soon. Next he tackled Bobby’s well taped up gift, using the paring knife that he was slicing his lunch with. There was a soft flannel plaid shirt with a note on one of the salvage yard’s invoices wishing him a happy birthday and telling him to wear the over-shirt. The contrary mechanic scribbled that he was sure it got cold as a witch’s finger in North California too. When Dean shook out the blue green shirt there was a fall of other mail. Some had those official windowed envelopes and they were all addressed to Sam. He guessed that the salvage yard was still the Winchester permanent mailing address. There was a couple of personal letters or cards for Sam too. One was from Jim Murphy and another in a delayed Christmassy envelope from the Paxman family. When Dean straightened them up against the spaghetti jar he noticed one with FOR DEAN written above Sam’s name and Bobby’s address. He slit the envelope open and pulled out a large white card with a printed row of red poppy heads. It was a strange choice for a birthday card. He flicked it open.

Sam,
It’s hard to believe another year is gone by without your promised visit to Indiana or mine to Stanford. My dorm door is always open here in Purdue.
Bet you are killing them on the Lacrosse field again this year. I made the swim team. No comments about webbed feet!
Do you remember Miss Kelsey? She ran off with Farmer Grainger. Vicky Grainger told Dad while he was doing her root canal.
I promise!!! Pinky promise!!! To stay in touch more often this year.
I’ll be thinking of you on the 24th and I’m sure Aaron will too.
Be good!
Kol tuv,
Sydney.

Dean’s butt collapsed into a kitchen chair. He held the card loosely in his hand. He stared at the handwritten words, and felt a crippling wave of guilt. All the years that had passed since he had been wrapped in Aaron’s arms. They hadn’t been in love, or anything like it, but it had been warm and affectionate with burst of teenage passion. They had been together on their ratty sofa and in the back seat of the Bass’s sedan. They had been friends and he had confided in Aaron things about his life and the way the Winchesters lived that he had never told anyone else. And there had been the baby. The card in Dean’s fingers weighed little less than the pregnancy test he had taken in the
school restrooms in Batesville. These people had grieved his passing, as had Bobby and poor Sammy. The new regime on the psych ward had brought Deacon who had offered to help the recovering patients to make contact with friends and family. His father knew where Dean was. By default he’d thought Sam knew too. While some of the other guys had sought help in reconnecting with lost friends, Dean had turned his face away and closed that door in his heart. Now he thought he had been wrong. If he had written to Bobby two years ago, then maybe he could have been with Sam earlier, or in Sioux Falls. If he had written to Aaron… even though he had lost their baby, if Aaron’s family had offered him assistance…

Dean gulped back burning regrets. He knew he should put the soft flannel shirt on a clothes hanger. He should call Bobby to thank him. But he couldn’t. He looked at his watch. Cas should be home from school. He shoved his feet into his boots and made a bad job of lacing them up. He didn’t remember making his way across the street, was not sure that he had locked the door behind him.

When Castiel opened the door, he took one look at Dean and slung his arm around his shoulder pulling him into the house. In the family room, Dean pressed his face into Castiel’s neck, feeling another ping of guilt for wetting Castiel’s suit collar with his tears.

“What happened Dean?”

“s m’birthday,” Dean muttered.

Castiel stiffened. Dean held his breath.

“I have no gift for you. I didn’t know.”

And that broke the pall of sadness. Such a practical answer. Dean stood straight and dried his eyes with his fingers. “Couldn’t. Didn’t tell ya.”

“What happened?” Castiel repeated.

“There was a card, for me, I thought. It was my name, but it was a kinda memorial for me.”

“What?” Castiel looked partially confused with eyes narrowed and partially outraged, “Some sort of sick joke?”

“No Cas. Shit. I’m no good at this.” Dean huffed, “See my Dad told them all I was dead.”

“Jesus.” Castiel’s unexpectedly uttered blasphemy made Dean stare.

“So these friends of me and Sam, seems they remembered me to him each year.” Dean sank into an armchair.

Castiel perched on the arm. “Good friends?”

“The best.” Dean agreed.

“What are you going to do?”

Dean blew a long breath. “I bet Sam has an e-mail or something. I don’t think I could call and say ‘Hi I’m Alive.’ We didn’t have lots of people in our lives but there are a few others; My dad’s old Marine Corp Chaplin Jim, The Mills in Sioux Falls, my granddaddies but Dad had cut all ties with them when I was little.”

“Does it have to be done today?” Castiel asked while he stroked the leather of Dean’s wrist cuff.
Dean shook his head. He leaned sideways so his shoulder pressed on Castiel’s arm.

“I am flattered.”

“Huh?” Dean queried.

“That you came to me.” Castiel pressed a light kiss into Dean’s hair. “I wish I didn’t have to work at Harmonies this evening, but must let Leonore go home and then close up for Balthazar. He has a date.”

“You need to go?” Dean asked with disappointment. He was just getting comfortable.

“I’ll need to change out of my teaching garb and get to the mall by four, so we have a little time.” Castiel shifted so he was more curled around Dean. “Maybe when I am home I’ll call in on you?”

Dean communicated how much he would look forward to that by wrapping his arm around Castiel’s waist and not letting him go until he was almost late. He knew now that Castiel was more than a date. They had a nascent friendship, something that might endure, be polished up like a gemstone, and form a bond between them greater than physical or lustful attraction.

Dean returned home with a lighter step than he could have fathomed possible. Sam was inside the door wearing his coat and in the process of dialing Dean’s cell.

“Dean. Oh My God. You saw Sydney’s card. Are you OK?” Sam did a freaky patting down of Dean’s arms that had his older brother taking a pace back to escape the weird.

Dean cleared his throat, “I’m good Sammy.”

Puppy dog eyes and not letting go of Dean’s sleeve, “You’re sure? Not putting up a front?”

“It was a shock,” Dean admitted as he eased Sam’s huge hand off his arm, “But I’m sorta glad you kept in touch.”

“He sends one every year. He’s doing great. Aeronautics at Purdue. We met up a couple of years back when Dad had a gig at the Indy 500. He’s still the same, y’know. And we are awful at contacting each other but if he had a problem I’d jump to help out and I know he would do the same.”

“And Aaron?” Dean gasped out the name.

Sam leaned against the wooden spines of the banisters. “Last I heard he was in Israel.”

Dean glared at his little brother to continue.

“He dropped out of college. He was heading for a career in dentistry like their Dad. But Sydney said it was to please his old man. Rabbi Bass linked him up with some distant relatives in Israel. Remember how you guys bonded in Art class? Aaron’s doing some sort of clay sculptures. He lives in Ein Hod, last time I asked.”

“Good,” Dean set his jaw. He hoped Aaron had found his niche and was happy. Maybe he had a girl or a guy over there.

“I guess we should tell people you aren’t six feet under.” Sam tried a weak grin.

“Suppose,” Dean agreed.
“Like there’s a few people who’d want to know.” Sam continued.

“That’s true.” Dean said with a firm nod to end Sam’s train of thought and added Castiel’s sage advice, “But not today huh?”

“Yeah, sure Dean. We’ve got our movie marathon tonight.” Sam popped his brows up and down.

“Is that my surprise?” Dean huffed a laugh.

“What did you want? A nightclub and a titty bar?”

“Maybe,” Dean teased but inside he was pleased with Sam’s choice. He went for a shower and to change into something more comfortable. When he came down Sam had drawn the blinds in the family room and laid on multiple flavors of chips, dips, and roasted nuts. The old cooler that lived in the Impala trunk was against the leg of the coffee table with four cold beers.

Sam’s mega watt grin was accompanied by a choice of Lord of The Rings or Star Trek The Wrath of Khan.

After Boromir’s tragic end, Sam disappeared to the kitchen, returning with a single serving size lemon meringue pie. The candle was suspiciously pink and the same as the ones that had been on Jess’s red velvet cake, but Dean didn’t care.

“Best birthday ever,” He complimented as he blew out the tiny flickering flame.

Sam’s self satisfied flop into the armchair and scooping of some of the lemon pie filling with the crook of his finger made Dean all warm and brotherly fuzzy inside.

The night was topped off when Castiel arrived between The Wrath of Khan and The Search for Spock. Sam welcomed him without being overly protective. When Castiel admitted never having seen the Star Trek movies, both Winchesters were shocked and united in their promise to correct Castiel’s cultural knowledge gap. Sam ejected the third movie and went on a hunt for the original motion picture.

When Sam shouted from the hall that he was braving Brady’s bedroom, Castiel produced a paper bag.

Dean smiled to allay the nervous expression on Castiel’s face.

He unwrapped his gift.

Sam appeared looming over the back of the sofa, “Watcha get Dean?”

Two CDs appeared. They were CD versions of Back In Black and Metallica’s Black Album.

“Awesome. These rock, literally. Hey, was there a conspiracy?”

Dean saw two wide eyed denying head shakes. Sam protested that he hadn’t spoken to Castiel, who looked bewildered at the question. Dean thanked Sam again for the walkman which made comprehension dawn on Castiel’s face.

“The helpful clerk at the mall’s music store recommended these.” Castiel explained.

“Great minds think alike, hey Castiel?” Sam grinned.

Dean made his way round the sofa followed by Cas, which allowed him to grab his two favorite people in a one armed hug each.
“More chips Sammy.” Dean directed, “Come on we’ve gotta teach Cas the wonders and wiles of James T Kirk and the Starfleet universe.”

“Well seeing as you are on a mission,” Sam chuckled as he went for Doritos.

“Damn right.” Dean asserted. He patted the sofa cushion next to him. When Castiel took his place, Dean shifted in closer, scenting laundry softener, a faint hint of New Age store incense and the lightly spiced fragrance of Cas’s aftershave. He made a mental note that being caught having his nose tucked into his boyfriend’s neck would give Sam too much teasing ammunition. Instead he threw his arm around Castiel’s shoulders. He was gratified when Cas eased into his embrace. Sam still eye rolled when he returned with the chips, but he brought another beer for Cas and they settled in for a Star Trek marathon.

Opening his eyes to silent darkness, Dean hadn’t a clue what time he had fallen asleep and proceeded to drool over Castiel’s shoulder, but he remembered Brady watching The Search for Spock with them. At some point Sam had covered the sleeping duo with a blanket. He was stiff and sore when he woke. Castiel’s head was tilted back on the sofa. Dean admired the plane of his nose and partial open lips. Little puffs of air left his mouth and Castiel curled his hand into Dean’s shirt. It was only when he realized that Cas must be dreaming that Dean recalled that he’d dropped into sleep without his medication, and more than that hadn’t woken in a ball of sweat and fear. He lowered Castiel’s upper body into a more comfortable less likely to muscle spasm position. Sliding a cushion under the dark haired man’s neck produced a soft moan that might have been ‘Dean’, but Castiel didn’t wake. Dean eased down so his back was pressed into Castiel’s chest. He pulled the blanket over their shoulders. Castiel’s arm draped over his body. Dean was nicely trapped. He was sure Sam and Brady would wake them when they got up for work, or Andy would blunder in from whatever party he had attended, but for now Dean was going to take the opportunity for another forty winks of blissful natural sleep, snug and coiled around Castiel.

Chapter End Notes

I know the last two chapters have been Sam-lite, focused on Dean and Cas.
Next instalment is from Sam’s POV.

Thank you guys for reading and all your encouragement. You rock.
Eight

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay. A few chapters clamored to be written simultaneously. This does mean I will post again in a couple of days.

Just a note about the rating, which has been Teen and Up. There is a slightly smutty paragraph in this chapter (in the kitchen, if you want to skim), but I am going to change the overall rating to Mature for intimacy from the next chapter (Hell-Yeah-Destiel-and-Samifer).

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Sam’s knee jigged up and down. Brady’s Dad had phoned minutes before they were due to head out for their Friday shifts. Sam reversed out of the car port and faced the Impala in the right direction for travel. He cursed his best friend under his breath. He knew from the previous Thanksgiving that Brady’s Dad could win a gold medal at the talking Olympics. He pulled out his cell and shot a text off to Nick explaining they were on their way but might not make it for exactly 5pm. There was no response. Maybe it was already getting busy in the restaurant.

Reflecting that last Friday night had been spent with beer and chips and teaching Dean’s odd but cute boyfriend about Star Trek, Sam wished he could take another night off. It had been a long week since Dean’s birthday, one of ups and downs.

On the positive side of the equation Dean was definitely more settled in. The little critical voice in the back of Sam’s head had shut up, mostly. There were less internal whispers during class when his mind drifted, less frequently pricking him with worries and shortfalls. Monday evening had been sweet. The Gates was moderately busy with enough customers for the time to pass quickly but not so many that he couldn’t snatch periods at the end of the bar shooting the breeze with Nick.

The most amusing event of the week was when Castiel joined them at the Comedy Club. Dean took to hissed whispers of punch lines that had gone over Castiel’s head. Jessica had to spit her drink back into its glass at one point she was laughing so much. She told them they should book a slot on stage as a duo. Sam had watched them closely. He noticed the way Castiel leaned in allowing Dean to whisper, the time that Dean cocked his head which Castiel correctly interpreted responding that he’d share another pitcher of beer, and how the graduate’s eyes never left Dean. A few days earlier on their easy Sunday Sam had sneaked Dean into the campus gym. Then they stopped at Light Up Your Beans on the way home. Castiel was working but took his break to sit with them and hear Dean’s impressions of Stanford’s facilities. Sam found that he was reluctantly developing a fondness for Dean’s boyfriend. He was glad there was someone else there for Dean. He had hoped that his brother might have hit it off and gotten close to one of his housemates, but he knew they were all a few years younger than Dean and focused on college life. He had his fingers, toes, legs and freaking eyes crossed that Castiel wouldn’t break Dean’s heart. He would hate to have to break the cute guy’s nose as vengeance.

Thinking of his fist smashing into nose cartilage brought up the shit-creek end of the week’s river.
Sam had composed joyful emails to friends that he was still in touch with, telling them that Dean lived, which should have acted like Prozac but it had made Sam reflect on his transient upbringing and how every one of those people had felt Dean’s loss. It made him sorry he hadn’t punched his father’s lights out back in Bobby’s yard on New Year’s Day.

Garth had been in touch to say that there was an open session for Ticket to Work employers and beneficiaries the following Monday afternoon. Sam could take Dean during his gap in classes but he couldn’t practically make it back in time for the start of his humanities class. He could be late and red-faced entering the lecture hall or ask Brady for another batch of illegible notes. It caused the Winchester brothers to have their first falling out since being reunited. Dean insisted he could go on his own in the Impala. Sam point blank refused. Dean’s new sleeping pill meant he could drive but he hadn’t sat behind a wheel for years. Dean had huffed and pointedly said that it was like riding a bicycle. Heading to San Jose on his own as his first ride was not going to happen, and Sam was not going to let his brother face a room of what would be essentially job interviews without support. Dean had given Sam the frostiest cold shoulder until he placed a mounded plate of homemade Mac’n’Cheese in front of Sam that evening as an unspoken apology.

There had also been the most horrific negatively marked multiple choice test in his Human Biology class. The exam had been the day before Garth’s house inspection. Sam had been so distracted that he thought he might have ticked Lysol instead of Lysosome. A few hours ago at tutorial the TA had distributed their scores. Sam had been slapped with a B minus. The test was only 15% of the final grade but it meant Sam would have to cram his efforts into biology to make his scholarship average or consign the unit to the dumpster. He could take an incomplete but then he would have to register for an extra class for Spring semester. There was no guarantee that his life would be less hectic then. At least Dean’s standing appointment with his psychiatrist had been set for every second Thursday, which meant Dean could walk to the clinic and Sam pick him up afterwards. Dean had actually been in a good mood after yesterday’s session and had surprised everyone by cooking again; meatball marinara this time. The new schedule meant Sam wouldn’t have to spend his Friday work shift worrying how Dean had got on with Victor. There were enough concerns preying on his mind.

He laid his forehead onto the steering wheel. If Brady didn’t get his butt out of the house Sam would have to dial The Gates and explain their absence. Explaining to Crowley, or even worse Alastair, would be the cherry on his misery.

The shotgun door opened. Brady threw himself into the seat with a huff and a “If Baldur throws a plate or a knife at me tonight I’m making a complaint.”

“You suck it up.” Sam grumbled. His sympathy reserves had run dry.

“Who pissed in your sandbox?” Brady shot back.

Sam didn’t answer, mainly because he would have called his friend out for making them late. He put the car in gear and headed for The Gates. Saying nothing hadn’t helped. Brady was in an obvious snit with him. The blond trounced to the kitchen while Sam headed to the staff room to stow his wallet and keys and to hang up his hoodie.

“Well lookie here. Sam’s gracing us with his presence.”

The nasal drawl announced that Alastair had not yet left the premises. Sam closed his eyes and prayed for divine intervention to hold his patience with his colleague whose superiority complex knew no bounds. He tagged on a post script for fortitude when dealing with grouchy customers and Ruby’s games.
“Hi Al.” Sam gave a fake grin through gritted teeth. Being called Al pushed the day manager’s buttons.

Alastair was pulling on his jacket. He sneered, “You think you’re all that? This year’s thang?”

Sam squinted at him, “What?”

“I see you. Waltzing in here, taking the boss’s fancy. I know your game Samael.” He hissed, “Lucifer’s pet.”

Sam’s nostrils flared with temper. “I am nobody’s pet.”

Alastair chuckled contemptuously. It was a dry hacking sound. “You have no shame. Throwing your legs over his in the staff room. I saw you on Saturday after lunch service. It’s disgusting.”

“You know what, Alastair?” Sam spat back, “Bite Me.”

“You little shit. Jumped up gold-digging busboy.”

“Get a life, you bitter twisted grump.” Sam took a step closer and hissed, “What Nick and I do is none of your business.”

Alastair shrugged his shoulders and drawled with exaggerated slowness, “Such a hotshot now. Wait until he grows tired of you.”

Sam’s anger steamed. He curled his hands into fists. It took all his restraint not to strike out as the bar manager walked by to get to the door.

Despite being late, Sam took a plastic cup from the water cooler and sipped it while he regained his equilibrium. He wondered if Alastair’s opinion of his relationship was shared by the others. He could imagine Alastair and Vepar with their heads together deriding his character. Brady had not told him if any comments were being made behind his back. Sam dumped the cup in the trash and decided he didn’t give a damn about petty workplace jealousies.

Wrapping the ties of his waist apron, Sam headed for the bar. Crowley caught his eye, “Young moose? Your antlers are hanging.”

“Huh?” Sam blinked.

“Bloody hell. You’ll want to wakey wakey Samael’s shaky.”

Sam eye rolled at the lame humor.

“How don’t let grim-guts get you down.” Crowley raised his brows and cocked his head at the staff exit, “Alastair said something didn’t he? Bloody jealous bollocks. And to think I always presumed you and Brady were lovers.”

Sam huffed a laugh at the other bar manager’s jest. “I’m a big boy, Fergus. Name calling doesn’t faze me.” Sam straightened his spine, “Many bookings for tonight?”

“The usual, but there is a Special Assignment for Winchester.” Crowley said mysteriously before his attention was grabbed by a patron.

Nick appeared from his office door. He beamed when he saw Sam and made a bee line for him. Sam couldn’t help smiling in response.
“Get your coat Sam. We are on the move.” Nick rocked on the balls of his feet before slinging an arm around Sam’s shoulders. “Purdy is working the floor tonight.”

Sam caught a glimpse of the waitress who normally only worked Sundays to supplement her secretary salary.

“We, as in you and me, are off to Gianni’s,” Nick winked, “working of course.”

“What?” Sam articulated as he tried get his head around the sudden change in plans.

Nick led him back to the staff room. Sam removed his clean apron and got his things while Nick reminded him of the Round Robin Review scheme. Members of the Bay Area Restaurant Association were reviewing each other’s establishments, then writing an article for the San Francisco Examiner. Tonight Nick and a guest were expected at La Cucina Dolce.

“But,” Sam tried to protest as he zipped his charcoal gray hoodie, “my shift? Won’t we leave the others shorthanded?”

Nick laughed, “Purdy, Lilith, and Meg are on the floor. Fergus is in charge, and Max is in the kitchen with Baldur so they can send Brady out at a push. Don’t fret, Sam, and remember we are working.”

Sam raised his brows skeptically but followed Nick to his car. “Where is La Cucina Dolce?”

“In San Francisco, Baby.” Nick clicked his tongue playfully.

“You could have told me, Nick. I’m in my uniform.” Sam grumbled as he sat in.

“You look fine, Sam. More than fine and Gianni’s doesn’t stand on ceremony. Look no tie.” Nick flicked his fingers against his own open necked white shirt. Sam quirked his lips. Nick might have forgone the tie but he was sure his steel grey casual jacket was designer.

Traffic was heavy as they made their way into the city. Nick kept up the conversation with a tale about their meat supplier. He solicited Sam’s thoughts for how they could impress their reviewer of The Gates. It was almost an hour later when the Lexus pulled into a small open air car lot.

“Where are we?” Sam asked. He had a vague idea but the lot had been on a quieter half retail half residential street.

Nick slipped his fingers into Sam’s hand. He swung their arms as they walked westward. “On our way to dinner where no one cares if I plant a smacker on your lips in public.”

“The Castro?” Sam checked with a laugh.

“There they are,” Nick said with soft eyes, “your dimples. I thought they had gone a hiatus. Welcome back.”

“You’re insane,” Sam guffawed but he kept hold of Nick’s hand as they made their way a few blocks and then turned down hill passing the first few premises. It was almost dark and the street was coming to life. Guys walked with other guys under their arms. Ladies strolled with their girls close at their side. Two exquisitely made up drag queens eyed Nick up and down before taking the staff entrance of a club. Sam squeezed his fingers around his companion’s possessively. The tense muscles in his neck and shoulders were already easing out in the laid back weekend atmosphere of the district.
La Cucina Dolce wasn’t as large an establishment as Nick’s place. It was more eatery and less bar. It had an early bird offer that was almost expired and the place was busy with many diners on dessert. Sam was glad to see a mix of fashions and ages at the tables which had deep blue tablecloths with white linen ones laid diagonally on top. There was a delicious aroma of fine food, with that garlic and herby onion scent of a good Italian. The ambience was one of chatty tables and full bellies. Italian guitar music played low in the background. A tall host with a Latin complexion and aquiline nose took Nick’s name and asked if they would like an aperitivo at the small corner bar while they waited. Nick ordered two Crodino on the rocks, which turned out to be a dry non-alcoholic pre-dinner drink.

There was a flurry of motion and a huge bellied white haired Italian chef clapped Nick on both shoulders. “Lucifer. In my ristorante. Buono.”

“Gianni. How are you? And the family?” Nick asked.

“Making me bald, Nicola. Such is life heh?” Gianni included Sam in his jocular frown. “And who is this young stallion?”

“Gianni Del Porto meet Sam Winchester, my guest for this evening.” Nick nodded in Sam’s direction.

“Benvenuto.” Gianni took Sam’s hand and kissed it.

Sam blurted out a friendly noise in response. Nick and Gianni exchanged a few words about their businesses’ recent health department inspections. Then a private booth under a large watercolor of Sorrento became free. Nick guided Sam to their table with his hand on the small of his back. 

“Is your name really Nicola?” Sam asked after Nick had been handed a wine list.

“It’s on my birth certificate.” Nick said absently.

“Like for real?”

“Yes Sam.” Nick tipped the menu down, “Nicola is an Italian boys’ name.”

“No wonder you go by Lucifer.” Sam puffed.

Nick chuckled, “My brother’s name is Michele.”

“You’re joshing me.”

“I’m not.” Nick stated. “If I order a bottle of Prosecco will you partake?”

Sam leaned in closer. “What if they ask my age?”

Nick shook his head. “They won’t. Trust me. I’m driving remember so no more than a glass or two each.”

“Are they bringing food menus?” Sam asked.

“Gianni is giving us a selection of delights.”

The prosecco came in an ice bucket. Their waiter brought a plate with parmesan crackers while they waited for their meal. He laid down an array of cutlery to allow them both to taste all the dishes. There were bottles of sparkling mineral water too.
“Oh my God. Nick, these are divine. They are like a savory cookie with cheesy goodness.” Sam extolled as the cracker melted in his mouth.

Plate after plate was delivered to their table. There was Mezzelune filled with crab and prawns, squid ink spaghetti with squid and chili, and Sardinian crisp bread with Parma ham and caramelized sweet onions. Sam was suspicious of the black pasta but Nick hummed in appreciation.

“You have to taste this Sam,” he twirled spaghetti around his fork and held it up. Sam bent forward and let Nick feed him the portion. To his surprise Nick was right. It was delicious. He closed his eyes to savor the tastes of sea and spice and olive oil. When he opened them Nick was gazing at him as if he was the dish of the day.

“If you do that with every mouthful I mightn’t last the night,” Nick murmured barely loud enough for Sam to hear. Sam gave a close mouth smile, then speared a prawn and crab combination with his fork and returned the favor. Nick pursed his lips around the fish. He half stood to reach Sam’s mouth for a peck of thanks.

They chatted about small unimportant things, nothing weighty or demanding. Nick’s favorite movie was a toss between Once Upon a Time in America and The Shining, with an honorable mention to The Godfather. Sam submitted Star Wars and Die Hard for consideration. Talk of movies turned to places they had lived. Nick had been born in Maryland but had been to schools in Virginia and New York. He had spent a year in Florida and once ran a bar in Wilmington. Sam claimed he couldn’t list all the places he had lived but talked about Sioux Falls and Irwindale.

When the dishes were gone Sam laid back in the leather bench seat wondering if he could fit a dessert. Two waiters appeared bearing more plates. Sam’s eyes nearly fell out of his head at stacks of roasted eggplant and tomato with basil pesto and a goat cheese layer, a whole baby chicken roasted in a fresh tomato herb sauce served with deep fried polenta fries, and Sous vide beef fillet with a marasla reduction and rosemary sauté potatoes with black truffle shavings.

“Eat up Sam. You are a growing boy.” Nick teased.

Sam blinked. The sting of Alastair’s baseless accusations of gold-digging and thoughts of others thinking that he had ensnared Nick to be his sugar daddy bit into his enjoyment. Sam pushed the negativity away. He looked across the table through the steam of the hot dishes. Nick had this secret smile on his face as if he had won the kewpie doll at the carnival.

“You’re staring,” Sam pointed his fork.

“Maybe,” Nick shrugged with a grin. “So did you always want to be a legal eagle?”

Sam smirked, “Did you always want to be a restaurateur?”

Nick chuffed a laugh, “Touché. If I tell, you must promise not to laugh?”

Sam put on a stern face and said “I won’t. I swear.” He displayed his crossed fingers on the tablecloth.

Nick sighed but divulged, “Botany.”

“For real?”

Nick nodded and took another fork of potatoes. After they both had indulged in more of the gourmet dishes he added, “I loved plant biology. I was fascinated by trees and forests. One of my
schools was set in parkland, and I volunteered in the gardens. I hoarded copies of National Geographic. Global warming and CFCs were unknown but we knew of acid rain and environmental disasters. I thought I could make a difference. Be an advocate. I am still a member of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.”

“What stopped you?” Sam asked in a hushed voice.


“But you have money, I mean.” Sam bit his lip. He didn’t want to seem like he was totting up Nick’s wealth in his head, “You could go back, as a mature student?”

“I don’t think so,” Nick answered. “Not now. Maybe as a retiree. You dodged my question. The law?”

Sam ducked his head and shyly confessed, “Anthropology.”

“Well now. Isn’t that a little different to ambulance chasing?”

“Hey, douche bag, I was never going into personal injury law,” Sam perked up. “I think I want to major in Anthropology. I have taken classes every semester and loved every aspect of it. And I can take the LSAT if I change my mind.”

“I must say you have your head screwed on much more than I did at nineteen.”

Sam tried to imagine Nick at nineteen, maybe a couple of inches shorter with unlined skin, hair a little longer and maybe a couple of zits. He snorted a laugh as he dressed fake-young-Nick in 1980s gear and gave him a cow lick of hair over his eye.

“What are you thinking?” Nick narrowed his eyes.

“I’m trying to picture teenage you.” Sam admitted.

Nick laughed letting Sam join in. “I’ll show you a photograph when we visit my home, if you are that curious.”

Sam wriggled comfortably into his seat. Nick wanted to bring him to his home and show him his private place and things. He was still smiling when their half eaten plates were taken away and replaced with two clean and simple pannacottas with fresh berries and mint.

Nick rose to go to the restroom. He bent from the waist and kissed Sam’s temple. Sam rubbed the skin with his fingertip and took a sip of his prosecco. The lady at the table opposite sighed and Sam overheard her whisper to her companion that he never kissed her adorably like that. He laughed inside thinking how lucky he was. A pleasant comfy feel settled over him as he sat in a public place where his gender identity was accepted and he could chat about fine food, careers, matches Ruby had made, and if Lilith dyed hir hair. It was like a micro-vacation.

Over strong dark coffees in espresso cups, Sam got his worries about Dean’s Ticket to Work open day off his chest. Nick offered to give them both a ride there. He wanted to visit a vineyard south of San Jose one day next week and he could drop and collect them. It was a nice gesture but Sam refused. Going in the Impala would probably help settle any nerves that Dean would experience.

They stopped for a drink in Gates on the way home and to pick up Brady. The restaurant was closed. Fergus was locking the safe and everyone else was gone. Brady was doing Sam’s normal job of mopping the floor. The mop head was flying to the loud strains of Fat Boy Slim’s Weapon of
Choice. Sam could tell he was going to have to do the corners again in the morning. By the wrinkle of Nick’s nose he could tell their boss was not impressed either.

Brady hissed a whispered question about how the night went while Nick checked in with his manager. Sam gave a thumbs up before they headed back out to the Lexus. They chatted about Gianni’s food on the way home. Nick dropped them to their door.

“Goodnight Boss.” Brady said as jumped out to the sidewalk. He caught Sam’s eye. “I’m straight for bed.”

Sam turned to Nick, “Thank you. I had a wonderful night,”

“You’re welcome and thank you for your company.” Nick smiled.

“Will you come in?” Sam asked, “I think Brady was hinting that he wouldn’t linger around.”

“I could have a coffee before heading home,” Nick agreed.

The house was silent, save for Brady moving between the bathroom and back down to his bedroom. There were dirty plates and dishes surrounding the sink but the room wasn’t too shabby. It was empty, meaning Nick and Sam had privacy. Coffee was forgotten when Sam pulled Nick close by his waist. Their kiss was long and deep. Sam saw oxygen deprivation floating spots before pulling apart, his heart racing and wanting to be closer, more touched, more wrapped around Nick. He pushed the older man onto a kitchen chair and straddled his lap.

“I want to have you Sam,” Nick gasped, “All of you.”

Sam ground down with a bitten back moan, “I want to give it to you.”

Heat rose inside. If they were in Nick’s house… or … if he could find a free bedroom and put a sock on the door… but they weren’t and there wasn’t. A small noise escaped the back of his throat.

“God, Sam. You don’t know what you do to me.”

Sam took in the flushed cheeks and tongue licked lips and he thought he knew. It was what he was feeling too. Nick’s head was thrown back allowing Sam to run his fingers through his hair and hold him for a deep kiss. He imagined if they were unclothed and he was riding Nick. He was rock hard. He knew Nick was too. Nick traced the curl of his ear with his fingers and moved his palm to the side of Sam’s neck. Sam leaned into the touch. His lips tingled as he kissed the evening stubble on Nick’s cheek. It was too much and too little at the same time. Nick moved to dig his fingers into Sam’s hips and jerk him forward pressing them together. Sam dropped his head to Nick’s shoulder and shuddered as they breathed each other’s names. It was slow and sticky to stand up. Sam though he saw movement from the doorway. Maybe Dean had come down, but it was gone now, and he was too wrecked to check if one of the others had been scandalized during their late night search for a glass of water.

The second time Sam was sure he heard something from the hall. He pressed his palm against his partner’s shoulder and moved stealthy to investigate. Dean was on the second step of the stairs pulling at the hem of his pajama top.

“Geez Dee, don’t stand there like a ghost. Come in and say hi.” Sam huffed and beckoned his brother to follow.

“You were busy,” Dean murmured but stepped into the kitchen. “I need water for my meds.”
That was a blatant lie. Dean dry swallowed his Ambien more often than not. Sam knew his big brother was checking on him, making sure he was fine, but he also knew Dean wouldn’t admit it.

Nick stood up and smoothed out his trousers. He approached Dean with his hand extended. “Very pleased to meet you, Dean. Sam speaks highly of you.”

Dean took the hand and used it to tug Nick closer. Sam could see him whispering something. Nick nodded and replied “I would expect nothing less.”

Sam passed Dean a cup of water and promised, “I’ll be up soon.”

Dean gave a short nod and turned to go. He twisted back and said “Goodnight Nick.”

Sam pouted reflectively when his brother was gone.

“What’s with the turned out lip?” Nick asked in breathy amusement.

“I think you made a good impression,” Sam grinned, “What did Dean say to you?”

Nick planted a peck to Sam’s cheek and wrapped an arm around his waist. He whispered into Sam’s ear, “He told me if I hurt you or am playing you, he’ll end me.”

“That’s my big brother.” Sam beamed.

Nick quirked his lips and pulled Sam closer for a long goodnight hug. They would see each other in the morning for work. On his way to the door Nick promised to sort things out so they could have a ‘proper date’ on a night that suited Sam. He was reluctant to see Nick go, standing on the porch until the Lexus made the turn off Cowper Street.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++ SPNSPNSPN

At lunchtime on Monday, Sam and Dean sat in the Impala in the car lot of Santa Clara Social Services Agency. Dean was tapping out a nervous tattoo on the dashboard.

“Come on, Dean, let’s get this over with.” Sam urged. Dean had been withdrawn on Sunday evening with the looming prospect of the Ticket to Work event. Earlier yesterday while Sam had his nose stuck in his World History assignment, Dean had visited Castiel during his shift at the coffee shop and had learned the basics of Air Combat from Andy, but as the day drew to a close Dean grew silent and almost visibly turned inwards.

“I get it. You are anxious about it. Hell, I’ve never had to parade myself on display like this.” Sam tried to sympathize when Dean didn’t make a move to leave the car.

“’m not a peacock,” Dean grumbled.

Sam laughed at the picture of Dean with a big fanned peacock tail. Dean smirked at him and nodded. It was time to go in.

The Ticket To Work open afternoon was being held in a large conference room on the second storey. Tables had been arranged around the walls and employers had various props from advertising backdrops to a simple fan of business cards. Sam and Dean were early. The employers seemed to be still setting up. Dean pulled his borrowed baseball cap over his eyes. He was doing all the clothes again too with Sam’s brown hoodie under his denim jacket. He held himself in a stiff
stance, standing too close to Sam and had taken a second Xanax in the car. Sam wished Dean didn’t have to go through this when he was clearly having a bad day. There had been dark circles under Dean’s eyes that morning making Sam suspect nightmares from the prospect of this, the less powerful sleep meds, or maybe a mix up of everything.

“I need the restroom,” Dean backed out of the conference room.

Sam chewed his lip as Dean crossed the corridor to the men’s room sign. He could understand not wanting to be the first beneficiary into the room. If Sam didn’t have his afternoon class to get back to they could have come later. The elevator unloaded a few people who headed in. Sam checked his watch. Dean had been gone nearly ten minutes. He opened the restroom door. Dean was leaning over the sink, staring at his reflection and his lips were moving silently. He caught Sam’s eye in the mirror and blushed.

“Pep talk?” Sam asked lightly.

Dean nodded but was clearly uncomfortable. He slapped his own cheek and gave a curt nod. He was ready.

Garth appeared from the conference room as the brothers approached to re-enter. Dean’s barriers stayed up. Sam knew Dean was hoping for a job where he could work in maintenance or fixing things up. He asked Garth, on Dean’s behalf, if there were any such positions. Garth curled his bottom lip and apologized that there was nothing suitable and Dean had no qualifications. Sam could see Dean’s shoulders sag ever so. Garth told them how there were educational opportunities like vocational night classes and possible apprenticeships, but not currently taking new registrations. He promised to make a note in Dean’s case file to look at this again when the next intake was due.

The social worker clapped Dean’s arm and advised, “It’s all cool. You’ll see. All the employers here want to take on at least one beneficiary. Just move around the tables. Point is to match you up. It’s not a job interview per se.”

Sam cleared his throat, “Are there tables which you advise us to visit or employers we shouldn’t waste our time at?”

Garth hummed and rubbed his chin, “I won’t lie to you Sam. A lot of the roles require good communication skills. Now that could be politically correct speak for ‘not one of your immigrants’, you get me?”

Sam gave a disgusted nod. Dean sneered obviously not wanting to work for prejudiced asshats, then huffed a long breath and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Sam saw Garth giving Dean an assessing eye.

“Look,” Garth whipped a notepad from his pocket and jotted down a few names while he spoke. “I was gonna tell you which employers are in the Palo Alto area or an easy public transport commute. There’s a place looking for a mascot wearer, the Alison Hotel is taking on a few people, Caldicards, Greengoods, and there’s the animal shelter in Mountain View.”

Dean choked, “No dogs.”

Sam sighed. He’d have like that job for himself and imagined picking Dean up from work and being able to scratch behind the puppies’ ears.

Dean eye rolled but the perky words prompted his return to the room. More beneficiaries had turned up. The room was filled with mingled voices. Most attendees were young, although there was a middle aged woman in a wheelchair and a guy in his thirties on crutches. Some were clearly intellectually challenged and with their parent or parents. A couple of people seemed absolutely fine to Sam’s eye. They took a slow turn around the room spotting the names on Garth’s short list. Dean saw a Sunnyvale multi-storey car lot’s table and waited behind the guy being chatted to. Sam should have known anything to do with cars would be Dean’s thing, but their overheard conversation turned from hopeful (as they needed someone with a driving license) to bust when it was made it clear that the ticket booth position required talking as a prerequisite. When the shopping mall wanted a ‘greeter’ and a small store on Garth’s list wanted a cashier, Sam knew Dean has hit by these rejections. Who knew so many menial and simple jobs required good communication skills?

Sam wished vehemently that Dean could buck his head up and show these people who he was and who he could be but Dean seemed to shrink in the face of professional strangers’ judgment. It was frustrating for Sam that Dean had totally clammed up. He was shaking hands and nodding but gave no indication that he was capable of speech. Although Sam considered maybe it would be better in the long term, rather than having a communicative Dean today and then have his first day of work be a FURBAR when they expected him to be loquacious.

The Alison Hotel’s table was manned by two uniformed employees. Dean looked interested in their A4 print out of the janitor cum litter picker’s duties.

“Hello sir, Alison Hotel Group is a proud sponsor of the program.” The mid-twenties dark haired guy said.

It took Sam a beat to realize that the greeting had been directed at him, not at Dean who was reading the job description.

“Oh, yeah?” Sam nodded down at the list of attendees on the employer’s side of the table, “It’s my brother, Dean Winchester, who is the beneficiary.”

“Of course, Sir.” Mr. School of Hotel Employee Politeness replied, “Does your brother have hearing issues?"

Sam wanted to punch somebody. It was a legitimate question in the circumstances, in a room with those who had disabilities, but if they had troubled to look at Dean’s details they would have seen his profile. Dean threw the sheet onto the table and stalked to the next stand.

A mother stood to the side as her son spoke slowly to the pretty blonde manning the table. Dean and Sam waited their turn. She met Sam’s eye and they nodded in acknowledgment. As her son finished up by shaking hands, the mother spoke to Sam, “Huey is so proud to be here today.”

Sam’s eyes widened. He guessed for some of those present taking the step of their first employment was a big milestone and achievement in their lives. But it shouldn’t be like that for his Dean. There should have been college or a trade or an apprenticeship years ago. Dean should be making his way up the career ladder or heading to open his own business, or maybe be post-graduate like his boyfriend, not vying for litter picker or advertising placard holder.

When his mind returned to the present he was pleasantly surprised to see Dean was in flirt mode with the long haired blond in her pink turtleneck and cardigan. It was the greeting card maker that Garth had included on their list. Shelly was clearly enamored with Dean who broke out a smile for her. The place was ten minutes walk from San Antonio caltrain station. They wanted someone with the skills to assemble orders and dispatch their hand crafted greetings cards to their stockists.
Shelly explained the shifts were two long ones at the end of the week. She asked if that would be suitable for Dean because some of the beneficiaries had said they weren’t suited to working for more than four or five hours. They were a growing business and Shelly confided that her boss, the original Mrs. Caldecott, was hoping to expand in the future. Sam mused that maybe Dean could get a toe in there and maybe get off welfare if his hours grew with the business.

The Greengoods guy seemed interested in Dean’s physique too, but not in the batting of eyelashes kind of way. They wanted a physically fit person to help stack their deliveries in the early morning. The dude was friendly. He was a supervisor named Mitchell and explained that Dean would be needed from 6am to 10am, Wednesday to Saturday. It would exceed his minimum twelve hours with the prospect of more after the trial period. The doors opened to customers at 8.30am so the majority of the fresh produce needed to be on display by then. It was an old family business and they already held the ticket for a guy called Carsten who had Downs and packed bags for the customers. The main selling point was the store’s location. It was in Palo Alto on the corner of High Street and Channing. Sam knew that was near the high school and whispered that it wasn’t far at all from Cowper Street. Dean could walk there easily or bum a ride from one of the housemates in bad weather, or maybe take the Impala some days.

The final few tables on that side of the room, a burger joint looking for a grill operator and a contract office cleaning company, were subject to the nadir of fake Dean smiles. Sam could tell that Dean was close to boiling as his brother vented his anger by viciously shuffling the leaflets and cards he had gathered. It hadn’t helped when the cleaning company supervisor asked if Dean could read and write. He put a hand Dean’s arm to calm him down. Sam made the executive decision not to see what job the golf course had open and steered his brother out of the room.

Dean was flushed and rigid. Sam wondered how he was expected to work for these people when it was clearly a trial for Dean to try and speak to them. Garth caught up with them and asked if Dean needed a few minutes but it was obvious to Sam that his brother had had enough. He was tensed to make the break. Sam asked if they could leave.

Through a clenched jaw Dean ground out, “I don’t fucking like any of them Sammy.”

Garth heard and tried to placate his charge, “I’ve been mingling and I can tell you now that Caldicards, Greengoods, and MyBurger are going to offer you work.”

“How a come back to another day?” Dean hissed low at Sam’s ear.

“Garth,” Sam said clearly, “Dean would like know if he comes to the next open day can he choose then?”

“No I’m sorry, guys,” Garth said with a regretful frown, “These are the choices. It is a condition of your welfare, Dean. But you know there is a trial period for you both to…”

“Yadda yadda,” Dean muttered.

Sam tried not to laugh. “Look Dean, sounds like you’re going to have a choice.” He looked to Garth, “When do you need to know?”

“I’ll be in touch over the next few days when the employers have given in their preferences and then Dean has until the end of the week to decide and we’ll take it from there.” Garth beamed as if it was all good.

Dean caught Sam’s eye. It was time to hit the road. Sam thanked Garth on Dean’s behalf. His brother was already pressing the elevator call button with brutal pressure. In the elevator car, Dean
pulled out his cell and tapped a text message with stabbing motions. Sam wondered if Castiel was about to receive an expletive filled rant.

In the Impala, Sam tried to run through the positives, but Dean had tuned out, twisted to look out the shotgun window. He mentioned how with his new sleeping meds Dean could easily rise early enough to take the produce store job and have the rest of each day off. He tried teasing how Shelly had given Dean the eye, but there was no reaction. He gave it up as a waste of breath, turned on the radio and tried to tune his mind into getting back in time to catch the last two thirds of his humanities class. There was only so much he could try to fix or make perfect for Dean. He wished it had gone better, but all he could do was be there for his brother, help him when he started his new job, and hope that Dean would grow comfortable enough in the new environment to connect with his colleagues and enjoy the work.
Dean took a long drink of the tea that Castiel had insisted he try. It was hot with milk rather than iced with lemon, and there was the disconnect that he was drinking something called English Breakfast Tea after 8pm, but it wasn’t unpleasant, just different. He flipped Greengoods’ business card between his fingers.

“So,” Castiel said as he stretched his legs. His stocking feet went under the coffee table. “The fast food joint will make your skin greasy, the cleaning contractor was an assbutt, the produce store will have douchey customers, and the card maker only wants you as eye candy?”

Dean snorted at Castiel’s negative summary of his grumbles. Sam had been driving him mental by looking at the positives of the four places he had been offered. He knew Sam was only trying to keep his spirits up and help Dean be more optimistic. The whole thing sucked. He knew he couldn’t get out of it unless he wanted his welfare cut off. It was only twelve hours a week, or thirteen at Caldicards, or sixteen at Greengoods. It wasn’t like he was lazy or aiming for a career as a couch potato. He wanted to work. Garth had called personally with the detailed job profiles. Dean suspected that the social worker had been concerned after his clammed up internal freak out at the open day. He was hardly doing home visits to each of the attendees. Garth reminded him again about trial periods and the easy process of transferring his ticket to another job. He spoke about other beneficiaries who had begun in jobs similar to the ones Dean had been offered and then, when their potential and capabilities became evident, had been promoted, done internal management training, or moved on to new careers outside the program.

“Seems to me,” Cas said bringing Dean out of his meditations, “there are only two options. The card place or the store?”

Dean nodded. He had considered MyBurger, but the shifts were in the evening meaning he’d miss seeing Sam, and although he enjoyed cooking, monotonously flipping burgers and deep frying chicken did not appeal.

“’s the people,” Dean muttered.

Castiel took a sip of his tea and waited for Dean to elaborate.

“I know I could do the packing and dispatching work. They never had a ticket before at the greeting cards place,” Dean pushed out the words in one breath, “It’s small, same people every day, and if some of ‘em are douches, could be real freaking tricky to avoid ‘em.”

“Dean,” Castiel shuffled closer, “The opposite is also true. If they are good folks, and you join their friendly team, you could find they worm their way into your affections.”

“That’s what Sammy said,” Dean admitted. He huffed and turned his attention to the other job, “I wouldn’t mind the physical work with the produce. It would be a work out and might help, y’know, with my walk and all. But when customers come in, y’know, and maybe want to talk to me and ask me shit.”

“After a time you might feel comfortable answering a few of the common questions,” Castiel said while Dean raised a skeptical eyebrow, “and if the store wants you, they have probably thought of how to handle that problem.”
Dean twisted his lip. He nodded. Cas was right. Greengoods had another beneficiary working there and from what Garth said they had been taking people for years. Maybe their regular customers were also used to seeing employees with differences.

He would sleep on it, but he thought he might go for the local store. He tidied up his papers into a neat bundle and slung his arm around Cas’s neck.

“Hey Cas babe, you wanna stick on the TV?”

“I guess,” Castiel eyed him, “You good now?”

“Peachy,” Dean grinned, “I’ll tell ya tomorrow but I’m thinking of Greengoods.”

Castiel nodded and flicked on Discovery. There were sharks, which was awesome. Dean pulled out the cushion from between them and hugged it to his middle, then snuggled in so he could rest his head on Castiel’s shoulder.

The feel of Baby’s wheel under his palms. Being seated on the left hand side of her. Revving the engine to Sam’s gasp of horror. Inserting his new Back In Black CD into the player that his brother had installed. Turning the volume up until Sarah protested from the back seat. Dean felt like he had finally come home.

There was a very slight incident when Dean overshot the white line at the turn onto Alma. The Stop sign was mid-Impala. A Camry had to do a subtle swerve as it drove by. Sam’s face paled. Sarah gasped. Dean shrugged it off, called the other innocent driver a sonvabitch for breaking the speed restriction and took the turn towards Menlo Park. El Camino Real was smooth sailing. Dean knew he had been right. Driving Baby was like riding a bike. Sam prompted him as they approached the stop lights for the turn onto Ravenswood Ave.

As they paused to wait for a passing Caltrain, Sam admitted, “OK Dean. You still have ‘it’. The Impala is safe in your hands.”

Dean fist pumped, low so that Sam could see but Sarah couldn’t. The crossing re-opened and Dean eased his baby across the tracks. Sam pointed left to The Gates of Hell. The single story long building had a peaked roof of oriental design. Sam spotted Dean’s wrinkled brow gaze at it and explained that Nick had bought it as a closed down Chinese restaurant. He directed Dean around to the rear employee parking spots.

“Come on in,” Sam grinned at the other two. “I’ll stand you guys a Coke.”

“A Rum and Coke,” Sarah teased, “I’m not driving.”

“Geez Sarah, it’s Monday afternoon,” Sam clicked his tongue and waggled his finger as they followed.

“I bet your bartender is serving liquor.” She winked, “But I’ll have a Coke if Dean is.”

They took the main entrance. It wasn’t Sarah’s first visit. She walked nonchalantly to take a stool at the high bar backed by the mirrored wall. Dean double blinked at the décor. They had stayed in
all kinds of wacky motel rooms during their childhood, but red, black and purple won all prizes for
freaky combo. There were red and crystal chandeliers, huge modern art pieces of splashes or
blocks in those colors, black lacquered chairs and stools, blood red booth benches, a huge bronze
dragon (that could have been left behind by the previous owners) and silver chains draped at points
along the walls.

Dean felt eyes on him. He looked up to find a tall older guy undressing him with his eyes. The
bartender wiped his hands on a white towel and creepily licked his lips at Dean.

Sam had disappeared to the staff room but was quick to return with his white waist apron on and a
bar towel tucked into the waist band of his trousers.

“Dean, Sarah, meet Alastair our day manager.” Sam introduced, “Can you put two sodas on my
tab, please?”

“Anything for you, Sam,” Alastair drawled. To Dean’s ear it sounded as if his statement was a dig
at Sam’s relationship with Nick, but Sam didn’t rise to the bait.

Sarah ordered two Cokes. Sam waved at an edgy looking young blond guy with big eyes who was
wearing chef’s whites and heading for swinging double doors in the far wall.

“That’s Max,” Sam supplied, “Baldur must be off.”

“Vacation.” Alastair volunteered. “Now Dean, tell me how did you get all the pretty genes in your
family.”

Dean flushed but not from embarrassment. That was another insult aimed at Sam combined with a
pointedly slimy come on. He got stuck for a comeback better than ‘you’re fugly’, so kept his
counsel.

Sarah took over reminding Dean that they wanted to get to the Shopping Center. He hissed a
question into Sam’s ear as to if he had to work with the disturbing dude. Sam laughed and said
Nick would be in soon to let Alastair go home.

With Sarah navigating they made their way back to Palo Alto. Once parked she proceeded to direct
Dean to Macy’s men’s store. Luckily he lost her when she became absorbed in a sunglasses
display, picking out a Valentine’s gift for Scott. Dean headed for the clearance sale racks. He
wanted to get a jacket for walking to the store in the early hours. Greengoods were going to supply
him with an employee uniform but he figured he needed a few more essentials. The closeout
section had packs of boxer briefs and plain boot socks on offer. He picked up a few plain v-neck
tees to wear under his uniform. In the corner of his eye there was a flash of color. Dean snorted in
amusement when he picked a candy striped jockstrap. He was very tempted to buy it for Cas, or to
buy it to wear for Cas. There was an additional 10% off the clearance price. He stuffed it in
between his other choices with a grin at the prospect of his boyfriend’s reaction. In the rack of
jackets there was a grey lightweight waterproof one. It wasn’t going to win any runway awards but
it was down to $29 from over a hundred bucks.

Dean was paying for his purchases when Sarah caught up with him. He was done with the
shopping center but Sarah wanted to head over to Balthazar’s shop. They carried a small range of
way out clothing and Sarah wanted a Dark Willow or a Vamp Willow style dress to wear to a fancy
dress party at Scott’s place. Harmonies was tucked into a corner of the mall near Bloomingdales.
Balthazar was at the counter selling a dream catcher to the tune of pan pipes. Dean tried to
remember that patience was a virtue as he was subject to a montage of Sarah in various extremely
similar Goth dresses. Opposite the fortune telling cards was a display of scented aromatherapy
candles in glass jars. Dean perused them between dress viewings. The card in front of the Rosemary and Mint one claimed it aided memory and concentration and was a big seller at exam time. Dean brought the smallest size up to the sales desk. Sammy would probably spout off about the benefits or the quackiness of aromatherapy but his brother’s reaction to the gift would be worth it.

“I hope that’s not part of Cassie’s Valentine, ‘cause you do know he gets a staff discount here?” Balthazar chatted as he wrapped the glass in tissue paper, “Not that he buys anything except from the teas’ shelf.”

Dean shook his head.

“You know, you must allow me to cast a chart for you. I could do a synergy one for you and my cous. Aquarius, right?”

“I dunno,” Dean muttered awkwardly. He didn’t have much faith in astrology and from what Cas said, Dean thought he might find having his cousin do such a reading to be offensive. He wondered if this was Balthazar’s weird attempt to get to know him better or be friendly. After all astrologer was the dude’s profession, and he sounded like he had offered his services free gratis.

“Cassie is such a Virgo,” Balthazar sighed dramatically, “serious, polite, considered, independent, even frugal. I know you Aquarians can be teases. Hell, I dated a few. If you want my advice, don’t push Castiel too hard, and remember to be kind to him.”

Dean was torn between telling Balthazar he didn’t need to give him the protective family member warning, and being suspicious that the older guy might actually be a touch psychic as Dean stood before him with a rainbow colored jock strap in his bag. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other as his candle was placed in a store logo gift bag. A new customer queued behind him. Balthazar rang up his purchase, freeing Dean to admire Sarah’s final preferred purple and black lace-sleeved dress.

Once the dress was bought they split up. Sarah headed for a cosmetics store while Dean drifted along the store fronts. Balthazar’s mention of Valentines made him think he should get something for Cas. He had already dipped into his first welfare check for the clothes, He’d purchased a handy sackpack and six unwanted coffee mugs in their unwrapped box at a thrift store. He had his eyes open for a few cheap uncracked and unchipped plates for the kitchen too. He’d portioned out his check so that he would have money for coffees and stuff, but he had also put into the groceries fund for the house and paid Sam back the some of the dollars he had funded him in January. There wasn’t much of a remainder. Garth had warned him that his new employer would have to set him up on their payroll, meaning a possible couple of weeks delay in getting his first wages. Without planning, Dean ended up outside the bookstore where Jess worked on Saturdays. There was a display of ‘Store Recommendations’ on special. Dean noticed a science book called The Elegant Universe by Brian Greene. It wasn’t brand new so there was a chance that Cas possessed it already, but it looked sorta cool, and Dean thought a book with a gift receipt would be a better than a gift voucher.

On Thursday Dean was back behind the wheel of the Impala. Sam was at classes and he was heading to Greengoods for his induction training. They’d asked him to come in at 11am for a couple of hours. That time would be added to his first paycheck but he was not starting his regular shifts until the following Wednesday. He and Sam had scoped the place out under the pretence of buying an unnecessary quantity of avocados and bell peppers, so Dean knew where he could park his baby and what the basic layout of the store was. He hadn’t taken a Xanax even though his palms were damp and his leg twitched. It wasn’t a good idea to medicate his attendance at his job.
Although it was daunting to go into a new place and situation, Dean knew at the back of his mind that he had a session with Victor later that day. He could work through any anxieties there. He imagined using a compression vice to press down his fretting nerves. He tightened his jaw as the automatic doors slid back to admit him to the store. He was faced with racking shelves of plastic crates full of fresh produce. Refrigerated units against the left wall held sauce pots, fruit salads and a selection of dairy. The right side had three checkout points, manned by older ladies in dark green uniforms. Beeping checkout scanners peppered the nameless muszak. He stood statue-like gripping the string of his sackpack. Then Mitchell spotted him and strode over to clap him on the shoulder and welcome him to the team. Dean let out a breath he wasn’t aware he had been holding at the sight of the wide shouldered brunet.

He was taken though easy swinging doors to a chilly warehouse area with a roll shutter back wall. Mitchell pointed out the heavy door to a chilled room for the dairy and fresh juices, which needed the temperature lower than the cool storeroom. He explained that when Dean arrived in the mornings the area would be full of deliveries that were dropped off to their night warehouse duo. Then they entered a wooden fire door. Mitchell typed in a code to a metal panel, telling Dean it was simply the Zip code. Stairs rose immediately in front of them and turned halfway on a landing with posters about fire drills, personal hygiene and customer service. The upper story was a short corridor with a well worn industrial brown carpet and white walls. The ceiling was low. Dean was fine but he thought Sammy’s hair might graze the neon strip lights. On the wall opposite were slots with cardboard clocking cards and a dip-in clock punch machine. Dean looked for his name, which was easy when he realized the roughly twenty cards were in alphabetical order by family name. Mitchell quirked his lips in approval as Dean dunked his card without prompting.

The first two doors were the ladies’ and men’s restrooms which were reached by passing through a cloakroom with lockers and places to hang coats. Mitchell said they’d have a locker key for Dean next week. There was an office with a few computers and the security camera feed, the manager’s office, another empty one with a long table, and a canteen with microwave, coffee machine, and refrigerator.

Mitchell knocked at the manager’s door. He smiled at Dean and said he wanted to introduce him to their main man. The door opened and balding guy in a suit with prominent eyes and a presence of authority said, “You must be Dean Winchester, our latest ticket. Welcome to the Greengoods team. I’m Mr. Adler the younger.”

Dean nodded and let out his breath slowly. He got the feeling that getting on Mr. Adler’s bad side would be a very bad idea. The manager seemed to realize he hadn’t put Dean at ease and leaned forward, “If you see an old dude in a long coat muttering to himself about the state of our apples, that’s probably Mr. Adler senior.”

Dean gave the expected smile but he thought it was on the cruel side to mock an elderly father who must have handed the business over to …. Dean squinted to read the manager’s bronze name pin… Zachariah.

Mitchell confirmed that a delayed delivery had arrived before Mr. Adler retreated into his office to do store manager things, Dean presumed.

They entered the office with the long table, which Mitchell described as their meeting room. There was a TV and VHS player on top of a filing cabinet. His new colleague became business like as he organized the sequence of a few health and safety movies for Dean and pulled out a plastic sleeve of papers. There were forms for Dean to fill out his contact details and bank information. It seemed he was going to be paid directly into his account. He was thankful to Garth and Sam for making him go to the Wells Fargo on campus where Sam did his banking. Mitchell disappeared to
photocopy his ID while Dean watched people who lived in the 1970s evacuate a supermarket. He was mid remembrance of how good a movie Towering Inferno was when Mitchell returned to brief him on their fire exits and assembly point. There was an inane video, thankfully only five minutes, on how to wash your hands properly, and a longer one on manual handling. Then Mitchell took him into the canteen for a coffee. There was another guy there leaning against the small square window frame. He was short, almost squat, with tied back long black hair. He might have had Native American blood. Mitchell introduced Dean to Tony who was one of the night team and worked from two to twelve. He had clocked out but needed a caffeine fix before driving home to La Honda. The two guys exchanged a few words about baseball and Tony’s kids, making sure to include Dean in their eye line so that he knew he was part of the conversation. When Tony said he was hitting the road, Dean gave him a short wave goodbye.

Back in the meeting room there was a final movie about preventing accidents which was mind numbing. Dean thought the pharmaceutical industry would be threatened if the film was marketed as a soporific. Mr. Adler popped his head in to check on them. Mitchell dragged his seat back and stood up, so Dean did too. He reminded his supervisor about Dean’s uniform. Mitchell cringed when the boss was done and apologized for forgetting. He took Dean’s sizes, explaining they had some in storage but could order any extras. Dean was getting a couple of pairs of heavy combats, a few polo shirts, and a warm vest all in the company green. They would also give him some gloves. He needed to wear their steel toes boots. They would make up a name pin with a message on it. Mitchell pointed at his which said Supervisor under his name. He explained some colleagues had ‘habi Español’ or such. He looked a touch uncomfortable when he told Dean that his pin would say he was mute and would be a larger size so it was easier for the customers to see. Dean wasn’t best pleased with anything that would single him out as different. Mitchell explained that Carsten, their bag packer, also had a large pin so customers did not presume to vent complaints at him or demand too much of him.

They finished off in the warehouse where Mitchell ran though the labeling which helped tell the different varieties from each other and Dean had a practice at correct lifting procedures. Mitchell clapped him on the shoulder again and said he looked forward to working with him bright and early the next Wednesday.

Dean took a deep breath and said, “Thank you, Mitchell, see y’all then.”

“Good God,” Mitchell laughed, “I know your Ticket to Work resume said you had speech capability, but you caught me off guard there, Dean. See you later.”

Back at the house, Dean changed into old jeans and poured himself a long juice. He just had time to make a chicken sandwich before driving over to Stanford Medical Clinic. Sam would meet him after his appointment with Victor and they’d share the ride home. He wondered what Victor would want to talk about. He chewed on the chicken wishing he had picked up Hellmann’s rather than using the lite Miracle Whip that was in the refrigerator. The morning had gone well. He knew before he went that he would be able to do the work but seeing the business was a normal and organized place had been good. He thought he might tell his psychiatrist about how Sam was going out with Nick on a date that evening and how he had his own arrangements for Valentines tomorrow with Cas. Nick’s restaurant was booked solid for Valentines with three sittings starting from early. There was a special love themed menu. Dean had nearly gone hyperglycemic by psychic osmosis when he read the printed four course menu for the Gates. He was glad Castiel had suggested pizza and a beer.

He did have one thing to bring with him to Victor. In the bedroom, Dean pulled his wallet from the sackpack and stuffed it in his pocket with a printed out e-mail.
Being his third visit to the clinic, Dean had gotten used to hatchet-faced-Frances. He figured the wind had changed when the secretary had been grimacing. It was five past the hour when Victor entered from the hallway wearing his white coat. Dean raised his brows.

“Hello Dean, my apologies, I was delayed on the ward.”

Dean stiffened. Seeing Dr Henricksen in his warm office had helped him distance the psychiatrist from his role as a hospital physician. He trailed in and took his place on the crap colored sofa.

Victor took a few moments to prepare and take his usual seat. “Tell me your news, Dean. How have the new sleeping meds suited you?”

“Good.”

Victor inclined his head and waited. Apparently they weren’t doing closed questions or silent answers today.

“I had a few nightmares but not bad, y’know. I didn’t wake Sam and they weren’t the worst.” Dean flicked his fingers against his thigh. “Just Dad ones.”

“Why do you think your father is featuring in your dreams?”

“I don’t know man. Maybe he was such a dreamy dad,” Dean snapped sarcastically. “Maybe ‘cause I’m InARelationshipWithAGuy’n’DadWouldTakeItOutOfMyAssIfHeKnew.”

Victor freaking hummed at the confession. “You are a twenty four year old adult. He has no authority over you and never had the right to abuse you.”

Dean snorted. He wanted to tell the shrink to talk to his hand ‘cos his face wasn’t listening.

“How are things with Castiel?”

“Good,” Dean beamed, “We are going for pizza and beer tomorrow. Only one or two beers, Mr. Doctor, I know with my meds…”

“I wish my wife would go for that Valentine,” Victor grinned.

Dean smiled. That was the first mention his doctor had made of his personal life. It was good, like Victor trusted him.

“Sammy’s got a date tonight.”

“With his older boss?” Victor checked using few words to ping on Dean’s lingering uneasiness about Sam’s relationship.


“That’s good, yes?” Victor eased back in his chair, “It means your brother is being safe.”

“I suppose,” Dean bit his lip. “I saw condoms in the over sink cabinet in Cas’s bathroom. I mean they could be his cousin’s but he has them in the house.”

Victor looked like he was trying to keep his professional mask in place over a compulsion to laugh. Dean glared at him.

“Are you considering taking your relationship to a more intimate physical level?”
“I want Cas.” Dean blurted. “I want him to fuck me.”

“Well, that’s cleared up then.” Victor’s pen made an entry on his pad.

Dean huffed, “More than fuck me. I want him. I want him to want me. I want to lie in bed after we have fucked and listen to his heartbeat.”

“You want to make love to him?” Victor suggested.

“Suppose.” Dean shifted his shoulders uncomfortably. That was too chick flick, too full of the four-letter L word that was too risky to expose his core to, but yet it was a much more accurate description of what Dean wanted than ‘fucking’.

“Are you going to ask your boyfriend to ‘fuck’ you?” Victor checked, “Because that is not the most romantic language.”

Dean chuckled. “Guess not.”

Victor shook his head slowly, “Why don’t you let the mood take you and if your partner is on board, move it to the bedroom?”

“I can’t believe you are giving me sex therapy, man,” Dean snorted. “My life is weird.”

“Tell me, how did your first day on the job go?”

Dean shrugged, “It was easy pie. I watched some museum piece safety videos and got a tour from the supervisor. Met the manager, seems to have a stick up his ass, but he is the manager. Got fitted for my stylish threads; polo and combat combo in dark viridian.”

“Good to hear,” Victor looked Dean in the eye, “Have you brought me anything to read?”

Dean licked his lips. It was time to hand over the e-mail. He hadn’t worked out what he felt about it yet, but he guessed this was the place to do that. “I… huh… didn’t journal much.. ahem… I got an e-mail on Sam’s account.”

He stood up and handed over the much folded sheet of paper. He watched Victor’s eyes move back and forth across the page.

aaronbass1979@RocketMail.com
I can’t believe it, I cannot believe it. Syd called me at like 3AM here. Hell I thought our Grandfather had bit the dust… When he told me I dropped the phone, then told him someone had fed him the happy pills, but he said Sam had found you, that your Ben Zona of a father sent you away. Fucking hell, man, it’s been like seven years. I don’t even know what to write. I thought of you lots. You were my lost boyfriend, my oyster... I didn’t come out of my room for a week after your jackass father tore you and Sam out of Speedway. I’d love to catch up. I don’t know when I’ll be back on American soil, but e-mail me back, Dean. Please do. I bet you are still a sexy dog. LOL. Ciao Bello, Aaron.

Dean’s stomach clenched. He got the treat of an acidic sandwich and juice reappearance. He moistened his lips again waiting for Victor to speak.

“More than a friend.” Victor stated. “He seems overjoyed that you are alive, but you seem conflicted.”

“He… we were close.” Holy mother of pie, he couldn’t say it. He had spent so many years with
Aaron’s name as his private secret. “He was… we were… Aaron was the father.”

Victor’s neck craned forward, “This boy, man, was the father of your baby?”

Dean wiped his mouth and jaw with his hand, “You freaking sound like you don’t believe me.”

“Your files…”

“Yes?” Dean narrowed his eyes.

“There was a presumption made… you refused to divulge who had gotten you pregnant… It was thought you had been raped…”

Dean’s jaw dropped and stayed open.

“…By your father.”

Dean sucked a loud heaving breath, “That’s sick. Oh my God. That’s… Jesus… when they demanded who… they thought my Dad…”

Dean leaned over and vomited a mouthful of spit and bile onto the carpet. “He wouldn’t….” Dean gave a hacking cough as Victor kneeled beside him with tissues, “He had this twisted up, alcohol and grief corrupted love for us… but never that… and I disgusted him… He only touched me to hit me… What the hell? They all thought that?”

Victor spoke low, “They didn’t know. You wouldn’t tell. But your history, your symptoms, the pregnancy… it was interpreted as abuse.”

Dean snorted. “I am telling you. Screw this.” He got up and walked to the window, “The baby was Aaron’s. Aaron Bass. And my father did not abuse me.”

“Not sexually.” Victor added the postscript.

Words went unsaid that Dean had been abused in other ways, mentally, emotionally and physically. He sighed deeply. He didn’t come looking for more analysis of his relationship with his father, or expecting to learn that all those sketches he had done for Layla must have been viewed with that slant. He came to figure out shit.

“Should I tell him?” Dean chewed his lip. Victor raised an eyebrow. Dean continued, “Tell Aaron about the baby. He never knew. I’d found out in Batesville. I was going to tell him. Dad was gone and I had to take care of Sammy, and I was so sick… but when Dad came back I was going share the news with Aaron. I mean it was his baby too.”

“Why didn’t you ask for him at the Batesville Hospital? As the baby’s father they would have been obliged to inform him for you.”

Dean hissed. “And tell him what? Your ex-boyfriend can’t even hold onto a fetus? Your old flame is being committed to the crazy house. You wanna come see the loser?”

“You are not a loser.”

Dean closed his eyes for a moment to regain his composure.

“I know that. I know it now, but back then when the blade of a scalpel was the brightest thing in my life…” Dean gave a nasal huff, “It was not happening. I was my shitstorm.”
“Do you still feel as if your burdens are your own? Not to be shared.”

Dean shifted uneasily. Victor had hit pay dirt. Dean disliked being a burden to Sam, although his brother wanted him in his life. The notion of adding to that by getting touchy feely or talking about emotional crap with Sam was just plain wrong. He’d spilled his guts to Cas a few times but it was different somehow. Castiel was solid. He didn’t cry, except once over the scars, and he was interested, like as if he wanted to know everything about Dean. Sometimes Dean thought those piercing blue eyes could see inside him, all the way to his fractured soul.

“I guess I was raised to be a man, to bear my burdens. But jeepers, Vic, I’ve spent gazillions of hours in Group. I know about sharin’ and carin’.”

“But do you? Would you? Let’s just say you have a bad day at work. Would you tell Sam?”

Dean shook his head, “Depends. If we were having a bitchin’… I think I’d text Cas or go see him. Or save it all up to dump on your lap.” Dean laughed.

Victor nodded, “You can do that. I see you’ve had that email for a few days. I am here, but you have your journal if you don’t want to ask others, and I think sharing ups and downs with your brother might be acceptable. Life is always going to throw issues in our paths. I want to know at our next session how you have dealt with an everyday problem that made you anxious.”

Dean nodded. Their time was up. He took the email back and folded it carefully into his pocket. “I don’t think I’ll tell him. Why cause him pain or confuse him now?”

“It is your choice, Dean. I will not tell you what to do. I wouldn’t like you to experience guilt or regret if you tell Aaron. On the other side of the coin, he is the person who would understand best your own grief.”

Dean weighed his grief against spoiling Aaron’s happiness and found the scales tipped to ‘don’t tell’.

He was still chewing over Victor’s words when Sam tapped on the Impala window.

“Good session?” Sam asked as he sat in.

“Told him about Aaron.” Dean said as he pulled out of the space. Victor had helped him. He had been able to sort out his scattered thoughts.

“Wow,” Sam huffed, “Did he get all analyzer on your ass?”

“They thought Dad was the baby’s father.” Dean clicked his tongue.

Sam was stunned. He gaped at Dean. “They did not!”

“They did, the whole freaking lot of ‘em. “

“That’s messed up.”

“I know, Sammy.” Dean humphed. Sam understood. “So where is the big super massive date to then?”

“We’re going to The French Laundry. Our reservation is at seven. Nick says their tasting menu will be like nothing I ever experienced. It’s all sensations, tastes and sublime delicacies.”

“Sounds like food porn.” Dean grinned.
“God I hope so,” Sam laughed, “I sent my only jacket to the cleaners for this.”

Dean eye rolled, “You must like him.”

“We aren’t all so allergic to formal clothes,” Sam teased, “If I do become a lawyer it will be all suits and loafers.”

“Sure, Matlock.” Dean snorted.

Sam punched his upper arm.

“Hey Bitch, driving here.”

“Jerk.” Sam laughed.

When Sam came home on Friday morning to change his clothes and grab his books for class, Dean smirked at him from his futon. Dean thought he looked like he hadn’t gotten much sleep. Even under the interrogation of a brotherly headlock Sam claimed that he and Nick hadn’t ‘gone all the way’. Dean was sure they went damn near.

That evening, in the spirit of Valentine pranking, Dean filled a condom with water and left the balloon as a gift on Sam’s bed. He checked he had his key, wallet and the book for Cas. He was holding back on the joke jock strap for now. He admired his own buns in his tight fitted jeans, that surely would scream ‘lick here’ to Castiel. Winking at mirror-Dean, he proceeded to walk down the stairs with only one foot on each step. Sarah appeared in her purple and black dress. She had straightened her hair and had drawn blue veins on the side of her face.

“Whoa!” Andy moaned with his hand on his forehead, “Did I fall asleep and wake up on Halloween?”

Sarah giggled, “The party… remember… fancy dress… me and Scott.”

“I have no clue.” Andy huffed, “I can’t keep up with all these new guys and yet no-one wants some Andy-lovin’.”

“Maybe that’s because you call it Andy-lovin’ and you invite girls to see the back of your van.” Sarah gave an indulgent smile, “What about Tracy?”

“Ash impressed her with his big brain.” Andy sighed, “Hey Dean? How about blowing off your teacher-dude and settling down on the sofa for a death match?”

Dean gave him a ‘seriously’ look before waving the two housemates goodbye.

Castiel was ready and waiting. They walked down Lytton to Alma Street. Castiel wrapped his arm around Dean and complimented his jeans and the plaid over shirt Bobby had sent him. In return Dean rubbed against Cas’s leather jacket and said he liked him in blue. He thought the blue crew neck tee and navy shirt brought out Cas’s eyes. Dean felt that they looked good together. Cas had made an attempt to tame his hair but it was too naturally wild to sit perfectly, and Dean liked that.

The Pizza Cave was a casual restaurant with earthy stucco walls to give it the feel that matched its name. The diners were a mix of students and those on a Valentine’s date. There wasn’t a window table available but Dean didn’t care when he and Cas got a sweet spot in an alcove. It gave them privacy and Castiel didn’t object when Dean took the side with his back to the wall so he had a view of the room. Not that he was planning on looking much beyond Cas, but it was like taking the twin bed closer to the motel room door or having a good panoramic view of the rec room.
The menu was short, a few set pizzas and then a version of all you could eat where you could choose as many topping as you wanted on a 20” Wagon Wheel for $20. Dean really wanted to try that. He wanted to share a giant pizza and eat until they had to open their fly buttons, but he wasn’t sure that Cas would go for it.

“Would you like to see if we could take on a Wagon Wheel?” Cas asked him. “I‘ve seen them at other tables and always wanted to try. Balthazar insists that he won’t vary from his spinach, tomato and bacon favorite.”

“We could get chicken, jalapeno, bacon, spicy sausage and tomatoes.” Dean’s eyes grew as his appetite flooded his mouth.

“And basil, extra cheese and mushrooms?” Castiel checked.

“And extra onions?” Dean licked his lips.

“Plenty of onions, but no spinach.”

“And no anchovies.”

“Agreed,” Castiel beamed. “Two Coors?”

Dean nodded. The waitress approached and Castiel gave in their order. They drank their beer and picked at the breadsticks. Dean became fascinated with the way Castiel’s lips wrapped around the bottle top.

Castiel talked about a boy in his 9th grade class who kept to himself and never spoke up. The kid, Jesse, had submitted the best project idea for the upcoming science fair, but Cas was concerned about his home life. Other teachers had said Jesse’s mom was raising him on her own, but there had never been an issue. “Do you think I should say something?” He asked Dean.

“To CPS?” Dean gawked.

“No.” Castiel shook his head, “Lord, I don’t have that sort of evidence. I meant to Jesse? Ask him if everything is good at home?”

Dean thought back to all the teachers who must have faced such questions about him and Sam. The fear that they would be separated, that Dad would find out they had raised suspicions. “I think you’d need to be more, kinda, subtle. Like maybe tell the principal you are suspicious, and then let Jesse know that you’ll listen if he wants to ask you anything.”

“But is that enough? I mean, what if he is in trouble or she is neglecting him?” Castiel took a gulp of beer, “and I did nothing.”

“What about the school nurse? Or if Jesse plays sports, his coach could keep a look out for signs of bruises or weight loss?”

Cas nodded, “Yeah. Thanks Dean. We are taught about these things, but it’s different when you face them in reality. You are right. I need to talk to the rest of the staff and my supervisor. Maybe he’s a different boy in other classes. It might be me!”

“You mean he’s crushing on you?” Dean smirked.

“Maybe he's shy cos he likes you.” Dean suggested.

“Oh Good Lord. It’s like a nest of vipers.” Castiel raised his eyes skyward, “I’m gonna have to tread carefully.”

“Joys of teaching, hey Cas?” Dean raised his beer. He could see two waitresses carrying over a huge round plate with edges of pizza crust spilling over the side. It was their meal. Dean’s face went slack and his eyes almost glazed over at the divine aroma and sight of the colorful topping. Sam and Nick could take their Michelin Stars and keep the shiny bastards. This was food. Honest American all good huge and dripping in cheese and bacon with piles of onions.

“Are we going to eat all of this?” Cas gasped.

“I’m agonna give it my best shot.” Dean promised.

Talking wasn’t possible, but not due to anxiety. Castiel chewed and savored each bite. Dean inhaled his first triangle but slowed down then and closed his eyes as he made an occasional food-moan.

“You know,” Dean said when they were over half way through, “I don’t think I’m going be able to walk to a bar after this.”

Castiel caught the waitresses eye, “Two more beers here, please.”

“You are a good boyfriend,” Dean fake-simpered, “taking care of me.”

“I should hope so,” Castiel responded firmly, “Now cut me that slice with the extra bacon.”

“Yessir,” Dean snorted and sacrificed his intended slice in favor of romantic sentiment.

Dean was right again. They could barely move. The pizza was gone save for a stray olive that had found its way into their feast. Dean burped magnificently. Castiel opened his mouth to comment and made a corresponding quieter but rolling belch, then flushed red with embarrassment.

Cas is adorable, Dean thought.

“Why thank you my handsome well fed date,” Cas snickered.

Dean closed his lids while blaming his brain for doing the speech instead of internal monologue thing again.

“Pie?” Dean beamed.

“Do not threaten me with more food.” Castiel moaned.

“Cannoli?” Dean’s stomach was so full it would be a waste of a good pie to stuff it in there.

“One Cannoli.” Castiel sighed in defeat, “one shared Cannoli.”

Dean grinned and formed his plan. When the ganache filled treat arrived Dean picked it up and came around to Castiel’s seat. He held it up for Cas to bite into his end then placed his own lips around the other end and sucked most of the filing out. Then he collapsed in laughter.

“That was mean.” Castiel pouted.

“Mean and sexy.” Dean amended.
Castiel licked a speck of chocolate from the corner of his mouth and agreed. “Come on, Dr Sexy, let’s go home.”

Dean put his hand down finding the book, “I never gave you…” he handed it over, “Happy Valentine.”

A glorious smile broke across Castiel’s face. He ripped the paper off and turned the book over to look at the blurb on the back. “I’ve dipped into this in the library but I don’t have a copy. Thank you Dean. It’s a great gift. I love it.”

Dean ducked his head, pleased but uncomfortable with the loving praise. A small package appeared next to his beer.

“I didn’t get a card.” Castiel said apologetically.

“Did ‘ya see a card with the book?” Dean replied gruffly, “They all had pink fluffy crap on ’em.”

Castiel gave a knowing smirk, as if he also had looked but not purchased a card.

Dean unfolded the paper. It was a wallet. A really nice soft leather Diesel wallet. Dean opened it up. There was something hard inside. It was a key.

“For if you want to come over anytime,” Castiel shrugged self-consciously, “I checked it with Balthazar. You know if your housemates are grating on you or you just want somewhere quiet.”

“Thanks Cas,” Dean breathed, not sure that he’d go to Cas’s house when he wasn’t home but it was a real thoughtful thing to do. “That’s awesome and the wallet is pretty awesome too.”

They went Dutch on the check and strolled home at a much slower pace. There was no sign of Balthazar. Castiel texted him. He was out with Suzy. Dean’s brows rose. He was sure Balthazar was dating a Catherine.

Castiel offered coffee. Dean accepted and waited in the family room. There was a piano behind the door. It had a layer of dust, but he wondered if Cas or Balthazar played.

When Castiel returned they nestled into their favorite spots on the sofa. Castiel rested his head on Dean’s shoulder. Dean ran his fingers through Cas’s hair, absently restyling it to messy sex-hair. Castiel turned his neck to look up and Dean’s breath caught. The light hit Castiel’s face making it supremely kissable. Dean bent to take those lips. Castiel’s tongue stroked along the inside of Dean’s bottom lip. He gave a pretty moan that had the blood rushing to Dean’s dick.

“Cas,” Dean said hoarsely.

“Yes Dean,” Castiel breathed with an added pant.

“Can we move this to the bedroom?”

Dean held his breath.

“Are you sure?” Castiel checked but his hand massaging Dean’s chest messaged that his body was on board with the suggestion.

“Hell yeah,” Dean emphasized with a deep kiss.

Castiel helped him to his feet with a hand. His room was across the hall. It was huge with a king bed, a massive old dark closet, a big desk and long windows. Castiel eased Dean onto his bed. He
moved away to draw the curtains and find lube and condoms. Dean took the chance to peel off his clothes, down to his boxer briefs. Castiel grinned at the speedy strip. Cas’s jeans were gone but Dean helped him pull off his shirt and tee. There were acres of pale skin just waiting for Dean to touch and taste. They made it to the bed. Dean climbed up Castiel’s body and sucked hard on his collar bone. His nose filled with the scent of Castiel and the fine spice of the long ago applied aftershave. Cas’s hands found Dean’s ass cheeks. He held and massaged. Dean moved down his sternum with his hickeys tasting Castiel’s soft skin. Cas muttered his approval and something about no visible marks for the school. Dean worked his way back up and extended his neck.

“Mark me, Cas.”

Castiel didn’t need to be asked twice. He flipped them with more agility than Dean thought he possessed. Then Cas’s hot mouth was pulling and sucking at Dean’s neck. It was glorious. He caught the sheets with his fists and moaned into the sensation. Cas’s hand trailed down, lifting and cupping Dean’s balls. He was rock hard now. Dean flexed his fingers out from the sheet and found Castiel’s cock. It was hard, just for Dean, leaking and straining up. The power made Dean heady, as Castiel’s nails traced back to Dean’s hole. There was the snick of a lube cap. Castiel rubbed his fingers together to warm it. And damn if Dean nearly cried at the tender consideration of that simple kind gesture. The first finger was easy but strange after so many years. Dean pushed down on it using his body to tell Cas he could take more.

Between kisses to each of his nipples, Cas muttered that he didn’t want to cause Dean any pain. At the second finger, Dean pulled Castiel’s body closer so he could bite on his shoulder and urge him on. Cas seemed to scissor him forever keeping Dean on edge, breathless and rolling in stimulation. The sensations aimed for bliss. Their cocks met, driving Dean crazy and tipping Castiel to the point where he rolled on the latex.

“You good? Like this?”

Dean interpreted Castiel’s question about positions. He knew it would be easier if he turned but he wanted to see Cas come apart. He lifted his hips.

Cas’s blunt head teased him, pushing oh so slowly. Dean’s head fell back. It burned but in a good way. It pushed and stretched him. He bit down on his lip. Castiel was moaning praise at how good Dean was, how hot, how much of a sexy man, how special. The words washed over him. Finally totally and completely filled, Dean opened his eyes to see Castiel’s passion glazed face. He sought Castiel’s hand with his and pressed their palms together. Castiel searched his eyes and Dean nodded. He was expecting thrusts and being pushed bodily, but Castiel was slow and smooth and gentle. He wrapped his free hand around Dean’s neglected cock and worked on his vein with his thumb. Dean wrapped his legs around Cas’s body, seating him better and helping Cas to find his prostate. And there it was. He gave a high pitched hiss. Brushing against his gland, Castiel’s nail on his slit, and the all encompassing feeling of being together pushed him over the edge and he came with a full body quiver and a scream of “Cas.”

Cas lost it when Dean orgasmed. He drove into Dean, pulling out and then fully seating again. Dean heaved recovery breaths and tightened his legs on Cas’s waist. That was enough and it was Castiel’s turn to shudder and pant. He held steady while he shot his load. Dean was almost sorry there was a condom. He wanted to be painted in Iridescent Pearl.

Castiel was dirty. He lifted the hand decorated in Dean’s spend and licked it like a lollipop while Dean watched with his lips parted and eyes wide. He touched Dean’s lower lip with the same pointer finger and Dean kissed it. Castiel moved off the bed. Dean made a small noise of complaint but his lover was only disposing of the condom and getting a warm damp flannel to wipe Dean’s
stomach tenderly and clean them both off. Castiel flicked off the light and snuggled down next to him. He pulled the previously kicked off comforter over them both and nuzzled into Dean’s ear.

“You were perfect, Dean.”

“You weren’t so bad,” Dean rejoined lightly and told how special he really felt by wrapping Castiel in his arms.
It was chilly. Dean reckoned he was lucky if it was hitting forty degrees. It had gotten cold in the Ozarks. His, occasionally biting, walks to work didn't bother him, and in the last few mornings there had been pre-dawn light breaking in the eastern sky. If he was running late or it was Saturday, he took the Impala, but normally he left Baby for Sam to get to class on time. Dean pushed back his jacket sleeve as he approached the open roll shutter at the rear of Greengoods. His watch read 5.52am. A grin spread across his face. Two minutes faster. Dean clocked the time he stepped off the porch each morning. If he stopped to buy a bottle of water at the all night store, or to make a super quick sketch in his tiny notepad, then he didn't measure that day's walk, but he was definitely getting faster. Next week would be his fourth week of work, and he was considering adjusting his scheduled morning leaving time to five minutes later.

Inside the warehouse, Tony and Joe had pallets and roll cages lined up for the morning crew. There would be another couple of deliveries but most of the fresh produce had arrived. The night team would have items that would not fit on the shelves in previous day ready to roll at the top of the line. Dean waved in greeting and received cheery salutations in response. He dipped his clockcard and dumped his coat and sackpack into his locker. In the canteen Risa and Jeffery sipped steaming coffees. Dean took a cup of water, having made his morning coffee to almost Turkish strength back at home.

"Annie wants me on a checkout tomorrow." Risa's growl was kind of scary.

"She doesn't?" Jeffery's mug paused on the way to his mouth.

"Kate's got her end of quarter exams next week and Mr. Adler gave her study leave and then promised Annie I'd cover Kate's Saturday morning shift." Risa hissed out the words.

Dean inclined his head in sympathy. Risa didn't particularly look like it but she could heft sacks of potatoes, squashes and yams with the best of the guys. He'd seen Risa flinging bar-coded items over the scanners and plunking weighted items on the cashier scales, when she had to cover a break. He kind of pitied Monica and Shirley if they had a storm cloud working next to them all day tomorrow. It was decent of Mr. Adler to grant Kate the weekend off. The pretty blonde freshman only did Saturday and Sunday. She was bright and friendly, always said 'Hi' to Dean, and had invited him to a party last weekend. There was a round of good humored teasing of how Kate fancied the strong silent type. Monica and Nora were more reserved and cliquey, keeping to themselves. Shirley, who was in her fifties, was like a momma-bear and brought in baked muffins for the crew every Friday. Annie was another kettle of fish. She had a scary-sexy vibe similar to Risa and was extremely competent at her job. Annie and Mitchell were the supervisors Dean worked with but he had also met the third senior employee, Irv, who started his shifts at a later hour.

"I mean she only works from opening to lunchtime," Risa was still grousing about Kate while she rinsed out her mug. "They should train you as a cashier, Dean. It would serve the moaning customers right if they couldn't get a sympathetic response."

Dean held up his hands and backed away a step at the idea, causing Jeffery to break out his donkey bray of a laugh. He truly hoped the suggestion was a bad tasting joke, because he had enough frustration dealing with early morning customers who asked him for produce. Most were happy when he showed them where the items were, or held up his pointer finger for them to wait while he checked the storeroom. A few now knew he rarely spoke and were smiley and grateful for his silent help. New customers and some of the regulars still checked his ear cavities for hearing aids,
shouted their requests, or gave him the same pitying looks that Carsten was subjected to.

As Dean pulled out a crate of yesterday's artisan cheese delivery, he thought about how exam fever seemed to have infected every student he knew, turning them into red-eyed insomniacs, popping caffeine pills, and retreating on pilgrimages to the library and their bedrooms. Even Castiel was on edge with his bedroom desk and the dining table covered in books and papers. Balthazar had these cushioned lap trays for eating in front of the TV. He had explained to Dean that the trays were a quarterly exam time essential.

Sam had taken it to another level. Dean was thinking about grinding down a few Xanax and spiking Sam's food with them. His baby brother's determination to meet his scholarship grade was fanatical. Dean got it. If Sam's grade's dropped for this quarter he would have to get something impossible like top of the class or straight A-plusses in the spring semester, or else lose his full ride, and there was no family trust fund in the Winchester back pocket.

By the time Dean was replacing empty tomato display cases with full ones, all the morning crew had arrived for work. Mr. Adler was freaking straightening up the bananas so that they leaned together in a more orderly fashion. He was glad that Wayne had been on that unit, because being smarmily shown how to place a banana on a shelf by Zachariah might have caused Dean to bite through his tongue in an effort to stay chilled. On his way to the back areas the store manager stopped to admire Dean's full shiny tomato display. He reached into the top crate of the empty stack and pulled out a beefsteak tomato with split skin which Dean had taken off sale. Dean licked his lips. He never knew if Zachariah was going to criticize, say nothing but delegate his comments to Mitchell, or offered cringing praise. It was un-nerving and one of the things about his job that set Dean's teeth on edge.

This time Zachariah was pleased. He gave a grimacing smile, patted Dean on the arm and before walking off said, "Good Boy."

Dean steamed inside. He detested the way the old balding dick would pat him and praise him like he was some prize sheepdog herding up his wayward vegetables. He wanted to complain about it to Garth, but it wasn't exactly discrimination, just condescending and demeaning praise. He deliberately skipped over the roll cage of delicate berries so he could slam crates of onions onto their display.

"Hey Dean!" Risa called, "They were my temper venting onions!"

Dean snorted with laughter. He eyed the main door to make sure they were still closed, then gifted his colleague with the sight of his raised middle finger.

He was sweaty and achy by 10am. He betted he had built more muscle mass in the past few hours than Sam would on Stanford's gym equipment in a week. He popped into Beans on his way home and pointed at a tall latte. Tamara was behind the counter with a very beautiful black haired woman in a stylish pant suit.

"To go Dean?" Tamara asked with a smile, but there a slight tension to her grin.

Dean nodded and cocked his eye towards the executive looking woman with the heavy gold bracelet and necklace set who seemed so out of place.

"Dean meet Light Up Your Beans' owner Andrea," Tamara introduced, "Ms Kormos, this is Dean – one of our regulars and my eye-candy fix."

Dean eye rolled at Cas's colleague.
"Pleased to meet you Dean." Andrea's smile did not seem forced and Dean warmed to her a touch, "I don't get to visit my Palo Alto branch as much as I would like. My ex-husband and I opened our first Light Up Your Beans in Eagle Harbor and the Washington shops keep me busy."

Dean nodded politely. He hadn't known Beans was a pacific coast chain. There was a slight emphasis on Andrea's divorced status. Tamara picked up on it too.

"Dean is Castiel's partner." Tamara announced as she poured frothed milk into the tall cup.

"Well in that case, you must take this latte with my compliments." Andrea insisted. "Castiel is one of my most loyal employees. I will be very sad to lose him when he seeks a teaching position in the Fall."

"Thank you," Dean's voice was hoarse. He needed the coffee to wet his throat. He hadn't been in the right headspace for making workplace comments.

After his shower Dean stretched out on his futon with Black Sabbath on his Discman. He dutifully wrote his journal. The topic of choice was how he'd like to install Zachariah on a bench and smash his head in with a relay of coconuts. He added a postscript of reasonable sentences about wishing he could call the boss out on his patronizing behavior. He thought he could conjure up a scream of "Fuck you," but he imagined his pink slip would soon follow that course of action.

Sam stomped up the stairs and flung his body into the room.

"Fucker. Prof Gilmore is a fucking fucker." Sam seethed.

Dean pulled out an ear bud. "Huh Sam?"

"A dickbag. A sneaky fucker." Sam threw his book bag on his bed. "Gender Psych class, right Dean?"

Dean nodded urgently.

"Last week, he hints the exam paper will have psycho-social development, androgyny and sex crimes. We've all been scrounging through journals and sharing the copies of books on the reading list," Sam kicked the leg of his bed, "Then he comes in today and says oops sorry class I'd read Eysenck, stereotyping and gender equality, but hey he adds, you'll all have a well rounded knowledge of this class won't you?"

"Can he do that?" Dean gasped.

"Now we don't know whether to believe him and we're gonna havta cram every fucking class since Christmas." Sam flopped his ass onto his mattress. "I don't need this. I just don't. My freaking World History exam is 7 to 10pm the night before this one and I won't have time to re-read the whole frigging textbook before I go in."

"Everyone else will be in the same boat," Dean tried.

"Everyone else doesn't need a freaking A." Sam's chest heaved. He pulled his next class notebook from the pile on the floor. "It's our last class with Dr Rutherford. His TA is doing the revision class next week. Last time to ask him a pertinent question, if I could only think of one."

Dean let Sam get absorbed in his notes. He puttered around, checking the moisture of Spider's soil and straightening his bedclothes.
"Dean?"

Dean turned round. Sam had his glaring bitchface on. He cleared his throat, "Can you be quiet please?"

Dean sucked in his lips to hold his patience. He understood his brother was stressed but he was being freaking quiet. He'd even turned off his music in case it drifted out of his ear buds. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Why haven't you asked Nick for study leave?"

"Why haven't I?" Sam gaped at him, "What the fuck?"

"Kate at work's got the next few days off." Dean muttered.

"Maybe because I was freaking lucky to have a job after our deadbeat Dad pulled me outta here back in December. Maybe because there is rent to pay and all the fucking textbooks for next quarter to buy. Maybe because I won't be able to work on the Monday of exam week because instead I'll be winging an on the spot essay about the merits of the Modernist Art Movement. Maybe I fucking need the job."

"Okay, okay Sammy," Dean made a placating gesture with his palm. There was no way Nick would fire Sam or replace him for asking for study leave, but he knew not to push it. "Ignore it. It was only an idea."

Sam gave a short nod but he was hyped up. Dean prudently decided that his little brother needed some alone time to get his mind in gear before his next class.

"I'm going over to Cas's place." Dean grabbed his denim jacket from the closet.

"Cool." Sam said in a calmer tone. "Hey Dean. I didn't mean to bite your head off."

"Forget about it." Dean called as he checked he had his new wallet and the key to the house across the street. He hoped Sam knew that he meant it. He didn't want his little brother adding a concern that things weren't good between them to his list of troubles.

Cas's house was empty. Dean had entered when no one was home on one previous occasion so he could welcome Cas home with a boxed pie he'd picked up at the bakery on Emerson.  

Cas and Balthazar had eaten most of a tuna casserole the night before. Dean turned on the oven to warm up the leftovers. The dining room table was still coated with Cas's arcane study system. He laid cutlery and kitchen paper on two lap trays and poured long glasses of soda. Then he went to the family room and flipped through the vinyl, cassette and CD collections for something he recognized. He knew plenty of Balthazar's musical choices but he'd eat his own earlobes before sticking on Lionel Ritchie or Luther Vandross. Cas had a CD copy of music to Romeo and Juliet. Somehow Dean didn't think it was Baz Lurhmann's version. He got curious as he held the album, enough to insert the disc. Dean nodded along to some of it as it played in the background. When Castiel's bike turned into the car port, Dean was playing conductor to a track he checked was called Dance of The Knights. Caught rotten enjoying Prokofiev, Castiel wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's waist and kissed his cheek.

"Hello Dean," Castiel smirked as he loosened his blue tie, "To what do I owe the very great pleasure for discovering your talent for interpretive ballet."
Dean's jaw dropped, "Ballet?"

"Romeo and Juliet." Castiel tilted his head towards the stereo.

"Shit, Cas. Who knew? I thought it was a play." Dean huffed. He'd read the cliff notes in the ACIC library. The oven timer pinged. "Hey, lunch. I warmed up your leftovers."

Castiel followed Dean down to the small kitchen. When he saw the prepared trays he planted another kiss on Dean's lips.

They shared lunch on the sofa. The tuna casserole was good with a rich creamy sauce. Dean listened while Cas talked about his day.

"How is that kid? Y'know Jesse?" Dean asked with his mouth full. Luckily Cas was able to decipher his meaning.

"I suspect you were correct, Dean." Castiel put down his fork, "I alerted my colleagues, but it seems his shyness is greater in my presence, and I saw my name written in the margin of his biology textbook."

Dean tittered, "It's sweet."

"Yes. Sweet, but unnerving to think one of my class sees me in a sexual way."

"Betya there's more than one." Dean teased.

"Dean!" Castiel huffed, "Stop it."

"Mr. Sexy Teacher." Dean leaned over and tickled Castiel's rib, "I'd be drawing you all over my books."

"I'd be sending you to detention for drawing in science class." Castiel dodged Dean's tickling fingers with a grin and took their trays to the kitchen.

"Bet you looked cute in high school," Dean continued when Cas returned with coffees.

"Not particularly." Castiel said drily, "My mother knitted my school sweaters."

Dean was already snorting a laugh when Castiel added that his mother made his sleeves too long.

"All my clothes were from goodwill," Dean said in mutual sympathy, "and then Sam wore'em."

Before Cas's maudlin expression could deepen, he added, "never let it stop me from catching a hot chick or dude's eye."

It worked as Cas got misty eyed, "My first kiss was a girl."

"Wowser, Cas. I thought you were strictly on team dick."

"My neighbor Rachel down by the creek on a hot May day when we peeled off our school sweaters and in over heated brain fugues ended up wrapped together under the old tire tree swing." Castiel smiled, "My parents found out, because I naively told them. I was sent to bible camp. I guess that should have been a hint for five years later when I came out to them."

"Why did you?" Dean whispered. He would never have 'come out' to his Dad and fully understood why Sam hadn't.
"I was at Cornell. It was this time of year. Your brother's stage of college and his age. 19 and spring break sophomore year." Cas leaned forward on his seat and clasped his hands together between his thighs.

"You don't have to tell me," Dean reached in and tugged on Castiel's shirt cuff so that the student released his hand into Dean's.

"I want to." Castiel gave a watery smile. "At Cornell, out and proud there. Dating Ephraim. They had been so supportive of my decision to study physics. You have no idea how wonderful their acceptance of my choice was. Mom and Pop, they believe in the Good Book, like in every word of it, but there was no issue with using my college fund and paying my dorm fees. I thought that, I don't know, that they were changing with the times, or at least accepting modernity. I took Eph back home with me for Spring Break and discovered lickity split that I had presumed too much. Ephraim was escorted off the farm by my mother holding a shotgun, while my father tried to beat the evil gay out of me with his walking stick."

"Hell, Cas," Dean slung his arm around Cas's hunched shoulder. It occurred to him that he was in the role of comforter rather than comfort-ee. It felt deeply right to be able to offer Cas his support.

Castiel gave a bitter laugh and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "They cut me off, didn't pay my fees. I had nowhere to live. A few of my friends let me crash on their sofas and floors. Ephraim was cool but we were no Romeo and Juliet. Balthazar called me. I hadn't spoken to him since a distant cousin's funeral two years earlier, but his mother had told him what my mother told her. He offered me a room. I went to the Dean of Students Office and threw myself on their mercy. They were fantastic. They helped me transfer to Stanford as a half-time undergraduate and aided my loan applications. All my complete units came with me."

"You are amazin'" Dean breathed.

"What Dean?" Castiel blinked.

"You didn't give up. Didn't let them beat you." Dean pecked the corner of Castiel's shock slackened lips.

"You know that spring I thought I'd lost everything." Castiel squeezed Dean's hand, "And it was no picnic, working full time and going to school. But I got my bachelors. I picked up work as a private tutor for struggling high school physics students until the start of my teaching degree. But you know what? If all that hadn't happened, I would never have learned that my parents didn't love me unconditionally, would never have found my vocation as a teacher, and never have met you."

"Hey Cas, schmoop warning," Dean winked.

Castiel chuckled, "No time for schmoop I'm afraid I have a seminar."

Dean rose.

"Stay if you wish, Dean." Castiel placed a hand on his shoulder, "I will only be a couple of hours, and maybe we could watch a movie. My brain needs a study break."

Dean grumbled to himself that Sam should be as sensible. While Cas changed out of his suit, Dean put on some daytime TV and curled into the corner of the sofa.

He knew he must have slept because he could hear Judge Judy dismissing a counter claim. His mouth was dry. He had an uneasy crawling sensation under his skin, like as if he was being watched. It was a lingering dread. He'd had the seclusion room nightmare. His left arm was pinned
by his body in the corner of the sofa cushions. Pins and needles ran down as he shook it out. Gritting his teeth he forced his mind away from the memory of being stood on his numb feet after God only knew how long strapped to the table. He smacked his lips together a few times and took a couple of deep breaths.

Dean noticed a tall glass of juice covered with a Kleenex on the coffee table. He must have drifted into his nap before Cas left. It was freaking touching, especially when Dean spotted the small post it saying 'Drink Me'. Laughing at the Alice In Wonderland reference, he gladly gulped down a few mouthfuls. There was a missed text from Sam with a simple 'sorry' for his early freak out.

Dean figured life wasn't too bad. He wasn't looking forward to the lead up to spring break. He was not all that enthusiastic about heading into work in the morning. Risa was going to be like thunder and Saturday was busy with early morning shoppers, getting their fresh groceries before commencing their weekend plans. Dean rubbed the back of his neck, massaging the tendons with his thumb. There were a lot of things he liked about working in Greengoods but the negative side wore him down at times. Back in Arkansas, when he gave himself permission to fantasize a life outside ACIC, he was always tinkering with car engines or running a repair business, maybe living above the premises with a hot chick or guy. He never imagined he would be working with fresh produce. Victor, Garth, and Sam all were quick to point out that the Ticket To Work program was a stepping stone to full employment. The place wasn't so bad. He got paid for honest physical work that was giving him muscle definition he hadn't seen since his high school track team days. The guys were cool. He enjoyed helping Tony with late deliveries. The heavy jacket and man-gloves for the cold warehouse gave him a bulky laborer vibe that Kate and Nancy, the shy office clerk, seemed to drool over. He enjoyed the routine and peace of his early morning walk on quiet streets and his pit stop at Beans on the way home.

The crap low-lights heavily featured Zachariah's micromanagement and 'Good Boy petting. Vying for top of the chart was his name pin and how at least once a day he had to point to where it informed the reader he was mute, because some blind old bat accused him of being rude when he didn't read the Eat By date on her yogurt, or a harassed soccer mom shouted if he had heard her question about the origin of her pineapple. Thing was, if they would just leave him be or act chilled, rather than raising voices or muttering about the employment of deaf and dumb boys, then Dean might have found his voice. As the days had gone by Dean had found it easier to exchange greetings or make seldom comments which always garnered a reaction from his colleagues because of their rarity. Speaking could be a minefield on the store floor. When he did, the customer might expect a full blown conversation. Although Old Mrs Lincoln, who purchased chilled fresh spray cans of cream for her Maine Coon cats, had coaxed whispered recommendations from Dean about the best value offers and the dear lady in her wool coat seemed to treat his efforts as their own special secret. She had Dean guide her around the isles carrying her basket. Last week she had tried to tip him $5. When he wouldn't accept, she sneakily gave Carsten $10 to split with Dean. He couldn't refuse when Carsten nearly bawled that he had promised the nice lady he would give it to Dean. Another day a lady had stuffed three dollar bills in his pocket when he had carried her heavy family sized groceries to her car. When Jed had called in sick, Mitchell had taken Dean with him for the delivery to the Poor Clare convent. After they had unpacked the motherload Sister Assumpta had given the hardworking men slices of warm crumble topped apple pie. It had been twenty after ten when they got back to the store but Dean would have worked an hour of overtime for the nuns' divine baking skills.

He figured on balance despite the looks, comments, exposure, and overbearing sympathy, he was getting used to Greengoods. The job was growing on him like a symbiotic fungus.

A text alert proved to be Cas checking if he was still at the house. Dean shot off a quick reply with a couple of capital Xs for good measure. He cleaned out the coffee filter and put on a new pot.
Then he tidied up their lunch bits. Balthazar's house was not large. It was a Californian Bungalow with two beds, the bathroom, and family room taking up most of the square footage. A narrow passageway led to the small dining room and tiny galley kitchen. There was barely room for two guys to stand side by side in the narrow galley. If this was Dean's home he would knock the wall and have a kitchen cum diner. The front door banged and a delicious meaty aroma drifted in as Castiel appeared looking tired but bearing a swollen bag of burgers.

"I knew there was a reason I hung around," Dean muttered with a kiss to Castiel's exposed neck.

---------------SPNSPSN----------------------------------

Dean rose before seven. It was the Monday of Exam Week, and every one of his housemates had an 8.30am start. Dean was hard at work in the kitchen while the guys fought over the shower and Jessica squealed that she couldn't find her lucky fountain pen. While Sarah helped Jess find her exam talisman, Dean grated potatoes, chopped onions, halved tomatoes, and squeezed oranges. Dean had planned the breakfast, bringing home the ingredients from work on Saturday, including overripe but extra juicy oranges on which he had got a mega discount.

Sam was the first student to appear. "I was gonna grab an apple," he gasped at the table with the full pitcher of OJ, and plates of bacon, hash browns and fried tomatoes.

"You want eggs over easy?" Dean gestured at a chair with his spatula, "or cinnamon and vanilla French Toast with extra sugar for brain fuel?"

Sam was speechless. Brady trailed in. Sam finger jabbed at the piles of food and Dean in his cooking apron.

Soon the table was surrounded by exam takers fuelling up for the day ahead, except Andy who slouched against the wall holding his head and chewing slices of bacon wrapped in sliced bread.

Sarah raised her mug of coffee and announced, "I declare an exam amnesty. No mention of the E-word until we leave the house."

Dean grinned with his back turned, flipping Sammy's eggs.

Jessica swallowed her bite of French Toast and dapped her mouth with a napkin, "Hear, Hear. Sarah found my lucky pen, so everything she says goes."

The others laughed as Jessica brandished the writing instrument.

"Are you actually going to Mexico, Andy? Or was that wishful thinking?" Brady laughed.

Andy grunted a yes, then added, "Ansem's flying out of Denver and we are meeting there Saturday for seven nights of hedonistic bliss."

"We are all so boring, heading home," Jess sighed.

Sarah cleared her throat, "Scott's taking me back to Lake Tahoe for the weekend before I head East."

"Whoo-hoo," Brady whooped.

Sam winked at Sarah while Dean slid eggs onto his brother's plate and sat down next to him to tuck into his own bacon. Sam grinned, "Some guys have all the luck."
"Don't you try and tell us, Sam Winchester, that devilishly handsome Nick has not got plans?" Jess wiggled her brows.

Dean thought Sam's cheeks flushed.

"Dunno," Sam shrugged, "I'm taking a couple of Brady's shifts while he is in The Windy City."

Brady snorted, "That leaves other nights for getting together."

"What's Castiel doing?" Jessica asked Dean earning her a grateful look from Sam.

"He's working more too. His cousin's taking a few days vacation, and Cas'll watch the store." Dean held a private hope that just like Sam he would be able to grab some extra time with his boyfriend.

As the students began to head out, Dean slipped upstairs. He had to take his Citalorapram and Penandrocol. He dragged his polka dot vanity case from under his bed and took out his meds. The Xanax tub rattled.

"Sonvabitch," Dean hissed. Victor had written new scripts last Thursday but with most of Friday spent napping on Cas's sofa and a forgetful head on Saturday, Dean hadn't got them filled. Sam came in as Dean was contemplating the two Xanax knocking around at the bottom of the white plastic container.

Sam checked his progress towards his book bag and jacket. "Dean?"

"Forgot my scripts." Dean huffed.

"Shit, man!" Sam ambled over and looked in on the two lonely pills "You got any of your other meds?"

Dean pulled the anti-anxiety blister out of its box and saw six remaining doses. Nodding in satisfaction he took his Penandrocol box in his hand. He grimaced and hoped he was wrong but he wasn't. He had taken his final 28th pill the previous morning.

"Its fine Dean. Don't sweat it, we can share." Sam extracted his own pack from his desk and threw it over to the dresser.

Blue Band Penandrocol had a 28 day cycle of pills - 1 dark blue, 2 pale blue, 10 white, another dark blue, 4 pale ones, and 10 white to finish. They had to be taken in order, which was inconvenient if one was forgotten, but they were the best male contraceptives on the market. Dean could see that Sam was on Day 6 of the pack.

"You take my day 14 dark blue and when you get your pack, leave your Day 1 in the blister for me. Easy peasy."

Dean barely had time to thank his brother, wish him luck, and promise to go to the pharmacy before Sam was flinging his bag over his shoulder and flying out the door to his first exam.

Heaven was rocking. Strobe lights spun across the dancers' heads. Floor lasers fanned in scare gaps between their heaving bodies. Dean licked beads of perspiration from his upper lip. His hands ran around the damp material of Castiel's half open white dress shirt lifting upwards to feel the motion of Cas's shoulder blades. Cas raised his arms to clasp his hands behind Dean's neck and draw them impossibly closer so their breaths mingled before they kissed long and deep. As they turned,
foreheads pressed together, Dean watched his partner's long dark eyelashes dip and hide his
cereulean blue pupils. With a beat of the dance track, Cas's eyes opened again leaving a single lash
defying gravity on the rosy heat flushed skin of his cheek. Dean held his breath as he reached up
and stroked it away with a gentle tip of his finger. Castiel smiled at his touch and leaned forward
whispering in Dean's ear that he would return in a moment.

Watching Castiel's finely formed ass swing to Pink's Get The Party Started, Dean ran his tongue
hungrily over his lips. His eyes stung from recycled air but he had to admit he was revelling in
Cas's sudden urge to celebrate his last exam at Heaven, a gay nightclub. Initially neither of them
were racing to expose their limited dancing skills. After Castiel's fourth vodka and Dean's third
beer, Dean couldn't be sure who had pulled who into the morass of guys moving to the thumping
beat. Hands on each other's hips, Castiel's fingers pressing into Dean's body, they swayed and
moved in unison rather than anything that could be said to resemble actual dance. He did recall Cas
securing the future of his leather jacket and Dean's denim one by lodging them with the cloakroom
attendant. Then he slipped his hands over the curves of Dean's glutes and slid the paper tickets into
his ass pockets. Stripped to his V-neck black tee and unintentionally co-ordinated arm cuffs, Dean
had received a wink from a baby faced crew cut blond with a sharktooth pendant dangling over a
ripped wifebeater. Castiel's gasp of indignation turned out not to be jealousy but shock at the sight
of one of his high school seniors. The equally taken aback boy's rapid vanishing act and Dean's
restraining hand, combined with a plea to 'Leave it Cas' saved the fake ID holder from the
interrogation of his teacher. Castiel looked stunning in his moral conflict, making Dean want to
wrap his body around him and grow octopus limbs to entangle them together.

Dean gyrated his hips in the sea of bodies, anonymous, buzzed, waiting for Cas to return. He
tipped his head back half laughing at a few of the other post-exam revellers who were blowing
douchey whistles to the music. He could feel the glide of the silky candy striped jock strap over his
confined cock and balls. The secret surprise for his lover had him straining and leaking in
anticipation.

The furnace of a body grinding into him from behind caused Dean to half-step forward into a
fleeting gap. The body moved with him, hard on rubbing his hip. It was not Castiel. Dean froze, his
adrenaline funneled down the 'deer in highlights' chute rather than the 'punch and ask questions
later' channel. His blood rushed with increasing velocity through his ears but the unwelcome
pressure did not pass along to another dancer.

"Why Dean," a nasal crawling drawl and the heat of sickly nicotine breath on his neck, "What an
unexpected pleasure to meet Sam's pretty brother here."

"Alastair", Dean sucked air around his constricting throat, suddenly sober and aware of every note
of The Prodigy's Breathe as the taller man ground his hard shaft against Dean's crack. Dean kept
moving but the sea of oblivious clubbers had morphed into a cage of flesh. With the edge of the
dancefloor in range Dean pulled forward only to have Alastair's hands snake under his arms and
hold his chest. If he could get off the floor he could break away, find room to twist expertly out of
the amateur hold, and spot a mark on the dickbag's jutting chin. He kept edging onwards luring
Alastair to the seated area readying his response, tensing his muscles to deal with the sonvabitch.

"Hey!" Castiel growled before them.

Dean took his chance and elbowed Alastair's ribs. He stepped to the side in time to see the blur of
Castiel's closed fist flying upwards to smack into Alastair's chin and the douchebag's head snapping
back, bloodied spittle spraying out.

Time stopped. Heads turned. Alastair stumbled back into the crowd. Castiel's righteous rage
burned incandescent. Dean's jaw dropped in awe. Cas had smacked the creep down... for him.

Then all at once reality rushed in. There was a scream of "Fight!" Alastair staggered to recover. A security guy with an earpiece moved in from the left. Castiel gripped Dean's shoulder tight and stared into his eyes with deep concern.

"Are you alright? Dean, babe, are you OK?"

Dean nodded.

"Let's move," Cas urged. He released Dean's shoulder to urge him forward through the crowd with a grasped hand. At the cloakroom Dean kept lookout for security or the creepy perv. His pulse jumped in his temple and his nerves in his knee hopped.

Outside on the sidewalk, Castiel bent double and took a couple of deep breaths. Dean took the opportunity to bring his own breathing back under control.

"You," Dean began as his rested his palm on the curve of Cas's spine, "...were magnificent."

Castiel straightened and looked sheepishly at Dean. "I... I saw him assaulting you on the floor and saw red."

Dean quirked his lips at the fire still kindled in Cas's belly. "You know I coulda taken him down?"

"Yes Dean. I know." Castiel looked marginally abashed, "I am not normally so much of a caveman."

"But thanks Cas," Dean linked their fingers together. "The assbutt had it coming."

"He did, didn't he?" Cas smirked and swung their arms as they wallked.

"He did," Dean agreed before pausing for a quick sweet touching of chapped lips, "Now take me home and ravish me, Barney Rubble."

"As you wish," Castiel replied softly.

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Eleven

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to everybody reading and hugs for those who have left kudos, bookmarked, and especially everyone who has commented.

Additional warning for this chapter: Instance of consensual very light bondage kink.

Sam woke slowly, becoming aware of the roar of the sea. Breaking waves were an exotic sound to his ear. Whenever his small family had lived by the coast, John would deposit them in a turnpike motel, an inner city weekly rental, or a backwoods cabin miles inland. Sam remembered once, perhaps their first stint in Daytona Beach, when he had pleaded with his knees planted in the sand, to live on the beach. He recalled his righteous childish logic had refuted all possible arguments by demanding they kip in tents. John had given a lecture about every dollar counting and how only lazy rich bastards had seafront properties. Sam blinked back the sting in his eyes as he recalled not only his own tears but also Dean’s, who got it in the neck for giving Sam ideas.

He walked his fingers across the smooth wonderfully high thread-count sheet, in a spider-like motion, then used the warm skin of Nick’s arm as a touchstone to the reality of here and now. Dawn light painted Nick’s sleeping form in muted colors. Sam turned on his side, sheet winding further round his legs, propping his body with his elbow, so he could admire his lover. He reached out, hand hovering, almost touching, not wanting to wake him. His fingertips tingled with static over fine blond chest hairs. Those fingers remained marked with a week of exam-ink even after finding purchase against the tiles of Nick’s wetroom. The stained digits had been kissed and sucked in this bed. Nick had, with loving concern, matched that bluish tinge with the dark circles under Sam’s sleep deprived eyes. If Sam wasn’t so sure of Nick’s affection, he would have been stung by a comment on his flaws, but Nick’s thumbs had glided feather-light along his cheekbones, and earlier had massaged his hand tendons and fingers while they lay together on the La-Z-Boy couch in front of wide sea view French windows.

Sam had celebrated the end of his exams with a beer toast at the house, while Dean was undergoing some sort of pre-date solo makeover, where Sam was banned from entering their bedroom while his brother dressed. Anyone would think he was hiding a panty-kink or something. Andy’s assembled crew arrived and the family room filled with the over-sweet stink of weed. Sam didn’t know if it had been passively smoked dope or a post-exam high that made him brave. He’d shot over to The Gates and dived his hand down the front of Lucifer’s trousers, while an observant Ruby almost required the Heimlich maneuver from a shock diverted slurp of wine.

Of the ride to Moss Beach, Sam remembered only angling in his seat with Nick’s expert hand on his exposed swollen cock, his impatient groans when Nick needed both hands to change gear or make a turn, taking the steps up to Nick’s door without breaking apart, his efforts to lose Nick’s suit jacket into the onshore breeze while the older man fumbled for the lock, and then the deep pile carpet where Nick sank down onto his knees and took Sam’s length, enveloped in heat, the flick of Nick’s tongue, the suction, the abandon of losing himself, tightening his fingers into Nick’s hair, coming long hard and gasping, opening his eyes to see Nick swallowing him down, come escaping
over his jaw, and finally being pulled down by his hips for the filthiest sexiest kiss of his life.

Now, with the racing river of lust stilled to placid waters, and the vice-like pressure of his grades in the hands of the Gods (or whoever was evaluating his papers), Sam could allow relaxation and appreciation of the little things he loved about his boyfriend. The luxury of possessing an unreturned gaze, the privacy of solitary adoration, and the tranquility of the new day, led Sam to reflect on how a relationship was a precious thing and how he burned deep inside with a nascent love for this man. Puffs of sleeping exhalations drew Sam’s eye to Nick’s bottom lip that turned out when he was unhappy and his thinner upper lip that Sam enjoyed nibbling on. Sam loved how Nick’s nose wrinkled and his pale brows rose when he was displeased. In slumber the fine lines on his forehead smoothed out, all the old worries and life experiences blended back. Missing too were the tiny wrinkles that forked the corner of his smiling eyes making Sam’s dimples deepen to joyful pits. Other features were hidden by sleep as well, like Nick’s wide sea-blue eyes and his softly spoken yet intense voice. Sam trailed his eyes down along Nick’s chest to where he had sucked a delicious deep purpling red hickey and lower to the adorable muffin paunch and the soft cock nestled in a blond thatch of curly hair.

Slipping out from between the sheets, Sam padded barefoot to the wide glass and stood motionless watching the breaking waves roll in. There was something primal and wild about the ocean. The sea had power that inspired ancient deities and great works of art like Moby Dick and Hokusai’s The Wave. One could be tossed and dragged under to unfathomable depths, or ride the crests glorious and surfing invincible.

The light touch of Nick’s hand on his arm had Sam turning round. Nick draped a fluffy hotel-style guest-robe over Sam’s shoulders.

“Aren’t you cold, darling?” He murmured into the nape of Sam’s neck.

Sam leaned back as arms wrapped around him, warm and held close. He lifted his hands to span Nick’s encompassing arms.

“I wish I could sleep for a week.” Sam spoke hoarsely into the middle distance, eyes focused on their window reflections.

Nick kissed his neck and his shoulder, “That can be arranged. Although we might have to check in at the restaurant a few times.”

“I couldn’t leave Dean,” Sam sighed softly.

Nick hummed in what seemed like a half-hearted disagreement. Sam knew Dean did not need to be babysat. Hell, his brother would be indignant at the mere suggestion.

“How about Wednesday?” Nick breathed.

“My results are Wednesday,” Sam trembled and let out a long calming exhale.

“I know,” Nick tightened his hug. “I was thinking, you come early, we can run the beach, flip burgers on the terrace. I’ll make my famous Tabasco potato salad, and we could watch the sunset over the bay.”

“Just you and me?” Sam whispered, hoping he would be coming to celebrate his grades, not seeking commiseration.

Nick hummed, “You and me.”
“Sounds awesome,” Sam turned around to share a deep kiss.

“Should I bring something?” Sam asked Dean at the last moment before they ventured across the street to take Balthazar up on his offer of a joint family meal. “We could ride over to the liquor store and you could go in and buy a six pack?”

Sam chewed the inside of his cheek. A spike of guilt about forgetting a gift for their host, was preferable to the chant of ‘results tomorrow, results tomorrow’ that was burrowing mole-like through his brain screaming for attention.

Dean gave him an exasperated eye and tapped his watch face.

“I know, I know. Should’ve thought of it earlier.”

“Shoulda, woulda, coulda.” Dean mocked with a lopsided grin before disappearing into their kitchen to return with a six pack of Prohibition Ale. Sam had never tried the Californian micro brew. He wondered if Cas had suggested it, or maybe one of Dean’s workmates. He was about to ask but Dean was already out the door.

“Hurry up, Sammy.”

Sam grinned at his brother’s cheeky expression. In less than three months he had seen Dean come out of his protective shell. Sometimes Dean’s fighting spirit staggered Sam. It wasn’t all roses and kittens. There were nights when Dean woke screaming, and others when he trashed unconscious fighting off nightmare assailants. But some nights, Dean slept at Castiel’s… with Castiel, Sam mentally corrected. Sam held close his own anticipation of the promise of spending the following night at Nick’s place.

“Come on, slow coach!” Dean called from the sidewalk. Sam was thrilled to have to catch up with his brother. He matched Dean’s close to normal walking pace as they crossed and proceeded to their neighbors’ door.

“No embarrassing stories,” Dean hissed while they waited.

“I wouldn’t.” Sam protested, but the admonishment made him rack his brains for a suitable childhood story. His brain-search was derailed by their overwhelming greeting by the caftan and sarong wearing new-age store owner.

Balthazar enthused over Sam, quickly ascertained he was a Taurus, and complimented him on his supposed strong will and warmhearted nature. Excusing himself to stir their Beary Biryani, he left Castiel to take their jackets and show them down a narrow hall to a cozy dining room at the rear of the house. The windows were steamed up from the cooking and a mouthwatering aroma of spices pervaded the room.

Sam stared at three increasingly large pyramid rainbow candles in the centre of the 4-seater dining table. There was barely room for the place settings. He screwed up his nose trying to figure out if Balthazar was making a political statement in support of gay rights.

“Chakra candles,” Castiel intoned in answer to the unspoken question. He tugged awkwardly on the cuff of his long sleeved blue tee, “We sell them in the store.”
“Excuse you, Cassie,” Balthazar appeared from the tiny kitchen bearing two plates of aromatic chicken curry with sticky flavored rice. “Those are handcrafted beeswax beacons, colored with organic dyes.”

Sam thanked their host as he placed the two plates in front of his guests. Balthazar was back with his own and Castiel’s meals within moments. He gestured to the stack of buttery naan breads and gilded dishes of mango chutney and riata.

“Please, dig in.” Balthazar grinned and raised his fork.

Sam noticed Castiel waited to eat until Dean had taken a mouthful and his brother’s eyes had done their half closed warning of impending gluttony. The curry was tasty. It was hotter with spice than Sam would normally take it, but he followed Balthazar’s lead by cooling his taste buds with the dips and heat quenching pilsner. Even Dean had to slow down after a while and move to ripping pieces of naan to share with Castiel.

“How did you become an astrologer?” Sam asked.

Balthazar leaned back into his chair, “It’s a long story beginning with a bohemian college life in London, a hippy-chick with long tresses and flowery skirts, a time of seeking enlightenment with a group of like minded people here in California…”

“A commune.” Castiel muttered to Dean.

Balthazar cast his cousin a stink eye, “A community living on the land and raising their consciousness. Some years ago we went our separate ways but I and three of the girls came here to Palo Alto. I opened a small office on Waverly. Bonny read cards. Jolie made dreamcatchers, and Leonore started a little shop in my reception area.”

Sam picked up on the wistful tone, “Where are they now?”

“Oh, still around,” Balthazar’s eyebrows popped up and down suggestively, making Sam wonder if Balthazar’s old friends were friends with benefits.

“From what Castiel said about his family they seem very traditional. Are yours too?” Sam asked. Dean glared at him as if he had overstepped, but Sam mouthed ‘what Dean?’ back at him.

Balthazar did not take offence. “Darlings,” He smiled, “I am the wayward lamb who journeyed down the daisy path away from the ovine fold.”

“He means that my Aunt and Uncle, while not as close-minded as my own parents, are of a different generation,” Castiel interpreted.

“I don’t think Mum and Dad would know a Hopi Ear Candle or a Neti Pot if one hit them on the head.” Balthazar laughed.

Sam knew about the ear candles. Sarah and Jess and a lingering stink of burning hair had taught him last year. He hadn’t a clue what a Neti Pot was, but he didn’t let on.

“Thanks to Balthazar, I, on the other hand, know all about dowsing rods, sage smudging, and soapstone spirit animals,” Castiel commented dryly.

“Hey Cassie, don’t disrespect the products,” Balthazar clicked his tongue, “I source the best.”

“I know you do,” Castiel said in a tone of compromise, while cocking an eye at Dean, who almost
spluttered his beer holding in a laugh.

“You know the Malayan Salt Crystal Lamps are being delivered, and the room is reserved for Jorge, the rune caster, on Friday.” Balthazar checked with an added apology to Sam and Dean for talking business.

“I know,” Castiel eye-rolled and recited, “Move the yoga mats and Nepalese rugs to make room for the lamps, make a display poster for the new Brazilian incense, Jorge on Friday and Madam Magda on Saturday, but you will be back Sunday.”

“Thanks Cassie,” the store owner grinned, “Now who wants burfi. Sweet Indian fudge balls, and coffees?”

“No pie?” Dean hissed to Castiel.

Sam snorted at his brother’s one track mind.

“I’ve spoiled you,” Castiel teased. “Try the burfi. They're homemade.”

Sam watched Dean relax into his seat. He hadn’t contributed much to the dinner conversation but Sam thought that could have been due to a healthy consumption of the offerings rather than anxieties.

They took the coffee and candies to the larger more comfortable den with its squishy sofa and armchairs. The fudge was deathly sweet. Sam didn’t take a second one, but Dean and Balthazar cleared the dish between them. Sam pondered where Dean put all that food. Then his brother’s stomach rumbled and Dean ended up blushing as Cas rubbed his belly for him.

“I hope that asshat isn’t causing hassle for you Sam?” Castiel asked when he was satisfied that Dean was cozily curled next to him on the sofa.


“Fucking creep.” Dean growled.

“The two of you look like you are ready to lay him out again,” Sam chuckled at their stormy faces.

“I’ll take him down if he touches you Sammy,” Dean vowed with such intensity that Sam was taken aback by how scary Dean could be.

“It’s cool, Dean,” Sam promised. “Al’s getting plenty of looks due to his split lip, and that I know how he came by it is very satisfying. I told Nick. ‘Cause it happened outside work, in Al’s private time, he can’t sanction him, but if Dean or I have any sign of trouble at The Gates, then he says there will be ‘consequences’ in a voice of doom.”

“Damn right,” Dean muttered.

“What sun sign is your man, Sam?” Balthazar asked.

“Nick?” Sam curled out his lip, “I have no clue. His birthday is 16th November.”

Balthazar gave an assessing hum, “You know if you and Dean tell me your times and places of birth I could cast your charts.”

“We were born in Lawrence, but time of birth? No idea.” Sam shrugged.
“That is a shame. For a precise reading you need the time.” Balthazar tutted, “Many people have an estimation, which can be helpful.”

“Sammy was born before 9 in the morning,” Dean offered.

Sam blinked, “I was?”

“I know ’cos Pawpaw got the call while I was having breakfast with Grandpa.” Dean said as if this wasn’t news to Sam.

“Pawpaw? Grandpa?” Sam asked.

“Yes, Sam,” Dean huffed wearily, as if Sam should know this, “Our grandfathers.” His brow furrowed as Sam continued to draw a blank. “We are named after them, Mom’s dads, Dean and Sam.”

“What the fuck?” Sam gasped, “Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to cuss. What? Our what Dean?”

“Mom’s dads.” Dean repeated. “I know I must have… didn’t I talk about them at all? And Dad… Dad wouldn’t have, would he?”

“Your family sounds as estranged as ours.” Balthazar commented. “Let me get some beers. Come on Cassie. Help me out.”

“Dean?” Sam pleaded, “Are they? Did they die, like Mom?”

“I don’t know, Sam.” Dean patted the seat cushion that Castiel had vacated.

Sam didn’t take it, knowing Dean’s boyfriend would return momentarily, but he perched on the arm of the sofa. “Were they nice?”

Dean half laughed, “I don’t remember much. I was a kid, y’know. Grandpa Sam kinda scared me sometimes. He and Dad used to shout at each other. I think Pawpaw was awesome. I get this warm tomato soup feeling when I think of him. They adored Mom, always coming over to see her. I guess they might still be in Lawrence.”

“Dad never….” Sam shook his head.

“I know,” Dean said with regret, “I’ve been thinking, ‘cause Victor told me they tried to help us, after the y’know, the fire.”

Sam could see Dean shudder when he mentioned their mother’s death. He patted Dean’s arm, getting his big brother to look at him so they could share a sad smile.

“So, maybe,” Dean continued, “Maybe if they are in Lawrence. They might like to see us? So I was thinkin’ like, if we are going to see Bobby this summer, we could head there too.”

“Back to Lawrence?” Sam muttered.

“Yeah,” Dean said tentatively, as if waiting for Sam’s approval.

“OK Dean.” Sam nodded, “We can road trip that way.”

Balthazar and Cas appeared bearing cold ones. Castiel retook his seat and entwined his fingers into Dean’s.
“So,” Dean cleared his throat, “Grades out tomorrow? I know Sam and Cas will do great.”

That was the subject of lost family closed, Sam guessed. His chest fluttered but he suppressed his threatened panic over his grades. He’d worked like a Trojan to catch up on his missed classes and his freaking biology unit. The morning would tell if he had done enough. Dean was so sure that they’d both succeed. Sam hoped and prayed that his brother’s confidence was not misplaced.

“I detest the night before. I always dream they’ve lost my papers, or I can’t find my way to campus, or I turn up naked amid all my classmates,” Castiel huffed.

Balthazar’s shout of “TMI” and Dean’s encouraging comment that he’d love if Cas turned up naked, had Sam breaking into a fit of contagious laughter.

They clinked bottles as they recovered their wits, exam result tension dissipated. Their conversation moved on to a new web resource for science students that Castiel’s teaching degree class were using. Sam enjoyed what Dean might have teasingly called a ‘geek out bonding session’ with Castiel, over journal articles available online. He scribbled down the site address for help with future classes. Turned out too that Cas was on the Classmates networking website, using it to keep in touch with old friends back east. When Dean pulled Cas into a more intimate whispered talk, Sam filled Balthazar in on a definition of the broad subject of Anthropology. He was slightly discombobulated, but covered well, when he thought he overheard mentions of candy stripes, jockstraps, and snowballing from the pair on the sofa.

“Cassie,” Balthazar called over his shoulder as took their empties away, “Hester’s been in touch. She’ll be in San Fran next month for a logistics conference.”

Sam could see Castiel stiffen in his seat and Dean’s brow furrow at his reaction.

“Does she… does she want to stay here?” Castiel’s middle finger hit out a beat on the edge of the coffee table.

“Good God, Hester here? Has the sky fallen?” Balthazar snorted.

“She is your sister.” Castiel said quietly, “I could take the sofa and she could have my bed.”

Balthazar pursed his lips and glanced at Sam and Dean, “Hester has her good points. She is one of the few of my siblings who keep in touch with little old me, the black sheep of the family… well I was until Cassie became the even blacker sheep.”

“Thank you.” Castiel commented dryly before taking a swig of his beer.

“She won’t want to stay here. Northrop Grumman will put her up in The Four Seasons. But she will invite us for lunch in her suite or such.” Balthazar waved a hand.

Castiel sighed, “I doubt I will go. Dean and I are busy that day.”

Dean’s eyes widened and Balthazar laughed, “I didn’t tell you when she is coming.”

“Still busy.” Castiel insisted.

“You are such an anti-social bitch.” Balthazar grumbled but there was little heat fueling his insult.

Dean bristled and straightened his back, but Castiel who was inured to his cousin’s idiosyncrasies, just shrugged and added, “You seem to be suggesting that meeting up with Hester would be fun.”
“Cas’s social,” Dean’s brows drew together as he glared, “We are going to Pizza Cave tomorrow. That’s not anti-social.”

Balthazar guffawed, “Not with you.” He cocked his head towards Sam, “Aren’t they bloody adorable?”

Sam nodded caught between his agreement with Balthazar and the danger of voicing that opinion which might lead to a revenge wedgy from his brother. He preferred the part of interested observer, but was drawn in to the conversation by their host saying “I suspect Hester will be ‘networking’ with your boyfriend’s people, Sam.”

“Excuse me?” Sam frowned at the older man.

“He is one of those Alighieris? You know, Alighieri Defense Logistics? Mike Alighieri – Dashing CEO? Ding dong? Not ringing any bells?”

“I don’t know.” Sam confessed, blinking back his perplexion. He’d never connected Nick with the arms manufacturer. He knew Nick had inherited or had come from money, but he hadn’t thought too much about its origin, happy that Nick would fill him in on his past as they shared their histories.

“Remember when we lived in Columbia?” Dean asked with his mouth full of the last piece of fudge.

Castiel suddenly looked fascinated.

“In Maryland,” Sam dashed the science teacher’s hopes for an exotic story.

Dean grunted his approval of Sam’s elaboration, “Remember the little league team, all the local teams had purple kits with ADL logos.”

“I was six, Dean.” Sam eye rolled, “I was more worried about getting to stay for the pre-Thanksgiving party at school.”

Dean sighed.

“And did you?” Balthazar asked, “Get to go to the party?”

“I don’t think so,” Sam muttered.

Dean patted his hand and gave Sam a wistful look, “We moved to Wisconsin.”

“Didn’t matter,” Sam plastered a smile on his face and ran his hand through his hair. He’d had enough reminiscing for the night. Luckily Balthazar began a tale about a yoga instructor from Wisconsin who could maintain the bendiest of poses. Castiel deftly professed a sudden interest in a TV Miniseries about to begin. They moved the armchairs and gathered around the TV. The historical drama was riveting enough to keep Sam’s attention, but Cas and Dean vanished to ‘clean up the kitchen’ and reappeared with suspiciously disheveled clothing. Sam didn’t comment but filed away a smart remark about kitchen duties for later use.

On Wednesday evening Sam was on a rolling high. The sun had shone for them. His elevated mood comprised of; exercise endorphins after his run with Nick, the lingering savored taste Nick’s simple home cooking, and his grade average. He had done it, even with the evil B minus for
Human Biology. Sam’s grade average was 3.76 for the quarter. Combined with his 3.85 for the previous semester, he had a modicum of breathing space heading into his spring classes. Sam had met a relieved Castiel on the stoop as the teacher arrived to share the good news of his own grades with Dean.

“Ready?” Nick called from inside the family room.

Sam drew reluctantly away from the pink tinged sky and the view over the pale Moss Beach sands. He entered the double doors to the gold and cream hued room. Nick was to the right behind the micro-bar. Tucked into the corner of the spacious room was a curved polished wood bar with two matching high stools. In the triangle of space behind there were a few shelves of high end liquors, space for a variety of glasses and bar utensils, and a clear fronted interior-lit mini-fridge of the same brand that The Gates had under its bar. Sam bypassed the La-Z-Boy and the boxy Perspex side tables with their old magazines. Sinatra played low, singing of witchcraft. Sam paused and ran his hand through his shower dampened hair.

Nick tipped his open cocktail shaker towards Sam so he could see the crushed ice inside. “Beginnings of the perfect Martini. Let class commence.”

Sam snuffled a laugh but came close enough for Nick to draw him into the tiny space. They both wore short sleeved tees. Sam’s was a navy V-neck over his old jeans. Nick was in a white tee with his restaurant’s red embossed name over his left pectoral and grey cotton lounge pants. The intimate rubbing of Nick’s naked arm against his bare skinned one set quivering heat to warm Sam’s core. He tried to concentrate on the self titled (to Sam’s snorting derisive laughter and Nick’s fake hurt-downturned-lip) … Bar-Maestro.

Sam’s lips twitched. “Lots of ice. Check.”

Nick took two stemmed Martini glasses from the refrigerator. He placed a small white saucer with pimento filled green olives on the bar with a bottle of Tanqueray Gin.

“I thought James Bond drank… “ Sam tried his best Sean Connery impersonation, “Vodka Martini, shaken not stirred.”

Nick made a tutting noise, “Martini means gin. I’m a purist. No vodka, no fruity syrups, no pearl onions, no absinthe, no olive juice – they’re all other cocktails.”

“Olive juice?” Sam imagined teams of Oompa Loompas squeezing olives on tiny juicers.


“Oh,” Sam nodded, as Nick planted a bottle of cold vermouth next to his other ingredients.

“A cap of Nolly Prat each,” Nick slotted behind him, curving his arm around Sam’s waist as if he belonged there, “You do it.”

Sam leaned into the touch and indulged his teacher in the fine art of the cocktail. He tipped a capful into each of the elegant glasses.

“Into the shaker,” Nick chuckled, “But you know, many expert mixologists swear by swilling a measure of vermouth into the empty glasses first. It coats the glass with a film that gives a drier final taste. You must be a natural.”

Sam shrugged, “Beginners’ luck,” But he was pleased with the praise and enjoying his private lesson.
“Add the gin, Swirl, easy Sam.” Nick’s fingers on his wrist slowed Sam’s enthusiastic motion, “Cherish it. It is a fine mix. Treat it well. We don’t want any bruising of the gin.”

Sam licked his lips. If Nick wanted to suck a gin tasted bruise into his shoulder, he’d be amenable.

Nick’s hand brushed against his. “Keep swirling.”

Sam must have moved from swirling to vortex production again, because a soft touch from the barkeep’s thumb halted his motion.

“Cherish it, my love, treat it with respect, caress it.”

Sam laughed, “You’ll suggest making love next.”

“You must be psychic,” Nick winked, “That’s for later.”

Sam’s dick was on board with the suggestive instructions and the promise of later. He focused on gentle swirls, on the chilled icy shaker, but his hind-brain wanted to pin down Nick’s plans and Nick’s body.

With infinite patience Nick precisely threaded three olives each onto specially made tiny sticks that looked like silver pitchforks.

“You should use them in the bar.” Sam raised his brows as he examined the miniscule prongs.

“Plastic ones in the bar, Sam, those are silver.” Nick came around to stand side by side again.

Sam squinted at tiny hallmarks on the olive holders. It was true.

“Now a final flourishing swirl.”

Sam obeyed, while Nick produced a small metal strainer that capped the top of his cocktail shaker.

“Into the glasses, Sam. They are chilled. Never put rocks into a Martini.” Nick’s voice curled through Sam. He tipped the shaker towards the waiting receptacles. “The liquor is cold. The glass is cold. No need for ice.”

The clear liquid seemed to shine as Sam strained it, as evenly distributed as he could get.

Nick plopped the olives in, so they rested at a jaunty angle.

Sam knew it was cheesy, but he wanted to try it. He cupped Nick’s cheek, stilling him and kissed his lips lightly. Then he gave Nick his Martini and took his own, twisting his arm through the angle of Nick’s elbow. Nick beamed, picking up on what Sam wanted. They took the first heady sip from the other’s glass. The olives didn’t get with the program and attempted escape, but when the two men’s eyes met in joyous admiration it was worth it.

They took their Martinis to the La-Z-Boy. Nick clicked out the recliners and they lounged warm and full bellied watching the fiery sunset slash vermilion, rose and amber across the sea and sky.

Twirling his now bereft olive stick in his fingers, Sam considered that Martini was an acquired taste, but one he might grow to like.

“Hey Nick?” He muttered.

“Yes Sam,” Nick turned his head to show his relaxed smile.
“Last night at Dean’s boyfriend’s place, Cas’s cousin asked me if you were one of the ADL Alighieri family?” Sam spoke lightly, directing his gaze into space. He didn’t believe in pressuring Nick to divulge family secrets or any past wrongs he would rather forget. Even more he didn’t want to seem to be looking for a bank balance statement.

“What did you say to them?” Nick asked with a curious lilt to his voice.

Sam gave a brief chuckle, “The truth. I said I didn’t know.”

“You haven’t done an internet search on me?” Nick smirked.

“No, should I?” Sam retorted playfully, “Are you one of the FBI’s most wanted? Or a porn star in your spare time?”

Nick guffawed, set his Martini glass on the Perspex table, and swung his leg over Sam’s so he was spanning his lap.

Sam let out an “Oof.”

“Sorry,” Nick said with a sheepish smile and adjusted his weight for the comfort of Sam’s thighs. He tipped Sam’s lips with his finger and met his eyes with an earnest gaze. “You know, my love, that you can ask me anything?”

Sam nodded, surprised at the intensity of Nick’s tone.

“I want to tell you everything. I will never hide anything from you. I want you to know everything and I want to know all of you.”

Sam grinned, breaking the passionate deep moment, “That sounds sexy.”

Nick back slapped his abs playfully. “I mean it Sam. We are only at the beginning, I hope.”

And there was something fragile about those last two words that had Sam reaching up to cup his palm around Nick’s neck. The other man tilted his head, leaning in and resting his ear on Sam’s bracing finger.

“I hope so too,” Sam replied softly.

Nick’s eyes glassed over and he blinked back a tear. Sam gasped, almost unable to believe that he was the one having such an emotional effect. Nick bent forward. Sam tilted his head to meet the tender kiss. It was soft and with only a light caressing of tongues, but Sam did succeed in finishing with the lightest of nibbles to Nick’s top lip, dragging his teeth lightly as they parted.

Nick’s smile was sunlit, as if the star that had sunk below the horizon, was now shining just for Sam. It made his breath catch as Nick swung his leg around and eased into a standing pose. He extended his hand and helped Sam to his feet. They didn’t speak as Nick led him to an antique roll top bureau near the interior door. Sam watched as the older man slid back the smoothly joined rosewood. He extracted two matching framed 7” by 5” photographs. They stood upright, to be seen when the bureau opened, but hidden from sight unless Nick made the effort to view them. In the first picture Nick’s hair was a little longer, a tad shaggy, his sideburns were heading for mutton chop territory, and his smile beamed. He was behind a bar, with streamers in his hair and his arm slung over a handsome grinning black guy in a baseball cap. In the second, monochrome photograph, Nick was a boy. Soft bangs fell into eyes that squinted in the summer sun. He carried a plastic spade and his toes were dug into the sand. Just behind there was a deckchair with a tanned balding man in a pair of swimming trunks, who had his head turned slightly away from the camera.
“My Pops and Jake.” Nick said slowly.

Sam looked up from the two past Nicks, moments frozen forever in time. He narrowed his eyes in question, encouraging his partner to continue.

“Jake Talley was the one,” Nick paused to wet his lips, “My old flame.” He emphasized the world ‘old’.

Sam nodded.

“We met in Wilmington. Jake was army. He was home from a deployment in Panama. We met through a mutual friend, and stayed in touch. When Jake came home permanently, we got together.” Nick made small smile that barely parted his lips, “Came out west to find a new life. Lived in The Castro, but gradually drifted apart. Only, he drifted and I thought we were anchored. I wanted to put down roots, find my dream bar or restaurant, buy a property, and he already had one foot mentally out the door of our relationship.”

Sam placed the photographs carefully on the green leather writing inlay of the bureau. He wrapped his arms around Nick’s waist and rested his chin on his shoulder, “You don’t have to… I didn’t want to bring up bad memories for you.”

Nick spanned Sam’s back with his hand, “I’m not sad. I couldn’t be sad with you here, in my arms.”

“Where is Jake now?” Sam breathed.

“We didn’t stay in touch, but I ran into him last year at a restaurant in Chinatown. He had a man with him. I didn’t ask. He didn’t offer. He’s living in Concord and had come into the city for a meeting.” Nick leaned around Sam and picked up the childhood picture. “That is my Pops. It’s Nantucket, 1974. Mike took the shot. I have a few other photos of our father, but they are all professional. It was our last hurrah. A vacation, unheard of when you are a workaholic CEO. That Fall I followed in Mike’s footsteps and started at St Patrick’s Military Academy for Boys. Sam?”

Sam nodded. He was doing the math. Nick was eight in the picture.

“I never will send a child to boarding school.” Nick pinned him with his eyes.

“OK.” Sam answered, “That’s fine by me. No boarding schools.” He breathed in and out. Someone had sent that little sandcastle building boy to a boarding school. “You were eight.”

The year Sam was eight, John had been particularly peripatetic, unable to hold down a job, and drinking like a surly fish, but Sam had a home. He had Dean to cut the crusts off his sandwiches, to warm cans of spaghettios on two ring burners, to help him with his spellings, and to wipe away his tears as they moved again. He tightened his hold around Nick’s hips and repeated, “Oh, my darlin’, you were eight.”

“Shush, Sam, don’t be upset now for the strange little boy I was. I survived it all. That school and the next Military Academy in Virginia, near ADL’s headquarters, but too far to be a day-pupil, Pops said. I graduated with far less honors than my older brother. Always playing catch up with the apple of Pops’ eye, until I decided I wasn’t playing. That I wasn’t the expected West Point Cadet material. That if it was an option I’d have tried for botany at a liberal college, but instead at eighteen I was ‘travel to find myself’ material and at twenty-one was cocktail bartender material.”

“Was your father pissed?” Sam asked easing his hold to stand pressed side to side.
Nick eye rolled. “I was the family disgrace. The louche. The cad. Sowing wild oats until I would mature and follow Mike into the family business. But I wasn’t and I wouldn’t. Then Pops died.”

“Oh, God. Nick, I’m sorry.” Sam gasped.

“Mike expected me to fall in line.” Nick huffed. “Daddy’s good little solider wanted me to bend to his command. Not happening. There was nothing Mike could do about the will, but Pops had been ‘concerned about my lifestyle’. My inheritance is held in trust, released to me as an annuity calculated as 75% of the national average wage for the previous year.”

“What?” Sam wrinkled his nose at the complicated terms.

Nick held up a finger, “Wait... enough funds to keep me off the breadline but to ensure I had to work if I wanted to improve my lifestyle. Ultimately designed to send me crawling back to Mike on bended knee to beg for a position at the firm, which would release the capital of my inheritance into my control, as long as I remained at the company.”

“That couldn’t be legal.” Sam scratched his scalp.

“Those were Pops’ terms for his wild son. However there was a loophole. If I came to the trustees with a sound financial business plan they were obliged to dip into the principal.” Nick grinned.


“Yep. Mikey nearly shitted himself. He was outvoted by Pops’ vice-presidents; Joshua, Raphael and Cain.” Nick shook his head at the memory, but he was grinning, “They released more than enough. I own The Gates outright. No loans, and when I began to turn a profit, I was able to buy this house. My bolt hole, my haven by the sea.”

“A happy ending.” Sam sighed, “I like those stories.”

“Not ending. Beginning,” Nick added with a sweet kiss to Sam’s lips.

“With me?” Sam murmured.

“Huh-hum,” Nick muttered into Sam’s skin. He wrapped his fingers around Sam’s wrist and tugged him from the room. They kissed on the first step of the stairway, and the fifth, and at the turn, and the top under the panes of the roof-window.

In the bedroom, Nick flicked a switch for only the low lights; the lamps by the bed, over the dresser and spilling out through the open door of the wet-room. They stumbled on the white shag of the mat, kicking off shoes and aiming to be first to expose their skin to the other, and yet somehow fingertips brushed and arms rubbed. Sam sucked in his glee at the sight of Nick as hard and straining as he was. He slid across the sheets, trying his best to pose seductively with lidded eyes, but part of him wondering if he was imitating a goofball.

He watched, desire coiling inside him, sending sparks of want to his brain and his small brain, as Nick retrieved the purple bottle of Astroglide and tore open the foil wrapped condom. Sam’s tongue hovered over his bottom lip as Nick rolled the latex over his head and down his length. He salivated at a micro-fantasy of replacing the condom with his mouth, taking Nick’s shaft between his lips and working his way down.

Sam gasped when Nick’s hand reached his chest and pinched over his nub. Nick climbed between Sam’s legs, into the space that Sam opened for him, then arched above, dipping to kiss his forehead. Their palms met. Nick maneuvered Sam’s wrists, crossing his arms over his head near
the leather back panel.

“Stay like that for me,” Nick whispered into the air by Sam’s ear.

Sam tried his best, but he hissed and panted as Nick sucked and laved his right nipple. “Fuck, Nick, Yeah.”

“So responsive”.

At the praise Sam’s hands jerked and moved, wrists parting.

Nick tutted with a teasing smirk, “We’ll have to do something about that.”

He leaned to the bedside nightstand and pulled a long boot lace from the mini-shelf. Sam moaned at the lack of contact, but then the lace was lightly wrapped round his wrists. Nick twisted it, but not too tight, just enough to remind Sam to hold his arms there.

“Why?” Sam panted, unsure if he was asking about trust, or desire, or maybe pleading to touch in response.

“I want to worship you,” Nick muttered as he bent to lick a circle on the areola of Sam's neglected left nipple.

Sam breathed in, blissed out, at the adoration. Nick worked his way down to Sam’s hip bones and a slicked up finger slid under his sack, pressing intention on his perineum.

Sam lost it then. He panted and raised his hips. He moaned Nick’s name. As two lubed digits sought to go deeper into his being he cried his “Yes.”

Nick took his time opening him so slowly that it was tortuous in a way that made Sam rock hard and pleading, then the smirking tease pulled away completely.

Sam moaned the loss, eyes seeking his partner, briefly wondering if something could possibly have gone wrong.

Nick had paused to gaze at Sam’s sweat slicked skin, loomed over to capture his lips in a consuming kiss. Then something small and buzzing vibrated against the underside vein of Sam’s cock. Where had that come from? Had Sam lost time? He mumbled some incomprehensible phrases about wanting to return such pleasure.

Nick understood him and laughed that he would have his turn, but not yet. The warm wet heat of Nick’s lips taking in the head of Sam’s cock and laving over his slit was too much. Sam gasped that he’d come but Nick wound his fingers around his base and squeezed tight. Sam gave a high pitched moan as his hips levitated off the mattress in invitation.

“That’s right, love, my sweetheart. Can you hold on? Come on my cock? Do you want to?” Nick asked in a voice heavy with lust, transmitting his wish for Sam to accept.

The fingers were back, stretching him but not giving him enough.

“Oh God yes.” Sam arched again, sliding his body to the edge of the mattress, trying to urge his desire to peak.

“My pleasure,” Nick gasped with grateful desire. He took his time sucking dark purpling marks on Sam’s inner thighs before pushing his leg back by the foot. Sam obliged bending his knees and
tilting his body. He could have slipped out of the thin tie around his wrists and gripped his fingers tight into Nick’s back, pulled him closer, made sure he got buried deep. The thought of that had him leaking and almost weeping with need as Nick finally pressed home, catching Sam’s rim before pushing on. It hurt, burning and stealing Sam’s breath until he puffed and hissed. His eyes watered but he kept his gaze on Nick’s impassioned face and he took in the gasps of his own name.

“Sam. Oh God. Sam. So tight.” Nick’s eyes were closed in ardor. His head thrown back as he panted. His lids lifted. Smiling intense eyes met Sam’s own dilated pupils.

Sam thought with a strange lustful pride ‘I did that’.

The pain was lessening. He was filled. He began to roll his hips signaling his lover to move. Nick didn’t hold back. He thrust forward with rhythmic soft moans. Pressing into Sam to the limit and eliciting a hissed orgasmic “Nick.”

“Sam,” was returned as a pant of pure desire.

A moment of detestable emptiness and then Nick was pounding him backwards along the soft sheets. Sam slipped his restraint, his hands found Nick’s and their rigid fingers intertwined. Sam wrapped his legs around Nick’s hips. The new angle was a revelation as Nick’s cockhead brushed against his prostate. Fireworks in white, pink and blood vessel red lit up Sam’s closed eyelids. He was so close, so close.

“Again,” he screamed, “There.”

Nick did his best to oblige catching the ball of stunning nerves as he rocked to a climax. He roared Sam’s name as he came. Sam could feel the pulsing pressure at his release. Nick didn’t pull out immediately but eased apart the fingers of Sam’s left hand and his right. Those fingers found Sam’s still throbbing neglected cock and applied just the right pressure to evoke a teeth gritted guttural “Jesus Christ” as he painted Nick’s faintly stubbled chin and his chest with ropes of come. Nick worked his magic until the final splatters decorated Sam’s own belly and he sagged back completely spent in every way. He moaned as Nick pulled his flaccid member out and bent down to dot a scattering of pecked kisses around the rim of Sam’s fluttering muscle.

Then Nick was flopping down beside him, both facing the ceiling until they turned on their sides.

“That was …” Sam tried.

“Orgasmic?” Nick offered.

“Literally” Sam tittered.

“A?” Nick’s more serious tone lit a touch-paper of terrible irrational apprehension that he was about to be rejected, sent away. He tried to remember where his clothes were. “The condom spilt.”

“Oh.” All Sam could think was relief that he wasn’t being pushed out into the night.

“I’m clean. I was tested recently, can show you, later… much later, but I’m good. You?” Nick said tenderly, hand rubbing Sam’s bicep reassuringly.

“Huh,” Sam cleared his throat. “Ah… you … you were my first.”

Nick used his elbow to prop his upper body. “Seriously? But you’re gorgeous Sam. How?”

This time Sam’s blush had an affectionate smile tagged on. “Dunno, I mean, I couldn’t do anything
with my Dad around, was in a dark celibate closet, not that I’ve, y’know ‘never been kissed’ but you were my first and I’m happy, Nick, I’m glad it was you.”

“I’m glad I didn’t know,” Nick chuckled and kissed Sam’s bottom lip, “The performance anxiety to make it special… yikes.”

Sam reached out a hand and cupped Nick’s cheek. “It was special, I promise.”

“And you’re on the pill, right?” Nick checked.

“Yeah,” Sam replied thinking of the dark blue pill still resting in the box of Penandrocol under Dean’s bed. He’d take two, the next white one and the missed one. That should work. He revised it and decided to take three pills together when he got home, just to be sure. Satisfied he had a resolution for his absent minded slip up, he snuggled down under the sheets, forehead finding Nick’s shoulder. Curved in Nick’s warm arms he drifted to sleep.
Twelve

Dean hummed a laugh as he cracked a second egg onto the skillet.

His knuckles were bruised. Small nicks marred the back of his hand. It looked like he’d been bare knuckle boxing. Scraped skin, combined with Dean’s warehouse uniform, had led to a round of raucous teasing comments about the gals loving a hard man, as a puce-blushing Nancy had administered first aid. It had hurt like a bitch but he stayed silent while Nancy cleaned and wrapped it. To be fair Mitchell had been most worried that Dean had crushed his hand in the chill room door. It was nothing, ached a while and excused Dean from lifting for half of yesterday’s shift, but he’d felt foolish about his lack of concentration that had resulted in his minor injury. His day had ended in Zachariah’s office, painstakingly filling out forms in triplicate about his hand. As if Dean was going to sue over a booboo. The fawning insincere concern of the store manager grated worse than the metal edge of the door.

Today the sun was shining. His fingers could still move. Castiel had use of his cousin’s car. They were going to Santa Cruz for the day. Dean turned up the volume on the radio and toe-tapped along to some crappy pop song. He was looking forward to hitting the road with Cas. He’d have preferred to show off his driving skills at the wheel of the Impala, but Sam was heading in the other direction to spend the afternoon with Nick, and his brother had been in such a snippy mood since classes had resumed that Dean considered discretion the better part of valor and was keeping schtum for a quiet life.

Dean had hoped that the new semester might have lessened the stress Sam had been under. There was a routine to Sam’s new class schedule that impressed Dean with its orderly nature. He supposed the regularity of Sam’s days didn’t matter so much to his little brother. However Dean appreciated that Sam started at 8am or 9am each day and had no evening class or tutorial. Two weeks in, as far as Dean could tell things should’ve been peachy for Sam. He was heavy on the Anthropology classes and had come home from a very positive meeting with the Anthropology faculty advisor about declaring the subject as his major. Dean had been proud as punch when Sam and Castiel had done so well in their quarterly exams. He’d hoped those grades would have lightened Sam’s load. Instead of a buoyant mood, Sam had been more exhausted than ever, falling asleep before ten with his head in his books, and sniffling as if he was coming down with a cold.

“Freaking hell, Dean, what the fuck? Why are you frying bad eggs?” Sam groused with a hand on his forehead, still dressed in his PJs.

“Come again?” Dean huffed in surprise. He bent low over the hot stove and sniffed the eggs. They were fine. He used a fork to pick at a corner of the white and blew on it before tasting the cooked egg. “They’re fresh, Sammy.”

Sam said nothing. Bitchface number five was out in force, complete with pursed lips and wrinkled brow. Sam broke eye contact to sink into a chair and pour a glass from the open carton of orange juice, while Dean watched with a hand on his hip.

“Who put a pea under your mattresses, Princess Samantha?” Dean teased lightly trying to get his brother to smile back.

“No way Dean, it’s not funny. The whole room stinks.” Sam waved a hand. “The OJ is bitter too. Is everything on the turn?”
“You’re on the freaking turn.” Dean blustered. He knew the juice was fresh. He’d bought the eggs yesterday. Sam had made him throw out (secretly bring to Cas’s house) a perfectly good carton of strawberries on Thursday, because he said they were stinking out the refrigerator. He was sick of it. Good food was not going to waste. He knew sour and rancid from fresh. Many times he had eaten the sour or mould tinged sandwich fillings so Sam could go to school with their meager healthy supply of sliced meat or cheese.

“Dee, please,” Sam sounded so pathetic that any ire Dean felt dissipated.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” Dean moved the skillet off the heat and pulled out the chair next to Sam. He placed his hand on his brother’s forehead, pushing back his overlong bangs. There was no fever.

“I dunno. I might be fighting off flu. I’m achy and tired. Thought it was adjusting to the new class schedule, but I collapsed on the staff sofa during my work break yesterday. Crowley had to wake me up.” Sam smiled ruefully, “You should’ve heard him crow about sleeping moose drool.”

Dean smiled obligingly in response, but he was concerned. “You want, we can both stay home? Blow off the boyfriends? Veg out on the sofa? I’ll make you hot lemon and feed you peanut butter cups?”

“Naw Dean. I’m not that sick. You go to the beach. Nick and I are taking it easy. He had his monthly poker game last night. Already got a woe-is-me text about his hangover. And I won’t be late. Promised Brady I’d be back to welcome home the Cardinals.”

“You sure Sammy? Cos I can stay?”

“I’m sure. You go. And don’t hurry back.” Sam sounded firm in his plans. “But first you can get me some toast and two Tylenol, Jerk.”

“What did your last slave die of, bitch?” Dean chuckled as he slotted in the toast.

“Happiness,” Sam retorted with a snort.

While Dean consumed both eggs, Sam showered and dressed. Dean was happy to see he looked refreshed. Maybe he was fighting off a cold, with his runny nose and headache. When Dean was ready to go, Sam and Brady were on the sofa talking about whether Uriel Cox or any of the other Cardinals were going to be drafted by the NFL at the end of the month.

Dean narrowed his eyes taking in Sam’s pale complexion. He was tempted to put Castiel off. “You sure you’re good?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Sam replied drily. “Dean, I’m fine.”

“You sure you don’t have a bug?” Dean tried for the umpteenth time. “I’m sick of your stinky gas, you should see a doctor.”

“You know what, Dean. Fuck you.”

Dean staggered at the tears that emerged in Sam’s eyes. He wet his lips and backtracked, “I didn’t… I… I… kn-now you’re sick, Sammy.”

Sam winced. “Shit.” He slapped his palm onto the table. “I didn’t mean that. What is wrong with me?”
“Dude, you don’t look so good. Your brother’s right. You need an antibiotic or euthanasia or some crap,” Brady tried with a laugh.

Dean nodded along with Brady’s joking concern. He knew Sam didn’t attack him out of spite. He was a big boy, a few Sammy jibes weren’t going to shake him, especially when Sam was under the weather.

“Dudes, I’m sorry,” Sam’s shoulders sagged, “I’m a grumpy douche. Ignore me.”

“Listen,” Dean grabbed the back of the sofa and waited to speak until Sam had twisted his upper body round, “I’ll have my cell on. You feel worse you text me. You rain check Nick. OK?”

“’kay,” Sam huffed.

“Pinky promise?” Dean used lil’Sammy’s old teasing test for his big brother, and extended a curved pinky finger.

“Dork.” Sam slapped his finger away but he was grinning and that was a win. “Enjoy the beach.”

“You too. See you guys later,” Dean took a final glance back but Sam had re-engaged in his football debate.

Dean offered divine thanks and praise for an understanding boyfriend as they drove to Santa Cruz in Balthazar’s old Aspire. He wasn’t exactly a chatty Cathy, but Castiel wasn’t all that big on small talk and he put on a local radio station playing seventies classics. Elton John and Kiki Dee led into Rod Stewart and Blondie. By the time the DJ proved his worth by adding Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Ramones, Dean was tapping out the beat and meeting Castiel’s sideways smirks.

Cas pulled into a diner’s car lot and they began their day out with Sunday pancakes. Dean’s second breakfast and their shared pot of coffee made him lazy but Castiel took his hand. They left the car behind and strolled down warm sunlit streets towards the sea. It was easy living. Pace didn’t matter as other people took their time too. After a while Dean popped into a pharmacy for some sunscreen, so his face didn’t turn into one giant burnt freckle. They sat on a bench and Dean closed his eyes as Cas applied the sun block for him and took a little for his own nose.

At a corner store Dean found a postcard to send to Arkansas of the amusements along the beach. He huffed to himself as he considered how different his life was now. He wrote the card on his knee while Castiel flicked through old sheet music and classic LPs in a second hand bookstore. Dean picked up a copy of The Hitchhiker’s Guide to The Galaxy. Cas had never read it. Dean promised that once he had revisited his teenage reading pleasure he would loan it to him.

Castiel muttered about bottomless stomachs as Dean bought two hot dogs from a vendor near the boardwalk. He ate his one in four bites, Dean noted with joy.

“Look,” Dean pointed, “An early convertible T-Bird. Isn’t she a beauty?”

Castiel looked more interested in Dean’s awe struck expression than the fine bright blue top-down vehicle that cruised past them.

“A classic,” Dean said in a sparingly worded attempt to educate Cas. “You should see under the hood, I betya she’s as fine on the inside.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Cas replied honestly, “I learned to drive on the farm tractor.”

Dean snorted, “Well you have one up on me. I’ve never driven a farm vehicle.”
“You should try a manure spreader,” Castiel laughed, “I suspect you’d be able to turn your hand at fixing up any engine.”

Dean shook his head slightly. It had been a long time since he did any more than improve on Sam’s monitoring of Baby’s oil and water. “I used to love it. Y’know, the smell of grease and engine oil?”

Castiel didn’t agree but Dean could tell he was listening with his head at an avian tilt analyzing Dean’s passion.

“Bobby’d let me help out. As I got older he’d give me my own junker to work on when we stayed in Sioux Falls. I used to help Dad out too, but he was inclined to faint praise and heavy critique. Bobby was a great teacher. He’d snap and grouch but wasn’t afraid to pat you on the back for a job well done.” Dean got lost in the past. “Sam would have his nose stuck in a book somewhere between the cars. I’d have my head in an engine. Bobby used to send Dad off to collect write offs or doer-uppers. Or Dad would have dumped us to travel with a race team…” Before Cas could feel sorry for him Dean quickly added, “That was the best. Bobby’s without Dad. I gave and got my first BJ with the Sherriff’s son, behind a rusty ford pick up on a hot September day.”

“You must think me very sheltered…” Cas sighed, “I was so innocent when Eph said ‘blow me’, I honest to God In Heaven, thought he meant it as a playful insult, like bite me.”

“You didn’t?” Dean spurted a laugh.

“Oh I caught on fairly quick that he was talking about fellatio.” Castiel huffed a laugh, “He was very patient with me.”

“He musta known you were worth it.” Dean knocked their shoulders together, hoping his subtle praise for Castiel’s patience with his own quirks and silences was transmitted.

A family with kids running for the beach had them pause to give way. It wasn’t that warm a day. No way would Dean have allowed little Sam strip down for fear of catching a spring chill. A prick of worry about Sam’s health wormed its way into Dean’s perfect day. He wondered if Sam was run down. Maybe he needed a multivitamin.

“You know Hester told Balthazar she’d seen my parents.” Castiel said out of the blue.

“Wow.” Dean puffed. He waited to see if Castiel wanted to say more.

“One of our mutual cousins got married… back in Illinois… Hester said they are well, but Father had another mini-stroke last year.”

“Geez,” Dean slung an arm around Cas’s shoulders, “And no-one told you?”

“I would not have been welcome at the hospital.” Cas shrugged but not so much to dislodge Dean’s hold. “And he has recovered. Their stubborn persistence to deny me is unsurprising. They are old enough to be my grandparents,” Cas ducked his head and moved into a quick tight hug, “Suppose that might have been part of the problem.”

“Or they are homophobic asshats,” Dean grumbled as they parted, “My Dad… he’s a prize asshat.”

Castiel’s smirk took the sting out of Dean’s declaration.

“And he isn’t in his seventies.” Castiel added.

“No.” Dean sighed and shook his head. Castiel’s family were sonsabitches. As they continued
along the boardwalk, Dean’s thoughts turned inward. He was aware of Castiel at his side and the hustle and bustle of the family attractions. Screams from the roller coaster drifted over them. When Castiel sought to understand Dean, examined him, it was like a bubble of light descended to encase them in their own world, keep them separate from all those around them. Cas seemed happy to walk along with the sea on their left, head tilting to the sun and back to Dean. They shared a companionable pause in conversation. Dean’s mind drew on Castiel’s comment about his parents being like grandparents. For the first time in an age, he thought of Henry Winchester, John’s father, who had run out on his son when he was a boy. Dean wondered if the hatred had stemmed from that, maybe Henry had left John’s mother for another man. Or maybe John’s attitude was inherited from his drunken step-father, who John boasted had whupped him into shape in a manner he attempted to transfer to Dean. Or maybe it was in the Marines, where a Man was a Man, even though Dean knew that Pastor Jim was in touch with other former servicemen who had fathered Vietnamese children with both male carriers and women during the war. He knew from the alcohol fueled bile that hissed from his father’s lips while Dean had tried to put him to bed, or clean up his vomit, that Pawpaw and Grandpa had thought John Winchester was not good enough for their Mary. Spilled words of how Samuel Campbell had looked down on him, had tried to prevent his marriage to their angel, had held up their perverted version of family as a paragon, and had rubbed John’s nose in it every time he lost his job. His father’s words filled his ears; about how being a carrier brought shame on the Winchester name, how carriers should keep their biology hidden and marry a nice girl, how just because we can walk on all fours and climb trees doesn’t mean we should live like chimps…

“Hello Dean.” Castiel tapped his arm, “Where have you been?”

Dean blinked. “Huh?”

“Penny for them?” Castiel asked with a cute smile.

They were back at the Beach Street side of the boardwalk. “I was… remembering not so good crap.”

“I’m sorry.” Castiel’s voice dropped. He rested his hand on Dean’s shoulder, and gravely added, “I have disturbed unpleasant memories for you.”

The heat of Castiel’s lingering touch seemed to penetrate his denim jacket. “Don’t be, Cas. I should be saying sorry… your Dad had a stroke… mine is only a bigoted mean drunk.”

“Let’s forget about them.” Castiel smiled, “Let’s make some new memories.”

“Sure thing,” Dean stuffed all his crap back down and pulled Castiel towards some touristy stores. They wandered among the other Sunday day trippers and visitors. Castiel threw a hideous feather boa around Dean’s neck and nearly pissed himself laughing as Dean struggled to get out of it as soon as humanly possible. It was not funny, no way was it funny, but Dean found laughter bubbling out of his lips as Castiel bent double wheezing his amusement.

As revenge, and on a secret mission to spice up their nights, on the way back to the car, Dean dragged his partner into a sex store. Castiel coughed and trained his eyes on the carpet as Dean waved a set of fluffy handcuffs in his face.

“Not doin’ it for you?” Dean laughed.

A smartly dressed red-head in her late twenties approached them, “May I help you gentlemen?”

Castiel mumbled that they were fine but Dean beamed and asked with a confident smirk, “Do you
have male lingerie?"

Cas’s jaw dropped as they were guided to the men’s section. The assistant left them to look. Dean whispered, “You like my candy jock so much, how about something silky?”

Castiel’s hand reached onto the rack and fingered a black lacey piece that had already caught Dean’s eye.

“You like it?” Dean muttered into his ear, “You’d like me in that?”

He lifted the mini-hanger and examined the black silk brief-shorts with their lace hem. They were kind of cool, masculine yet pretty. Dean rubbed the soft material with his fingertips. It was smooth and seamless. He could feel a phantom version against the sensitive skin of his dick and balls, imagined the dark silk riding up his crack as he swelled and strained against the thin crotch. He could push it aside and feel Castiel’s tongue on his slit while wearing the luscious man-panties. He licked his lips as he caught Castiel’s dilated blue pupils, “Can you see them? Wet as I’m leaking for you? Wet from you mouthing my head through the silk?”

Castiel huffed and steadied his body by leaning their sides together.

“Fuck,” Dean gasped. “I want you.”

“I want you too,” Castiel croaked, “Can we go home Dean?”

“With the panties?” Dean smiled both shyly and slyly.

“God yes,” Castiel yanked Dean’s arm toward the cashier counter. He had his credit card out while they waited to be served. Dean’s idle hands fiddled with a counter display of flavored nipple balms. “You want one, Dean?”

Dean hummed, imagining Cas rubbing the jelly in circles around his nubs. “You chose the flavor.”

Castiel laughed lightly, “That way you get all the fun. Do you like vanilla?”

Dean snorted and deliberately misinterpreted, “I’m not vanilla. How about the strawberry vanilla ripple? You got a food kink?”

Cas’s cheeks pinked up, “No… not a kink….” He flushed more, “But I have hidden talents.”

Dean hummed, “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Castiel purred, “Why Mr. Winchester that is an offer I can’t refuse.”

They couldn’t get back to Palo Alto fast enough. Dean flicked radio channels for some classic rock distraction, or else they might have risked a ticket for public indecency or dangerous driving. Settling for Glen Campbell’s soothing tones, Wichita Lineman saw them across county lines. Dean’s emotions were in tune with the lyrics and he mouthed along to “And I need you more than want you, and I want you for all time.”

Castiel caught him and squeezed his thigh.

“That’s not helping Cas.” Dean chuckled. “Eyes on the road.”

“My eyes are on the road,” Cas replied, “My mind though…”

“And your dick,” Dean snorted as Cas’s hips twisted for comfort.
Dean wasn’t sure whether he was pleased that the lights were with them as they headed for Cowper Street. A stop light might have afforded some relief but the string of greens meant their thrumming urgency would be sated sooner.

Dean had Castiel’s face in his hands as the student stumbled backwards through the door. Castiel for his part was attempting to peel Dean’s jacket off his shoulders, while keeping hold of their purchases.

“Whoa, Darlings, mental scarring alert,” Balthazar raised a glass of white wine in their direction and shouted after them, “Den off limits, take it to your room, Cassie!”

Castiel muttered an approximation of an apology. The TV began to blare. Dean quirked his lips at Balthazar’s attempt to drown out their impending sex noises. Castiel pinned him against the wall. Dean’s chest heaved, “What do you want Cas?”

“I want,” Castiel kissed the cleft of Dean’s chin, then the corner of his lips. “I want you naked.”

“What about the panties?” Dean hissed as he crushed Castiel’s messy hair with his fingers, pulling their heads together.

“I want you to wear them all day, so you can think of me, and I can think of you…”

“Shit, that’s so freaking brazen, twisted and hot,” Dean licked a stripe onto Cas’s neck under his afternoon stubble. “You in front of those young teenage minds, imagining me with silk sliding over my needy cock as I bend down to fill displays of low hanging fruit…”

Cas snorted and smacked Dean’s arm, “You’re so cheesy.”

“I’m adorable.” Dean retorted.

“You are, my adorable green-eyed lover,” Cas tenderly cupped Dean’s cheek and smoothed his skin with his thumb, before kissing lightly, “Adorable freckles, symmetrical lunar scar, long sexy lashes…”

Dean was heating up under the admiration. His mouth was parched. He was hit by the miracle that such a flawed being would be worthy of Castiel’s attentions, but he pushed aside his awe in favor of making Castiel’s eyes sparkle with laughter, “Don’t forget my perky nipples.”

“Strawberry rippled nipples,” Cas tittered.

“Maybe you’ll get the tasty nipple dip treatment.” Dean growled and helped Cas rip his tee off over his head. As he used one foot to dance out of his jeans’ leg, he dived for the sex store bag, and whooped as he pulled out the little metallic tub.

Cas flopped onto his unmade bed. Dean followed with feline motion. He pushed Castiel back and blew cold air over his pink nubs. The dumb balm cap was a screw top but the momentary struggle to open it didn’t ruin the mood because Cas took the chance to flick the elastic of Dean’s boxer briefs. As he took in Castiel’s slightly parted full pink lips Dean stepped out of his last item of clothing. Then he made sure to join their lips and tongues in a passionate long caress. Cas moaned deeply as Dean circled his left nipple with the pale balm.

“It’s soft,” Castiel breathed as his body responded to the stimulation.

Dean laughed at the obvious description, “Bet it’s yummy.”
He bent down and swirled his tongue around in circles. It was sweet and fruity. Castiel pressed his hands on Dean’s head keeping him there until all trace was gone. He nibbled and laved, moving down slowly. He kneeled between Cas’s thighs and drew circles and hearts in a shiny balm trail. He drew stars and leaves following with his lips in kisses and tastes. Finally he painted rings along and around Cas’s length and bent to taste them. Cas keened and drew upright, grinding their cocks together. He snatched the balm from Dean and moisturized his palms with it before taking both their lengths in his hold and applying a pressure more delicious than any flavored lube or balm. Dean wasn’t being left out and he braced his body with one hand on Cas’s shoulder while he rolled Castiel’s balls in his fingers. With glee, he could feel them tense and contract. His own release was building quick on Cas’s heels. With speeded up motions Castiel brought them both to panted mutual orgasm. Dean cried out Castiel’s name adding a few cuss words for good measure. Cas leaned forward almost collapsing into Dean’s arms, whispering how good it and Dean was.

Dean was spent. He rolled sideways so he could lie on his back. He was overwhelmed by how in sync he and Cas were, how open Cas was to what Dean wanted to do in the bedroom, how responsive his gorgeous dark haired lover was. Cas turned to gaze at him. Dean traced Castiel’s ear with his finger and leaned forward for a gentle caress. Their foreheads met, lips parted in relaxed smiles.

“I think the balm is ruined,” Dean laughed as he caught sight of the remains squished up in the little tub.

“No, Dean, you destroyed it, like you’ve destroyed me.”

Castiel was smiling so he must be teasing, Dean thought but his breath caught.

“Destroyed me for anyone else.” Castiel thankfully continued, “I’m yours Dean, heart and soul.”

“Cas,” Dean gasped, hoarse and broken, “Cas. I…”

“You don’t have to respond in kind, Dean.” Castiel said tenderly, cupping Dean’s cheek and transmitting his sincerity through his gaze.

“I… you’ve carved a place… Here.” Dean tapped his own heart. “I need you, need you with me.”

“I need you too.” Cas dipped his head so it laid on Dean’s shoulder. Dean wrapped an arm around him, holding him there, wanting to keep him there forever. Both of them cocooned in the moment, safe, together and needed… loved.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

It was the Friday after Easter. Dean had been having a good week, which made him suspicious that a tidal wave of crap was around the corner. He’d expounded his theory to Victor the previous afternoon, making his psychiatrist grin and joke he was crossing off optimist as one of Dean’s personality traits. One of Castiel’s seniors had been offered a science scholarship at Berkeley, reflecting glory back on his teacher. Sam was much better. He seemed to have fought off whatever virus had been battering against the walls of his immune system. He had a lingering tiredness but there were no more sniffles or comments about weird smells.

His walk to work had been pleasant, the early hour warm enough for Dean to shuck his outer jacket. The delivery was light and Shirley brought in the remnants of her grandkids’ Easter eggs melted down into a rice krispie treats. Mrs. Lincoln was in early. She took priority as Dean helped her search for the smallest brown onions, to save on waste as the elderly lady cooked for one.
It was near clocking out time when Mitchell asked him to tidy the tubs of prepared salad. Dean was hunched over mixed up quinoa and ranch potato, internally cussing customers who shuffled everything and then walked off without replacing the display. A harassed looking older woman with wild grey hair, a dark long coat, and broken veins spidering her face, plunked a jumbo sized squishy handbag on top of the egg mayo by Dean’s ankles. He turned his head slowly and raised his brows but either she was oblivious or didn’t give a damn if she damaged products. She began rooting in the bag muttering to herself about specials and someone called Missy. Dean took a pace to the side and moved to straighten up the pots of sour cream dips.

“Young man.” She demanded imperiously.

Dean gave her his best customer service smile which did not extend to his eyes. There was a bad vibe coming from her, as well as a faint whiff of old liquor.

She had sheets of coupons in her hand and was waving them at him, “Where is your Greengoods Premium Slaw?”

Dean so wanted to jab a finger straight in front of her and point it out on the shelf but annoyingly she was correct. It was off sale. He nodded and pointed to the nearby warehouse doors.

“Yes, yes, go fetch me some,” She said with patronizing distraction and began to dig in her bag once more. Dean stalked to the chill room and was vindictively glad that the slaw was out of stock, except now he had to explain that to an old witch who made his vocal cords seize up.

He cleared his throat a couple of times to gain her attention as well as to launch into speech, “It’s all out.”

“What do you mean all out? There is none on the shelf.” She gestured wildly, causing one of the tubs to totter as her hand glanced over it.

Dean caught a stronger hit of whiskey fumes from her breath or her pores. There was no reasoning with drunks. He ducked his head and apologized, “Sorry, Ma’am. It is sold out. Be in tomorrow.”

“Missy’s coming today. What use is that to me? This store has gone to hell since young Adler took over. Ridiculous.” She fumed and reached for her open bag. Then she halted, “Where are my coupons, boy? What have you done with them?”

Dean stared at her. This was not happening.

“My coupons. Hand them over. Now!” Her voice rose to shouting pitch.

Dean glanced around. Risa looked over from the fruit section. The woman was wacko. He hadn’t touched her dumb frigging coupons.

“N-n-nothing,” He stuttered and raised his palms as she continued her verbal onslaught.

“Coming in here all my life. Never thought a retarded store boy would steal my coupons.”

“Hey, hey,” Dean managed, “I didn’t steal nothing.”

She was batshit crazy. Dean watched as she frantically tossed around the contents of her bag.

Zachariah’s voice pierced Dean’s head, “What is going on here?”

“This boy is a thief.” She declared in a high pitched screech.
Dean went red with anger and embarrassment as other customers turned to look. Mitchell and Risa moved closer.

“Mrs. Bender,” The manager batted his eyelashes at the nutjob, “Won’t you come to my office? There has been a misunderstanding.”

“I am not going anywhere with you, Adler.” She steamed, “Tell your boy to give me back my property.”

“Dean,” Zachariah turned to his frozen employee, “Do you have Mrs. Bender’s coupons?”

Dean’s jaw dropped at being asked if he was a thief. Technically he’d used the five fingered discount all across the States, but that was years ago and to feed his growing weed of a brother. He had been scrupulously honest at work, not even popping grapes and berries into his mouth like he saw some of his workmates do. He shook his head with his teeth biting down on his lip.

“He took them.” Mrs. Bender’s nose wrinkled exposing yellowed teeth, “What are you going to do about it, Adler?”

“Empty your pockets, Dean.” Zachariah commanded.

“What?” Dean gasped.

Risa hissed. Mitchell tried to intervene, “Why don’t we take this out back, Boss?”

“Turn out your pockets, Winchester,” Zachariah’s expression brooked no argument.

Dean gulped in humiliation. His arms hung by his side, mouth agape, pupils wide with shock. He felt his hands comply, turning out the lining of his jacket pockets, while their audience took in the show. He displayed his trouser pockets too, showing his pen, locker key and plastic covered blade. He wanted to shout at the drunken bitch that he’d never touched her fucking coupons. The old hag probably had them in her handbag or another customer snatched them from under her nose.

“See, Mrs. Bender,” Zachariah laid on his smarmy charm thick, “Dean did not have your coupons. You must have forgotten them.”

“I did not.” The older woman stamped her foot in anger and cast an accusing eye over them all. Dean wished he could stamp on her instep just as hard.

“May I?” Risa asked kneeling down and gesturing at the open bag.

Mrs. Bender huffed, “Go ahead. Let all of you help yourselves to my possessions.”

Risa ignored the jibe. Dean was still immobilized by the events, concentrating on breathing and trying to believe he wasn’t asleep having a nightmare. He admired Risa’s braving of tetanus and bug bites, as his colleague took mere seconds to find a closed zip pocket and extract the folded coupon sheets.

“Yes. Well. Sorry.” The obnoxious woman said without conviction before proceeding to attack Zachariah for not having the Premium Slaw on sale.

As he heard Mr. Adler’s apology include that Dean could have been more helpful, he felt his jacket being tugged. Risa guided him as he followed her numb and compliant up the stairs to the staff room. He could feel his pulse racing as his mind started to catch up. Risa sat him down and made
him a cup of coffee with three heaped spoons of sugar.

“You OK, Dean?”

He half nodded, half head shook. He handed her his numbered locker key. Thankfully she understood and returned with his sackpack, while he stared at the inky surface of the coffee between his knees. He rooted as blindly as Mrs. Bender, seeking his Xanax but finding the smooth surface of his cell phone.

Risa had to get back to her work. As the un-tasted sweet coffee cooled in his hands, Dean began to shake, but it wasn’t with fear or anxiety. Rage was building under his skin. He would not be treated like that. His fingers fumbled around his cell.

*I’m quitting this shithole!*

He scrolled beyond Cas, not wanting to interrupt his classes, and rolled back from Sam for the same reason. He stabbed the send button with Garth’s name highlighted.

He closed his eyes but could see himself from the outside, like looking down from the ceiling, standing there like the dumb-fuck Mrs. Bender had assumed him to be. He fumed at his own inaction. He hated the way he had obeyed in the face of authority and irrationality. Why had he been so compliant? Why hadn’t he stood up for himself, insisted on his rights? Winchesters weren’t pussies. He was not going to let any bully walk all over him like Dad had, like the bastards when he got to ACIC… No freaking way. He wasn’t going to let that dickwad steal his voice.

Instead of popping a Xanax, Dean let his anxiety turn hard and dry. It solidified into a golden snitch-like ball of rage. How dare Zachariah treat him like scum? How dare some drunk accuse him of stealing? How dare they put him back in the position of his father’s good boy rolling over in the face of abuse?

His hands shook. He put the cup on the table and grabbed his wrist cuffs to steady his tremble. He tried to count his breaths. He had to get out of Greengoods. He stood and grabbed his bag.

Mr. Adler stood in the doorway watching him, “Come into my office, Dean.”

He turned without a backwards glance, sure Dean would trail after him like a well behaved puppy.

Dean had enough. It was a tipping point. He wasn’t taking anyone’s crap a minute longer. He marched into the room almost blowing the door off its hinges.

Zachariah raised his brows as he took his big leather swivel seat.

Dean laid his palms on the surface of the assbutt’s desk. It was safer that way, adding an extra motion before Dean could curve his hands into fists.

“Fu-Fuck you!”

“Now, Dean. There is no need for vulgarity. Mrs. Bender is an old loyal customer. Her mind is now put at ease about the trustworthiness of Greengoods and our employees.” Zachariah leaned back in his leather chair, blatantly pleased with the way things had worked out.

“Fuck you, asshole.” Dean unpinned his detested name pin and slammed it on the desk. “You can stick your crappy store and your customer fucking service where the sun don’t shine.”

“Calm down, Dean.” Zachariah elaborated as if he was talking to a small child, “I can overlook
your outburst due to your condition…”

“My condition?” Dean blinked.

“Your mental state.” Zachariah gave a condescending smile, “and your irrational reaction to the accusation…”

“I don’t give two shits about Mrs. Freaking Boozy Bender. It was you, you dickhead, you treated me like dirt and I am out of here.”

“Excuse me young man. I don’t care for your tone. We gave you a job. You should be grateful and have respect for your employer. These hysterical hormonal carrier outbursts will not be tolerated.”

“I don’t give a crap. I quit.” Dean shook his head in disbelief. He couldn’t have heard that last comment.

“Hold your horses,” A new voice called from the open door.

Dean turned to see Garth leaning against the frame. He furrowed his brow at the sock puppet over the raised hand.

“Oopsy,” Garth gave a giggle, “Mr. Fizzles was out in force at the women’s shelter.”

“Mr. Fitzgerald,” Zachariah began.

Garth interrupted, “So I get a text from my client as I’m finishing my Los Altos appointment. Then I pull up in the lot here and overhear two ladies talking about a disgraceful display of employee intimidation, and now I believe I heard an example of sexual and gender discrimination.”

Zachariah’s mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“Greengoods’ place in the Ticket to Work program is contingent on providing an exemplary work environment for the beneficiary to reach their full potential free of bullying or harassment.”

“It is.” Zachariah insisted, “We are. Mr. Winchester was using foul and abusive language.”

Garth turned to where Dean was still flushed with anger but holding his ire in check as he watched developments. “Have you quit?”

Dean licked his lips, “Told him to stuff his job.”

“In writing?” Garth asked.

Dean shook his head.

“What exactly happened?” Garth looked to both men.

Zachariah jumped in, giving an accurate account, if twisted towards defending his actions and customer service.

“Why didn’t you ask my client if he would submit to a staff search in an appropriate office? Why did you not firstly attempt to reason with the customer and allow her time to find the items in her possession?”

“It is Greengoods policy that the customer is always right.” Zachariah pursed his lips, “But on this occasion, perhaps it could have been handled more professionally.”
“If it was another member of your team, Mr. Adler, would you have acted in the same manner?”
Garth leaned forward, “Think carefully, your continued inclusion in the beneficiary scheme is contingent upon your answer.”

Zachariah cleared his throat, “Honestly. I am not sure. I wish to apologize to you and to Dean. I hope, Dean that you will reconsider your decision to leave.”

Dean sucked in his bottom lip. “I don’t know.”

Garth spoke directly to him, “You can transfer your ticket, Dean. You have worked most of April so your May social security will be unaffected, but the next main intake day is not until July, so you will need to start anew in one of a limited list of current vacancies.”

Dean remembered back to the start of the year. There had been a lot of dud choices.

Garth looked at Dean for his reaction, “If you truly detest it here, or today was a common occurrence…”

“It is not,” The store owner protested.

 “…I will support you, but if you withdraw your verbal resignation, I am sure Mr. Adler will be more circumspect in his employee relations.”

Dean thought about it. He had made the effort to get to know his workmates and had grown to feel he was part of the team. He didn’t mind the work. If Zachariah was guaranteed to be less of a dick, then maybe he was better where he was, than risking a worse position.

“I don’t like it when you call me ‘Good Boy’. I’m not a dog.” Dean shot a look at his chastened manager.

“No more. You are a good worker, Dean. I would be sorry to lose you.” Zachariah promised, “I will be happy to take on board your concerns.”

Dean nodded. “I’ll stay for now.” He puffed out a breath, “And I’m sorry I cussed you out.”

“Apology accepted.” Zachariah stood to shake their hands. “And Dean, why don’t you take tomorrow as a day of paid leave.”

Garth gave an approving nod, before asking Dean if he was ready to go.

“You got your car?” Garth asked in the warehouse.

“Naw, left it for Sam.” Dean sighed.

“I’ll give you a ride home”.

Dean was grateful. He was OK. He didn’t need a Xanax or to call Victor, but he was glad he didn’t have to walk home. He felt his legs weighing him down and he wanted to go to his room for some quiet time. Later when his equilibrium was more balanced and the hummingbird stopped fluttering in his chest, he would call Castiel and fill him in on the nasty old bitch and his run in with his douchebag manager.

“Would you like me to come in? We could have a coffee?” Garth asked outside the house.

“I’m good,” Dean said with partial honesty. “Don’t you have appointments? And thought you didn’t do caffeine?”
Garth gave a toothy grin, “My appointments got shelved by an emergency call out. I have my own herbal tea if you have hot water?”

“I’m good,” Dean repeated with more confidence, “You get back to the other suckers who need your help.”

Garth met his eye, suddenly diamond sharp, “You are not a sucker, Dean.”

Dean swallowed hard and nodded. He’d let Zachariah make him empty his pockets in front of everyone, his colleagues, the customers… sure he’d chewed him out afterwards when his anger fuelled confidence flooded in, but he could bang his own head against the wall for falling back into victimhood. He should’ve walked out of the store… he huffed with his hand on the door handle.

“You know if you want to keep your options open, you are welcome to attend the summer Employer/Beneficiary day. See if you’ll like to transfer.” Garth offered.

Dean nodded, “Yeah, put my name down. I’ll check it out.”

“And if you get any more…”

“Crap?” Dean interrupted.

Garth chuckled, “I was going to say hassle, but yes, any crap, you call me, and I’ll move you. You haven’t seen any nastiness towards Carsten?”

“God. No. He loves the place, and everyone loves him.” Dean reassured the social worker that his fellow Ticket to Work staff member was fine.

“Good. You sure you’re OK?” Garth checked again.

Dean hummed, then gave a plastered on grin. He would be fine. He had to let it go. He thought back to Layla and her advice about the pointlessness of regretting actions or inactions that occurred in the heat of the moment. Learn from it and move on. He’d learned. He wouldn’t let Zachariah get the jump on him again, and now Garth had Mr. Adler on his radar, the manager wasn’t going to jeopardise his store’s reputation as a good community business by risking exclusion from the Ticket to Work program. He muttered a final thanks to his social worker and headed indoors.

The house was blessedly quiet. Dean went to the refrigerator and was tempted by a beer to dull the jumpiness under his skin, but he pulled out their share size Coke and gulped down a tall glass.

There was a lump in Sam’s bed. A Sam shaped lump. It was after 11am. Dean paused inside the door and rubbed the back of his neck. He was sure Sam had a Cultural Anthropology class. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. This was too much. There was something wrong with Sam.

Dean moved silently to his bed. He eased the zipper on his vanity medication case, looking for his vitamins while keeping one eye on Sam’s bed. This month he’d gone to the pharmacy straight after his appointment with Victor and he had his full new boxes of each script taking up space in the polka dot case. His hand brushed against the Penandrocol box and stopped dead. The dark blue pill, his day one in the previous blister, the one to replace Sam’s day 14… it had been in the pack for too long….

Dean cupped his hand over his mouth, pressing in and breathing through his nostrils. Sam couldn’t be? Could he?
Dean remembered. He had been so tired. He’d dragged his body around, trying to make Batesville seem more pleasant and homey for Sam. He moved his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. It still hurt to think of his final days with Aaron, how happy they all had been in Speedway… but he remembered how he’d gotten dizzy spells that made him afraid he was going to faint like a girl and how everything tasted weird… how he couldn’t stomach the smell of his favorite paprika chips… how he was just about ready to barf at the stink of Dad’s Old Spice…

“Hey,” Sam croaked as his mussed hair and his crumpled white tee appeared from beneath the blankets.

“Hey yourself.” Dean replied, “You got sleeping sickness or what?”

“Very funny, Dean,” Sam bitched and grabbed his watch off his stool nightstand, “Damn it. Where did the morning go?”

“Sam… talk to me,” Dean paused and met his brother’s huge eyes that were brown with fatigue, “something is wrong.”

“I just don’t feel great, Dee.” Sam sagged back into the pillows. “Do you think I could have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or Lupus or something? I’m sleeping but when I wake I’m still tired. What if there is something really wrong with me?”

Dean heard the scared sick little boy he raised for the first twelve years of Sam’s life. He moved to sit on the end of Sam’s bed. “I don’t think so.”

Sam huffed, “I took out the garbage and my stomach flipped. I had to give up my cardio at the gym because I was wheezing like an asthmatic. I woke with a bitch of a headache.” Sam’s voice turned wry, “Brady is note taking for me this morning and Jess said she’ll copy her Development Psychology notes for me if I don’t make it in after lunch. I thought I was fighting off a virus, but it’s not going away.”

“I think you should get checked out.” Dean noticed a tremble to his hands. He didn’t know how to broach the topic of pregnancy with his brother. He couldn’t find the words. It wasn’t like they told each other the intimate details of their sex lives. He presumed his college smart brother wasn’t so lacking in real life smarts that he would bareback when he’d messed up his pills, or at all this early in a relationship. Or was as naïve as seventeen year old Dean who had listened to Aaron’s genuine but worthless promise to try to pull out in time.

Sam noticed Dean’s shaking and looked across at the open meds case. Suddenly alert, he coughed and asked “Dee? Are you OK? Did something happen?”

“I had a bad morning,” Dean gave a vaguely hysterical laugh, “I told the bug-eyed sonvabitch to fuck off.”

“You didn’t?” Sam gasped.

“I did.” Dean nodded with a furtive grin.

“And you didn’t get fired?”

“Garth rode in as a one man cavalry.” Dean snorted at his own metal image of Garth on a huge horse, “This old hag accused me of taking her dumb coupons… they were in her handbag… but Zachariah had me turn out my pockets…”

“Bastard.” Sam spat.
“I did it.” Dean moistened his lips, “I shouldn’t have. I should have told him to take a running jump….”

“He is your boss, Dean.” Sam insisted. “Of course you did what he asked. I’ll snap his scrawny chicken neck…”

“Hold up, hero,” Dean put his hand on Sam’s chest and pushed him back into the pillows, “I got my mojo fired up and gave him hell. I was ready to walk but Garth held peace talks and it’s all cool. Zach got his knuckles rapped and I made an apology for my foul language with my fingers crossed behind my back.”

Sam laughed. “I can picture you.”

Dean clicked his tongue.

“You still nervy? Were you going to take a pill?” Sam asked.

At the word pill, Dean got up. He muttered that shit happens to calm Sam’s worries. He paced the short distance between their beds and rubbed at his left arm cuff. He muttered that he was good and had it covered. He blew a long exhale and prepared to take the bull by the horns.

“Dean. Seriously. You are making me dizzy.”

Dean stilled, but fire ants of anxiety crawled under his skin. He stood within two feet of Sam’s bed. “I was thinking, y’know.”

“What?” Sam gave a put-upon sigh.

Dean responded as he retook the spot at the end of Sam’s bed. “Do you think… y’know… when I forgot my scripts…?”

Sam nodded.

Dean took another breath and wrung his hands.

“So you think you might be… y’know?”

Sam’s brows rose and he inclined his head with wide eyes encouraging Dean to continue.

Taking a final deep breath Dean finished his drawn out question, “Y’know… Sammy… pregnant?”

Sam started to shake. He shook his head in a repetitive negative motion. His shoulders hunched and Dean could see the trembling in his arms. It was like when one of the guys back in Arkansas threatened a panic attack. He caught his little brother in a strong armed hug.

Sam’s voice broke with hitching breaths, “I…. I can’t be. I can’t.”

“It’s OK, Sammy. Just breathe for me,” Dean urged as Sam’s chest heaved and he stuck his nose into Dean’s neck, “We’ll figure it out, Sam. We’ll figure it all out.”
The word echoed in Sam’s head, reverberating and bouncing off the walls of his skull.

Pregnant?

He could hear his brother’s softly worded attempt to offer comfort and feel his body being pulled into a tight hug.

Pregnant with a baby?

He knew he’d denied the hints his body had been giving him. He was no expert but he’d taken Human Biology 101. He’d pushed away errant fleeting thoughts that gagging at the garbage or feeling tired and dizzy might be more than fighting off a tummy bug. Heck, he’d thought he’d handled the risk by taking a triple dose of Penandrocol when he’d gotten home from Nick’s place.

Sam moved subtly not wanting to draw Dean’s attention and pressed his flat stomach with the span of his hand. Was there a tiny grain of life in there?

He felt stunned and sick at the same time. He couldn’t be? He supposed biologically and physically he could be, probably was pregnant. But mentally, academically, in terms of his age and his developing relationship with Nick, he couldn’t be. His breathing picked up pace. Dean rubbed circles into his back. Sam stuffed his nose into Dean’s collar bone, like when he was little boy and scared of the monsters under his bed.

“Hey Sammy?” Dean asked gently, “You want to make sure? You want I can buy a pee stick?”

“No. I can’t.” Sam said. He sounded like a scratched vinyl record. His vocabulary narrowed down to those negatives.

“How about seeing a doc?” Dean tried. “’Cause, y’know Princess, if you’re not baking a bun in your oven then you’ve got some seriously weird-ass infection.”

Sam gulped. His nose felt cold as he untucked it from his brother’s Greengoods polo shirt. He nodded.

“You want me to call?” Dean asked.

“I can do it.” Sam said pressing his lips into a tight line.

He knew Dean found it harder to speak on the telephone, preferring to text when he wasn’t face to
He had programmed the number for Student Health Services into his cell the previous year when he’d caught a chest infection from his intolerable dorm roommate. The receptionist sounded busy and didn’t ask why he wanted to see a physician, which was just as well, because Sam wasn’t ready to explain. He had an appointment for 2pm. Dean went to shower his morning away, while Sam tried to figure out what he should wear to his appointment. He decided on sweat pants and the dark blue hoodie Dean kept stealing. It was easier to focus on his search for clean boxer briefs and matching socks than any of the thoughts racing through his brain.

He got a text from Jess asking if he would make their shared psychology class, how he was, and if she needed to keep her handwriting neat so he could read her notes.

He texted back a simple Please.

In the kitchen Sam wanted a hot pocket and a coffee but that got vetoed by Dean, who made him a BLT and instructed him drink two tall glasses of Sprite, because Sam was going to have to pee in a cup.

“Are you going to call Nick?” Dean asked low with his back turned scraping tomato seeds into the trash can.

“Can’t,” Sam muttered. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. There might not be a baby. He might have a strange virus or condition. They might name it after him: SamWinchesterItis or SamWinchesterSyndrome.

“OK,” Dean gave a slight smile, “Just thought you might want his company.”

“You’re coming aren’t you?” Sam gasped. He’d presumed Dean would go with him, “Like in with me to the doctor?”

Dean’s eyelid twitched, “You sure?”

“Yes, I can’t go in on my own. Please Dee.” Sam knew he was asking a lot, and if Dean said he wasn’t able for the stress of it, then he’d back off, suck it up and go alone, but he had virtual fingers and toes crossed that Dean would come to stand beside him.

“Sure Sammy. I’ll come with you.” Dean came and patted his shoulder, “Come on, let’s move.”

Dean drove.

Sam had to grasp the paint work outside the clinic door. His knees suddenly decided they couldn’t take his weight. Dean was there, pushing his body under his shoulder and telling him it would be alright.

The waiting area was sparsely occupied. Two teary eyed girls sat opposite. Sam wondered if they were there for the same reason he was. He wasn’t crying. He was numb. Dean leaved through a National Geographic. Sam couldn’t look at it. The magazine reminded him of Nick and the story he had told him about growing up wanting to go into botany and maybe be a founding light of environmental science. Nick hadn’t gotten his dream. Sam’s chest clenched with the implications a baby would have on his academic dreams. Those dreams might have changed recently from hot-shot lawyer with a house and family in the ‘burbs, into expanding knowledge of Anthropology, a life including Dean, and refuge in Nick’s arms…

“Sam Winchester?”

Sam rose and straightened his shoulders. Dean was beside him.
The room was like any other clinical doctor’s surgery. It was painted in muted neutral tones and had a lot of floor space around her desk, the patient table, and a screened off area.

Dr Grainger’s glasses perched on the end of her nose as she looked at the slim file the receptionist had left for this appointment. Sam remembered the middle aged rather heavy-set brunette from when he was coughing up his lungs but he doubted she recalled a patient she had only seen once. She looked from one brother to the other. “So Sam, what brings you here today?”

Sam cleared his throat. “I’ve been under the weather.”

He could sense Dean urging him to continue. The doctor looked across unblinking as she too waited for more.

“I… messed up my Penandrocol.”

Dr Grainger hummed and glanced at his file. Sam wondered if she needed evidence in print of his carrier biology.

“Have you taken a pregnancy test?”

Sam gulped and shook his head. Dean’s hand pressed his right forearm into the armrest.

“Well why don’t we start there?” She smiled kindly and produced a small plastic cup. “There is a cubicle through that door.”

Sam thanked Dean silently for the Sprite overdose because his whole body seemed to have seized up from his voice box to his limbs.

Dr Grainger disappeared for a few minutes. Sam looked at a spot on the floor between his trainers. Dean shifted in his seat a few times, perhaps thinking of offering verbal support, but he stilled and said nothing. What was there to say anyway until they knew?

When she returned the physician took her seat before placing her joined hands on the desk, “Sam. Yes. You are pregnant.”

A single short noise of distress, almost animalistic, escaped Sam’s mouth.

“Are you the father?” Dr Grainger asked Dean, whose mouth dropped open.

“No.” Sam recovered his wits, “Dean’s my brother. My boyfriend is... I mean, I haven’t said... we didn’t plan...I’m sorry.”

“Well, it’s good to see you have family support as this is an unplanned pregnancy.”

Sam was sure that statement was meant to be reassuring but it made the pregnancy all the more real, imagining Dean supporting him through it.

Dr Grainger turned her attention back to Sam, “At your age...”

“Nineteen,” Sam supplied.

“Nineteen.” The doctor repeated with a kindly nod, “I rarely see a planned pregnancy here. Unfortunately you are only the first of this year’s Spring Break potential parents to come for other than the morning after pill.”

Sam moistened his lips. Fucking hell, he’d never thought of calling in for a morning after pill.
“I am a correct? A Spring Break conception?” She asked keeping her tone light, as if he couldn’t take firm probing questions.

Sam nodded, “Evening of the 26th.”

She hummed sagely, “Grades day.”

Dean squeezed his arm again.

“Condom broke… I’d missed the day 14 dark blue pill…” He raised his eyes to look at the doctor, “But I took three together.”

She gave a little laugh, but not a cruel one, “That is ineffective.”

“When should you have cycled?”

Sam coughed, “Without the Penandrocol I don’t know. I was never regular. That’s why I started them as soon as I turned eighteen.”

Sam felt Dean stiffen. He knew Dean was putting two and two together and understanding how difficult things had been living with their father.

“But if I’d taken them in order, three weeks ago.”

The doctor nodded. She picked up a desk calendar. “We can look at a firmer due date, if and when you go for a scan, but if you are close on five weeks now then we are looking at an end of year or New Year birth.”

“Dude,” Dean hissed his first comment since entering the office, “If you have the first baby of 2004 it’ll be like winning the diaper lottery.”

Sam chuckled in spite of himself at Dean’s fantasy of a mountain of sponsored diapers.

“I have some literature on your options.”

Sam nodded. He bit his bottom lip and reached forward for the pamphlets.

“If I did want a termination…”

Dean gasped. Sam looked to his right. Dean’s face was stricken. Sam’s heart almost stopped at the pain in his brother’s expression.

Luckily the doctor answered, “This is not a decision to be rushed into. If you do decide not to proceed then I’d like to book you a session with the clinic counselor, and not schedule the D&E until a week later.”

“D&E?” Sam asked. Tension was literally vibrating from Dean but Sam needed to know.

“It is dilation and suction. The cells are vacuumed rather than the D&C’s scraping of cutterage.”

And Dean was gone, stumbling out the door of the office.

Sam jumped up and called a panicked plea to excuse him for a minute. He found Dean pressed against the wall outside the office door. He was bent double, breathing heavily.

“Dean?” Sam asked very tentatively.
“’m sorry, I’m sorry, Sammy.” Dean sighed, “Fuck. I want to be in there for you. I just… Fuck it. I can’t.”

“If we change the subject could you come back in?” Sam asked. He knew it was selfish but he needed Dean there.

“It hurts, Sam.” Dean whispered, “It still hurts. If you are making an appointment for… I don’t think I can.”

Sam caught Dean’s arm and pleaded, “I’m not Dean. I swear to God, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m treading water here, Man. I don’t have a clue.”

It must have been the right thing to say because Dean stood tall and walked back in, without even a shuffle, sticking close to Sam’s side.

Dr Grainger raised an eyebrow but didn’t ask. “Sam, would you like to remove your lower items of clothing and hop up on the table for me?”

Sam was sure he would not like to remove his clothes and expose himself on a table but he did as requested.

Dr Grainger asked easy questions about his alcohol, caffeine and smoking habits, while she drew blood. Sam admitted his occasional indulgences, omitted that the smoking was of shared Andy’s joints, and wondered privately if his child had been conceived in a mix of gin and vermouth.

Sam found his legs being eased into stirrups while Dr Grainger distracted him with her explanations of the blood tests she was ordering. He could see Dean leaning against her desk, staying in Sam’s eye line while being considerate enough to allow him his modesty. He appreciated it and gave a reassuring head bob in his big brother’s direction.

The doctor continued to ask him questions about his tiredness, headaches, diet, any allergies and medical conditions while he underwent the weird and uncomfortable sensation of being stretched and a pap smear being taken.

“All done,” She smiled snapping off her gloves. “Now hop on the scales and we’ll get a baseline weight for you.”

The scales read 190 pounds. Sam pulled back on his clothes and retook his seat.

“Just a final few items,” The doctor must have been able to tell both Winchesters were getting antsy. “Any previous pregnancies? STDs? Surgeries?”

Sam shook his head at each.

“Have you taken any drugs since you conceived?”

“Just a few Tylenol and my contraceptive.” Sam smiled ruefully, “Guess that was a waste.”

“Any family history of medical conditions? Pregnancy problems?”

Dean stuttered, “I… I… lo..lost a baby. About 10 or 11 weeks…”

“I am sorry,” Dr Grainger said sympathetically, “We’ll schedule you for an early obstetrics appointment and ultrasound, Sam. At eight weeks, just to check everything is going as planned.”

“Fine,” Sam agreed.
“And the father’s medical history?”

“I dunno.” Sam chewed his lip. “I guess if I’m … I’ll find out if…”

“It would be helpful to know of any genetic history on his side, but that can wait. I want to take your blood pressure and then you are free to go.” She pulled the cuff out of her drawer and came around. Sam removed his hoodie. She wrapped it around his arm and asked if he had any questions.

“I suppose,” Sam took a breath, “Some of them are dumb.”

Dean caught a laugh before it blurted out. Sam shot him a narrow eyed look.

“I am sure I’ve heard them all. Shoot.” Dr Grainger offered.

“Should I eat different? Like more of some foods or take vitamins or stuff?” Sam asked.

“A healthy balanced diet. Plenty of fiber. Lots of water. Hydration is important. I’m going to give you a good multivitamin with folic acid.” She paused, “I’m afraid you are looking at increased heartburn, bloating and more than likely morning sickness in the coming weeks, so eating what you can stomach and keep down will be more important than if the soup is homemade or from a can.”

“When can you hear a heartbeat?” Sam sucked a breath. He hadn’t meant to ask that. He’d wanted to ask about his tender nipples. If he heard a heartbeat, then that would make the baby more of a real person.

“Not until the end of the first trimester.” She concentrated on her blood pressure monitor.

Sam had a final question. He shot a warning look at Dean, “Will I? Will I have to wear a bra?”

Dean snorted and turned his face away. Sam knew the bastard was laughing.

Dr Grainger took pity on him and answered in perfect seriousness. “Your chest will develop more towards the final trimester, lactation in the final weeks is common, but most male carriers only reach an A-cup and chose not to wear a support garment. If you breastfeed, and we recommend it, then you might swell to a B-cup. After the milk dries up if you exercise for weight and chest definition, your body will redefine into a more non-carrier male shape.” She undid the Velcro of the cuff, “Now. We have a small issue. I need to ask you to stay for a while.”

Sam stared at her. Dean leaned forward in his seat.

“I didn’t like that you have been experiencing headaches and you say you occasionally have had them before the pregnancy. Your blood pressure is 142 over 85.”

“What does that mean?” Sam gasped.

“You may have chronic hypertension. Normal readings are in the range of 120 over 70. The first figure is your systolic which can be raised by stress, and given your unplanned news, it is not surprising. The second reading is your diastolic, which is when your heart relaxes and fills with blood, and it is a more fundamental reading of your body’s condition. I would like you to head out to the waiting area and try to relax. Sip some water. Take it easy, and I will take another reading in approximately thirty minutes after my next appointment. OK Sam?”

“What does this mean?” Sam gasped.

“At the moment, not much. Let’s wait until I have a second reading.” She nodded and walked them
to the door, telling the receptionist that she would be calling Mr. Winchester back.

Dean put his hand on Sam’s elbow and guided him to a quiet corner away from the magazine table.

“You have to calm down,” Dean whispered.

Sam realized he was clenching his fists. He eased open his fingers and made an effort by puffing a few breaths.

“Calm?” Sam’s voice shook, “I’m a freak, Dean. People are gonna look at me and see a freak. When was the last time you saw a pregnant male carrier around here?”

“Last month in the store…” Dean tried to say.

“I can’t remember when,” Sam talked over his brother, “I can’t recall the last pregnant any gender student I’ve seen on campus. I know you won’t think I’m a freak of nature. I mean you’ve lived with pregnant guys for years. But other people are going to look at me and think I’m a dumb freak-queer, getting caught while a sophomore, with a big basketball stomach displaying my freakishness for everyone.”

“Hey, Hey” Dean patted his knee, “You listen to me Sam. Fuck them. Fuck every one of them, if they think that. Who gives a crap what some bigoted asshats think? And I betya from what the Doc said you’re not the only one with a Spring Break baby.”

Sam gave a stiff nod. He was supposed to be trying to relax. He spotted the water cooler and got a plastic cup from the chilled side. He caught a glance of his body reflected in the glass of the entry door. There was a tiny life in there. Did he want it? A life made out of his and Nick’s DNA, he did. Could he do it? He didn’t know. He was scared shitless. He was scared of losing his dream of a degree, his escape from the life he grew up in, his chance to shine academically. He looked at Dean and wondered what dreams had he had at seventeen. His brother had lost so much. He slung his arm over Dean’s shoulder, surprising him and splashing his hand with an over spill of filtered water.

“What am I going to do?” Sam thought and must have spoke aloud because Dean reached up to squeeze Sam’s hand where it hung over his shoulder. “I don’t know how to tell Nick. He might think I’ve trapped him like the desperate girlfriend in a lifetime movie. I mean, he wants kids down the road, Dean, but he said that, y’know, in the future, not now.”

“I wish we’d still been in Speedway,” Dean said quietly, “It’d been fricking nerve-wracking but I could have sat at their kitchen table or met behind the school or the back of the Gas’n’Sip and told Aaron. He’d have been as freaked as I was, but do you know, Sammy, I think he’d have been cool?”

Sam nodded, “His Dads would have been too. And me and Syd.”

Dean smiled, “I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know how. And I spoke less then.” He sighed. “You need to take care of yourself, Sam. I mean it. If I’d done things differently then maybe… maybe I could have saved my baby. Was it my fault?”

Dean’s cheeks were wet. Sam nearly joined him in crying. Coming here, hearing Sam talk about the option of abortion, talking now, was so raw for Dean, Sam had to speak up, “Naomi told me the medical report suggested it was an ectopic pregnancy.”

“Yeah, they told me that too.” Dean shrugged, “…when I’d listen. But you listen to me Sam. I’m gonna take care of you.”
“Geez Dean, like I didn’t.” Sam gulped.

“What? What the hell?” Dean’s mouth dropped open.

“I kicked you, I wrestled you in the motel lot, I got CPS on our case, got you into the hospital and... It was my fault...” Sam said all in one rush.

“Bullshit.” Dean spat. “Total bullshit. Sammy, you were a kid, a snot nosed acting out 12 year old who had lost his best friend.”

“Yeah,” Sam urged, “And you were a pregnant 17 year old who’d lost his boyfriend...”

“No way Sam. No frigging way. You can’t feel bad about this. I won’t, won’t allow it.” Dean shook his head vehemently. He twisted out from under Sam’s arm and turned in the hard seat to face him, “It was Dad who signed me into psychiatric care and my attempt to end it all when the baby died that kept me there. Not your fault at all. Do you hear me?”

“I dunno Dean. It sure felt like it when you were dead,” Sam answered with his head hung low.

Dean laughed. He actually laughed. “Hey little brother, I wasn’t dead.”

“I know Dee. I’m so fucking sorry,” Sam blew out a long exhale. He had to hold it together. All the years of guilt was a hard ball inside him that was cracking open under Dean’s complete forgiveness, absolution and refusal to pin any blame on Sam.

“Hush, Sammy, it’ll be ok, you’ll see,” Dean said.

Sam huffed, “I’m meant to be getting my blood pressure down.”

“Jerk,” Sam nudged Dean with his elbow and they grinned.

By the time they were called back into the office, Sam’s pressure had dropped but not as much as Dr Grainger wanted. She’d been busy while they waited. Sam had a provisional obstetrics appointment at the clinic on May 12th. However Dr Grainger wanted him back the following week for another blood pressure reading. She said if it was still elevated he would have to be monitored for the gestation. The nurse could take the reading but she wanted to see him as his bloods would be back and it would give them a chance to talk about his options. Dean remained silent as Sam nodded his agreement. With an instruction to take things easy and the confirmation of his pregnancy sinking in, Sam left the clinic.

Outside he felt ill, his stomach was queasy, and there was a buzzing spinning in his brain. He sat into the shotgun seat and said, “I feel sick.”

“No barfing in the ‘pala.” Dean said gruffly but with a concerned eye.

“’kay,” Sam managed to reply. He rested his head against the cool glass of the side window.

Dean pulled up outside the small grocery store on Webster and disappeared inside. Sam just wanted to get home, but if Dean needed Bing Bongs or a slice of pie after his own traumatic remembrances Sam wasn’t going to deny him. Instead he got four cans of Canada Dry Ginger Ale dumped on his lap. He chanced a querulous, “Huh?”

“For the nauseous tum,” Dean answered, “ACIC had a whole storage pantry of ginger ale and
saltine crackers. Chuck and I raided it one day when Kit couldn’t keep anything down.”

When they pulled into the car port Dean held out his hand, “Give me your cell.”

Sam obeyed, maybe Dean’s battery had died.

“Hi, this is Sam’s brother.”

Sam heard the introduction and mouthed at Dean to tell him who he had called.

“Sam’s ill. He won’t be in tonight.”

Sam’s jaw dropped. He blinked at his brother while the cold condensation from the ginger ale cans penetrated his sweats and chilled his thighs.

“Thank you. I’ll tell him.” Dean gifted Sam with his best shit faced grin, “Vepar says he hopes you are better soon.”

“You coulda got Alastair.” Sam gaped.

“I coulda disconnected the call.” Dean shot back.

“You coulda got Nick.” Sam added.

“I woulda said the same.” Dean responded as he exited the car.

The sound of laughter and the smell of sweet baked goods told them that the house was no longer empty. Dean pointed wordlessly at the stairs asking if Sam wanted to avoid company but Sam shook his head. These were his friends, his housemates, he wasn’t going to avoid them, and he figured he needed some distraction.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Sam hissed urgently.

“I wouldn’t,” Dean replied earnestly and kept Sam’s gaze until he nodded in acknowledgment of the intrinsic trust between them.

In the warm brightly lit kitchen, Jessica’s hands were covered by oven mitts as she pulled a tray of freshly baked giant choc chip cookies from the oven. Sam smiled at the sight of his happy friend with her flour dusted jeans and diamond pattern blouse. Sarah was at the coffee maker. Sam saw Castiel’s trench coat draped over a chair before he saw his brother snake around the open refrigerator door to pull his boyfriend into a tight hug. As Castiel straightened he cupped the back of Dean’s head encouraging a kiss.

“You guys,” Castiel chuckled, “You had Jessica and Sarah worried.”

“I wasn’t the one who asked three times where Dean was.” Sarah laughed.

“I just got here.” Castiel protested, “I was enquiring from each house member. By the way Brady said he has gone on the Caltrain to work and you are late, Sam.”

“Sammy isn’t going in. He’s not well.” Dean informed them.

“Is that where you’ve been?” Jess demanded. “Did Dean finally persuade your stubborn butt to go to a doctor?”

“Hum, yeah, I’ve got high blood pressure.” Sam muttered as he took a seat and pulled the tab on
his ginger ale. His stomach was doing fluttery flips again. The cookies smelled divine but he didn’t
know if he could eat anything.

Jessica snorted, “You wasted your money. I coulda told you that, Mr. Headache and Stress-ball.”

“Thanks, Nurse Moore,” Sam teased back. “I gotta ‘take it easy’. Dean called The Gates and told
‘em I wasn’t coming in.”

“Good on you, Dean.” Sarah beamed with obvious approval, “High time Sam started taking care of
himself.”

“I kinda gotta.” Sam huffed, not adding that there was another life involved now.

“Coffees?” Sarah offered.

Sam refused but the others all took a mug. They sipped their drinks while they waited the
proscribed minutes until Jessica approved the cooling cookies for consumption.

Looking around the table, at his two best female friends, at his brother practically sitting on Cas’s
lap, at the easy relaxed atmosphere of his home, Sam tried to shake off a feeling that everything he
knew, that every good thing that he had made for himself since getting out from under John’s
thumb was coming to an end. It was a morose and depressing thought. Along with that came the
gut clenching doubt that he might also be about to lose his work family. If Nick rejected him, he
thought he might shatter into tiny pieces. If Nick didn’t want anything to do with the baby, if Sam
couldn’t cope with continuing the pregnancy and Nick hated him for making that choice, then there
was no way he could continue to work at The Gates of Hell. It would be the heartbreaking end of
the road not only for his relationship but also for his love of Crowley’s teasing, of Meg’s snarky
attitude, of Ruby’s playful games. He would even miss Vepar’s superior sashaying walk, Baldur’s
temper, Max’s shy laughter, and Lilith’s quick wit.

“Hey, Sam, who died?” Sarah bumped his shoulder.

“Whaa? Sorry. I was thinking.”

“About what dead puppies?”

“No about how life changes around us.” Sam sighed and looked into the darkness of his soda can,
as if the mysteries of the universe were contained at the bottom of it.

“Are you OK, Dean?” Castiel’s graved tone drew Sam’s eye to his brother who was pale and
wan after their joint ordeal at the clinic.

Dean cleared his throat. “I had a bad day at work.”

Sam cursed himself internally. Dean telling him about the awful customer and his boss’s
disgraceful behavior seemed like a lifetime ago, not mere hours. He listened while Dean gave a
short summary to Castiel and the girls.

“I swear to God, if that assbutt so much as looks at you wrong I will…we will sue his ass off.”
Castiel’s fist hit the table so hard their coffees quaked and the cookies made mini-leaps on the
cooling rack.

“Awh, my knight,” Dean snickered.

“I’m deadly serious.”
“I bet you could sue him now,” Sarah shot a look at Sam. “Must be discrimination or something.”

“Hey ease up guys,” Dean sighed. “My social worker sorted it. It’s all cool. And I got a free pass to the next open day if I want to change jobs.”

Castiel gave a growling hum as if he wasn’t totally satisfied with Dean’s answer, “I hope you aren’t staying because you think you don’t deserve to work somewhere better.”

“I like the guys. The work is OK. And I promise if Zach is a douchebag to me again, I’ll walk. Garth already knows I will. OK?” Dean looked around, “OK Cas?”

While Castiel muttered his agreement, Jessica felt the cookies with the back of her fingers and took an experimental nibble. “Dig in guys!”

Dean did not have to be asked twice and reached over to grab a couple for himself and Castiel while Sarah placed side plates around the table. Dean looked at the plate as if it was alien technology. Sam huffed knowing his brother had no intention of eating slowly enough to require a plate. Sam took a smaller cookie while Dean attempted to stretch his lips wide enough for a half-cookie bite. Dean’s eyes rolled back and his lids fluttered.

“OlmJessDawmmUmmmy,” Dean moaned and mumbled with his mouth full.

Castiel wrapped an arm around Dean’s waist and gave an indulgent smile.

Sam laughed, “Watch out Castiel, Dean Winchester Patent Food Orgasm on approach.”

Dean flipped him the bird. He picked up Cas’s cookie and made a barely intelligible mutter about shared orgasms. Castiel blushed intensely while the others shared a laugh at their expense.

“Dean has a special relationship with food.” Sam teased.

Dean took a slurp of his coffee, sighed and said “Can you believe I ate the same thing every day for two years?”

“Never,” Castiel said in disbelief.

“I did. Once we gotta choose our food at the hospital… I guess it made me feel safe.”

Sam bit his cheek, sorry for making the comment about Dean and food. Castiel gave Dean a peck of a kiss, “You are amazing.”

Then as if he realized they were in company, Castiel made an attempt to deflect the topic of conversation away, “Is there a special occasion?”

Jessica rubbed her palms together nervously before tucking a strand of curls behind her ear. “So, I guess I should wait for Brady and Andy but you all know how hard it is to get everyone together.”

“Cept when The Osbournes are on,” Dean interjected.

“Yeah then,” Jess admitted, “Right. OK. I have an announcement.”

There was a pause. Dean’s lip smacking cookie eating broke the silence. For a second Sam tried to imagine that he was in Jess’s place, making his own announcement, but he couldn’t picture it.

“I’ve pledged to Pi Beta Phi.”
That dropped brick met with another moment of surprised silence.

“For real?” Sarah enquired, “Like really?”

Jessica nodded.

“You mean I’m gonna have to answer the telephone as Blake, Winchester, Brady, Gallagher and Winchester?”

“Ha, Ha, Ha,” Jessica mocked, “But seriously guys, I got a room share with Rebecca.”

“When do you go?” Sam asked tightly. He didn’t want anything to change but it seemed life was whitewater racing around him.

Jessica winced, “Next week.” She quickly added, “But I wouldn’t leave you guys in the lurch, Mom and Dad are going to pay my rent here until our year lease is up at the end of June.”

“June?” Dean blurted.

Sam twigged that he had never explained about their student rental agreement. It went unspoken that the residents may want to go their separate ways, back to their hometowns, traveling, whatever, for the summer break. Sam had secretly hoped that the same crew would want to share again in the fall, but if Jessica was already leaving, it was something they’d have to get together and talk out.

“We have a year rental agreement,” Sam explained.

“Jess and Sam found the house in June last year,” Sarah supplied.

“Andy and us moved in at the start of July,” Jessica added.

“Brady and I came back at the end of August,” Sarah continued, “Which is why I got the small boxy room and he lives in a dining room. Sam had won his rock paper scissors championship and got the master bedroom.”

“So what happens in June?” Dean puffed a breath. Sam could see his bottom lip was quivering slightly.

“Maybe nothing,” Sam tried to reassure him, “If we can keep going without Jess’s rent, or find a new housemate, and if Sarah, Andy and Brady want to keep the house over the summer so we can all share again for next year.”

Sarah twisted uncomfortably in her seat. Sam gritted his teeth but didn’t want to ask now. The unwelcome surprise of a possible house hunt was probably too much to add to the list of shocks Dean had experienced in one day.

“Any news with you, Cas?” Sam asked.

“Me?” Castiel had been lifting his mug to his mouth but replaced it on the table, “Besides the hell of applying to every high school in California for a fall position, no.”

“Any hopes of staying where you have trained?” Jessica asked, “My cousin Philip did that back home in Vermont.”

“I would be very happy to stay in Menlo Park, but they don’t have a vacancy. My position will be taken by next year’s trainee.” Castiel’s shoulders sagged, “It almost feels like a lottery to send out
scores of applications with only so many vacancies for all the newly qualified teachers and the established ones vying for the places too.”

“...And do you have a preference?” Sarah piped up.

Castiel looked at Dean out of the corner of his eye, “I’d like something local. Or at least somewhere with an easy commute.”

“I’d like that too.” Dean added and leaned more into Castiel. Sam wondered if they could get any cuter.

Castiel managed to look nervous and excited, “There is a vacancy at The Kershel Academy.”

“The prestigious private elitist Kershel Academy?” Sarah checked, “Where Doctor Dickenson went? You know Sam, the Klimt expert, never shuts up about a good art appreciation education at High School level?”

Sam nodded. “They have a science vacancy?”

Castiel got a furtive but pleased look in his eye. “Their senior Math teacher is retiring at the end of the academic year.”

“But you don’t teach Math,” Dean pointed out.

“Well I can teach lower grades, but I have it on good authority,” Castiel tapped the side of his nose, “that an old friend of mine from Cornell is up for tenure and he has been teaching Math and Science classes.”

“So he’ll be taking 100% Math…” Jess leapt to say.

“...and they’ll need a science teacher.” Sarah finished.

“Precisely.” Cas grinned.

“Where is this posh pinnacle of a school?” Dean chewed on his lip.

“On the shores of Clear Lake.” Castiel moistened his lips, “About 3 hours north.”

“Not a commute then,” Dean mumbled.

“Hey,” Castiel turned Dean’s face to him with his fingers, “I’m applying from Crescent City to San Diego, but that doesn’t mean I’ll get any job or that I’ll take a post. I’ve gotta try. I have to get a teaching position before my student loans cause banks to send debt collectors to my door.”

“I know. I know Cas,” Dean whispered but he didn’t look happy.

“I think one of my psychology class went to Kershel. I could ask her for any insider tips.” Jessica volunteered.

Castiel thanked her before suggesting Dean might like to move into the den and watch some TV. Sam was nodding his approval when Dean squinted at him. “You look beat Sam. You should go lie down.”

“OK,” Sam gave an obligatory eye roll, but Dean was perceiving the truth. He was wrecked. “I’m taking dibs on the shower and then I promise I’ll lie down, Fussy McFusserson.”
As he dragged his body upstairs the whole crap of the day hit him again, starting with the prospect of Dean being heartbroken if Castiel had to leave Palo Alto for work. He stripped on autopilot and stood under the hot water leaving it soak into his mane of thick hair and down his back. He placed a hand against the tiles to brace his body. The memory of doing just that in Nick’s shower while his lover’s hand snaked around from behind jerking him off made his cock twitch and fill. Nick liked to see him splayed on the sheets of his huge bed but in the shower he was more adaptable and took Sam from behind marking his hips with finger shaped bruises that were only now fading from their last passionate morning under jets of hot running water. Tears began to run down Sam’s face, the salty taste of them marring his lips. He didn’t know what to do. He tried to suds up his hair with shampoo, but even the coconut scent of that reminded him of a Yankee Candle Nick had lit late one evening.

He could lose Nick. He could lose so much. His dreams, his future… His hand strayed down in a move he sensuously made for his own benefit many times, but before he reached his half hard cock, he stopped and spread his fingers across his belly below his navel.

“Hi there.” He whispered. No-one was going to hear him in the shower, but it was too fragile a moment for anything other than a whisper. “Hey there, Little Grapeseed.”

He was talking to an embryo.

“I’m your Daddy.”

Sam gulped. He was this tiny little proto-child’s carrier-father. Him or her, his son or his daughter was a miracle. He wanted her. He couldn’t imagine going to the clinic and having a termination. He couldn’t parse the regret and loss that he would have to live with… He knew all about living with loss and it was Hell… Could he go from years of mourning his brother to a lifetime of wondering what this embryo would have been, who he or she would have grown up to be?

The baby was still barely more than a bundle of cells but Sam huffed under the running water as it spilled down his back. He couldn’t terminate. And he knew that when it came to it he would never be able to relinquish his hold on his newborn child to give him or her up for adoption. He wondered if he was going to be raising her out of a trailer in Bobby’s salvage yard, or watching his son grow without his other father. He’d do his best to figure out if there was a way to stay in Stanford. There must be help for pregnant students. Maybe even if he lost his scholarship he’d be entitled to housing or be assisted with loan applications. Castiel had done it on his own without a scholarship. There was the other issue of how he would attend classes when he was as large as a small house, or if he was put on bed rest for hypertension, and what would he do when he had the baby? He hoped and wanted, and now he had come to the point where the bundle of cells inside him was his baby, he craved the love this new person would add to his small family. He imagined Dean with the baby, cooing over a bassinet and then blushing in denial when Sam would catch him. He was terrified to risk imagining Nick’s arm around his waist in that fantasy nursery.

He cracked his head back against the tiles. His fingertips were getting wrinkled. It was time to get out of the shower. No matter what happened with Nick, he vowed that he was going to keep their baby.

He finished up. Wrapped in a bath sheet he made his way back to his room. He looked at his balled up PJ bottoms and white sleep tee, but it was too much effort. Kicking them out of his way, Sam lay sideways on top of his comforter, curled in the damp towel. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing in and out. The thought rose that he was curved around his belly, instinctively protecting his little girl or boy from the world.

“Sam! Sammy!” Dean called from outside the door. “You OK?”
It had gotten dark. Street lamplight poured over Dean’s sketches on the wall. Sam must have slept. The towel was uncomfortable and his feet were cold.

“Nick is here.” Dean opened the door a crack and called in, “He brought Lasagna and garlic bread, because you are sick.”

Sam uncurled and sat on the edge of the bed.

“What will I tell him, Sam? Are you ‘too sick’? Do you want to see him?”

Sam took a deep breath, “I’ll come down.”

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++
Sam took several deep and steadying breaths before he pulled on his sleepwear and robe. He yanked a pair of boot socks over his feet. Catching sight of his tangled damp hair in the mirror, he combed his fingers through the strands pushing it back off his face. He was meant to be sick not readying for his debut on the runway of fashion week. He scrubbed his hand over his chin, feeling stubble. He hadn’t shaved that morning. If Nick didn’t find the scruffier version of his boyfriend attractive there wasn’t much that Sam could do about it at short notice.

“Come on, Little Grapeseed,” Sam dipped his head and added in a hushed tone, “Time to tell your other Daddy that you exist.”

He was talking to the embryo again, maybe it was daft, a sign of losing it.

At the top of the stairs Sam paused. What if telling Nick now was the wrong choice? What if something was wrong with the pregnancy? What if he lost Nick then three or four weeks later he lost the baby? A little voice told him that if Nick walked, then he wasn’t worth keeping. Doctor Grainger was sending him for an early scan because of Dean’s ectopic miscarriage. He should go to the library and look up if such things ran in families. He could bet there were whole shelves devoted to male pregnancies, miscarriages, and teen pregnancies. Sam huffed, thinking he had only a week left of being a teenager. He was delaying, standing there as if waiting would change anything or make it any easier.

The intermingling of voices and the TV drifted up from the den. Dean stuck his head around the doorway and looked up at his paralyzed brother with concern. That got Sam moving, but each step was like a precipice. Dread chilled him and each inhalation caught in his tightening chest.

Stepping into the room Sam could see Sarah and Jessica lounging on their sofa. Dean hovered nervously. Andy waved a smoking roll-up from his spot on the bean bag. Nick was perched on the arm of the couch with one tan leather loafer raised off the floor, talking to Sarah. Sam’s heart clenched with the sensation of his lover slipping away from him. He feasted on this snapshot view, the overhead light giving shine to Nick’s hair and the fine thread of his grey Ralph Lauren suit. As if he sensed Sam’s arrival he turned with a beaming smile that died on his lips.

“Oh my God, Sweetheart, you look awful. You shouldn’t have got out of bed for me.” Nick gasped and took the few strides to meet Sam.

Sam emitted a nervy titter at the contrast between his handsome put together lover and his own scruffy dreadful appearance. Warm hands on his waist pulled him close. Their foreheads knocked together lightly.

“Same air, if I had an infection you’d catch it,” Sam quirked a smile and wove his hands behind Nick’s neck, stealing an indulgent kiss before the storm.

“Get a room, dudes!” Andy shouted and then let out a chortling laugh.

“About that,” Sam looked around as he attempted to draw apart but found Nick linking his arm, “Could you guys give us some privacy if we occupy the kitchen a spell?”

“You can have our room,” Dean was quick to offer, shifting from one foot to the other, “I got my
bonus day off tomorrow, don’t need to hit the hay yet.”

“I think I’d prefer a few minutes in the kitchen,” Sam tried to give his brother an easy smile rather than the grimace he felt his face muscles contort into. There was something about the private sanctuary of their bedroom that he didn’t want to defile with the memory of a crushing break up.

“A few minutes?” Andy snorted, “You gay guys work fast.”

“Not helping,” Dean aimed a kick at the bulge of the bean bag.

“We’re cool,” Jessica stated.

“Cool,” Sarah added, “And take your time.”

“And save us some lasagna, I can feel imminent munchies,” Andy tagged on.

Sam gave that comment an eye roll while Jessica asked Andy if that was his considered medical opinion. Taking Nick’s hand, Sam guided him into the kitchen. He almost teared up when he saw lasagna, garlic bread wrapped in aluminum foil to keep it warm, a takeout tub of green salad, a tall bottle of light beer, and a thin slice of Max’s indulgent chocolate Genoise Cake.

“Shall I serve, Sir?” Nick raised his brows with a soft smile.

“Please, Nick. Please just sit here with me,” Sam’s choked up plea had Nick pulling out a chair for Sam. He took the next one so that their knees knocked together and he could hold both of Sam’s hands in his.

Sam gulped.

“What is it? Did the doctor…? Oh God. Whatever it is we’ll face it. I’ll give you full medical from the restaurant. I can get my accountant to work it so the cover is backdated from the start of the year. Sam, what did they say was wrong?” Nick’s words tumbled out, colliding with each other but understandable to Sam.

“I…” Sam stared at their entwined hands. He squeezed, taking strength and holding on fiercely.

He wasn’t going to cry. There would be no weeping sorrow. It wasn’t in his plans to cry. A huge teardrop ran down his face and plopped onto his lap.

“Take your time,” Nick’s hushed words quivered with horror. Sam didn’t want to imagine how much worse it could be.

“I… I mean. We…”

It was the hardest thing Sam had ever said in his life. Multiple times worse than braving John’s wrath about coming to Stanford. Sam sniffled loudly and cleared his throat to make a third attempt.

“I’m pregnant.”

Time stopped.

Sam was afraid to look up. He lifted his eyes. Nick was stunned into statue-like stillness. Sam was riveted in place, eyes fixed on Nick.

The encouraging touch on Sam’s hands and fingers withdrew leaving a blank empty chill. Nick reached sideways, caught the beer and chugged down a good portion of the bottle.
“I need something stronger.” His chest rose and fell in heaving sighs.

Sam jumped to find some liquor, anything to please and put off the nuclear blast wave he feared was coming. He tried to brace himself as he silently and shakily handed over somebody’s fifth of Southern Comfort.

Nick winced as he downed a double shot. He repeated almost inaudibly, “Pregnant.”

Sam retook the kitchen chair because if he didn’t he might have fallen to the floor.

Nick was subdued. Sam wasn’t sure what he expected. He’d feared an explosion, and hoped for joy, but hadn’t imagined this shocked almost unresponsive reaction, as if Nick was trying to comprehend and translate the meaning of what Sam had said.

“Are you?” Nick stopped as if he was unable to complete the question. He ran his tongue over his lower lip and looked furtively from under his lids at Sam’s belly, “What are your plans?”

Sam laughed hysterically. Nick gaped at him.

“Plans?” Sam choked, “like to graduate?”

Nick nodded and said with gravity, “I see.”

Sam didn’t know what he saw.

“I mean I understand,” Nick said with deep sadness, “If that is your decision, I will respect it and you. It is your body and your choice.”

“Whoa! Back up,” Sam blurted, “What decision? I said nothing about any decision. I found out today that I am having our baby. Our baby, Nick.”

“You are having our baby?” Nick’s eyes opened wide and blue.

Sam nodded, “Yeah, dumbass, our baby.”

“I thought…” Nick leaned forward so he could retake Sam’s right hand, “Your education…your age… You’d want to terminate… And it is your body Sam, your choice, but I want us too, you and me and our baby.”

“I want that too.” Sam insisted with a germ of hope.

“I won’t push you into keeping the baby.” Nick said with obvious effort, “but I promise to be there for you both, and I want you to have our child.”

“I want that too.” Sam repeated, filing to the brim with emotion. For a moment, it had been as if they were shattering, as if they were on two ice floes drifting apart, “I want it. I want us.”

By some magic, Sam knew he had said the perfect thing, because Nick melted and relief flooded Sam.

“You want us?” Nick checked, with the disbelief of a man previously badly burned.

Sam simply nodded. “You and the grapeseed.”

“The grapeseed?” Nick grinned.
“Yeah, he or she is only about the size of a tiny little seed.” Sam took Nick’s hand and drew it to his tummy.

“Our little bitty Apple Pip.” Nick smirked.

“Grapeseed.” Sam corrected with a nasal huff of amusement. “That night, the condom split…”

Nick smiled at the memory, making Sam relive that wonderful night. He was suddenly glad that their child had been conceived on such a perfect date.

Nick came around to pull Sam’s head into his body in a kind of awkward but amazingly comforting hug. Sam wasn’t sure who let out a few sobs first.

“I thought….” Sam said when his speech capabilities returned, “You said you wanted kids but not now…”

“Sam,” Nick put two fingers under Sam’s chin and titled his head so their eyes could meet, “You have made me the happiest man on God’s green Earth.”

Sam’s shoulders hitched in a self-depreciating laugh at the exaggeration.

“Are you happy?” Nick asked.

“I’m in a state of prolonged shock,” Sam answered honestly, “Dean came to the doctor with me, and I totally freaked him out when I enquired about terminations, but then I came home and I had time to process, I suppose. This baby is made of you and me.”

Nick’s smile broke out again, “Yours and mine.”

Sam leaned into Nick’s side, “And I couldn’t bear to think about ending it any longer. I had decided one thing, no matter how difficult it would be without you, I’m keeping my little guy or girl.”

Nick kissed his hair.

“But you know. It’s not going to be easy for me,” Sam huffed, “My Dad, he really did a number on me and Dean. I don’t want to be a freak.”

Nick dropped to his knees and wiped away the trail of tears, “Shush, my love, shhh-hush. You are not going to be a freak. You are going to be radiant and fabulous bearing our child.”

“Covered in puke, with swollen ankles, and leaking nipples, and mood swings,” Sam snorted.

“Yes, wonderful and magnificent,” Nick kissed his cheek. “Did you think I would think…were you worried I’d think that the baby wasn’t mine?”

“What No Way.” That particular worry had not crossed Sam’s mind.

“There was no need to doubt my love,” Nick sighed, “My sweetheart.”

“I didn’t, Nick.” Sam insisted, edging forward, “I just didn’t know what to think or do… I had high blood pressure at the physician’s.”

“You are so brave, darling.” Nick swallowed as if overcome, “Are they concerned about your blood pressure?”
“I’m not brave, and I need to go back next week for another reading, to see if it's a problem.”

“Can I come with you?” Nick asked softly.

“I’d like that. The doctor asked about you, medically I mean. But I didn’t know. I was so confused. I didn’t know how I was going to tell you.” Sam gulped air and tried to stem his racing heart.

“I am so happy you told me. So happy we are pregnant,” Nick helped Sam up and hugged him tight. Sam fell into his embrace letting go of all that fear he had built up about sharing his news.

“Thank you.” Sam whispered.

Nick huffed with an amused body shudder which transmitted to Sam. “Why are you thanking me?”

“For not freaking out, for not breaking up with me?” Sam said in a small voice into the air over Nick’s shoulder.

“The carrier daddy of our baby. My handsome lover, my friend, I want you. Do you hear me? I’ll keep saying it until you believe me. You’re the one, Sam.”

Sam wasn’t sure he could have faith in that assertion yet, but he could work on it. He knew he wanted this. Wanted to be a family with Nick and their child, but he couldn’t quite believe that he was important enough, special enough to be the only one, the forever one for Nick. He closed his eyes and let his partner hold him, drawing his love through their joined bodies and letting it soothe him. He could have stayed there all night, tucked together.

In the end they shared the cake and a can of ginger ale divided into two of the mugs Dean had bought. Nick topped his drink up with more Southern Comfort but Sam didn’t judge his need for a drink.

Nick raised his cup “To our family.”

Sam drank to that. He reached over with his fingertip and wiped a smudge of chocolate from Nick’s upper lip, which led to a tender sweet kiss, before Andy banged on the door claiming he was in dire need of edibles.

“They know nothing,” Sam warned.

Nick nodded his understanding.

“I’m not ready to share yet.” Sam added.

“Of course,” Nick rose to let Andy in, “Just you, me and Dean, yes? It’s a family matter.”

“It is.” Sam nodded with smile, glad Dean had been automatically included in Nick’s words.

While Andy raided the uneaten food, Sam saw Nick out. With a promise to call the next day, an instruction not to try and come to work in the morning, and a squeezed hand Nick departed after a final embrace.

Sam spent the weekend taking his doctor’s advice and trying to de-stress. He went to the park with Dean and watched him sketch. He went to the new Adam Sandler movie for comedy therapy with
Nick, and helped Jess to take down her posters and pack her books into boxes.

On Monday night he went to work. Nick tried to send him home but Sam pulled out his notepad and took the order from a table of four. When custom died down, Nick poured him a spray hose soda and installed him at the end of the bar. Almost shyly he produced a fax from his accountant confirming Sam had gold standard employee medical cover.

Sam’s days were as full as usual. He spent a little while between classes in the Lane Medical Library cramming knowledge into his brain. Seeing the printed word, and reading up on everything that he might need to know, helped him to adjust to his new reality. He didn’t avoid scary facts but took comfort in accounts of normal pregnancies and deliveries.

Sam kept to his class schedule almost on autopilot, his mind drifting to his Little Grapeseed as if there was a psychic magnetic connection between them already. When he read back his Anthropology of Ancient Crete notes, it was like he was learning about Knossos for the first time. Dean was doing his best to be supportive in an unobtrusive manner, making sure he ate and doing their combined laundry.

On Thursday morning Sam met up with his classmate Madison who was also declaring anthropology as her major. Using a tall mocha as bribery, he explained that he had a medical appointment later and she kindly volunteered not only her notes but copies of the articles she had Xeroxed for their Advanced Genetics and Evolution essay. He promised to return the favor when she needed, hoping privately that he would be in the position to do so.

Nick’s Lexus pulled up well before their appointment. Dean chuckled and nudged Sam as they saw Nick emerge from their position at the bedroom window.

Flanked on either side entering Stanford Medical Clinic, Sam felt like Leonardo Di Caprio with the air stewardesses in Catch Me If You Can. Only Sam wasn’t an identity thief and Leonardo hadn’t been pregnant.

Dean was happy to sit in the waiting area perusing a National Geographic article on Snowy Owls that Nick had dived into before they were called. Sam appreciated that his brother had come at all, after the traumatic first visit. He took his seat opposite Dr Grainger but Nick remained standing to lean over her desk and surprise the physician by shaking her hand firmly. Sam imagined that was how Nick would get a business meeting started.

“Nick Alighieri. I’m Sam’s partner.”

“Very pleased to meet you.” The doctor nodded.

When Nick was seated, she commenced a litany of questions. Sam answered that he wasn’t vomiting, still had nausea, had eaten, taken his vitamins, had only a couple of mild band-tightening headaches, hadn’t been breathless nor sweaty. When she explained that edema meant swelling, Sam was able to confirm he hadn’t that either.

“Good,” Dr Grainger smiled as she ticked a final box on her sheet, “Your bloods are back. You are not anemic and your blood count was healthy. Let’s check your blood pressure. Can you remove your jacket?”

Sam took off his brown hoodie, leaving his plaid shirt and tee on. He asked in surprise, “Don’t you want me on the table?”

“Not today,” She smiled kindly as she wrapped the pressure cuff around his upper arm.
Sam tried his best to stay calm. Nick’s hand pressed his knee.

“Nick, may I ask you a few questions?” She asked while she took the reading.

“Go ahead,” Nick answered but didn’t remove his hand.

“Any family history of genetic disorders, pregnancy issues, multiple births?”

Sam let out a miniscule squeak at the last item on the list.

Nick chuckled before answering in the negative.

“What age are you?” The doctor asked as she removed the cuff. When Nick bristled she added, “For the condition of your sperm.”

“Ah, 37.” Nick answered.

“146 over 86, Sam.” The doctor frowned. “That’s not good, I’m afraid. Still elevated. You will have to take things easy. Have you been?”

“I didn’t work last Friday or Saturday but I did on Monday.” Sam licked his lips. He could see Nick’s intense stare as he listened.

“And classes?”

“I haven’t missed a class until today.” Sam said with a touch of defiance.

“I am not telling you to skip class or not to go to work, if you feel well enough and comfortable to do so. I am telling you as your physician that you need to avoid stress and stressful situations. Literally put your feet up when you get the chance. Your hypertension is mild but it is elevated.”

“Kind of hard not to be stressed,” Sam mumbled.

The doctor nodded, “Unplanned pregnancy and stress go hand in hand. Have you thought any further about your options, Sam?”

Nick’s hand exerted supportive pressure on his thigh.

Sam looked her in the eye, “We are keeping the baby.”

She smiled, “Let me offer the congratulations delayed from our first visit. Okay, in that case I’d like to get a handle on your chronic hypertension. I’m going to fit you with a portable blood pressure monitor for the next 24 hours to eliminate White Coat Syndrome.”

Sam’s eyes widened at the strange term.

“Some patients’ pressure spikes from the stress of seeing a doctor.” She explained and handed him a folded over A4 tabular sheet. “I want you to fill out this sheet while you are wearing it, detailing any symptoms, for instance pain, dizziness, fatigue, and when you eat, drink, sleep, exercise or engage in sexual activity.”

Sam blushed. Nick winked at him making him blush harder. Sam was distracted when Doctor Grainger rose to get the portable monitor. She had him remove his shirt and watch, then she strapped the smaller band around his upper arm. A tube ran down from it to his wrist where a large watch-like strap recorded the readings.
“No getting it wet, no removing it to wash, and it may pinch as it inflates,” She instructed. “When you come in tomorrow, we should have a clearer picture. If you do have mild hypertension I will be recommending a low salt diet, sleeping in a left lateral position, and some relaxation techniques for you, but today I want you to act normally.”

Dean jumped to his feet when they emerged, wrinkling his brow at the monitor and how Sam was carrying his shirt and hoodie. Nick explained about the monitoring on their way to the car. Sam concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Inside the Lexus, Nick made to insert the key into the ignition but Sam’s hand stayed him.

“I’m freaking out.” Sam huffed.

“Sammy?” Dean asked urgently from the back seat.

Nick’s forehead creased and he rubbed Sam’s arm in between the two straps.

“I’ve gotta wear this thing and act normal,” He emitted a high pitched hysterical laugh, “Normal? Fuck.”

“I think you’ll find you mean Fuck Normal.” Dean tried to joke.

“They’ll all want to know why I’ve gotta wear it.” Sam hissed thinking of having to lie and evade his housemates.

“I thought you told your friends about the blood pressure,” Nick said calmly.

“But Jess’s send off is tonight. Just a few guys and sorority chicks, for like drinks and crap, but I can’t drink now can I?” Sam sighed, looked at Dean in the rear view mirror, and continued, “’bout tomorrow, Dean, I know about the invites to come around our place and the massive bags of chips stuffed everywhere were a dead giveaway.”

“It’s a casual thing, not a birthday party,” Dean protested, “Brady and Jess organized it.”

“I sound like an old party popper but I don’t want that. I don’t want to have to worry that it will turn into the house party to end all house parties. I don’t want to have to clean up the Lacrosse team’s puke from the carpets. I don’t want to have a pitcher of beer shoved in my hand and have a chant start for me to chug it down.” Sam knew he was getting worked up but he needed to get it off his chest, “And I’m not ungrateful to the guys, to you, Dean, but I…”

“We didn’t invite half of Stanford and you can tell ‘em you’re on meds that can’t mix with alcohol,” Dean suggested.

“You’ve haven’t been at a full on party yet, Dee,” Sam hung his head, “Andy and Ash might bring ‘gifts’. And then Sarah’s Scott got us all tickets to the National Rugby Final matches and Brady’s stewarding and expects us to go. And Jess wants us at the Cinquo de Mayo party at Greek House, and God, if I wasn’t… I mean if things were normal, I’d be into all of it, but I’m too tired, too worried, and I’ve got a frickin monitor on me like a freaking criminal on probation.”

Dean snorted.

“Oh, yeah, you can laugh, you’re not the stinky one not permitted to shower.”

Nick grinned then too.
“Stop laughing at the pregnant man,” Sam poked his partner in the arm.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said mid laughter, “You are so cute when you are moody.”

“Who’s moody?” Sam shot back but with a smile.

“Come home with me,” Nick urged, “Stay at mine.”

“What?” Sam breathed and looked back at Dean.

Nick turned in his seat, “If it's alright with you, Dean, and you are welcome to come too.”

“Naw. It’s cool. I was gonna duck out of Jess’s send off early. Cas is driving back from his interview at Fresno High. We’re going to see the late show of Phone Booth.” Dean quirked his lips, “And I’m staying over with Cas because I have work tomorrow.”

Sam chuckled, “Yeah, you’ll get tons of sleep.”

“I sure will. Cas has classes tomorrow too.” Dean said with a defiant pout.

“So, Sam, will you come?” Nick asked again, “I’ll drop you back tomorrow for your classes, come take you to the clinic, and later we can do a takeout Birthday feast. No work tomorrow and we’ll hold it early? Your housemates are welcome to come, and anyone else you want there. Maybe your man would like to be there, Dean? Stay with me for the weekend, what do you say, Sam?”

“Would you mind, Dean?” Sam asked. He thought Dean might have planned to spend their free time together for his birthday, but no matter where he slept Sam still had classes and his new doctor’s appointment.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Dean leaned into the space between the front seats, “Better than staying here. Jess was gonna bake a cake, but if you are leaving the ‘pala here then I can give Brady and Cas a ride, and Jess could bring Sarah and the cake. What do you want to do, Sam?”

The emotional rollercoaster was swinging again. Sam gulped air, “I want to go home with Nick. But I don’t want you or the guys to miss my birthday.”

Nick leaned over for a chaste kiss and finally got the car started.

“Sorted.” Dean pronounced, “Can you guys drop me at the house?”

“Of course,” Nick said as he pulled into traffic.

“I need to pack a bag,” Sam added, “You sure you’re OK, Dean?”

“Peachy,” Dean eye rolled, “Samantha Princess of Fussy-land. Cas and I will be chillin’”

“Chilling? Seriously?” Sam snorted.

“Hey I’m chilled.”

Sam harrumphed but his brother had convinced him that he was cool with the change of plan.

They dropped Dean and called in to The Gates of Hell, so that Nick could check that all would run fine in his absence. Nick raided a savory fish pie from the chill room for their evening meal and they headed home to Moss Beach.
An hour later under warm evening sun and with ozone sea air filling his lungs Sam leaned back into the cushioned bench seat. They were in partial shade on the terrace under the upper storey balcony of Nick’s home. Sam had found an old white wide sleeved poplin shirt of Nick’s and was wearing it over the monitor with sleeves rolled back to mid forearm and the top buttons open. Nick slipped his arm around Sam’s shoulders.

“Our little Bean.” Nick directed his words at Sam’s belly, “We are going to love you so much.”

Sam bit down on his lip. The blood pressure cuff chose that minute to inflate and thankfully distract him from another fit of weepiness.

“I don’t want you to be stressed about anything, Sam,” Nick’s earnest gaze met Sam’s eyes, “Any problems, we will face them together and we’ll find the solution.”

All Sam’s problems seemed monstrous. He didn’t know where to start. He took a deep breath. “More huge looming storm clouds than little bumps.”

Nick half smiled, “Well, let’s break ‘em down to rain drops and I’ll deploy the umbrella.”

Sam laughed in spite of the heavy topic, imagining Nick chasing after him in a downpour with an open umbrella.

“Hit me,” Nick said and pursed his lips in readiness.

“What?”

“Hit me with a cloud.”

“That sounds ridiculous,” Sam huffed, his humor rising.

“Come on Thor, hammer me.” Nick grinned.

“I am no Thor.” Sam ducked his eyes.

“Zeus, then, my handsome Greek God, after all Zeus gave birth to Athena.” Nick suggested his fantasy in a reasonable tone.

“I think you will find that she sprung from his head,” Sam chuckled.

“Head Smead,” Nick wrinkled his nose.

“OK,” Sam conceded when he had finished a silent upper body shaking laugh, “My degree, my grade average, my scholarship…”

“Okkaaay, I see three separate issues. Firstly I will do everything in my power to make sure you graduate. I don’t know if you’ll want to defer a semester or take a period of reduced classes…”

“My scholarship, I can’t,” Sam choked out.

Nick grabbed his hand, “Listen, my love, you can’t be discriminated against for your pregnancy. Remember Luther, the gender rights lawyer, I bet he’d love to take a case, but I bet even more that Stanford has a way to offer aid and assistance to pregnant students, and yeah, maybe you won’t be able to meet the terms of your specific scholarship, but we’ll sort it out. If you want I’ll come with you to the campus financial assistance people, your dean of students, whoever, and if you need to take out a loan…”
“I already have a small loan, and that was a bitch to get without parental backing.”

“Sam,” Nick said with slight admonishment to pull Sam’s attention to him, “If you need a more substantial loan, then I can go guarantor. I’ve told you that there are no loans on my business. If I can’t use my money to underwrite my partner’s career, my child’s other Daddy’s education, then what use is it?”

“I couldn’t ask,” Sam gulped.

“You didn’t. I offered. If it comes to that, then there won’t be an issue.” Nick snuggled in closer. “I’ll take payment in kisses.”

“Will you?” Sam huffed.

“I will,” Nick cupped his cheek and kissed the corner of his lips. Sam opened up and they met in a delicious soft exploration of lips and tongue. He closed his eyes and let the kiss linger. Nick’s hands moved under the old shirt pressing and almost holding Sam together. Nick moved to nibble at Sam’s jaw and suck a renewing mark over a fading hickey near his collar bone. Sam let out a moan of pleasure and ran his fingers through Nick’s hair.

“I need to note this,” He muttered.

“This is kissing, not sex,” Nick protested between rapid kisses to Sam’s neck.

Sam teased, “Feels like.”

Nick grinned and began to open the few closed shirt buttons, “Do you have to write it down if I do this?”

Sam said nothing, fascinated at every move of Nick’s fingers as he undid the button of Sam’s jeans.

“Or this?”

Sam shook his head, panting uncoiling desire as Nick’s hand slide down and carefully freed his hardening cock.

“Or this?” Nick smirked before taking the tip between his lips and wrapping his hand around Sam’s length.

Gasping, “Oh Nick, Oh God, more.” Sam lost it. He didn’t last long. Not as long as he wanted, but the heat of Nick’s mouth and the flick of his tongue was too much. He strained forward. Nick pulled off and gave a last few talented jerks with pressed in fingertips. Sam shuddered as he came. Nick seemed to climb up his body to join their lips for another lengthy embrace.

“I ruined your shirt,” Sam giggled. “You should have stopped, you know?”

“Really?” Nick chuffed as he retook his spot and let Sam curl under his arm.

“I’m not writing the doctor a porno diary.” Sam gave a fake pout, “And I’m filthy.”

Nick stroked his hair and murmured, “I’ll run us a nice hot bath soon.”

“Promise?” Sam asked, body languid and sated, only briefly considering that his arm would have to stay dry and that the bath would have to be marked on the sheet too.
Standing in Nick’s arms waiting for the rest of their food order to arrive, Sam commented, “Thought no longer being a teenager would be sort of momentous or something.”

“Your brother seems to think it is,” Nick laughed as the delivery van pulled into the plot.

Dean had brought the poignant sketch of them as children, that Sam had first touched in Dean’s room in Arkansas. It had been professionally framed and formed part of Sam’s birthday gift along with a new mechanic’s tool set for the Impala, which Sam suspected actually meant Dean was giving him the gift of servicing the engine.

It was easy to slip into a feeling of being comfortable in the shelter of Nick’s embrace. Sam watched as Nick took paper bags from the delivery girl and paid her with a decent tip for being early. It was those little generous touches that made his affections bloom further. Like earlier when Nick had kept hold of his hand at the medical clinic. Sam’s hypertension was blessedly on the mild end of the spectrum but it would have to be monitored and watched closely during his pregnancy. Dr Grainger had been pleased that they could avoid medicating his condition but tagged on her repeated anti-stress warnings.

They had come home in buoyant mood. Sam had showered while Nick tidied up for their guests and set his stack of Rat Pack CDs to play.

Sam was on the terrace when Dean arrived in a blaze of Impala engine and AC/DC with Castiel, Brady and Jessica, bearing a large party cake with twenty lit sparklers. The others had sent their best wishes. Sam knew they hadn’t bailed, rather they had been considerate enough to respect his wish to keep it low key. Sarah was up to her eyeballs helping her rugby fly-half boyfriend with the influx of other college teams but had sought out Sam at Stanford that morning and given him a new Cardinals sweatshirt. It would be perfect in the future for hiding an early baby bump but Sam had left that reason for being pleased unsaid.

Dean and Castiel spread all the cutlery, napkins and seasonings for their Thai choices on the coffee tables, while Castiel groused about how the Fresno School Board didn’t like him. Dean nodded sympathetically but Sam knew his brother was glad Castiel wouldn’t be moving a few hours away. Nick and Brady turned the recliner by the window, the squishy armchair and the fireside two-seater so that they faced each other. Jess had taken over Nick’s spacious kitchen and was slicing strawberries and whisking cream for their cake-dessert. Brady took station behind Nick’s corner bar, bravely staying put when Nick threatened his manhood if he broke anything.

When she joined them in the family room, Jessica cornered Sam about his health. He felt uncomfortable lying to her about fictional pills that prevented him from partaking of alcohol, but he wanted to keep knowledge of the precious new life he was carrying strictly between him, Dean and Nick for a while longer.

With his mouth and belly pleasantly full of Pad Thai and stolen bites of Nick’s Massaman curry, Sam was content to listen in as they all compared hometowns in some sort of contorted competition to see whose was lamest or best depending on the turn of their conversation. There seemed to be some consensus that Castiel had the most soybean producing and the most obscure hometown between Pontiac and Peoria. Brady was not permitted to claim the whole metropolis of Chicago so grudgingly narrowed his home place down to Forest Glen. Dean surprised Sam by promoting Lawrence, seeing as they hadn’t lived there since he was five. Jessica and Nick had a rapid fire debate about the community spirit in Montpelier versus Ilchester, until Nick conceded that he had lived more of his life in California than any other state.
“So have I,” Sam commented lazily.

“Huh?” Dean asked from his spot on the two-seater with Cas.

“Add together that half year we spent living in the trailer behind Jefferson’s Auto, my last year of high school in Irwindale, and almost two years in Palo Alto. Even Sioux Falls doesn’t tally up as far,” Sam reasoned out.

“Geez Sam, that makes me an Arkie,” Dean grumbled.

Sam grinned, glad Dean could joke about his enforced residence in The Ozarks. His cell began to vibrate towards Nick’s glass of Johnnie Walker Blue. He flicked it open suspecting a wasted Andy, Ash and Tracy greeting but Bobby’s name lit up the screen. He pushed it towards Dean so he could see, before excusing himself to take the call.

“Hey Bobby,” Sam grinned as he headed to the kitchen.

“Guess it’s your birthday,” Bobby greeted.

“Thanks,” Sam interpreted that as a Bobbyism for Happy Birthday.

“Sent ya one of those belts my friend Rufus makes, y’know the ones you like.”

“Thanks Bobby. I didn’t get it yet but thanks,” Sam smiled privately thinking that it was years ago when he’d admired Bobby’s leatherworker friend’s craftsmanship, but he’d cheer when he finally got his hands on an example of Rufus’s work, although his waistline was about to go into hyperspace expansion. He wondered if he should tell Bobby.

“Are you listening to a damn word I said?”

“Hmm, no, sorry?” Sam winced.

“You with people, Sam?” Bobby asked.

“I’m at my boyfriend’s place with Dean and the guys.” Sam answered glad to be on safer territory.

“I’ll keep it short then, call me when you get a chance, and catch me up on how you and Dean are. You are both OK, aren’t you, son?”

Sam’s breath caught. He gripped the cell tight, “Bobby, I’m having a baby.”

“One second there, Sam. I think I need to get my ears cleaned out because I thought you said you’re pregnant.”

Sam chewed on his lip, “Uh-huh, yeah.”

“Darn it boy, how are you going to keep that a secret from your Daddy?” Bobby sighed loudly.

“He’s out of the picture, Uncle Bobby.” Sam thinned his lips and said bitterly, “He’s not welcome here.”

“Shucks, boy. You want to have this baby?”

“I do,” Sam said softly, “Nick and I, we were surprised. Hell, we were shocked, but yeah, we want him or her.”
“OK then. I’m gonna have to meet this Nick person. Tell him I’ll take it out of his hide if he hurts you.” Bobby growled.

Sam leaned against the pantry door and let Bobby’s gruff concern raise his spirits.

“I’ll try to talk your Daddy outta any notion he gets about heading your way.” Bobby promised.

“You seen him?” Sam asked.

“He breezed through here after the Elkins job on his way to Minnesota. Wanted a bag of tools he’d left in the shop.” Bobby huffed, “Told him you were doing good but the old fool only gave me a grumble about your buttheadness for taking Dean out of the hospital.”

“Dickass.” Sam spat.

“He sure is.” Bobby agreed. “Well I suppose I’d better get looking for baby mechanic overalls.”

Sam snorted, “That’ll be for Dean’s babies.”

“He still with his teacher boyfriend?”

“Yeah, they’re here.”

“Good. Don’t forget I’m here if you need anything.” Bobby added.

Sam thanked him again before they ended the call. Coming back from the kitchen, Sam met Dean at the bottom of the stairs.

“Bobby gone?” Dean asked.

“Yeah,” Sam winced guiltily and held out his cell, “Sorry, I didn’t think. You wanna call him back?”

“It’s fine,” Dean nodded, “Is he good?”

“Yeah,” Sam whispered, “I told him.”

“You did?” Dean inclined his head and turned out his bottom lip thoughtfully, but he didn’t seem too shocked.

“He’s cool.” Sam added.

“Knew he would be.” Dean nodded.

“Oh yeah?” Sam checked. There had been trepidation as Sam had blurted his news to their surrogate uncle, but deep down Sam had known that Bobby was a rock of support for both brothers.

Sam gave a sigh of tension release. Dean gave him an assessing look. Sam smiled, “Are you OK, Dee?”

“Me? I’m good.” Dean claimed.

“I know this must be hard for you, y’know, bringing back memories,” Sam tried to draw him out.

“No, Sammy. I’m happy for you,” Dean insisted with his jaw tight.
Sam saw his deft avoidance of how the pregnancy was affecting Dean, but he wasn’t going to probe here and now. Instead he tried to transmit his deep abiding love for his big brother in a few words said with feeling, “I’m happy you’re here, Dean.”

Dean ducked his head at the transmitted emotion. He looked at his boots as he confided, “You know I used to think of you all day on May 2nd?”

Sam caught his sleeve and tugged on the material until Dean permitted a back patting hug. “I’d wish you were with me every year.”

“It’s alright, Sam. I’m happy I’m here too.” Dean squeezed his arms around Sam, “Happy Birthday, Sammy.”

The void that had carved into Sam’s soul at twelve years old had been repairing and filling since he had re-found his brother. The hug, which tightened to bone crushing, seemed to seal over any ragged edges of those old hard times. In that moment Sam felt that no matter what shit rained down on them, they’d face it and win.

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Chapter End Notes

I’d hoped to post sooner but RL was rocky this week. Couldn’t get in the headspace for writing until midweek. I am happy with the chapter but I hope it reads well for you all.

Next chapter will be Dean’s POV.
“You haven’t spoken yet Dean.” Victor commented patiently, “There are ten minutes gone.”

Dean nodded almost imperceptibly to show that he was listening. He hugged his knees tighter. The photograph was burning a hole in his pocket. He slipped his left hand up over his wrist so he could grip his leather cuff tightly.

“Dean?”

Moistening his lips Dean focused on the faded denim covering his kneecaps, “I’m not supposed to say.”

That got Victor jerking upright in his chair, “You can say anything within these four walls, confidentially and privately.”

“I know.” Dean whispered.

“Do you want to write it down? Would that help?” Victor offered.

Dean shook his head. He let down his legs and poked into his pocket. The grainy black and white ultrasound picture of his niece or nephew came out face up between his fingers.

He passed it to Victor.

“Sam isn’t telling people.” Dean bit his lip. “He’s having Nick’s baby.”

Victor raised his brows.

“It was a surprise.” Dean let out a nervous laugh, “I was kinda shocked. Couldn’t tell you last time, because I was… I dunno… crossing every digit that Sam wouldn’t change his mind and want to get rid of it, because I’d have been there for him, but it would have been too hard… too close.”

“They are sure that they’re keeping the baby?” Victor checked.

“Sam’s calling it The Grape now. They could see the heartbeat jumping on the screen at the scan.”

“What do you feel about becoming an Uncle?”

“I’m cool. I mean it’s cool. Uncle Dean,” He tried the words out for size liking how they felt on his tongue.
“How is Sam? Are you concerned?” Victor asked carefully.

“He was hacking chunks of food into the porcelain bowl this morning,”’ Dean ran a hand over his own mouth in an unconsciously empathetic move, “He spewed in the Impala yesterday. Morning sickness has kinda wacked him over the head in the last couple of weeks. I’m trying to cook stuff he’ll like, but who wants green olives on everything?”

Victor smiled, “So he’s got an olive craving?”

“He says The Grape wants them and if Nick is there they do this sly eye-smile sharing. I know something went down with olives when they did the deed but I’m not asking, y’know.” Dean cocked an eyebrow at his psychiatrist.

“So things are good, but you must have worries about it, otherwise wouldn’t you have been bursting in here with the good news?”

“Naw, Man, like I said. Sam isn’t telling people, though the dudes at the house are nearly wearing freaking Michael Jackson germ-masks in case they catch Sam’s lingering gastro flu. I saw him putting on his baggy sweatshirt. He isn’t all gym ribbed and abs anymore. He’s gonna have to tell soon.” Dean paused with a sigh. “The doctors are keeping an eye on Sam’s blood pressure ‘cause it’s dipping up and down from normal to too high, and he thought the doctor at the scan treated him like a medical anomaly so Nick’s taking him to a new one, and there’s all the stuff hanging over him, like how he’ll do college in the fall when he’s in his last trimester.”

Victor hummed. He prompted, “But there is something else?”

“They say he is at 10 weeks. They were able to work it out because Nick and Sam are sure of the fertilization date.” Dean took a shuddering breath, “I was ten or eleven weeks when I lost my baby.”

“Are you worried that will happen to Sam?”

“Not really,” Dean looked up, “You see the picture. The little thing is snug as a bug, not trapped in a funky old tube. Sam’s body did a bang up job.”

Victor was quick to ask, “Do you think the miscarriage was your fault?”

“Well it was my body wasn’t it? And I didn’t exactly take good care of it.” Dean huffed, “I drank liquor, I went without food, and when I found out, I panicked and didn’t go to a clinic. When I was cramping I keep going.”

“You were seventeen and alone.”

“I was carrying a child, and I failed them.” Dean hung his head.

“No, Dean, you didn’t.” Victor spoke clearly, “There was nothing that could have been done.”

“How can you know? Maybe I could have saved my… my…” Dean’s breath shuddered and his voice dried up.

“Dean, I graduated with a medical degree before I specialized in psychiatry and I can tell you, that you did nothing wrong. Ectopic pregnancies and miscarriages happen, and sadly these losses are not preventable. It was this time of year wasn’t it?”

Dean gulped, “A couple weeks ago, right after Sam’s birthday,” He scrubbed his running nose with
the back of his hand, adding softly “Seven years ago.”

“It’s alright to remember, you know, and to talk about your loss.”

Dean nodded because Victor expected it, but he didn’t feel like it was alright. It felt like burning barbed pokers were driven through his heart, making him remember not only the lost scrap of life but the years of hell that followed.

Victor seemed to sense that he had probed enough and asked, “Last time you told me about Jessica Moore moving into the sorority house. Have you and Sam sorted out your summer living arrangements?”

“Way to go from one freak out subject to another Doc.” Dean huffed.

“So I take it you can’t stay in Cowper Street?”

Dean twisted his fingers together. “I like it there. I like our room. Spider likes the windowsill. I see Cas coming and going when I sit there.” He sighed, “Brady’s been recalled by his father to work at his firm. Sam says Brady’s Dad is a nice guy but he has plans for his son. Brady says he’ll probably be stuck in the mailroom and he wants to share again in after summer. Sarah was all shady for a few days until she came and announced that she and Scott have exchanged promise rings and will live together when they re-unite. Sam got all dopy and weepy. I blame his hormones. And then Andy…” Dean couldn’t suppress a laugh, “His mother turned up unexpectedly and caught him mid-bong. He is moving back into dorms next year, because we all corrupted him according to Mommie Dearest.”

“That means you are not keeping the lease?”

Dean uh-huhed. “We’ve gotta move out end of next month. Sam says there’ll be plenty of rentals vacant ’cause anyone not taking summer classes will be gone, but,” Dean’s chest heaved, “We’ll need somewhere baby-friendly, and Brady friendly.”

Victor laughed at Dean’s lame joke. “I’m sure Sam is a capable lodgings hunter. After all he found your current residence.”

“Yeah, it’s another change, y’know.”

Victor leaned forward, like he did when he was about to say something profound or Dean had surprised him, “I have seen that you have great tenacity and resilience in dealing with issues as they arise. You need to have more faith in your own ability to deal. I’m sure that will come with time but I get the feeling there is more on your mind.”

“Cas got called back by two schools.” Dean pinched the hem of his black tee between his fingers.

“From your subdued tone I take it they aren’t in the locality.”

Dean shook his head, “Shoreline Unified District and The Kershel Academy. He likes ‘em both. But they’re not close. I don’t want him to go. I won’t want him to leave me, everyone leaves me.”

“Pardon?”

“Dad left me, and I know Sammy didn’t but it took years for him to find me. Caleb dumped my deranged ass,” Dean snorted. Victor opened his mouth to presumably ask Dean not to make self-deprecating comments, but Dean continued, “I’m sure your head shrinking is going at warp speed and you’re adding my Mom’s death and the baby onto the list.”
“Sam hasn’t left you,” Victor pointed out, “and many times people left your young lives because you moved on to another city.”

“Like Aaron, like the guys back at ACIC, yeah. I get it. Life marches on. I guess the house breaking up is ripping into me more than I thought.” Dean took a beat, “I kinda put my foot in it with Sammy.”

“You did?” Victor prompted when Dean didn’t add more.

“I said we could ask Garth for help with the house search, ‘cause he’d have to help me, wouldn’t he and Sam’s pregnant?”

“That is true.” Victor nodded, “You may both be entitled to assistance with housing.”

“Sam freaked. He said the CPS weren’t getting anywhere near his baby, and that he didn’t need a fucking social worker, and I should keep my bright ideas to myself.” Dean flushed as he relived Sam’s vitriol and his later emotional apology, “And he’s right. It was a dumb thing to say.”

“Maybe you could have been more tactful or chosen your moment better. But it was a legitimate suggestion, Dean.”

Dean checked that Victor wasn’t soft soaping him, but the psychiatrist’s gaze was genuine.

“Does your brother find it difficult to accept help?”

Dean thought for a minute. “I suppose. I’ve been in the fricking system so long that I’d forgotten how petrified we were of social workers and the CPS catching up with us and splitting us apart. I figure Sam thinks they’d appoint a case worker to his baby. But I didn’t tell Garth that Sammy is pregnant. I asked him about help for single fathers and then had to almost pee on a stick to convince him that I wasn’t pregnant.”

Victor cocked a sideways smile, “Sounds like you got tangled up in knots.”

Dean huffed and tightened his jaw ruefully, “Then Balthazar offered to put us up at his house, if we have nowhere or there is a delay between leases, and even said he would be fine if we needed to stay there until Brady comes back and we link up with other students. But then I sleep with Cas and Sam gets their sofa, which isn’t going to work, with a baby on the way.”

“So is there a solution?”

“If Sam tells Nick…” Dean stopped, “I want Sam to tell Nick. I bet Nick will ask us to live at his place. But maybe Sam wants to be independent, or he wants to focus on his summer exams, or it’s a stubborn thing about not imposing on Nick, but I know Nick would want him there.”

“Do you fear Sam will have as much pressure and stress for these exams?”

Dean twisted his lip, “He did good at the midterms, I dunno know. I hope not.”

“How about you pick a good time and suggest to Sam that he might tell Nick what is happening? You could say that Nick might hear of upcoming rentals from customers at his restaurant.”

“That’s genius. I’ll do that.” Dean decided he’d try to do it before Nick accompanied Sam to his new obstetrician appointment and Sam entered the final cramming stage for his end of year exams.

“We have a few minutes left. Do you have anything from your journal that you want to raise?
Anything else you’d like to bring up?”

Dean sucked in his lips and bit down. He looked at his boots as he said, “Wanna quit work but then everything with be all messed up and like in flux, and I’ll have nothing to hold onto…”

“Slow down Dean,” Victor urged. “Take a breath.”

Dean did as instructed and waited for a question.

“OK. Why do you want to quit Greengoods? I was under the impression that things had improved.” Victor twirled his pen between his fingers while Dean got his thoughts together.

“I fucking hate the place,” Dean bit the inside of his cheek, “I don’t hate the guys, but…” He sighed, “Sometimes I want to yell ‘fuck off and leave me alone’. It’s partially my deal, y’know. Take finishing time, Zach, who is a big bag of dicks on a good day, has this new thing because some of the crew were hanging around the clocking machine before they were due to go home. So now Mitchell has to make sure we are working on the floor until seconds to go, and King Dickhead patrols it.”

“And were you one of the people pulled up for waiting to clock out?”

“No,” Dean said quickly, “But ya see before when I finished my cage, pallet, whatever and there wasn’t enough time to bring a whole other one out from the warehouse, then I’d tidy around or check if the warehouse guys needed help. But now we have to run another roll cage.”

Victor nodded but Dean could see he would have to explain why that was an issue.

“It’s like when I’m given a job to do, I see it through, yeah?” Dean puffed a breath, “I don’t do things by halves, so I’ll pack it all out and then maybe be ten or more minutes late going home. Which is wrong, it’s like taking advantage of us because some douches were stealing two or three minutes from Mr. Adler.”

Victor looked at Dean thoughtfully, “And what do the others do if they have a half a, what do you call them, a cage? When it is their time to go home?”

“They roll it back into the warehouse with stuff left on it.”

“Well, if that is acceptable to your supervisors, then why don’t you do that?” Victor said reasonably.

“Because it makes me feel like crap. Like I didn’t get my job done.” Dean seethed, “Take this morning. It was twelve minutes after when I clocked out and Mr. Alder saw me, and do you know what he said? Not ‘thanks Dean for staying to finish that cage’, but he says ‘Only leaving now?’ the motherfucker.”

“Dean,” Victor said patiently and leaned forward, “What do you do at home if say… you are mopping the kitchen and the doorbell rings?”

Dean chuffed a laugh, “I cuss the person under my breath as I go answer it.”

“And say you are mid-sketch in the park and it begins to rain?”

“I cuss God for the rain, dash home and try to finish the drawing in my bedroom.” Dean nodded, “OK Mr. Smarty Pants, you got me. I like to get things finished and I feel panicky and grumpy if I can’t do that.”
“It’s all part of your anxiety disorder. But why not take this opportunity to work on that symptom. Put your crates of vegetables away at 10am, tell your supervisor you are finished, and go home knowing you have not failed in any way. Say to yourself ‘My work is done. I have done all that was expected of me. I succeeded today,’ and see how that works out.”

Dean snorted, “I don’t think I’ll be saying that mantra, but I could try rolling stuff back and saying ‘All done for today’ or something.”

“Whatever works.” Victor smiled.

“Or I could quit the shithole.” Dean grouched. “I’ll give your way a shot, but maybe once we’ve a roof over our heads for the summer, I’m going to check in with Garth about changing jobs again.”

“Good. That is a positive pro-active way to handle things. Don’t leave a job until you have another lined up.” Victor looked at his watch. “That’s it for today Dean. You can update me on your work and on Sam at our next session, and remember everything doesn’t have to be perfect, yes?”

“Yeah. Thanks man.” Dean rose to go, “I dunno how you do it, but I feel better than when I came in.”

“Glad to hear it,” Victor nodded, “You take care now.”

There was lightness to Dean’s step as he made his way to Beans for an after-session beverage. Sam usually picked him up but the Impala’s upholstery was being steam cleaned after the unfortunate puking incident. He sent Sam a text asking if he was OK and telling him he was pit-stopping for coffee. Dean had his light green army jacket over his black tee. The sun warmed him as he took his time mulling over Victor’s advice and gearing up his resolve to finish his work shift the next morning without doing unnecessary and unappreciated extra time. Sam texted back to say he’d collected the Impala and that he had gotten the door open before he lost his lunch at the stop lights by the AT&T store. Dean laughed internally as he sent back congratulations on his brother’s improving projectile vomit aim.

Opening the door Dean felt the heat of a busy coffee shop hit his face. He guessed Beans weren’t pumping up the AC just yet. He could see Tamara and their new barista bustling to serve a short queue. Unexpectedly in the far corner there was the welcome sight of Castiel’s side face as he lifted a bowl sized cappuccino to his lips. Dean shucked his jacket, draping it over his arm as he made his way towards the table. He was preparing to surprise Cas by touching the shoulder of his sky blue tee that Dean liked so much. As he got closer he noticed Castiel was not alone. There was a tall slender brown haired guy wearing a beige Henley taking a sip from an espresso cup. Any doubt that Cas was sharing a table with a stranger vanished when the dude began conversing animatedly with Cas. When Castiel nodded and returned the guy’s smile, Dean narrowed his eyes. Dean wasn’t jealous or threatened by Castiel having friends, but this dude was a stranger and they seemed so relaxed with each other. Dean chewed on his lip trying to convince his racing mind that the reason they were seated so close into each other’s personal space, was because the coffee shop was busy. Castiel couldn’t see Dean’s approach as his nervous boyfriend threaded his way through the few central tables. Dean’s palm tingled with the imminent sensation of the back of the vacant chair next to Castiel under his hand. He would pull it out, say hi, and steal a kiss.

Dean was startled when the guy rose without warning. Castiel followed suit. His eyes nearly came out on stalks as the two men hugged. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Castiel leaned forward and pecked the dude’s cheek. Dean’s forward movement stuttered awkwardly, suddenly conscious of the scar bisecting his own cheek. Castiel had kissed the guy. Dean tried to parse why. Maybe this was another one of Balthazar’s siblings, Castiel’s cousin, but Cas wasn’t on such
friendly terms with the rest of his family. He was right behind Cas now, but his legs were
deadweight and his arms hung useless by his side.

The kiss-thieving guy air-kissed over Castiel’s shoulder, then eased out of the embrace and grasped
both of Castiel’s hands in his. What the fuck? That was enough. Dean summoned every ounce of
wronged-boyfriend-indignation and coughed pointedly.

Castiel turned, blue eyes wide and searching. Dean’s heart stopped expecting guilt or shock to mar
his boyfriend’s features, but Cas beamed at him.

“Dean! Come meet Inias,” He urged, extending an arm to draw Dean in, “I’ve been talking about
how we met.”

“I’m impressed,” Inias’s narrow face seemed to expand in a broad smile of greeting, “The Baader-
Meinhof phenomenon.”

Dean melted, all the ice of his fears rushing away. He recalled those first few words exchanged
with Castiel.

“Inias shared classes for our biology minor when I transferred to Stanford.” Castiel explained. “We
met up again at the Shoreline interviews at Bodega High.”

Dean asked diplomatically, “And y’both were close at Stanford?”

Inias seemed to pick up on Dean’s challenge faster than Castiel who said affectionately, “Inias was
my guide at the Biology faculty.”

Inias added, “I was telling Castiel how much I’d love him to meet my partner and our daughter.”

Dean’s tensed muscles relaxed. He finally took the vacant seat. Castiel sat next to him and
threaded their fingers together. Inias stayed standing and apologized that he had to hit the road. He
said he hoped to meet Dean again. Dean shook his hand and prepared to extract more details from
Cas.

The interrogation was delayed while Cas got Dean a tall roast blend of the day.

“Spill.” Dean demanded when Castiel came back.

Of course Cas had to do that adorable head tilted narrowed eye questioning thing that made any
heat leach out of Dean’s clarifying words, “Inias, spill the beans?”

“Oh.” Castiel puffed. “He is a teacher now. Teaches Social Science. He graduated two years before
me, not being a half-time student. Did his teaching degree at Berkeley and got kept on by the
school where he did his placement.”

“Lucky bastard,” Dean grumbled, sending mental daggers to Menlo Park High for not wanting to
keep Cas.

Castiel huffed in acknowledgment. “It was nice to see a familiar face when they gave us a tour of
the school, and he was passing through Palo Alto on his way back from visiting family.”

Dean took a long drink of his coffee, “Soooo just to be clear, the dude is your work colleague and
you were hugging because…?”

Castiel chuckled, “Potential work colleague and he showed me a picture of his little daughter,
Dean figured he’d be churlish to have his nose out of joint because his boyfriend got mushy over a photo of a cutely named baby.

“Did you think…?” Castiel squinted. He pushed his head forward, “Dean, were you jealous?”

Dean cleared his throat and sat up straight.

“You were. You were jealous.” Castiel broke out a beaming toothy grin.

“Maybe.” Dean admitted.

“That is so cute,” Castiel shifted his chair closer.

Dean bumped their shoulders together. “Didn’t feel cute, felt burny and gack.”

“Dean those aren’t words. And it is very cutesy wootsey.”

“Stop, Cas.” Dean felt his cheeks flush under the teasing, and refrained from correcting his boyfriend about the legitimacy of the word wootsey.

“You are so kissable when you are offended.” Castiel pecked his cheek but with his cheek kiss Dean got an added squeeze around his waist and an offer to buy him any treat he wanted off Beans’ menu.

The consolation cherry almond pie was awesome. Mid-slice Castiel managed to coax out of Dean that he’d had a tough session with Victor after a shit day at work, but the silver lining was that the Impala had been fumigated.

Tamara was clearing the table next to them and interrupted, “Sorry, Castiel, Dean, I couldn’t help overhearing. You know if you are serious about changing jobs other Light Up Your Beans shops take Ticket to Work Beneficiaries.”

Dean poked Castiel with his fork, “You never told me that.”

“Only the bigger ones have tickets,” Tamara rescued Castiel, “But Ms. Kormos will be here next Saturday morning.”

Dean clicked his tongue. “I work Saturdays.”

“I can ask her, if Tamara will text me when she is due. I’ll make sure to be here.” Castiel offered. “I’d prefer to ask her face to face, rather than trying to get a call through to her. She is the big boss.”

“If all Beans are like this one…” Dean thought aloud, “Sam might give me the Impala if I’ve gotta commute a stretch.”

“One,” Tamara laughed, “Don’t shorten the name if you are talking to Ms. Kormos, and two I think you’d be great in a coffee shop. You’d move from bussing tables to barista in a flash, and the female clientele love a pretty face, voila I give you Castiel Fletcher.”

“I dunno,” Dean wasn’t too embarrassed at being called pretty because Castiel got the deserved, in his opinion, same tag from Tamara, “There’s times when the words won’t come.”

“But you talk all the time now,” Tamara exclaimed.
“But I know you,” Dean explained, “It’s tough some days, but I talk with customers at Greengoods most of the time, so I guess by the time I’d be trained as a barista… if I they have a vacancy and they wanted me.”

“They’d be dumbasses not to want you,” Castiel said with flagrant bias, “And once you start talking they wouldn’t be able to stop you. Tamara, fair warning, don’t mention the Buffy finale.”

“What?” Dean protested, “I have feelings about the show. They freaking killed Spike and Anya. I mean why kill Spike. It makes no sense.”

“See,” Castiel said smugly as Tamara was called back to the counter. “You ready to go home, Dean?”

With a final finger swipe at the cherry filling smear on his empty plate, Dean put on his jacket. Once Cas had unlocked his bike and moved to the edge of the sidewalk to guide it home, he offered his arm to Dean. His text to tell Sam he was going to Castiel’s place had been sent, so he happily linked elbows.

Castiel shouted for his cousin as they entered the house, but Balthazar was probably still at Harmonies. While Cas got two beers and a bag of paprika chips, Dean turned on the TV. Rolling news from Iraq came on screen. Dean decided he’d wait to see what Cas wanted to watch, although he probably could guess Discovery Channel. Instead of sitting down next to Dean, Castiel’s face was all scrunched up and he was searching his pockets and his wallet.

“What’s up?” Dean asked.

“Inias wrote his home and cell phone on a napkin for me. He said if I call him in a week or so, he’ll fill me in on any insider information he can procure from the staff at the high school.” Castiel huffed as he booted up the chunky laptop on the desk by the wall. “Excuse me a minute, Dean.”

Dean wandered over to see what Cas was doing. He rested his hand on Castiel’s warm shoulder watching as he brought up a phone listings site.

“Hey Cas, can you get anyone’s number on that site?”

“Yeah as long as they are listed.” Cas answered distractedly as he wrote down the listing for Inias Faith, “You want to look up something?”

Dean nodded. He made a quiet sigh of relief when Castiel got up to find the remote, giving him some privacy. The boxes wanted first and last names and city, zip or area code.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard suspended in sudden indecision. He gritted his teeth and typed Samuel Campbell and Lawrence. There were no matching results. He bit his lip, maybe they were dead. He didn’t like to think that but it was a possibility, one that made his guts twist with a loss he didn’t know he would feel. He tried Dean Campbell but hit another blank. Curling his fingers into his palm and pressing his nails into skin, Dean noticed a tab saying search options. When he clicked, he saw he could widen his criteria. Puffing a breath, he checked what Cas was doing. True to form the Discovery Channel was on screen, something about automated manufacturing. Dean watched German engineered robots fixing bolts into panels and hoped Cas might leave that on. He gave finding his grandfathers one last shot. He combined Campbell and Kansas knowing he’d get a crapload of results. Luckily they were alphabetical. He scrolled down until he found S & D Campbell, of Apartment 19, Pinelands Retirement Community, Eudora. Mouthing a silent ‘Yatzee’ he peeled off the top post-it from Castiel’s multi-colored block and scribbled down the telephone number. As he asked Cas if he should shut down windows, he
stuffed the note into his jeans pocket.

After the German robots had built a Porto-cabin, Cas extracted his body from Dean’s tentacle hold. He produced a box of salted caramel chocolates explaining that one of his students gave them to him.

“Another crush?” Dean teased.

Cas squinted at him and popped a chocolate into Dean’s open mouth. Dean moaned around the milky chocolate that broke into melting gooiness with a hit of salty sweetness. “Oh My God they are so good.”

“I know,” Cas said with self-satisfaction as he took one.

“I bet your mouth tastes of heaven,” Dean said in his best sultry tone.

Castiel got with the program. He climbed on the seat, kneeling between Dean’s legs. He leaned in, cupping Dean’s jaw and opening him up with a slow but insistent pressing of his tongue. Dean tasted along Castiel’s teeth and into the soft inside of his cheek. The sweetness continued into prolonged soft kisses and exploring gentle touches. They tingled Dean’s body and made him gasp. Castiel curled his hand around the back of Dean’s neck and aligned their bodies. Dean closed his eyes, breathing in Castiel’s presence. Small nibbling kisses made a trail along Dean’s jaw and down his neck. Dean ran his hands through Castiel’s hair wanting this moment to linger. They didn’t make a move for the bedroom, instead curling up together as daylight faded and the TV threw blue light on the ceiling. Dean cracked his neck and Castiel made room for them to be entangled in a mutually comfortable embrace.

“That was very satisfying,” Cas muttered.

“I’m so relaxed I could float up like one of those ashram dudes on the book covers in your cousin’s store.” Dean mumbled into Cas’s skin.

“No levitating away, I’m too sleepy,” Castiel murmured.

Dean snuggled in. It was exactly what he needed.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++

Dean heeded Victor’s advice. He didn’t down tools at 10am on the button, but once he had packed the box he was working on, or tidied the specific shelf he was stationed at, he put away his roll cage or cleaning materials and headed home. After a full week of his new rule, neither Mitchell or Mr. Alder had commented.

It was Sunday morning. Sarah and Ash had slept elsewhere. Brady had risen early and gone to the gym to burn off his excess exam energy. Their last classes of the year would be on Wednesday. Sam had designated their bedroom desk as a no-touch revision zone. Dean was fine with that. He had taken to sketching or writing his journal with his legs crossed on his futon.

If anyone asked, Dean had not found the recipe for fluffy blueberry pancakes in a girlie magazine that Sarah had left on the coffee table, and he definitely had not opened said magazine because of the cover mentioned article that promised the best of new season panties. He also was not dusting his created pancake stack with diced green olives.

“Sammy,” Dean curved his body out the family room door and yelled up, “Pancakes getting cold. Shake your butt.”
Under the assessing eye of a concerned brother, Sam looked reasonably well that morning. His color was good and he had put one of his loose tees over soft lounge pants. Dean was picking his battles and suggestions of expectant father clothes shopping were not high on his discussion list.

“Is this bribery?” Sam asked as he forked three pancakes onto his warmed plate and reached for the maple syrup.

Dean wondered where Sam got the psychic gene as he added a can of spray cream to the table. It was finally the right time to talk.

“I did want to talk about some stuff.” Dean admitted. “You want a de-caf?”

Sam nodded but looked at Dean suspiciously. “What?”

Dean scrubbed his hand over his mouth and chin, “About finding a new place to live…”

“Look Dean,” Sam blew a long breath, “I get it. You need to know where we are going, but I got this, once the exams are done, I’m on it.”

“I believe you.” Dean treaded carefully, “You know it’s alright to ask for help.”

“Excuse me?” Sam bristled. “Is this an intervention? You gonna get Garth in on this?”

Dean looked skyward for inspiration. “I could get a list of family friendly decent apartments from Garth, but I won’t do it, if you don’t want me to.”

He took a moment. Thankfully Sam didn’t interrupt, although Dean feared that was because his little brother was silent with anger.

“Sammy, I get help. Hell, I wouldn’t be here if Layla, Deacon, Victor, Cas, You didn’t offer me your help and support.”

“Dee, I…” Sam seemed lost for words.

“It’s not wrong to ask other people when you need a helping hand.” Dean gulped. “No-one will think less of you. I wouldn’t. Nick wouldn’t.”

“Geez, Dean. I don’t think that about you. No way. God, I think you are… you are so strong. I guess, I learned if I didn’t help myself and pull myself up by my bootstraps nobody else was gonna. I had to fight and claw my way here,” Sam sniffed back emotions, “On my own, and I wasn’t going to let anyone stop me. So it’s kinda hard when you learn not to ask.”

Dean mentally cursed their father. “I know I’m on a repeating loop here but I wish I’d been there for ya.”

Sam blinked back tears, “But this is on me Dean. I need to provide you with a place to live”

“Bullshit. Sammy. I’m your big brother.” Dean tried, “Let me help. Nick is almost on his knees pleading for ways to help.”

Sam was silent. He took a slurp of coffee. Dean thought that was a good sign.

“I believe you could find us great digs, Sam. I do. But why don’t you tell Nick about our hunt?” Dean raised his palm before Sam could have a seething mood swing, “He wants to help. It’s not asking for charity if you have that bullshit notion in your big brain. He is your partner. And he has his ear on the ground.”
“He has his what on the where now?” Sam asked around partially chewed pancake.

“At The Gates. People tell their bartender everything. He could be hearing of mega places coming up for rental.”

Sam hummed. “Yeah. I guess.”

Dean would have fist pumped if he didn’t think he’d be put in a headlock. He thought he might have to buy Victor a new red striped tie if all his advice hit home runs.

“Y’know Lucile Packard runs baby classes?” Sam asked before Dean could move onto the news that he had a post-it with their granddaddies’ phone number stuck in the back of his journal.

Dean nodded. When Sam and Nick had come back from meeting their new ob-gyn, Dr. Milton, they had been full of praise for Lucille Packard hospital and their straight talking practical doctor. Sam had leaflets on a range of classes that he was hoping Nick would take with him over the summer.

“There is one for the expectant parent and a sibling or close friend. Would you come?” Sam asked gingerly, “There might be babies and maybe other carriers?”

“Hey I love babies.” Dean grinned, knowing Sam was thinking that going to a children’s hospital might bring back bad memories, “Who do you think changed Gossie’s first diaper?”

Sam laughed, “Just as long as you didn’t name Chuck’s baby.”

“I know. You’re not thinking of anything like Gossamer or Tulle or Ball of Yarn, are you Sam?”

That got Sam to throw his head back and laugh in a way that brightened Dean’s day.

“So when we go in for the ultrasound after the exams, I’ll put us down for that class.” Sam said pleased.

While he was on a roll, Dean thought he’d stick his neck on the line, “You know, dude, soon that tee isn’t going to hide much.”

Sam leaned back in the chair letting the cotton stretch over his slightly thickened waistline. He drifted a hand down to rest on his belly.

“Will be bumpage code red, huh?” Sam smiled, “I guess. Sometimes it seems like forever until my due date in December, and then other times I can’t believe how fast… Anna said that I could have a small but pronounced bump by the end of this month.... I think…”

Dean finished his cold cup of coffee, while Sam paused.

“I think that once the exams are done, it will be time to share the little one’s arrival.”

Dean grinned, “Thank God Sammy. I hate keeping shit from Cas. He’s always asking how you are.”

“About that. I think it’s safe to tell Cas.”

“Now?” Dean checked.

“Well maybe not this minute but yeah. He’s not going to take out a full page spread with the news.”
Dean laughed, “You mean like Jess and Sarah would want to do, but they wouldn’t.”

“I was thinking more of Brady crowing it in the kitchen at work.” Sam chuckled.

The doorbell rang. Dean shoved back his chair, “We good Sam?”

“Golden,” Sam grinned.

On the stoop Castiel stood with his hands in his jeans pockets while Balthazar examined Sarah’s blue glass Turkish evil eye protection amulet that hung from a nail.

“Hi,” Dean pulled the door back.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel smiled.

“May we come in?” Balthazar asked.

“Sure dudes.” Dean gestured them by, “There’s fresh coffee in the pot, but it’s decaf. Sam’s in the kitchen.”

“Lovely home,” Balthazar commented, “Bigger than mine. I’m sorry you guys have to move.”

Sam waved hello. Castiel asked him if he was over his stomach bug. Sam replied that he was much better, which was true, as his morning sickness was now a sort of afternoon nausea with rare actual vomiting.

“How do you take it?” Dean asked Balthazar while he stirred two sugars and creamer into Castiel’s cup.

“Black, darling, like my heart.”

“You say the strangest things,” Castiel pursed his lips at his cousin while he took his cup from Dean.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Sam asked, his friendly tone putting their new visitor at ease.

Balthazar leaned against the refrigerator and crossed his ankles, “I would like to renew and reextend my charming invitation to the Winchester brothers to recline on my sofa and in my cousin’s bed as appropriate while you source new accommodations.”

“Balthazar,” Sam answered, “That is very kind of you but we couldn’t…”

“I have lived in a natural community…”

“Commune,” Castiel hissed playfully.

“Darlings. The more the merrier.” The blond beamed, “As long as dear Sam can extend his long limbs over the low arm of our sofa, we will be house fellows.”

Sam shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Dean didn’t say a word. It was up to Sam if he wanted to cover or tell.

“It’s a real generous offer, but I have another person to consider.” Sam said.

“Who?” Castiel asked, “Has Brady stood up to his father?”
“No,” Sam ducked his head and cupped his belly loosely with joined hands, “This little one. I’m expecting.”

“Sam!” Castiel leaped off his chair and surprised Sam with a rapid and back clapping hug. “That’s wonderful. It is wonderful? Isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Dean answered while Balthazar shook Sam’s hand and air-kissed over both of his cheeks, “It was freaking a bolt out of the blue, but now it’s magic.”

“Well my offer definitely bloody well stands now.” Balthazar insisted, “Dean’s bed isn’t a house fixture. Didn’t your partner buy it? I can clear furniture and you could have a proper bed in our lounge?”

“Thank you,” Sam promised to think about it, but Dean knew Sam didn’t fancy not having a bedroom. Dean could understand too that Sam might feel a bit anxious about living in Castiel’s home. Suspecting that Nick was going to insist that they live in Moss Beach with him, Dean was already preparing that the benefit of having his own room would be weighed against hearing sex-noises from his brother’s bedroom.

“Do you know if it is a boy or a girl?” Castiel asked.

“It’s too early,” Dean answered from his expert knowledge of the guys’ scans at ACIC, “If Sammy wants to know, it will be another few weeks.”

“I have news too.” Castiel said and reached for Dean’s hand, “Not as momentous, but there was a letter I was procrastinating over opening, until Balthazar threatened to read it out to me this morning. I’ve been offered a teaching position.”

Dean tensed. Castiel squeezed his hand.

“Where Cas?” Dean choked out.

“Bodega High,” Castiel answered, “It’s a small school, small class sizes but really up to date. They offer chemistry and biology now, but I suggested in my interviews that I’d set up an optional physics class for their gifted and AP students, and Inias heard that they loved that, so I got it. I got the job.”

Dean hugged his boyfriend tight in part congratulations and part possessiveness. Sam added his cheery well done.

“This won’t change anything Dean.” Castiel retook his hand and met Dean’s eye, “I swear to you. I might be teaching a couple of hours away, but we’ll make it work.”

Dean was comforted by the commitment in Castiel’s words and expression, but it was upsetting to imagine a long distance relationship, with their contact limited to weekends, and what if the school wanted Cas to get involved in weekend extra-curricular stuff. He became aware his mind had drifted. Cas was telling Sam and Balthazar about some Summer school event.

“Inias and Alfie have offered me a bed in their box room for the two week summer school job, and they’ll help me find an apartment for new term.” Castiel finished.

“Isn’t it a bit rich to expect you to work this summer?” Dean felt peeved that more precious time was being taken from them.

“No, Dean, not at all,” Castiel tilted his head, “It’s an opportunity to meet some of the other
teachers and to get to know the enthusiastic and AP students before term commences. They only
want me from Monday of one week until the Friday evening of the next.”

Dean could see how excited Castiel was. He tried to match his smiles and his joy but that little
undermining voice was in his head, driving him to crave a couple of chewed up chalky Xanax so
he could put a stop to its repetitive chant of ‘he is leaving you.’ He gripped Castiel’s hand tighter
hoping he would never have to let him go.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++

Chapter End Notes

The Shoreline Unified Schools District exists but the real High School for the
communities is in Tomales. I didn’t want to use a real school so I invented one in the
little town of Bodega Bay which in real life has only an elementary school.

Shout out to Nyx Ro on Fan Fiction who several chapters ago suggested that Dean
should be the one to point out to Sam that it is fine to ask for help. I will quote her
suggested words for Dean. She nicely put it that Dean could use “the irrefutable
argument "Do you think less of me because I receive help?".”

Next Chapter continues Dean POV, but anyone looking for mpreg Sam’s outlook, the
following chapter will be from Sam’s POV.

This week Tread Softly and my Season 8 to 9 hiatus fic Candy both surpassed 250
kudos. I am so delighted that you all like my writing. You all rock.

Thanks everyone for all your comments, kudos and bookmarks and for continuing to
read my tale.
Second chapter in a week… and I’ve written part of the next one, so hope to update at the weekend.

I had some feedback on the last chapter that suggested giving everyone an idea of Sam’s pregnancy dates would be a good idea. I didn’t want to include a whole list of dates into a clunky conversation mid-story, so here is a quick note for reference.

The last scene of the previous chapter was on Sunday 1st June (11th Week).

His obgyn appointment and scan (in this chapter) is on June 12th and he’ll have another one at 19 weeks in late July.

Stanford Fall quarter classes begin on 24th Sept when Sam is at 28 weeks.

His full term due date is 17th December.

Additional Warning: This chapter contains Top!Dean Bottom!Cas and Dean’s panty kink, in case that’s not your thing.

Dean was glad that Sam was going to his new obgyn the very next day after his final summer exam. He’d been worried, perhaps fussing, because he wasn’t sure Sam would remember to eat properly during that frantic week. He had collected his brother from the evening exam locations, so that he wouldn’t have to drive home when he was drained of energy. Sam had been deft in his diplomatic refusals of herbal energy pills from Andy and offers of high caffeine energy drinks from the others. Dean had removed folders of notes or textbooks from Sam’s slack hands in the early hours as his brother’s drooping sleeping form bent over them in his bed. Dean also hadn’t stayed over with Cas during that week, wanting to keep a close eye on Sam.

Castiel didn’t have exams at the end of his Teaching Degree program, instead he had submitted a final presentation on the last day of classes and once the results were out, there would be a conference before graduation. Castiel was pretty confident that he had graduated.

While Sam was on a triple stack of exams, Dean and Castiel went on a tour of local used car lots to find something roadworthy, reliable and sweet (Dean), and cheap, practical, and easy to drive (Castiel). Dean campaigned on behalf of a 1994 Chevy Caprice but after a test drive Castiel said the handling was not to his liking. Despite car shopping, meeting for coffee and exchanging texts, Dean missed Castiel. He seldom had a nightmare in Castiel’s bed. Missing being close to Cas in the night, he tried not to think about how difficult it was going to be when Cas moved away.

The day of the appointment was about Sam, who had freshly squeezed and consumed most of their giant bag of Greengoods oranges, had tried to burn off his nerves by going with Sarah on her morning three mile run, and then spent an inordinate amount of time in the shower. Dean took Nick into the kitchen to wait while Sam finished blow drying, or chemically taming, or whatever he did to his floppy mane of hair. Brady, who was chewing on a cream cheese bagel, nosily asked why Nick was bringing Sam and Dean to Sam’s gastroenterology appointment. Dean muttered a lie
about the Impala being due for a service and Sam thinking he’d have no transport. Brady gave the Impala’s main caretaker the scathing look his lame dishonesty deserved and flounced to his bedroom mumbling in a put out way about being Sam’s best friend.

“I’m glad Sam is ready to tell people,” Nick blew across the top of his steaming mug of black coffee and met Dean’s eye, “I hate lying.”

As Sam’s footfall descended the stairs, they heard Brady’s room open.

“Sam.” Brady’s voice was calm, “You’d tell me, wouldn’t you, if there was something really wrong with you?”

“Yeah, Man. Of course.” Sam insisted.

“Only... is there?” Brady asked.

Dean was ready to move to the hall and support Sam but he listened another moment.

“Brady, will you be home later?”

“Yeah. I’m packing my life into boxes.” Brady said warily.

“I promise I don’t have some deadly disease.” Sam said with a smile to his tone. “And if you can get Sarah and Andy, and Jess if she is around, to be here later, I’ll extort pizzas from Nick, and I’ll fill you all in on what’s been going on and how I get on today. OK?”

“OK, Sam, but you haven’t exactly put my mind at ease, but dude, if that’s what you want, I’ll round up the Cowper Street Crew for a final hurrah.”

“Cool.” Sam added as he turned into the kitchen. Dean could see the way his brother’s eyes lit up when he saw Nick.

Nick put down his coffee to take Sam into his arms. “How is my love?”

“Not too bad, Babe,” Sam pecked him on the cheek. “I can’t wait to see the scan.”

“We’d better head,” Dean said with a glance at his watch.

Nick poured the remains of his beverage away, rinsed the mug, and teased Sam, “On the way you can tell me your pizza extortion plans.”

“Oh,” Sam laughed with deep dimples, “it involves only pleasurable exploits.”

“I like it.” Nick bumped his eyebrows up and down.

“Not in the car.” Dean cried in protest.

Lucille Packard was officially the nicest hospital Dean had ever been in. Even the waiting area outside Anna Milton’s consulting room was beautifully decorated with vases of flowers at the reception desk and on a low table in the middle. Sam submitted his completed forms for all the classes he wanted to take. Dean noticed the pretty brunette’s pupils dilate as she took the stack of applications. He huffed in amusement knowing the research king had probably signed up for everything. Sam had already found an independent class called ABBC advertised on the notice board in Harmonies. Aqua Baby Body Classes ran pregnancy and parent/baby sessions at the pool in Menlo Park. Sam had also nabbed Dean to give his expert opinion on the blood pressure relaxation exercises that Dr. Grainger had shown him.
“You should write a book,” Dean commented to Sam as they took the two seats Nick had saved for them.

“I should what now?” Sam wrinkled his brow.

“Hands down, this pregnancy is gonna be the best researched on the planet.” Dean clarified with a grin.

“Oh, I ordered that book for you on online.” Nick interjected.

“First Time Carrier Dad and Baby?” Sam asked. When Nick nodded, he got a kiss and Sam turned to tell Dean, “It’s out of print but all the websites say it’s the best of the few published works that focus exclusively on carriers.”

“I’ve seen it.” Dean said smugly. “ACIC had copies in the library.”

“And was it worth two hours of second hand book store web searching?” Nick asked.

“Considering how dog-eared the copies there were, I’d say so.” Dean replied as they were called in.

Anna Milton, consultant Obgyn, met with Dean’s approval. She had the perfect bedside manner to put a jittery Sam at his ease, and was willing and patient to answer any questions the younger Winchester addressed to her as she worked. She was also a flame haired babe. Dean appreciated her vast knowledge and professionalism as he enjoyed the view of her shiny hair and slender figure. If he wasn’t already spoken for, and she wasn’t some super qualified medical genius way out of his league, he’d have liked to run his hands over that body and shown her a good time.

“Dean?” Sam asked from the examination table where Nick was holding his hand, “Are you lost in space? Come have a look.”

Dean hopped up and stood next to Nick, as Dr Milton smeared gel on Sam’s belly.

Sam winced and hissed, “Cold.”

“Sorry,” Anna didn’t pause as she ran the transducer over Sam’s flesh, “Let’s see how baby is today.”

Dean made sure not to laugh. Every time Dr Milton used the term ‘baby’ like that, his brain unhelpfully supplied a mental picture of a newly waxed shiny Impala.

The ultrasound screen was just like on an episode of Dr Sexy MD. Transfixed, Dean lifted his hand and pointed at the vaguely baby shaped blob. The baby seemed to be filling up a lot more space than in the photograph of the eight week scan.

“There’s baby,” Anna confirmed with an indulgent smile for stunned Dean.

“Our baby,” Nick breathed. Sam squeezed his hand and nodded, clearly rendered speechless by the sight of a distinctly more baby shaped picture.

Dean checked and found both Sam and Nick’s eyes were as glassy and brimful as he suspected his own to be.

“You see baby’s head here, and the eye, chin and nice straight neck at the base of the skull,” Anna pointed out as the three men gazed in wonder.
Anna pressed something and the sound of a rushing heartbeat filled the room. Sam made a noise that Dean could only describe as a meep. Nick gave a long gasp of awe.

“One hundred sixty a minute. Good regular heartbeat and everything on track.” Anna said pleased as she pressed the transducer along Sam’s skin changing the angle of their perspective. In the new view she was able to point out the tiny moving arms.

“Some practitioners will attempt to estimate gender at this stage, but I prefer not to do so. If you wish to find out we will have a nice clear view at your next scan, Sam.”

Sam nodded. “I’m… we are happy so long as there is nothing wrong.”

“I am going to measure the little one and in a minute take your current weight, but everything is looking good, guys.”

“Thank God.” Nick sighed, then shared a smile with Sam.

Dean added his internal prayer of thanksgiving.

Anna gave the transducer to Nick so he could hold it in place while she worked. The baby seemed to bounce inside the amniotic fluid.

“Look… look at that,” Sam gasped, “It’s like our baby knows…”

“Sam,” Nick gushed simply.

“I know,” Sam replied, “Isn’t it amazing Dee?”

Dean couldn’t pull his eyes away from the image. The more he looked at the shape of his new family member, the more features he could pick out.

“Way to go, Sammy,” Dean grinned as on screen the baby’s head bobbed, “You’re incubating a rock star.”

“Soccer player,” Sam snorted, “but I bet Brady will source baby lacrosse gear.”

“I preferred orienteering at school.” Nick contributed.

“That’s plain weird,” Dean blurted, then sucked in his lips afraid he had been insulting. He didn’t know Nick as well as Sam and wasn’t sure what would offend him.

Nick paused a moment before clapping Dean on the arm with his free hand, “I guess we are all a little weird.”

“Hey,” Sam joked, “No including our baby in the weird, hey?”

Anna stepped back, “I am pleased to confirm Baby Winchester is on schedule for a December 17th arrival.”

“I knew my child would be punctual,” Nick beamed.

Sam eye rolled affectionately.

“Would you like a couple of pictures?” Anna asked.

“Please,” Sam answered.
Anna rotated the image to the clearest profile for their snapshots.

“OK Sam, you can get down and hop on the scales.”

When they we all seated in across from Dr Milton, she shuffled some papers and said, “We are done for today. I will see you at my part of the next What to Expect for New Parents Class, yes?”

“Sure will,” Sam confirmed. He glanced at Nick, “We’ve signed up for the New Parent Evening Class, the sibling half day session, and the Baby First Aid and CPR classes too.”

Anna looked down at Sam’s file, “You certainly are embracing all we have to offer.”

Sam made the pleased announcement, “You can’t do too much research.”

Dean snorted, “Man, that could be your motto.”

“Shuddup,” Sam chuckled.

“I’d like to see you again at Week 19, Sam,” Anna smiled sharing their joy, “Keep up your twice weekly blood pressure monitoring at Melanie Grainger’s clinic. I am happy there has been no significant elevation in your figures, but work on your relaxation techniques, and now that school is out, I expect you to find time for gentle exercise and no over exertion.”

“Gotya,” Nick replied, “Listen to Dr Milton, Sam, no lifting heavy tables at work.”

“I heard you last week,” Sam said peevishly.

“Just checking Sweetheart,” Nick leaned over. Sam tilted his cheek for the kiss.

Dean cocked his eye at the doctor, trying to communicate how hopelessly gone for each other Nick and Sam were.

On their way home they stopped at the liquor store for beers for the guys and then for takeout pizzas. They got a giant meat feast and a trusty pepperoni. Sam said tomato was turning his stomach and went to sit in the Lexus while Dean and Nick got their order. The third pizza was a plain white with double extra toppings of sliced olives, which they didn’t offer, but using some Jedi mind powers Nick persuaded them to produce. When Nick got Dean to open the box and show Sam, they were delayed while Sam made a decent attempt at eating Nick’s face off in deep kisses.

At their front door Sam admitted he was apprehensive about telling everyone and unsure of how to begin. Nick pulled him into a hug, while Dean reminded him they would both be standing by his side.

In the end, Sam didn’t need words. He produced the scan pictures and was swamped in the squealing embrace of Jess, Sarah and Becca. Andy surprised Nick with a hug.

Brady hung back until they were finished screaming and cooing over Sam. He cleared his throat, “I’d like to propose a pizza and beer toast to Sam and Nick and their new baby.”

When everyone had taken a bite and a swig of beer, except Sam who had ginger ale, Brady grinned mischievously, “And a second toast for the nomination of Tyson Brady as Godfather.”

Sam roared with laughter and punched Brady in the shoulder, “Get out of here.”

Sam chuckled, “A sports mad, joking, party loving lawyer?”


Everyone’s laughter signaled the start of an impromptu baby celebration combined with a summer farewell get together. Dean would be sorry to say goodbye to their housemates. Sam got choked up a few times as they relived some of their year highlights and promised that even if they didn’t share a home again they’d always remain close friends.

While Sam had to wait until the next week, Castiel’s results came out the day after Sam’s appointment with Doctor Milton. They celebrated his official status as a qualified teacher with dinner for two at The Pizza Cave. Cas apologized when he learned Dean had eaten pizza the night before. Dean reassured him that a man could never have enough meaty cheesy doughy goodness.

It wasn’t a late night because the next day was the STEP teaching conference where new graduates made their presentations. Family and friends were welcome at the event. Dean had booked the day off from Greengoods. Any nerves about being out of his depth were lost in his bursting pride at accompanying Castiel as his partner. At times he did feel that he was in over his head but Castiel looked so happy to have him there that it didn’t matter. It was surprisingly interesting to hear things from teachers’ point of view.

Castiel was one of the last to present. His talk was about teachers as role models and sources of support and guidance for their students. Dean sat front and centre, whispering to the lady next to him, who turned out to be one of Castiel’s professors, that he was his boyfriend.

Dean welled up several times but stayed strong and focused on Castiel. He knew everyone there could tell that Cas spoke from the heart as he stood in his blue tie and dark suit at the lectern, barely glancing at his notes. Castiel began by telling how he had been homeschooled by his mother until finally she recognized that his desire and aptitude for learning exceeded her experience. He drew his audience in as he recounted his fear and shyness lost in a sea of seventh graders, who had been together in their cliques and friendships since kindergarten. It had been his perceptive teacher who had ensured without being obvious that Castiel was included by others and coaxed into participation. At high school, Castiel recalled, his love of science was nurtured under the tutelage of a sometimes tired and jaded teacher, who was always willing to answer Castiel’s challenging questions. When he came out to his English teacher in a submitted homework assignment, her kind words had sustained him, as he coped with teenage angst and an intensely conservative home life. Dean knew Castiel was glossing over the pain of being cast out of his family at the part where he praised the educators and dean of students at Cornell for going above and beyond for a newly homeless and penniless student.

Picking up on the theme of ‘above and beyond’, Castiel encouraged his listeners never to forget how small gestures and kindness on their part could make a huge impact on an individual’s life. Without using names, Castiel spoke of Jesse’s inspirational mind for chemistry, of the boy he had assisted with his successful scholarship applications, and a shy girl who had struggled with science until he took a minute or two at the end of his classes to let her ask for clarification without an audience. Castiel didn’t fail to point out the prime directive of educating young minds and the central goal of inspiring those of all abilities to achieve their academic best. He ended with a plea to all his graduating class not to let future issues they might face, like lack of funding or years of teaching in a tough environment, grind them down or lead them to forget the life changing difference they were in a privileged position to make to their charges’ lives.

Dean thought Castiel did brilliantly. He could see how his students loved him and how his earnest
personality gained their commitment. He made sure to show Castiel how wonderful he was with a tight emotional hug once the round of applause had faded.

There was another opportunity for applause the following day at Castiel’s graduation ceremony. Dean stood on his feet as Castiel was conferred with his teaching degree. Balthazar’s cheer of “Bravo Cassie” was combined with Dean’s enthusiastic clapping. Castiel looked scrumptious in his cap and gown as he raised aloft his scroll of parchment. Dean retook his seat with the satiny slide of his new pale blue panties reminding him of his secret celebratory plans for that evening.

Dean reflected on what a privilege it was to witness this moment of Castiel’s life, the culmination of seven years of university and all the struggles it had taken. Glancing around at heads of proud parents and siblings, Dean looked forward to the day he would be cheering for Sam.

Castiel found Dean and Balthazar as soon as he could break away from the rest of his class. They wandered amid the crowd linking arms. Balthazar followed, hissing instructions to Leonore on his phone, about how to placate a diva-like palm reader who was renting his private consulting room.

When Castiel and Balthazar approached the professional photographer for the graduation shot, Dean was trailing behind watching all the happy faced people. He saw Cas grab Balthazar’s arm to give his heartfelt thanks for giving him a home and new start. Dean prepared to stand to the side and watch the cousins get immortalized in print. He was stunned when Castiel yanked his sleeve to get him in front of the lens.

Thus for posterity, Balthazar smirked, Castiel’s cap was askew and Dean’s green eyes were bright and wide with surprise as Castiel’s arm wrapped round and squeezed his shoulder tight.

There was an official graduation reception and several unofficial parties that night. Once Castiel had said his farewells to classmates who were more than college acquaintances, he slumped down into a bucket seat next to Dean at the low table where the older Winchester was nursing a long necked beer.

“It’s not really to my taste,” Castiel gestured vaguely at the venue.

Dean thought he’d heard, but with Eminem’s vocals blasting to Sing for the Moment, he wasn’t sure.

“They have really tasty party sausages,” Dean offered Cas a tiny sausage on a stick from his buffet hoard.

Cas took it and pulled it off the cocktail stick with his teeth. Dean took a sip of his beer to stop from licking his lips at the sight, imagining Cas tearing off his panties with his teeth.

“Will we get out of here?” Castiel raised his voice to be heard.

Dean nodded gladly, nabbing three quick sausages while they donned their jackets. It was a sin to let food go to waste, and they were so good.

Taxis had been drawn to the club like flies to a cowpat, Castiel told Dean, who nodded to his boyfriend’s superior rural knowledge. They snuggled up in the back seat for the short journey. Dean had his key to Cas’s place in his hand and headed for the door while his boyfriend settled up their fare.

Inside they didn’t stop to check if Balthazar was home or awake, making directly for Castiel’s bedroom. Later if asked, Dean wouldn’t remember taking off his clothes. Castiel smothered him in kisses that Dean endeavored to do his best to return.
When all that remained were Dean’s blue panties, Castiel groaned deliciously. Dean’s cock half hardened at the sound, bobbing up, pushing against the satiny material. Cas dropped to his knees and fulfilled Dean’s fantasy by mouthing through the damp material. Dean ran his hands through the dark messy strands of Cas’s hair. Cas rubbed his cheeks against Dean like a cat. He took the light waistband in his teeth and attempted to pull downwards. Dean tittered and helped with his thumbs in the sides. As he stepped out of the ruined panties, Dean saw Castiel spread his body out across the top of his rumpled bed sheets, belly down, head twisted round to look at Dean.

“I want you to take me like this.” Castiel said in a sultry tone that went straight to Dean’s dick. “I want you inside me.”

“I…I wo.. won’t be able to see you,” Dean stuttered, undone by what his boyfriend was offering and trying to say that he would miss seeing Castiel’s face, his eyes, his expression.

“You’ll see plenty,” Cas gave a single laugh. “Please, Dean, it feels amazing.”

Dean couldn’t deny that statement. There was nothing on earth like when Castiel moved inside him, bringing them both to climax. Neither could he deny him that experience, nor that the sight of Castiel spread out like a banquet waiting for him to dig in had him hard and throbbing with want.

He kneeled on the mattress and leaned down, bracing his hands either side of Cas, and licked a stripe down Cas’s crack and over his furled hole. The scent and taste of his lover was intoxicating. He took his time opening Castiel with his tongue while he writhed and begged for more. The expanse of Castiel’s skin lay exposed for Dean. There was a heady power to his teasing but Dean wasn’t cruel. He placed a hand on the small of Cas’s back to steady him as he finally used his first lubed finger to enter the warm spit-licked cavity of his lover’s body. He worried for a moment that his shorter stubbier fingers wouldn’t be able to give as much pleasure as when Castiel’s long slender ones rubbed over his prostate, but he must have done something right.


“Cas. Oh God, you’re perfect,” Dean sighed in gratitude to a higher power that let him have this wonderful man as his partner.

Dean scissored Cas open, trying to catch that bundle of nerves. The much rimmed muscle gave for him like it was meant to be.

“More now, Dean,” Cas begged, “I’m ready, please, my love.”

Dean heeded him. He ripped the condom packet open with his teeth and rolled it on, drinking in how Cas’s hips arched seeking his touch. He stroked his length liberally with lube, then slowly, just this side of achingly slow, Dean pushed into Cas, breathless at the sight of his flesh sinking into his lover’s.

“God, so tight.” He gasped in pleasure.

Cas managed a huffing laugh, “It’s been a while.”

“I’m not hurting you?” Dean checked with concern.

“No,” Cas hissed a white lie, “Keep going.”

Dean filled him, ball sack slapping against Cas’s skin. He took a moment to revel in the sensation, letting Cas adjust. He blanketed Castiel’s body with his own. As he covered Cas, skin of Dean’s chest meeting the sweat beaded skin of Cas’ back, he began to move. Their legs were aligned.
Dean breathed in the scent of Cas’s hair as he bent chin to shoulder. Cas moaned and rolled his hips to signal his need for Dean to take control and move.

“So good. Good God, Cas, so good.” Dean chanted as he pulled part way out and moved his whole body forward, thrusting over Cas and panting as they moved in unison.

Cas moved his arm under to give himself relief. Dean thrust forward again, needing to go impossibly further. Heat built. Dean hissed. Castiel ground out his name. Then Cas was clenching around him, wonderfully tight and hot, as he came. That sensation did something to Dean’s whole being as sparks filled his brain and he came long and hard, sagging down onto Cas’s body. He pulled out slowly. Planting kisses across Cas’s shoulder blade, Dean wanted to praise him for being so perfect. He turned Cas’s body to hold him and whisper thanks into his ear for the gift of this precious experience, and his hopes that it was good enough for Cas.

“Stop, Dean. You were wonderful. I haven’t bottomed for a very long time, and I enjoyed it very very much.”

“You sure? I wasn’t too rough?” Dean checked with one eye closed.

Cas laughed. Dean stared at him. “I swear, Dean, if I am sore later I will cherish each twinge for the memory of tonight. But I won’t be. Now dump that come filled rubber and get in here under the covers with me.”

Dean sneaked across to the bathroom and got a warm cloth, quiet as a mouse, or as a badass cat-burglar, so not to disturb Balthazar. He tentatively cleaned Cas up, wiping his come splattered stomach and swiping gently below.

Cas’s sticky hand found his, “We’ll do it again.”

“Definitely, baby, but not right now,” Dean muttered sleepily his arm draping over Castiel’s chest.

Cas’s silent body laughter was warm and cozy. They wrapped together. Castiel mumbled his agreement and they drifted into shared sleep.

+++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Sam achieved a 3.66 grade average for his summer quarter classes. Any concern Dean had that he would be upset for not hitting 3.7 was dispelled when Sam explained his year average was a combined one, and he knew he had slipped up a tad on a couple of the afternoon exams when he had to pause from writing to breathe through sickly nausea.

That week Dean also learned just how much of a force to be reckoned with Nick could be. By joining them at one viewing of a dingy apartment, consoling Sam on loss of a decent one in Los Altos, and some smooth negotiation on the role of a supportive partner, by the end of the week Nick had gotten Sam to say ‘Yes’ to moving in together. Dean had to admit Nick was both good for and good with his brother.

Although he missed living opposite Cas, and his stroll to his favorite bench in the park at the end of Cowper Street, Dean had to acknowledge that living on Moss Beach in Nick’s huge house was pretty damn sweet. He had his own room with access to the upper storey balcony that ran along the sea front of the house. It was next to a massive bathroom, which was really Dean’s too, because
Sam and Nick had this amazing wet room adjoining their bedroom. While Nick’s home had only three bedrooms, every room was larger than the floor plan of a small apartment. Nick was generous and open with his home, saying everything was to be shared. He pulled Dean aside and told him that included the liquor and if he felt like an evening night cap he didn’t need to ask. There was plenty of space outside for the Lexus and the Impala to park at the northern end of the property. Facing the ocean was a long wooden decked terrace that extended outwards on the south end encompassing a hot tub and a built in BBQ. Steps led down to the sands of Moss Beach, where Sam and Nick ran every morning. The previous summer Sam had worked full time hours at The Gates of Hell, but after further negotiation and reflection on his energy levels, Sam was rostered for four evening shifts each week. Now that he was in his second trimester Sam confided in Dean that he wasn’t so fatigued or nauseous but was happy not to be working day and night. He was also occupied with amassing a proto-library of Anthropology texts filling half empty bookcases that adorned the walls under the stairwell.

Dean had been a little anxious about having to ask for the Impala to meet up with Cas, but the issue never arose because Sam gave him the keys and explained he would be car-sharing with Nick when working. Sam stopped the transfer of Impala power from being too click flick when he teased that Dean might have first dibs but he would still be driving her when Nick was absent.

Days flew by, bringing Castiel’s couple of weeks at the summer school closer. Dean feasted in spending as much time with Cas as he could, outside of his mornings in Greengoods, and Castiel’s summer shifts at Beans. The news that Beans had no current Beneficiary vacancies was not too much of blow, when things in Greengoods were ticking along fine. By moving to Moss Beach Dean had crossed county lines but Garth was happy to presume it was a temporary arrangement and hadn’t sought to transfer him over to a social worker in San Mateo. Dean understood that Victor came under his Medi-cal and could remain his psychiatrist, if the move to Moss Beach extended. Dean suspected that having taken the step to live with Nick, Sam was happy and probably would not want to move out come the new year at university.

Dean grew to love sketching the sea and beach. His Palo Alto park bench was replaced by a favorite rock near the house. He invested in high PH sunscreen, but the freckles still won the sun battle. At night with the sound of waves filling his senses, he considered sneaking ninja-like along to Sam and Nick’s room and launching through the door like a superhero, but he didn’t like to think what he might be interrupting and there was Sam’s hypertension to consider, so he reluctantly shucked his new home inspired prank.

Dean was getting to know Nick better. The older man was totally open with Sam but was a certain amount guarded with other people including Dean to an extent. There seemed to be some breaking of ice, when Dean wiped the floor at Nick’s poker night. Although silent and glad to let the other guests take the lead in conversation at the start of the night, later Dean was glad he hadn’t ducked out to meet up with Cas, and had stayed to get to know some new people. The players had been snarky yet amusing Crowley, Sam, a neighbor and local bar owner called Jason, and Meg’s brother Tom, who used to sous chef for Nick before moving on to work as Chef de Partie at a hotel in Redwood City. Other new people who Dean conversed with included the nice cashier at the small grocery store and their next door neighbor who was a retired airline pilot. He met Ava Wilson one day when she was half carried by Sam and Nick up from the beach. Her dog had gone missing she weepily told Dean over strong coffee, while Nick and Sam went on a second run in the opposite direction to search for the pooch. They all were in receipt of her undying gratitude and affection when Sam returned with a seaweed stinky Pomeranian.

On a balmy night in early July, when Sam and Nick were working, Dean considered having a Star Trek marathon with a shot or two of Nick’s Glenfiddich, but he promised Victor he’d try and write honestly about his reaction to moving. As he strolled up to his bedroom he reflected on Victor’s
suggestion to come off his nightly Ambien and replace it with a situational sleeping pill to take if
and when he couldn’t get to sleep. He guessed the time was right. He wasn’t subject to frequent
nightmares any more, even with the move. He took his journal and a couple of CDs down to the
den. The plus point of an empty house was the ability to twist the volume knob up to blast level.
Black Sabbath’s Paranoid threatened to rattle the windowpanes as Dean closed his eyes and did a
slow-mo head bang for the guitar riff. Mouthing along to Ozzy’s vocals, Dean flopped down onto
the sofa. The last line ringing in his ears, Dean fumbled for his journal which had fallen open onto
the floor. With Ozzy’s words *I wish I could but it’s too late* echoing, Dean saw the post-it. He
chewed on his lip as he peeled off the sticky note.

It wasn’t too late to telephone, even with the two hour difference between Central and Pacific. It
might be easier to call Eudora on his own. He’d hate to raise Sammy hopes only to find the listing
for S & D Campbell was only a co-incidence. Dean flicked off the first drum beat heavy tones of
Iron Man.

His hand trembled so much that he had to abort his first attempt at tapping in the number. Maybe
he should have had the Glenfiddich.

There were four interminably long ringing tones.

“Hello, Campbell residence,” A soft easy toned voice answered.

Dean thought it might be his Pawpaw but he couldn’t be sure. He hadn’t thought it through. What
did he say? He steadied his nerve as he heard a second querying “Hello?”

“Hi, ahem, I mean, Hello. Can I speak with Dean or Samuel please?” Dean crossed his fingers that
he wasn’t connected to the home of some David and Sally, or Deirdre and Stephen Campbell.

“This is Dean speaking. May I ask who is calling?”

It was like the light bulbs in the room threw out extra wattage. Dean gulped back a flood of
feelings.

“This is Dean,” He swallowed hard, “Dean Winchester.”

There was silence. Dean thought for a moment that the line had gone dead.

“Excuse me, Son,” The older man almost whispered, “But how can we be sure…?” His voice
trailed away in a mix of fragile hope and defensiveness.

Dean caught on quick. Of course his elderly grandparents would need proof that he wasn’t some
random psycho who’d uncovered the name of their long lost grandson.

“You used to make chunky home fries for me and Mom, and you’d give me three or four wrapped
in a triangle of paper, so I was getting ‘takeout’ to bring into the den, and Grandpa would steal one
every time…” Dean bit the inside flesh of his cheek. He hoped that was enough and that his tale
wasn’t something his childish mind had dreamt up. He sucked a breath. “Pawpaw?”

He heard a clatter as if the handset was being put down on a glass surface. Then there was distant
shouting.

“Samuel? Samuel? Samuel, Goddamnit. Put your hearing aid in and come here this minute…”
There was a cracking break to Dean Campbell’s voice, “Samuel get in here. Deanie is on the
phone.”
Tears welled up and spilled down Dean’s cheeks. No one ever had called him Deanie since.

“Deanie? Is it really you?” His Pawpaw asked in wonder. “Oh God, we never knew what happened to you and baby Sammy. You must be… Yes, you old coot, I can do my own math… twenty four?”

“Yeah, and Sam is twenty.” Dean confirmed. His brain flooded with questions about how they were, if they were both in good health, if they had tried to find him and Sam, if they’d like to meet sometime, but they caught in his throat.

“Twenty years since dear Mary…” The elder Dean choked up, “Are you boys in Kansas?”

“No, Pawpaw,” Dean said with regret for disappointing him, “We live in California.”

Dean smiled as his grandfather held the phone away from his face again, “Wow, Samuel?… Deanie says they live in California… you do it. I’m no good with technology. Your Grandpa is putting us on speaker.”

“Hello Dean. It’s good to hear from you, Son.”

The sound of his Granddaddy’s deep husky voice made Dean blow a long exhale before he replied, “Hey Grandpa.”

“So,” Samuel asked, “What made you look us up? Are you boys in some sort of trouble?”

Dean winced, riddled with guilt and sadness for these wonderful figures from his young childhood who lost their beloved daughter and only grandsons in a short few months.

“Not in trouble but it’s a long story.” Dean pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I betya it is.” With bitterness Samuel asked, “Is that no good sonvabitch still around?”

“Samuel! John is the boys’ father.” Pawpaw hissed.

“He’s still kicking,” Dean said quickly, “but not around.”

“Hum, he treat you right, raise you boys right?” Samuel demanded.

“No, sir. It was tough.” Dean confessed, not wanting expand for fear of spreading heartache.

“I wish we’d fought harder back then to keep you two little angels.” Pawpaw said with emotion, “But you are good now?”

“I’m good now.” Dean said honestly.

“Sammy too?”

“Sam’s OK, he’s good, great. He’s expecting.” Dean smiled into the handset, “You’re gonna be great-grandparents.”

He could hear a sharp intake of breath, and Samuel whisper, “You alright, dear?”

“I’m OK. I can’t believe it. He was only a little feisty infant when we last saw him.”

“He’s still feisty.” Dean chuckled.
“When?” The elder Dean huffed in adjusting amazement, “When is Sam due?”

“Oh, not until December.” Dean said quickly in case they thought Sammy was about to pop any minute.

He was surprised to hear a gulping sob.

Samuel cleared his throat, “Your Pawpaw is a little overcome. Mary was a December baby.”

It was Dean’s turn to gulp. He didn’t remember, had been too small to figure out his parents’ birthdays at the time, but later there had been a few rare pilgrimages to the graveyard in Lawrence but Dean hadn’t processed that Sam’s baby was coming in the month of their mother’s birthday.

“I remember,” Pawpaw was speaking again, “December and the holidays 1978, full of hope, but poor Mary was so uncomfortable. You were a kicker, Dean.”

“I was?” Dean gasped.

“Sure were,” His Grandpa confirmed. “Thought she’d never get a good night’s sleep, but then when you were born…”

Pawpaw broke in, “You were a baby angel. Such a sweet little boy too, always trying to help your Mommy and me, and looking in on your little brother’s crib.”

Dean thanked God they weren’t connected via a videophone because his cheeks were baking and he was sure they were beetroot red.

“Dean, son,” Samuel said in a grave tone, “I want to apologize. We tried but we never thought that bast…. Sorry dear… that John would cut us out completely.”

“We hoped once the dust had settled,” Dean Senior sighed, “We waited too long to try again. Your Grandpa made a road trip to Blue Earth, but you were already gone.”

“Yeah,” Dean said bitterly, “Dad was good at that.”

“I’m guessing you moved about a lot,” Samuel said.

Dean grunted his assent. “Let’s not talk about it. How are you both? You left Lawrence.”

Pawpaw laughed, “That took some doing, prying Samuel away from that house.”

“Hey, I rebuilt that home,” Samuel chided, “and that business.”

“He was sixty eight before I persuaded him to down tools and put them both up for sale. My old pins aren’t what they used to be, and we have a single level home here.” Dean Campbell whispered, “And your Grandpa’s really deaf.”

“I heard that,” Samuel guffawed.

“What about you, Pawpaw?” Dean asked, “Were you working? I think I remember you going into the elementary school sometimes.”

“I filled in if they needed a substitute, fancy you remembering that.”

Dean’s mind conjured a non-angelic temper tantrum in their kitchen with his Mom standing over him trying to reason that they couldn’t go see Pawpaw because he was teaching little kids at the
school, and Dean feeling how totally unfair it was that those stupid kids got to see his Pawpaw when he couldn’t.

“I taught 3rd Grade when I met your Grandpa, but once I had your Mom, that was it. 1950s Lawrence, carrier or lady, staying at home with your baby was the expected thing. Luckily Samuel had a good job, and I enjoyed being a homemaker.”

“My boyfriend, Cas, is a teacher too,” Words flowed from Dean’s tongue. It was so natural to speak with his grandparents that he didn’t even comprehend that he was coming out to them, and had already revealed Sam’s gender.

“I suppose there is no hope that either of your men are good Kansas boys,” Samuel asked in a slight tease.

Dean chuckled, “Cas is from Illinois but he is a country boy. Nick, Sam’s partner is from the East Coast, but he is pretty settled here in California. We’re living at Nick’s. “

“And do you work, Dean?” Samuel continued.

It was a more uncomfortable question but not asked cruelly.

“I work part time,” Dean summarized, “at a produce grocery store, but I was… ill for a long time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Samuel said sympathetically.

“Stop grilling the boy,” Pawpaw protested, “Dean doesn’t want to fill his first call with sad stories, but you are well now, Dean, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Dean said proudly. “It’s been awesome talking to you both.”

“Will you call back, Deanie?” His Pawpaw asked.

Dean promised that he would and that he would get Sam to be there. His grandparents hadn’t entered the cell phone era, but they took his cell number and Nick’s landline.

His Pawpaw made a kissing noise before they ended the call. Dean pressed his Nokia against his forehead and smiled with closed eyes.

When Sam and Nick got home, Dean was waiting on the sofa, having transcribed the conversation almost word for word into his journal. Sam squinted at him and asked why he was grinning like an idiot.

“I found our Pawpaw and Granddaddy.” Dean beamed enthusiastically.

“Y’did?” Sam’s jaw dropped.

“I did. And I’ve been talking with them, and they want to talk to you when we call them again.” Dean grinned.

“Wow, that’s freaking amazing,” Sam pushed his bangs back off his forehead and huffed in wonder. “How did you do it?”

“I told ya, I’m awesome.” Dean laughed as Sam caught him in a celebratory hug.
Seventeen

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who is reading. Every time I see the number of hits rise, I think Wow there are more people who have clicked on my story or who have liked it enough to return and read another chapter. Special thanks with a cherry on top for everyone who has favored on fanfiction and left kudos on AO3. And a slice of cherry pie for all of you who have offered me encouragement and taken the time to leave a review or a comment. A special mention for phipiohsum475 on AO3 who very kindly pointed out that I had typed sixty beats per minute for Sam’s baby’s heart rate instead of 160. That has now been corrected (phew).

CHAPTER WARNING:

“Storm is coming” to quote Bobby Singer.

Things take a turn for the worse in this chapter. I want to reassure everyone that this is not changing into a hurt/no-comfort fic, there is hope.

The later part of the chapter contains abusive, foul and derogatory language, violence and extreme mental distress.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++

Traffic was light on Portola Drive. As the street turned Sam caught a brief view of downtown San Francisco and the bay, then the Lexus was back amongst the buildings of Market Street until the next glimpse of water. Nick and Sam were on their way to North Cali’s only Every Baby, the nationwide chain of supersized department stores that claimed they could provide everything parents and babies would ever need. Ostensibly the trip had been planned to buy Sam some decent quality black pants and tops for work. Sam didn’t care if the tops were in a polo-shirt or button down style so long as he didn’t have to wear one of the strange smock-like garments he had seen in smaller stores in Palo Alto and Pacifica. He didn’t even want to think about the floaty white things that Wal-Mart and Target considered acceptable for the rare male carrier who might stumble into one of their branches in dire need of clothing.

After their appointment with Anna, Dean had insisted on treating them to a late lunch snack of fresh apple and raspberry pie at a little bakery with a coffee counter and a couple of tables, near to Greengoods. He was mightily chuffed that they could toast learning that Sam’s baby was a girl, with raised forks of pie. Sam added a laugh to his eye roll when Dean leaned over and spoke to his small bump when they were parting ways, telling his niece to be a good girl for her Papa. Dean had travelled separately in the Impala because he had an appointment with Garth in Santa Clara. Sam hoped that discussing the prospects of a new job with his social worker would lift Dean. His brother had been a forced sort of cheery in his interactions while Castiel taught his two weeks of Summer School in Bodega Bay. Sam had attempted to draw him out, and asked him if he wanted to talk about it, but he got a trademark shrug and a mumble that Dean was ‘good’. At least Castiel would be back tomorrow.
As they got closer to their location, Nick answered a call from The Gates. Sam tuned out the Bluetooth call with Alastair but allowed the sound of Nick’s voice to drift across his mind. He loved Nick’s soft tones, from his careful enunciation when he was serious to his breathy sighs when in the midst of pleasure. He thought of how Anna had told them that their daughter could hear them now. Dean wanted to set up a playlist to educate the baby in utero. Sam hadn’t given a very enthusiastic reply. He wasn’t sure that he wanted Enter Sandman and Take Your Daughter To The Slaughter played into his belly.

More than anything Sam was thankful that his baby was healthy. Nick was worried about Sam’s slight elevation in BP and baby was small, but Anna wasn’t overly concerned, saying expectant parents with hypertension tended to have smaller babies. She reassured them that everything looked fine and that a weight of 7 oz was still in the spectrum of acceptable at twenty weeks. She smiled adding that babies don’t follow a linear growth chart and it wasn’t possible to tell what weight their daughter would be at full term. They saw her perfect brain and arms and feet and even individual fingers and toes. At first the baby wouldn’t co-operate with the gender search, crossing her legs so that Anna couldn’t see. Dean joked they were having a baby with Winchester stubbornness. Once Anna had all the other anatomy checks done, baby did a long stretch and all of a sudden Anna could tell that she was clearly a she. Nick had planted kiss after kiss on Sam’s forehead and temple. It was wonderful to know, but it took a while for the news to sink in. As long as his baby was healthy, Sam was happy.

The high emotions of the day finally caught up with Sam in the most unexpected place when he had a breakdown right smack bang at the top of the escalator in Every Baby. He couldn’t explain it to Nick, mostly because he couldn’t stop crying as his concerned partner led him back down to the corner cafeteria on the second storey.

“I wanna pee,” Sam managed to gulp when Nick asked him what he wanted to drink.

With an apologetic smile to the server behind the counter, Nick took Sam’s hand and headed for the men’s restroom. From under his dipped embarrassed head and eye concealing bangs, Sam noticed it was the nicest men’s room ever, with a baby changing area and a couple of comfortable seats by a row of basins, before another door to the urinals and cubicles.

Hands washed and face splashed, Sam plunked down onto the comfortable upholstered chair and fingered the edge of the waterproof mat on the changing table.

“You want to tell me what’s wrong?” Nick asked cautiously, taking the adjoining chair.

“I dunno,” Sam looked at the recessed lights in the ceiling. “Bits of stuff.”

Nick put a supportive hand on his thigh, “Anything I did, sweetheart?”

Sam hung his head and shook it. He took a gulp of air. “I guess, it was having to go to the top storey, like into the back corner, like away from all the normal female Moms to find carrier pregnancy clothes. And I know I needed black work clothes, and we got them, and the pull-on jeans and the cool summer plaid shirt, but it’s that we had to come into the city to find a store with more than just a couple of ugly pants and smock tees for guys.”

“When you don’t get a lot of customers…” Nick began.

“I know, business logic… why would a store hold items when there are so few of us?” Sam pushed his hair off his forehead, “And I wish my fucking bangs would just grow out already, and I’m cranky, and I’ve heartburn again, and my bump is popped out, and I fucking hate how sad Dean is with Castiel away.”
Nick dug around in their canvas bag of supplies, finding the Tums under Sam’s water bottles and phone. As Sam took the offered antacid, Nick reminded him, “I love your bump. I love that people can see it now, that they know you are having my baby. I wish I could keep you in tight wet t-shirts so I could admire you every minute.”

Sam laughed despite his ill humor, “I’d get a chill.”

“You in your new jeans and nothing else,” Nick growled and grabbed Sam’s lips in a hard pressed kiss.

“Why, Sir,” Sam did the worst stage-school southern accent, “I could just wear my pants and chew a blade of grass and lie outside on the bayou.”

“Don’t fucking tempt me,” Nick chuckled, “You in your swim pants getting ready to head down to the water, makes me want to tie your wrists to the bed posts and swallow you down.”

Sam flushed with arousal. At that moment the door swung open and a guy in his twenties walked by into the restroom proper. Sam and Nick exchanged a look that told each other that they had both temporarily forgotten where they were. They blurted out laughter which ended in indulgent smiles promising more when they got home later.

“We OK now?” Nick checked.

“Just…Oh my God, Nick. A girl. A little girl. I know nothing about little girls.”

Nick squeezed Sam’s arm, “We’ll figure it out.”

Sam’s mind raced as they stood to go. Dresses…dolls…band-aids with flowers on them…and birthday parties for millions of tiny girls... and what did Santa Claus bring girls? He blew a breath and reminded himself that most of those things would be new experiences in his life even if he was having a boy. He did know somebody he could ask, their grandparent who Dean called Pawpaw. Samuel and Dean had raised Mary. Sam had spoken briefly to Dean Campbell the previous weekend. It had felt awkward, despite both of their best intentions. His grandparents were strangers to him. He didn’t have the childish memories of his brother. He hadn’t known what to say on the call, except to answer his grandfather’s questions about Stanford and how he was feeling in his second trimester.

Sam pulled the clothes bags from Nick’s fingers. He was pregnant not incapable of carrying shit. Nick wisely didn’t say anything.

“You want to stop at the cafeteria or any other department?” Nick asked.

“I’m not hungry.” Sam sighed, “You?”

“Nope,” Nick patted his own belly before pecking Sam’s cheek, “Full of pie.”

A young couple passing by stared at them, but then the very pregnant young woman noticed Sam’s bump and she twisted her head to meet his eyes with a lingering smile. Sam nodded with his own slight twitch of his lips.

“Can we have a look at the newborn section? We were chatting about what to have in your hospital bag at my aqua-exercise class.” Sam said as they walked, “Annemarie said she found the most super soft tiny matching baby mittens and socks here.”

“What you going to do about color?” Nick teased.
Sam laughed, “If I see pink and I like it, I’m buying it.”

“No argument here.”

Sam ran his hand along a row of mini soft hats. Then he saw them. The newborn booties and mittens… “Oh, Oh Nick, look at all the little… they are so cute.”

Sam could hardly believe it. The tiny mitts were barely larger than his thumb. His baby would wear these, in a few months time, when they finally met their daughter. Nick picked up a set of lemon booties, mittens and a hat with teddy bear like ear decorations. “Look organic cotton, Sam.”

Sam huffed affectionately, “Yeah, it was the organic in tiny print on the label that got you to pick them up, not the cute little ears.”

“Well, it might have been the ears, but can you imagine?” Nick sighed.

Sam took the set from his partner’s hand, “And the best thing is that in many years times when a moody teenager peeves that we are showing her dressed up as teddy bear, I can blame you.”

“Deal,” Nick bumped his butt off Sam’s hip.

Sam spotted a pack of five plaid baby bibs in different shades, a nightlight in the shape of a strawberry, and a cute pink sleep suit with a bunny on it.

“You are perfect, Sam.” Nick uttered in approval as they linked arms to go check out their choices.

Sipping his water bottle while waiting in line, Sam was distracted by the sight of twins in a double stroller. When he looked, Nick was crouched down examining boxes of self-assembly hanging mobiles.

“Good God!” Sam squealed, closed his eyes tight and pushed his hand out knocking away the box that Nick had offered with a grin, “Take it away.”

“What?” Nick gave a surprised nervous laugh, “It’s gone Sam. It was only a mobile.”

Sam opened his eyes to make sure, “With Freaking Evil Clowns on it.”

“Evil clowns?” Nick snorted in amusement, “I’m sorry but the box says Circus Clowns not malevolent ones.”

“All Clowns are Evil, even cartoon ones. No way are we hanging disgusting scary clown monsters over our baby’s head.”

Nick continued to chuckle softly, but he wrapped an arm around Sam’s back and bent down to talk to their baby, “Papa is a bit crazy.”

“Hey!” Sam smacked the back of Nick’s head.

“My poor Sammy.” Nick kissed his neck as they took a couple of steps forward to be first in line to be served. “I’ll protect you from the scary clowns.”

“You better. It’s part of our relationship agreement.” Sam teased.

“Our relationship agreement? OK I’ll bite, our what?”

“I carry our baby into the world. You protect us from the clowns and” Sam dropped his voice to a
whisper, “give me copious blow jobs.”

Nick threw his head back and laughed.

On the way to the car, Nick shook his head and repeated, “Copious blow jobs.”

“That’s right.” Sam said with self-satisfaction.

Before they left the car lot, Nick turned to Sam, “I am sorry I made a booboo with the clowns. I didn’t know you’d leap out of your skin like that.”

“I did not.” Sam protested.

“You really did.” Nick scrunched his nose and brows, “You startled and closed your eyes until I took the bad thing away.”

Nick laid his hand on Sam’s softly rounded bump, “Hey my little baby, your Daddy here. Papa and I promise you that you are the most precious thing in our lives, and we’ll take care of you and love you forever. And I bet you’ll have Sam’s gorgeous foxy eyes and his adorable dimples and Papa’s intelligence and his…”

“Stop,” Sam choked. “That was beautiful until you went wrong, our girl will have your sea blue eyes and cute nose, and…”

Nick shut him up with a kiss. “Let’s go home so we can mutually appreciate each other in our bedroom, rather than the cramped confines of the car.”

“Is that what you hoity toity restaurateurs are calling it these days? Mutual appreciation?” Sam chuckled.

“Yes, sir, with a side order of bodily exploration and post-coital satisfaction.”

“I’d settle for during coital satisfaction.” Sam snorted.

“Picky! Are you sure you’re not going into law?”

Sam laughed and shook his head. His mind filled with the promise of some couple time. Maybe he could persuade Nick to join him in the wet room. Since his energy levels had improved in recent weeks leaving his chronic tiredness back in his first trimester, Sam had wanted to take Nick to bed for reasons wholly different to sleeping.

They were lucky with traffic again, reaching home in just over thirty minutes. The Impala was pulled into the north side of the property, meaning Dean had beaten them back.

Dean called out greetings from the other end of the house. He was outside on the terrace with a beer, making a sketch of one of the coyote brush plants beyond the decked area.

“Whatya get, Sammy?” Dean gestured at their shopping bags.

“Boring expandable pants,” Sam huffed, then broke out a huge grin, “But we got the most adorable newborn clothes, and a low watt light in the shape of a giant strawberry.”

Nick opened the bags to display their purchases. Dean melted over the tiny teddy ears on the little hat.

“Get this,” Sam said as he lowered himself into one of the wicker outdoor seats, “Nick wanted to
get a Clown Mobile. He put it right in front of my face.”

Dean’s half smiled and pointed his finger, “We’re not all clown phobic, y’know.”

Sam hummed at the lack of sympathy. “Well? How did your meeting with Garth go?”

Dean blew a raspberry, “Nothing decent. No car lots, or even car washes. Only janitor ticket was in frigging Gilroy.”

“That’s crap, Dee.” Sam knew Dean must be disappointed, “Is there any hope of other places coming up?”

“Garth had a suggestion.” Dean scrubbed the back of his neck, “He thought I should apply for jobs, like jobs that regular people apply for.”

“You are regular people,” Sam protested.

“Yeah? Not so much.” Dean squinted, “But I think I could fight my corner, y’know, if something in the vacancies column of the paper caught my eye. Garth says I might come under some other schemes that let you keep part of your welfare for a period if I only get something with short hours. He said I’ve months of job experience now and I got a good GED. He’s going help me put together a resume.”

“That’s great.” Sam said with pride. His sentiments were echoed by Nick.

Dean gave a short huff, “Geez, me? Hey? In gainful employment. I need a professional reference, but I’m going to ask Mitchell because Zach is a bag of dicks and if he knew I was planning on leaving he’d make my life hell.”

“I can give you a personal reference, if you like,” Nick offered.

“Wow, yeah Man, thanks,” Dean blinked.

“And you should ask Balthazar too,” Sam suggested, “And put him down as a professional reference because you’ve helped Cas in Harmonies.”

“Good thinking,” Dean nodded, “I guess I’ll ask Charlene in the corner store to keep me a copy of the morning paper.”

“I’ll keep my ears open too,” Nick promised, “And ask Castiel, you never know what he’d hear of through the coffee shop.”

“Hey, you guys want something to drink?” Dean asked when he picked up his own empty beer bottle. “I’m thinking of making homemade patties and fixings for dinner.”

“Sounds good,” Nick replied, “I think Sam wanted to have a lie down for a while.”


“Sorry, Dean, duty calls,” Nick used two hands to help Sam out of the chair.

“I’d say enjoy, but it sounds like I’m talking bout you taking a whizz.” Dean called after them.

“Shuddup.” Sam yelled back, “And put on some music, because I’m planning on being noisy.”
Dean’s strangled cry had Sam laughing all the way to the bedroom.

It had been a hot and humid weekend. Night time temperatures led to Nick and Sam sleeping sprawled out under a single sheet rather than spooned together. Sam had grabbed sleep in two or three hour phases, whispering to his baby bump that he was getting good practice for when she arrived. It was too hot for clothes and too muggy to bother with a robe when venturing down to the kitchen during the night. Luckily Dean had disappeared to Balthazar’s house as soon as Cas phoned to say he was back in Palo Alto on the Saturday afternoon, so wandering around the house naked wasn’t an issue.

Sam was polishing off the last bites of his lunch on Tuesday when he heard the distinctive rumble of the Impala outside. While his green olive craving had faded, he was glad Dean was too late to tease him for his experimental combination of canned wiener, fried bread, pickled pearl onions and mashed banana.

“He’s gone to work in Beans.” Dean sat his ass down on top of the long pine kitchen table. “I ran out of clothes.”

“Cas bought something else too.” Dean smirked. “Got a car.”

“Did it get the Dean Winchester seal of approval?”

“Weeeeeell,” Dean drew out the word and kind of winced, “It’s a Goddamn awful used ’96 Ford Taurus, not only is it butt ugly, it’s white with a weird ass curvy dash.”

“Yet you seem strangely pleased?” Sam checked.

Dean coughed, “We sorta christened the back seat.”
“Ah ha.” Sam sucked in his lips and nodded knowingly. He wasn’t sure what he was meant to say to that.

“And at least it’s not one of those two door tin cans. And the engine specs and mileage were good.” Dean smugly added, “I got them to supply all new tires. And Cas said…”

Dean was licking his lips like he was about to reveal something about his or Castiel’s feelings. Sam lifted his brows in anticipation.

“Cas said that if we weren’t, you know, together then he’d have waited to buy one. He’d have biked around Bodega Bay and caught a bus into San Fran then the Caltrain if he wanted to visit Balthazar.”

“So he bought the car for you?” Sam knew that was what Dean meant but he couldn’t resist making Dean’s cheeks pink up.

“I guess.” Dean glanced down at his wrist cuffs, exposed because he was wearing a well washed short sleeve grey tee with Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man on it. “He wants to call the car Kitten.”

Sam spurted a single loud laugh, “You can’t talk, Dean. You call the Impala Baby.”

“Y’know, I saw this cool pick-up, but Cas wouldn’t go for it. Said he wanted a car you could put a baby seat into.”

Sam gaped, his mind going down Dean and Cas, Cas and Dean routes.

“For my niece, Sammy!” Dean bent double with mirth, “Your face. Man, that was priceless.”

“Oh yeah, punk the pregnant dude.” Sam groused but without any bad feeling, “Come on, it’s like a pizza oven in here, let’s go down to the water.”

“You could crank up the AC,” Dean suggested.

“Have you even heard of the environment, Dean?” Sam eye rolled. “Nice breeze, we can sit in the shallow waves.”

Sam almost expected a smartass remark about Princess Samantha and her mermaid playtime, but Dean went to change his jeans for a pair of shorts. Sam gathered a couple of beach towels, sunscreen, and bottles of water. He threaded his house key around the strap of the new waterproof sports watch that Nick had given to him for his aqua exercise class.

They remained in direct sight of the house, dipping in and out of the sea for the rest of the afternoon. They didn’t talk much. Dean said Balthazar had agreed to be a referee on his resume and he was going to talk to Mitchell privately at work. He was less enthusiastic when telling Sam how much Castiel had enjoyed meeting everyone in Bodega Bay and getting to take the students to the Marine Lab there. Sam astutely changed the subject to the upcoming sibling and expectant parent class. It ran once a month but Dean and Sam had missed the previous one due to moving into Nick’s place.

When no one was close to them, Dean, the giant dork, drew a Batman symbol into the sand. When Ava came by walking her pooch, he claimed some kids had done it. After draining his water bottle, Sam went back into the house to use the restroom. Meanwhile Dean built a quick sandcastle in the shape of the Impala. Sam didn’t say a word and diplomatically stuck his nose into the new Harry Potter book. It was such luxury to have the time to read for pure pleasure.
By late afternoon the breeze had picked up and Sam wanted to shower and dress before Nick came home. Crowley had control of the restaurant for the evening so Nick and he could have a shared night off. It would be nice if Dean stayed so they could all eat together.

“Hey, Dean,” Sam asked while he balled up their towels, “You sticking around or going back to Palo Alto later?”

“Cas’s working until close and I’ve work in the morning, so thought I’d sleep here,” Dean replied, “That OK?”

“‘Course,” Sam answered, “We’re doing Take Out Tuesday.”

“Seriously? Is that a thing now?” Dean laughed.

“Four times since we moved here makes it a thing. I have decided.” Sam chuckled. Hot sand was stinging in between his toes. He was going to have to shower. Trails of sand through the house were one of the few drawbacks of their location. He’d learned the hard way that romantic as it sounded to go from making out on the beach to making out in the bed, sand followed you everywhere.

With Dean behind him and his key in the lock of the rear door, Sam could hear his cell phone ringtone blaring.

“Shit shit shit,” He hissed as he turned the key, “I left my cell here when I hit the head.”

“’S probably Nick.” Dean said following in. “I didn’t bring mine down, didn’t want to lose it in the sand.”

Slanting sunlight glinted off Sam’s cell phone at the edge of the counter under the window. He failed to make it before it fell silent. He flipped it open. There were six missed calls; three from Nick in the last twenty minutes, one earlier from Bobby and two from an unknown number. Sam stared at the phone, perplexed that he had been in such demand.

“Hey,” Dean called from the hall, “I’ve got missed calls from Nick and Bobby and the light is blinking on the house ansaphone.”

Just then Dean’s cell started up with Sympathy for The Devil. He turned slightly away from Sam to avoid the disapproving expression that Dean insisted on calling a bitchface. Sam had told him to change his ringtone for Nick.

“Hi Ni… Yeah… Yeah OK, keep your shorts on, I’m putting him on now.” Dean sighed exaggeratedly and held his cell out for Sam to grasp.

“Nick?” Sam said with expelled breath, “What’s wrong, babe?”

All sorts of dreadful scenarios ran through his mind.

He could see Dean, stilled and braced for action.

“Sam, are you alone?” Nick asked in a clipped tone.

Dean left the kitchen to give them privacy.

“What happened? Are you OK? Oh God, you weren’t robbed were you? Was there an earthquake?” Sam looked wildly around the room checking for any fallen items.
“No, Darling, sit down.”

Sam grasped the edge of the table and carefully sat.

“I was in the cold room doing inventory with Max.” Nick paused.

Sam’s mind unhelpfully conjured up all manner of workplace accidents, “Uh huh?”

“When we were done, Alastair said some guy had been looking for you. I didn’t think much of it, figured it was one of your college buds.”

Sam could almost see Nick rubbing his jaw as he told his tale. He urged, “Go on, Love.”

“I asked Al if he told the dude you would be at work tomorrow evening,” Nick sucked a breath, “Al told me the guy said he was family, and had been to Cowper Street but the students had moved on.”

Sam’s heart lurched. It must be, but Sam hoped it couldn’t be, John. Bobby had their new address. Their newly found grandparents only knew this address.

Nick said it aloud, “It sounds like your father.”

Sam licked his dry lips, “Did Al tell him?”

“I roasted him for not calling me, but yeah, and I’m going to kill him…”

“I’m sorry Nick,” Sam apologized. He could hear Nick saying he was on his way as he dropped the cell. He called out, “Dean.”

His brother ran into the room.

“Dad…” Sam tried.

The whites of Dean’s eyes grew large and he went rigid at the mere mention.

Loud insistent battering knocks could be heard from their front door. Sam was ready to be quiet, freaking hide in a closet if necessary, despite the evidence of the parked Impala. However as if Dean was hardwired to answer John’s call, he darted from the room.

Quickly adjusting to the reality that John was about to appear, Sam caught his sand covered towel from where it was thrown for laundry, and wrapped it sarong like around his chest. He checked he’d covered his darkened nipples, and quickly retook his seat. He felt as if he had been dropped into an episode of the Twilight Zone, or maybe Quantum Leap; John marching through the door as he owned the place, in layers of denim and his leather coat despite the summer weather, Dean trailing after him like a shadow with his head cowed. Only it wasn’t like years ago. John’s gait had a pirate like roll, a residue of his December leg injury. Dean’s gaze was on the floor but he was speaking, telling John that they had moved from Palo Alto a month ago. Sam could see the tremble in his brother’s body.

“John.” Sam acknowledged simply, remaining straight backed in his chair. There was no way he was getting up for a hypocritical man-hug.

“Hey, Sammy,” John said with fake cheer, as if nothing had ever happened. It made Sam’s blood boil. He could see Dean’s eyes darting between the two of them. A little nugget of Sam’s ire was flaming at Dean for letting John into the house, but knowing their father he’d likely burst through
the door as soon as Dean opened it.

“It’s Sam.” The younger Winchester said through tight lips. “What do you want? Are you short of cash? I have nothing to give you.”

“Damn it, Sam. Can’t a man come see his sons?”

Sam scoffed, “Like you were road tripping to Arkansas on a regular basis.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” John ran his hand over his mouth and jaw in a gesture that Sam had never realized that both Dean and his father shared. “And I’m not frigging looking for money.”

Sam watched open mouthed as John dug into his inside pocket and pulled out a tightly packed bundle of greenbacks, slapping it down onto the table.

“I got a call from Jefferson,” John explained, “Porsche were a mechanic short for the ALMS Grand Prix at Infineon last weekend. Drove all night from Minnesota. Got a bonus.” He shrugged, “Thought my boys could do with some of it.”

Sam breathed heavily through his nostrils, reliving so many times that John thought leaving them to survive on their own could be magically mended by treating his sons to a slap up meal in a diner and shoving extra housekeeping money into Dean’s hand.

“Forgotten your manners now you’re some college hot shot?”

Sam stared at him in disbelief.

“Th…Th..Thanks Sir.” Dean stuttered from his spot at the other end of the table near the sink.

Sam’s jaw dropped. It was like he was in the room with teenage Dean who obediently was thanking his father for the crumbs from his table. This was the man who had dumped Dean, seventeen and pregnant, into psychiatric care, dropped him like a stone and told the world he was dead. Where was Dean’s rage, his fury? Why wasn’t Dean calling John out on every cruel and nasty thing he had done?

Attempting to control his temper, Sam repeated, “What do you want, John?”

“Maybe I wanted to check in on ya.” John shrugged. “Dean, anything to drink in this show house you’ve landed? How have you got this prissy pad? You house-sitting?”

“No. My partner lives here.” Sam answered.

“Does she?” John hummed in appreciation running his hand along the high quality kitchen units. “Stanford’s good for something then? Caught yourself a trust fund doll?”

Sam almost laughed at how close to the truth about Nick’s annuity his father had accidently hit.

“A beer, Dean.”

Sam seethed at the way John talked down to Dean. He had always either spat vile rage or spoken like that to his eldest, like he was some sort of slave.

“Wait, Dean,” Sam pleaded, “John is not staying.”

John clicked his tongue, “Maybe I want to meet the girl who snagged Sammy.”
“It’s Sam.”

“Whatever happened to that girlfriend of yours? Jessica? The blonde bombshell in those pictures you showed us at Singer’s.”

“Jess and I were never together,” Sam took a shuddering breath and tried a reasonable tone, “Thanks for calling. We are fine. Nick will be home soon and I think you should go.”

John heaved a laugh, “Nick? Isn’t that a bit butch? Nicola? Nicole? She’s not some ball busting modern chick is she? Not ashamed of introducing your hick old Dad are ya?”

Before Sam could formulate a reply that might persuade John to go, he watched as his father turned on Dean, “I thought I told you to get me a beer, just as dumb as ever.”

John’s arm shot out, probably only to give Dean a shove to get him moving, but Sam saw every hit, every punch from down the years. Dean visibly shook and took a step back, pressing his body against the sink unit.

“Don’t you touch him!” Sam jumped out of his chair to defend Dean.

All Hell broke loose.

The towel fell to the floor.

Dean whimpered and hugged his arms around his body.

John turned back towards Sam, anger flaring, “How dare you...”

His father’s eyes roved downwards over the hickeys on his collar bone, his changing chest, widened areola, his small but rounded baby bump, his obviously pregnant body.

Sam felt ill, physically sick. He moved his right hand to cup his little girl protectively.

“What the Fucking Hell?” John bellowed.

“I’m pregnant.” Sam blew through rounded lips, “20 weeks.”

His father growled and slammed his fist down onto the table with such force that Sam was surprised the sturdy pine did not crack apart.

“You’re fucking queer?” John let out a bitter bilious laugh, “I have two filthy faggot sons. What you doing Sam? Whoring yourself out for a fancy place to live?”

“No, I mean I’m pregnant.” Sam said with as much firmness as he could while blinking back sudden unwelcome tears, “This is your grandchild.”

With eyes flashing John strode into Sam’s personal space, “I will speak to you whatever way I fucking want. You run off to college, let some man fuck you, put his spawn into you. I should never have let you go.”

“I was eighteen,” Sam drew up to his full height and spat back, “You couldn’t stop me, and you knew it. This is my life. I love Nick. This is our baby and our life and if you can’t accept it then shut your mouth and hit the road.”

“How dare you? You jumped up piece of shit. Always thought you were better than me, even as a boy, talking down to your own father, and you,” John swung back to where Dean stood quaking,
“You encouraged him. I worked my ass off for you two boys. And the only thanks I got was Sam’s attitude.”

Sam laughed drily, “You worked your ass off for us? Please? Don’t insult us by re-writing history. You worked your ass off for Jim Beam and Jack Daniels.”

“You little shit.”

“What are you going to do, Dad? Hit me?” Sam strained his neck forward daring his father to do it.

And he did. Sam’s mouth dropped and his eyes crossed at the sight of knuckles flying towards his face. The punch to his cheek caused Sam to stagger back, pain blossoming. He was blinking in shock as a second hit slammed into his jaw. Behind his father’s snarling homophobic insults, an animalistic wailing noise grew.

It was Dean. He grabbed hold of his father’s arm as it raised for a third punch, swinging his father sideways.


“Get off me, you cretin.” John hissed, but Dean wouldn’t let go.

John kicked Dean’s knees, dropping him to the floor so his legs slid under the table. He added a second kick to Dean’s rump, telling him he was useless.

“Still trying to defend you. Your champion.” John sneered turning back to his younger son, “You think you’re special, do you? Boy wonder?”

Sam shook his head. He could see Dean’s hand reaching up for his cell phone. He needed to stall John, try and talk him down from his tendency to hit first and ask question later or never.

“Not special, but not a freak. Not different. This is natural Dad. I’m a carrier, like Dean, like Mom’s birth-dad. It isn’t a life choice. It’s who I am. Please.” Sam tried. He swore it would be his last attempt as a bead of blood trickled into the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t you give me that liberal clap trap. Carriers do not have some biological drive to fuck homos. They do not need to degrade their bodies with other men. They can marry women. They can father children, and stay with those children, not run off when their so called biology calls to them like animals in the wild.”

Sam had heard this before. It was wearying to listen to the because we can climb trees doesn’t mean we have to live like chimps argument. John couldn’t seem to look at Sam’s belly. He was keeping his eyes above Sam’s shoulders. Sam hoped it would give Dean his chance.

Could they never catch a break? John shut up at the moment when the only sound was their heavy breaths and a tinny distant voice on the other end of the line, “911, what is your emergency?”

John swiveled on his heel. He spotted Dean under the table.

“He…He’s attack…tackling my pregnant bro…” Was as far as Dean got before John grabbed his foot and tugged him out from under the table with a roar.

Sam wrapped his arms around John’s neck from behind. He couldn’t get the angle right but tried his damnedest to yank his father back. There was no way he was going to beat on Dean.
Dean let out a pained puff of air as John kicked him in the guts. As the female voice on the call asked repeatedly for a location, John stamped down to crush Dean’s hand. Fortunately Dean saw the boot coming and the Nokia took the brunt of the stamping. Pieces of phone casing flew across the floor. John jerked backwards dislodging Sam’s hold. He landed another kick to Dean’s body before Sam yelled his protest at the top of his lungs and pummeled into John’s back with his fists. John flung his arm back in a bar fight move. It landed under Sam’s raised arm with surprising force, wounding him. Dean scooted back further under the table.

“Come out of there and face me like a man,” John shouted, “Pathetic. Sam should have left you in that hospital. Look at what has happened since he went and got you. You’ve ruined him, letting him think it’s fine to lie with another man. I don’t know how I ever trusted you with him when he was a boy.”

“Get out.” Sam yelled at the top of his lungs. He could feel his pulse leaping in his temple. Blood was pounding through his veins. He didn’t know if it was an illusion but he thought he could feel the baby fluttering inside. “Get out of my home.”

Sam’s volume was so great that John halted. Sam caught John by his jacket lapels and began to march him backwards out of the kitchen. “You will never speak to Dean like that again. Never speak to us at all. Get out of here. Out of our lives. If there was any ruining done, then you did it. You ruined Dean’s life. You bastard. You sick, abusive, bastard. Did you ever care for us? Were we just possessions? Relics of your life with Mom? Get into your truck and don’t you dare come back here. Do you hear me?”

“I hear ya.” John said, lifting his arms and slamming them up under Sam’s wrists, breaking the hold, “I’ll put this down to irrational pregnancy hormones.”

Sam hissed like a snake. “Out. Do you hear me, John? Out now. Or I swear, when Nick comes back and tries to kill you, I won’t stop him.”

John raised his palms, “OK, OK. I’m going. Don’t know why I thought you’d be reasonable and listen. You’ve obviously made your lifestyle choice, and not on the side of the angels. Keep the stack.”

Sam didn’t say another word. He glared as his father descended the few steps and entered his truck. He desperately wanted to check on Dean, but he needed to be sure the man was off the property. When the truck turned onto the street, Sam hastened directly back to the kitchen.

There was a whining noise from under the table. Sam gulped. He’d hoped Dean would be standing up or picking up the bits of his broken cell phone. Sam got down on his knees. Dean was pushed back against the chair legs on the opposite side, curled up.

“You?” Sam said as softly as he could, “He’s gone, Dean. For real.”

He wasn’t sure Dean had heard him. His brother’s breathing was all wrong, kind of heaving and shuddering at the same time. His arms were wrapped around his body protectively. Sweat had broken out across his brow. In the shadow of the table, the whites of Dean’s eyes were enormous.

“Dean? Dee?” Sam pleaded, “Please be OK. Geez, Dee. What can I do? Do you need a Xanax?”

There was no response.

“I’ll get your Xanax.” Sam ran as fast as he could up to Dean’s room and snatched the medication from the dresser. His own cell was ringing again when he came back into the kitchen. Dean hadn’t
moved, even with Sam’s ringtone screaming above his head. Flicking the phone open Sam crouched down so Dean could see him.


While the sound of his lover’s voice was like a cool flannel on his fevered forehead, in response to the questions all Sam could do was give an incredulous laugh, “He was here.”

“What? Are you both alright?” Nick exclaimed.

“I don’t think Dean is…. Nick I gotta go. I gotta take care of him.”

“I’m a few minutes out, passing the airstrip at Half Moon Bay.”

“’kay, we’re in the kitchen.” Sam gulped, “Love you.”


Sam put the cell on the floor beside his leg. “Dee. Look, Dee. I have your Xanax. You want one or two. They’re the good meds, remember?”

Sam cocked his ear. He thought Dean mumbled something, but he was humming, maybe Metallica.

“Dee? Please? Let me get you water for them.”

Dean wouldn’t take the glass of water. It was like he didn’t see it in front of him. Sam attempted to give him the pill, going so far as to press it against Dean’s closed lips. He’d make airplane noises and moves like Dean did for him when he was little, if he thought it would help.

He knew he was completely out of his depth. He wished Nick would get home.

From the waiting laundry Sam grabbed a pair of loose cotton pants and a long grey tee that weren’t too soiled. The crew neck of the tee hurt his injured cheek as he pulled it on.

Sam saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He dropped to Dean’s level hopefully, but all Dean had done was move a hand to his head trying to pull out his own hair.

“Jesus Christ.” Sam glanced to the door again, “Where is Nick?”

He tugged on Dean’s arm. His brother didn’t resist, allowing Sam to move him like a mannequin.

“Dean, Hey, Hey,” Sam huffed a breath, “Dean, are you with me?”

The door slammed. Nick’s running footsteps lifted a heavy weight from Sam. Dean gave a hoarse wheeze.

“It’s OK, Dee. It’s Nick. It’s not Dad. It’s Nick coming.” Sam tried to soothe. Stink of ammonia hit his nostrils. Dean had pissed himself.

Sam covered his mouth with his hand and sobbed. He was there with shoulders shaking, the other hand on Dean’s knee, trying to ground his brother, when Nick sank down beside them.


“Oh Baby,” Nick sighed sympathetically, “I’m so sorry. What did he do to you both?”
Sam twisted to begin giving Nick the most concise summary. Nick gasped.

“You are hurt. He hit you. His pregnant son. He hit you.” Nick repeated in complete disbelief. He ran his hands down Sam’s bare arms, “Are you OK?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Sam panted. He jerked his head at Dean. “I can’t get him to respond to me.”

“Did you call his shrink?” Nick offered his phone.

“No. No I didn’t think. I got the Xanax, but I can’t get him to take it.” Sam picked up his own cell, “I have Victor’s number in here. Dean, I’m calling Victor for you, OK? He’ll know what to do.” Sam explained to his unresponsive brother.

“Dr Henricksen’s office, Frances speaking.”

“I need to speak with the doctor now.” Sam demanded.

“Dr Henricksen is busy. Can I take your name?”

“This is Sam Winchester, and I am serious. I need to speak with Victor NOW.”

“Hold a moment, please,” the secretary said calmly as if Sam wasn’t freaking out.

Nick pointed at the refrigerator. Sam nodded although he didn’t know what Nick was doing until he came back with ice for Sam’s cheek. Dean was making a slight rocking motion back and forth.

“Sam?”

“Doctor, Dean…” Sam took a deep breath. “Our Dad turned up. He attacked Dean and me. Dean’s tucked under the table. He’s not talking. He won’t come out. I don’t even know if he can hear me…”

“Are either of you injured?”

“No, not really. Dad got a few kicks in to Dean, and punched me in the face. It’s like he’s having a panic attack. Should I try get him to breathe with me?”

“Just stay with him. Does he know you are there? Have you tried talking to him?”

“Yes.” Sam snapped. “I offered him a Xanax but he…”

“What is Dean doing Sam? Is he vocal?”

“He’s not reacting to me, but he was humming and he kind of whined. He’s curled up, and he was shaking and sweating.” Sam swallowed hard, “He was pulling at his hair but when I moved his arm he stopped and now he has one wrist cuff gripped with the other hand.”

“Sam,” Victor intoned, “That sounds, without examining your brother, like an Acute Stress Reaction.”

“What do I do?” Sam tightened his hold on the cell phone so much it dug into his skin and it felt as if the small muscles and tendons in his hand were seizing.

“I need to see him, Sam. Can you bring him in? Or I can send an ambulance?”
“No ambulance!” Sam gasped. Nick’s brow furrowed.

“Alright. You bring him in, Sam. I’ll be waiting at reception.” Victor said calmly. “Right now, Sam. OK?”

“OK.” Sam whispered. He ended the call and looked at his partner. “We need to bring Dean in to see Victor.”

Nick nodded. “You see can you get him out from under there. I’ll gather up our things. I’ll be back in second to help.”

Sam spoke to Dean the whole time while he went around to the other side of the table and pulled out the chairs from behind his brother. With his hands under Dean’s shoulders and a plea for Dean to help him, he managed to half drag, half help him to shuffle out. Nick was back and they both took a side. Dean’s feet dragged but he moved his legs letting them take him out.

It was profoundly distressing. Sam wanted to collapse in a heap, but he couldn’t. He had to stay strong. It was like Dean had checked out. He wondered if Dean would be pissed at him for bringing him to see Victor, but he didn’t know what else to do. Sam sat in the Lexus backseat with Dean, who remained silent but curled in to rest his head on Sam’s shoulder. Nick asked a litany of questions about what happened. Sam remembered the 911 call, but couldn’t recall how long it was before John smashed Dean’s cell. Nick made a call to the local police to tell them what had happened, and that they had left the house, in case the location had been traced.

Sam cupped the back of Dean’s head with his hand, feeling his short hair under his palm. If Dean was comatosus there was no way he’d allow that, but Sam needed to hold his silent brother. He couldn’t bear to think that the confrontation with John might have erased all the stunning progress Dean had made since leaving Arkansas. Sam knew from his psych classes that going into a ‘state of shock’ wasn’t just a turn of phrase, and he was hoping with every fiber of his being that Dean was experiencing a temporary reaction. He didn’t know what he would do if this was some sort of regression in Dean’s anxiety disorder. Hell, Dean had been doing so good, Sam barely remembered the disorder anymore unless it was a Victor Thursday or he saw Dean taking his meds.

Nick ran the Lexus right up on the curb outside the entrance to Stanford Medical Center.

“Stay here, Sam,” He urged, “I’ll go in to find Dr Henricksen.”

Sam nodded. He remained focused on Dean, repeating that Victor was on his way and would help him. But inside Sam was breaking down, feeling that everything was falling apart.

Chapter End Notes

I am aiming to update again midweek, from Dean's POV.
Eighteen

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Mental distress, remembrances of past abuse. The beginning of the chapter was difficult emotionally to write. Dean is in a dark place, but I promise it is temporary.

Additional Disclaimer: Stanford Medical Center in this story is a totally fictionalized version of the real world hospital. Although I have researched extensively this is a work of my imagination in an AU world. I do not claim that my version of procedures and practices bears any resemblance to the reality.

They were outside Stanford Medical Center. Dean blinked and tried to parse how they had gotten there. He remembered Sam pulling him out from under the table. Nick was there. They had gotten into the back of the car but there was a blank between then and now. Sam’s warm hand was on the back of his neck. Dean tucked his chin in. He tried to tell Sam that he didn’t want to be at the hospital but nothing would come out. There was a tight constricting ball in the middle of his chest. His shorts were damp and his heart sank knowing but unable to remember what must have happened. Tremors ran down his skin, making his arms tingle and the nerve in his knee jump.

His father’s words echoed in his brain. Worthless, dumb, cretin, loser… and Dad had hit Sammy… who was pregnant. He could have hurt Sam’s baby. It was wrong, all wrong. Everything was wrong. He was never enough. He couldn’t stop John. He’d collapsed and taken the kicks and the beating. He couldn’t remember what halted John. It was all blurring and crushing.

Two nurses looked through the car window at him. They were talking to Sam. Dean could hear their conversation but it was like it was happening in another reality, the words flowing around an invisible shield that divided him from the rest of the world.

“Has he taken anything?”

What did that mean? Did they think he was a druggie like Kit or maybe some pothead like Andy? Sam was telling them that he wouldn’t take his Xanax, but it wasn’t that he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. They wanted to know if he had head trauma. A laugh died and crumbled inside him. Now Sam was shouting that his brother wasn’t schizophrenic or autistic and that he was Dr Henricksen’s patient. Victor had been called to an emergency, but was on his way.

“Dean? Dee?”

Sam was talking to him, but Dean couldn’t break through the haze to respond to him. They wanted him to get out of the car. Nick was in the doorway on his side to help him out. It wasn’t going to happen. He wanted to go home. He wanted his own bed, and Spider, and his sketch pads, and for Castiel to come over and see him. He threw his hand back for purchase and connected with Sam’s
His brother let out a whoosh of air.

He’d hurt Sam. He’d hit him. He was as bad as John. Self-hatred wrapped around him vine-like and tight.

Then things got chaotic. Sam was saying loudly that Victor should be there. There was a male orderly with the nurses and they were pulling Dean out of the Lexus. He went limp but they got him out. Sam was shouting that they shouldn’t handle his brother like that. His legs wouldn’t cooperate with the nurses who wanted him to go inside or with his own desire to get back into the car. He saw a gurney with side restraints. He threw his head back and forth trying to say no, but nothing came out. The others had him pinned. He wasn’t going back. He couldn’t. His breath shortened. He heart thudded in palpitations. He couldn’t get control of it. He felt like he was detached from his body. The orderly was making meaningless soothing noises. They wanted him to breathe. He fucking wanted to breathe. They lifted him onto the gurney and wrapped the body restraint across his torso. One of the nurses was telling Sam that it was so he wouldn’t fall off and injure himself. He could hear Sam crying and protesting that Dean wasn’t dangerous and they’d come looking for help. He curled inward blocking everything out as his vision filled with white.

When Dean came to, he tried to shift the fog rolling through his mind. His ribs ached when he took too deep a breath. He smacked his lips together trying to dispel the taste of ashes in his dry mouth. He opened his eyes to artificial light. He was staring at a white polystyrene tiled ceiling. Tears leaked out of his eyes. He was back in a white room with no windows, only the ubiquitous double mirror. He flexed his limbs on overly starched sheets, surprised he was not restrained. His clothes were gone, soiled of course. They had cleaned him up and put him in white scrubs. A rustle between his legs made his stomach drop in shame. They’d stuck an incontinence pad in his underwear. His leather cuffs were gone too. He raised his arm in front of his eyes looking at the slightly blurred image of a hateful hospital bracelet over his scars. The fingers on his right hand were bandaged, his ring finger straight with two plastic splints, wrapped onto the ones on either side. His watch was gone, his wallet. His cell was in shards on Nick’s kitchen floor. He had nothing. Everything was gone.

He turned into the wall, not wanting whatever spy was on the other side of the glass to see him losing it. He shook until a sensation of emotional numbness took over.

The door opened and a soft voice called that it was check time. Dean remained still, hoping they would believe he was sleeping. He didn’t have peace for long before he heard the door pull back and Victor’s voice saying hello. Dean tried to turn away, face the wall again, but Victor asked how he was feeling.

There were no words. They were lost. He didn’t bother trying to open his mouth. Victor asked him if he remembered his shock. Dean nodded as he scooted up the mattress so he could hug his knees.

“Listen to my voice Dean. You are in Stanford. You had an Acute Stress Reaction. You were admitted to the ward.” Victor paused, “Your father cannot hurt you here.”

Dean gave Victor the acknowledging nod he sought. He was on 72 hour hold. His insides coiled. Despair washed over him. He tugged his head into his knees. Victor was trying to tell him or ask him crap. He wanted Sam. He wanted to go home. Nothing else mattered. He couldn’t hear the doctor any more.

A nurse came with meds. Dean took them.

They moved him from the seclusion room to a bedroom with a window and a closet, a sink, shower and toilet to the side. The only unusual item was the patients’ rights handbook on an empty
dressing table cum desk. Dean sneered at it, wondering if it was as fictional as the one back in Hell. He staggered to the restroom and ripped the incontinence pad off. After a long time under hot running water he began to feel a little more human.

Clean and after putting on a new set of white scrubs from the closet, Dean pulled the mattress and blankets from his bed and retreated to the corner of the room. When a different nurse stuck her head in to check on him she put him back to bed. He remade his fort and tucked himself under the blanket. He couldn’t care less if it was irrational behavior. It made him feel better and he gave a self-mocking chuckle that if he couldn’t behave irrationally on a mental ward, then where could he?

In the morning when a new ginger ringlet haired nurse came, Dean was seated on the edge of the mattress on the floor staring at the far wall unseeing. She checked the clipboard chart hanging on the outside of his door.

“Hello Dean, I’m Bonny.”

Dean inclined his head to show he had heard.

“How is your pain this morning? Your fractured rib and finger? On a scale of one to five?” She looked up from where she had been reading about his injuries.

Dean looked at the blackening nail poking out from beneath the bandages. He held up two fingers of his left hand. He had figured that his dulled ache meant they had included painkillers in his meds.

“It’s time to go to the dining room for breakfast.” Bonny said kindly but in a tone that brooked no argument. She stood in the doorway waiting for him to follow.

Dean stood up, but his legs were like tree trunks, immovable.

“If I can get a wheelchair for room 5?”

Dean shook his head. No freaking way was he getting strapped into a wheelchair. He’d spent too many years at the mercy of utter dickasses. He put up a hand attracting Bonny’s attention and shook his head, trying to say he wasn’t coming, wasn’t hungry.

“Well that’s fine Sugar, but you need to get to the dining room.”

Dean dragged his legs forward. Bonny caught on that he was having trouble and moved to give him her arm as support. He let her guide him. He had no choice. His choices had been taken away from him. He turned his head so the nurse couldn’t see how affected he was.

The corridors were painted in cheery pastels. Dean watched his reluctant shuffling feet clad in disposable slippers. It wasn’t far to the canteen, or dining room as it seemed to be called here. The wide white tiled floor had been recently mopped. The antiseptic smell of the cleaning chemicals burned his nose. It overlay the hateful clinical hospital scent.

Bonny sat next to him, pointing at a glass of orange juice and plate of rubbery scrambled eggs and buttered toast. There was no hunger in his belly, no drive to eat. An ennui settled on him. He would wait until Bonny determined it was time to leave. However the nurse had other ideas. She lifted the juice to his mouth. It was pointless to fight. Dean opened his mouth and allowed her to tilt a large sip. She hand fed him the unappetizing toast. Once he had half a slice eaten he shook his head.

Being coaxed to eat by this kind professional woman was demoralizing. He took the juice from her hand with his undamaged left one and finished the drink.
After the partially eaten meal Bonny helped him back to his room. Dean stayed close to the wall. A tall older man began shouting at the other end of the corridor. Dean flinched as the man banged his fist on a door. He turned his head away and spotted Victor coming out of another room. He tried to make his body smaller but Victor had seen him too and made his way over.

“How are you feeling this morning?”

Dean licked his lips.

“We had breakfast.” Bonny informed the psychiatrist. “Dean held the juice on his own.”

Dean rolled his eyes. ‘We’ hadn’t had breakfast. The nurse hadn’t eaten anything.

“An improvement on yesterday evening,” Victor smiled his pearly whites.

Dean hadn’t a clue what he was talking about, but suspected he had been so unresponsive that they couldn’t get him to eat.

“I will see you privately later, Dean.” Victor promised.

Bonny asked if he would like to sit in the communal area, and apologized that he couldn’t go out to the sunny courtyard as he was currently restricted. Dean gave a negative hand motion. He hadn’t expected to be allowed outside. She kept up a commentary on the various games, books and distractions available. Dean let her talk but he must have reacted without realizing it when she mentioned drawing materials because once she had brought him back to his room, she reappeared minutes later with some A3 sheets and washable fine-line markers.

Left alone, Dean knew he shouldn’t hide or wallow in his room. Layla had always encouraged him to come out of his bedroom and to join in classes and activities. Still it was his first morning there and he couldn’t summon up the willpower to override the part of him that wanted to strip his freshly made bed and remake the mattress fort. His silence wrapped around him like a blanket, but it offered no comfort, only swaddled him too tightly against the world. Loneliness and isolation pressed on him. He wanted to go home so badly.

He put the blank paper on the desk with two drawers that was in the corner by the single closet. Sitting on the bed, he twiddled a black marker between his un-bandaged thumb and index finger. He bit off the top and began tracing over his left wrist ridges, then colored in the spaces. It was more difficult with his left hand. He had his tongue pressed between his teeth when Victor walked in.

“What are you doing?”

Dean dropped his arms palm up.

Victor didn’t make any critical comment but took Dean into the small bathroom and washed his arms with soap and warm water.

Dean lifted his head and looked in the mirror. A stranger stared back at him, white-faced and wide-eyed. There was a cut on his cheekbone above his lunar scar.

Back in the bedroom, Victor dragged the chair over from the table so he could sit across from Dean. He took a moment, as if he was getting his thoughts together.

“I know you are scared, Dean.”
Dean hitched his shoulder to say *Who’s scared?*

“You went through a terrifying ordeal. It is natural to be afraid that your father will return, but a warrant has been issued for his arrest, for assaulting you and your brother.”

Dean snorted in derision. Warrants for John weren’t worth the paper they were written on. All they meant was that the Winchesters couldn’t cross state lines into Maine after John knocked out an employer who had been displeased with his work, and that John could never go back to Canada after the post Montreal Grand Prix bar fight in 1994.

“You must be fearful for Sam too.”

Dean perked up his ears.

“He is fine. They treated him for his minor injuries in the ER. He was more worried about you and will come this evening for visiting hour.” Victor kept his tone even yet concerned, “It would not be unexpected for your condition to be causing you heightened anxiety. We are here to help you and I promise that you will regain control.”

Victor rose to go. Dean stood in a gesture of respect, for the solace his doctor was trying to impart. It did feel better to receive good news of Sammy’s visit and to hear the confidence with which Victor spoke of his recovery. A few minutes later Bonny appeared with his leather cuffs, saying Victor asked her to bring them to him. She helped him to tie them. Seeing his scars being covered, and having the nurse compliment his taste in accessories, brought a shy smile to his face.

A new nurse stuck her head in to check on him and told him that Group was about to begin in the communal area. There was a vacant chair for him when he joined the four other guys and two chicks. Victor wasn’t hosting, instead a Turkish looking resident with an insipid moustache introduced himself as Dr Yilditz. Dean tucked one leg under his other knee and prepared to listen to an hour of moaning.

The mood disorder group was different and yet the same as every other session Dean had attended. It was different due to the mixed genders and small number. The similarities pulled Dean back in time. An older guy called Jack peeved about his least favorite herb, basil, being in the tomato soup. His issue morphed with years of petty gripes back in Arkansas. Carol Ann’s voicing of her conviction that she wasn’t receiving all her mail, was overlaid with George’s tears when his parents failed to write proving they had dumped his pregnant ass in the care home. News of Lewis’s breakthrough bled into the past announcement of Jim and his baby’s move to Cabins after his recovery from the medical abuse.

It was like a fall of leaves, each one a different hue but originating from the same tree and piling up until time and weather broke them down into leaf mould; rotten, degraded and lost.

“Dean?” Dr Yilditz waited until Dean met his eye, “Would you like to contribute?”

Dean held up a hand to say he was good with being a fly on the wall.

“Welcome to the madhouse,” Lien chirped, earning her a disapproving look from the doctor.

Dean shrugged. If he was speaking he’d have told the Vietnamese girl that this wasn’t his first rodeo.

It was lunchtime when they finished up. Dean trailed after the others. He wasn’t going to be hand fed again. He picked a carton of milk with a straw from the chilled cabinet and pointed at the sandwich choices. The dining room server asked too many questions about what fillings he wanted,
but with some insistent pointing Dean ended up with a bacon, lettuce and cheese. He made sure to take a table on his own, even though he did notice Carol Ann and Jack waving him towards their spot. He wasn’t feeling up to making silent conversation of exaggerated nods, grimaces and hand gestures.

When it was time to see Victor, in his office, Bonny came to get him. His hospital slippers crinkled. He stayed pressed against the walls while Bonny urged him on. He took the corner of the elevator, then focused his gaze on the floor so he wouldn’t see Victor’s secretary. Bonny entrusted him to Victor’s care. He shuffled to the fugly couch and took the opposite end, curling his legs under and bracing his back against the solid arm.

“The results of your CT scan were normal.” Victor announced.

Dean blurrily recalled the white tunnel from the previous evening. He furrowed his brow in query.

“Your brother could not be certain that you had not received a kick to the head, and as you were unresponsive, it was standard procedure. I’m satisfied that the catatonia was a symptom of your stress reaction.”

Dean widened his eyes at the mention of catatonia but he supposed phasing out was being catatonic. While he thought about that Victor told him that they had taken bloods too, but he believed his reaction was psychological, not due to a physical injury. Dean plucked at the hem of his scrubs while he listened. Victor noticed and promised Sam was bringing some of Dean’s own clothes later.

“I’m going to adjust your medication.” Victor informed him.

Dean didn’t care.

“Your meds have included diazepam since your admission yesterday. You had several catatonic episodes but today you have been ‘present’ continuously? No lost time?”

Dean gave a slight nod. There had been no weird leaps in time.

“I would not like you to have to battle depression while you recover from your traumatic reaction. Readmitted patients often suffer a mood drop and are in danger of becoming depressed due to their re-hospitalization.” Victor leaned forward, “Do you think you are depressed?”

Dean shrugged one shoulder. Of course he was freaking depressed. He was back in hospital. The ward might be nicer. There might not be bars on the windows, but he was still confined.

“You know, Dean, we have never had a silent session?”

Dean looked up. He supposed Victor was right. At their very first meeting, the psychiatrist had succeeded in drawing him out to speak.

The pen was tapping on Victor’s knee. “When I first took you on as a client, I contacted Layla Rourke in Arkansas. She recommended some techniques, however they depend on you wanting to communicate with me. Do you?”

Dean shrugged.

“I am here to listen. To hear you no matter what way you wish to communicate.” Victor tilted his head, “Would you like me to contact Dr Rourke about how best to help you?”
A flush of shame rose from Dean’s breast, up his neck and cheeks. He drew his knees closer and hid his blush by planting his forehead on his knees. He didn’t want to imagine how disappointed Layla and the guys back in ACIC would be to discover that he was back on a psych ward.

“Dean?” Victor had knelt down on the floor beside him. “There is nothing to be ashamed of. There is a statistically high likelihood of re-hospitalization for those who have spent prolonged periods in psychiatric care. You have not failed or lost. Your mind has sought a place of safety in the face of a traumatic attack. It is not a weakness but a strength that you display by being here today. We are all here to help you.”

Dean moistened his lips. He heard what Victor was saying, could even appreciate his logic, but it didn’t feel like that. It felt like he was floundering in the deep end of an Olympic sized swimming pool.

He gave Victor a stare, filled with the sentiment of ‘Are we done here?’

Victor nodded, “Perhaps that is enough for today. I’ll buzz Frances to have someone bring you back to the ward.”

Dean took a corner seat in the communal room. On the surface he watched TV, but his mind was plagued with negative thoughts. He wished he had never opened the door to his father. If only he had been quicker to react, he could have jumped between Sam and John and prevented his little brother from being hurt. He wondered how Sam really was. He considered if maybe it was better that he was back in hospital, rather than being a burden on Sam and Cas.

After meds, there were meatballs and rice for evening meal. This time Dean did sit with the blond receding haired Jack and young Lien, but he let their conversation about the decline in food quality since they got a new cook wash over him.

A slim black nurse with Claude on his name tag, came to tell Dean his visitors had arrived. All of a sudden Dean’s legs became more co-operative even if he did drag his feet slightly.

Inside the main door to the ward, Sam surged forward and grabbed his brother in a welcome body covering hug. Dean didn’t protest that it stung his ribs. He laid his head against Sam’s plaid shirt and listened to his little brother’s heartbeat. Holding on to Sam was just what he needed. Finally it was Sam who pulled apart, grinning and saying he wanted to look at Dean.

Nick asked “How are you, Dean?”

Dean shrugged and guided them to room 5. He tried to pretend he didn’t see Sam’s face fall when he realized Dean wasn’t speaking. Claude spotted them and brought a second chair in for Nick to sit down.

Sam spun round taking in the sparse furniture and the view of Stanford from the window.

“It’s not too bad, hey Dean?” Sam held his hand out to Nick, who passed him a bag, “We brought your own PJs, robe, some sweats and a couple of tees. Your slippers were kinda ratty, Man, so I picked you up a new pair.”

Dean wrapped his dark blue robe over the scrubs. He appreciated this so much. His own clothes were a luxury. The slippers were kinda granddad style. If Dean was in joking mood he’d have asked for a pipe to go with them. He bit into the plastic tie to part them. Using his left hand to rip off the detestable hospital ones, he stuck his feet into the fleecy lined leather soled dark brown slippers.
“Glad you like ‘em,” Sam grinned, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Dean gulped back how upsetting it was to see Sam worried and sad for him. He hoped Sam wasn’t too disappointed with the way he had crumbled in the face of their father’s wrath. It didn’t seem like Sam was on the outs with him and bringing the slippers was so thoughtful.

“I got these too,” Sam pulled Dean’s CD walkman, a few albums, and his latest sketchpad and his charcoal from another canvas bag.

Dean smiled and reached to take them with his uninjured hand. Letting the sketch pad fall open on blank pages he scrawled:

CAS?

“He wants to come see you,” Sam placed his huge hand over Dean’s wrist cuff, “I called him as soon as I got released from the ER. He’s as worried as we are. Would you like to see him? I can ask for him to be put on your approved visitors list.”

Dean took a second. He yearned to see Cas. Dean lifted his fist to his mouth, crooked out his index finger and bit down on the soft flesh either side of the knuckle. He didn’t know if he wanted Castiel to see him when he was hospitalized in a psych ward, but on the other hand he deeply wanted to see Castiel. He missed him. A little voice inside told him that this was his life, that he couldn’t say that he was done with hospitals, and if Cas was serious about their relationship then maybe it was better to show him what to expect.

He met Sam’s eye and nodded.

“I bet he’ll be here for tomorrow evening’s visiting time.” Sam patted Dean’s hand.

Another thought occurred to Dean. He flicked to one of the first pages and pointed at his line drawing of Spider.

“Yeah,” Sam huffed a laugh, “I’ll water your freaky alien plant.”

Dean stared at his knees while Sam apologized for things that were not his fault. He looked up and examined how Sam really was. His little brother’s eyes were sunken as if he hadn’t slept. Sam’s nose was bandaged with thin strips and his right eye was bruised in multicolor. Dean gulped. He reached over to touch. Sam ducked his head and muttered that he was fine. Dean wasn’t having that. He got up from the edge of the bed and stepped over to the two chairs. Nick had Sam’s hand held in his. Dean raised his eyebrows for permission and cupped Sam’s belly.

Sam bit his lip and promised the baby was OK. He’d had a scan at the hospital. The cops had interviewed him, and following his and Nick’s statements had issued a warrant for John’s arrest. Dean nodded, hearing it again from Sam. Nick supplied the news that he had applied for a restraining order.

Dean gulped air. Just like that. John smacked his younger pregnant son up and there are cops and warrants and restraining orders. The information was too much to take in. He wanted to fold into himself again. He was alone in Batesville, dying in a bathroom cubicle. He registered that Sam kissed his hair and was readying to go. Dean stood quickly grabbed Sam’s face and kissed his cheek. Perhaps it was too demonstrative but Sam patted his arm and promised to come back the next evening.

Dean didn’t emerge to watch evening TV with the other patients. He opened his sketch pad and did
a few line drawings of the furniture. At nine they came with his new meds. He was asleep before lights out.

The next day wasn’t so daunting. He knew where the dining room was, serving himself a ladle of oatmeal for breakfast. He still wasn’t permitted outside so sat in the recreation room playing solitaire until Victor came on his rounds.

“Would you like to go to your room to talk?” Victor asked.

Dean waved his hand about, signifying that he knew Victor had lots of other patients to see. He hardly wanted an impromptu session with Dean amid his busy morning.

Victor kept Dean’s pace as they headed to his room, “I kept the best until last.”

Dean gave a huffing laugh. Victor left the door open but pulled up a chair so there was not much space between them. He had grabbed Dean’s chart and produced his streamline super-pen to make notes. He pulled a small notepad from his pocket, handing it and a pencil to Dean so he could communicate.

“I’m happy with your progress, Dean.” Victor wrote a note, “I’m granting you privileges; to the outside patient area, access the dining room during the day, phone calls, extended visitors list.”

Dean felt lighter at the news. He hadn’t known how much being on the restricted list was bringing him down.

“Now do you have any questions for me?”

Dean put the pad and pencil to one side. He coughed. Victor lifted his gaze from his clipboard. Dean cleared his throat and coughed again. He was determined to ask his question.

“Ca-Can Cas c-come to see me?”

Victor sat up straight with a huge smile, as if Dean had just hung the moon.

“Your brother already arranged for him to added to your approved list.”

Dean nodded with a sensation of joy. He would see Cas later, if he could come. The prospect was wonderful.

Another thought occurred to him. He took a breath and hoped his voice wasn’t going to fail him.

“Did…Did they get Dad?”

“No, I’m sorry, Dean,” Victor sighed, “It seems your father has left the state.”

Dean betted the truck had left a dust trail out of California. He wondered if the cops considered the assault serious enough to extradite him from another state.

“Y’know,” Dean coughed again. Victor stood and called into the hall for someone to bring a cup of water.

After a sip Dean started over, finding that once the dam had broken on his words there was no impediment to telling Victor what was on his mind, “Everything Dad did. All the years and no one helped us. Why? What was so wrong with me that nobody stopped him? He hurt Sam and there are police and the law on our side but I was a child, a little boy and he killed me.”

Dean scrubbed away tear tracks with the back of his hand and gulped hard.
“He killed you?” Victor raised his eyebrows. Dean supposed the psychiatrist thought he was being dramatic.

“It was summer, no school, and it was a rough town so we weren’t allowed out. I was so bored,” Dean looked out the window at a flat-topped cloud, “Sammy was asleep. I sneaked out of the motel room. I didn’t mean to be gone long but I found a few quarters in the change slot of a payphone. Spent them on a video game. When I got back, Dad was sitting at the rickety old table with a half bottle of bourbon and the strap waiting across his lap.”

Victor’s breath caught.

Dean scrubbed his hand over his chin, “I knew I was in for a beating. Sam woke up,“ Dean huffed, “From a nightmare. Dad wouldn’t let me go comfort him, said I couldn’t be trusted, that the motel owner knew we were on our own. It was like I was invisible while he hugged Sammy and dried his tears.”

“That’s terrible. What did you do?”

Dean huffed and shook his head, “You don’t get it, Man. I tried to be as silent as I could, not draw his attention. I started packing up because I knew we’d be out of Fort Douglas as soon as Dad had Sammy calmed down. He took me outside, dragged me into the scrub at the rear of the motel and he laid into me with the strap and his fists. I hit my head off a rock and everything went white and next thing I knew he was pounding on my chest like EMT’s on the TV. Then I was in the Impala in the backseat and I thought my head would explode. I couldn’t understand why he’d bothered to revive me. But I saw Sam in his PJs twisting around from the shotgun seat to check on me, and I wiped away the blood coming from my ear and soldiered on.”

“No medical attention?”

“I healed up on my own.” Dean chewed on his bottom lip, “I had to keep going for Sammy. I wanted to run. I wanted to but Dad said if the CPS got us we’d be parted. I had to stay low, keep my head down. Not look like the dumb fuck I was.”

“Dean, please don’t call yourself those derogatory names. I am sure they were never true. Your father’s actions back then and now were criminal. None of that is your fault. You were a kid.”

“Was then. I couldn’t protect Sammy then, and I couldn’t now. In Nick’s kitchen, I froze, Victor. I was useless. By the time I got my body to move he had punched Sammy. And he called Sam a whore. Sammy! A Whore? I was the whore.”

“Breathe for me Dean. In and Out.” Victor crouched down beside him helping him to regulate his breathing. Once Dean was able to nod that he was good, Victor commented, “You were not a whore. You became pregnant with your steady boyfriend.”

Dean gave a cruel self-mocking laugh. “Tell that to Dad. He asked if I knew who my baby’s father was, said he should have known I’d whore myself out, that no-one could want me if I wasn’t selling it.”

“You know that wasn’t true. He said those things to hurt you.”

Dean sucked his lips in and breathed deeply through his nostrils, “How could he? How could he call Sam a whore? How could he hit Sam when he’s pregnant with his own grandchild?”

“There is a report that he slapped your face when you were pregnant in Batesville General.”
“Yeah, but that was me,” Dean explained, “You don’t understand. He hit Sam.”

“Dean you are worth…” Victor began but Dean’s chest heaved again.

“Why Victor? Why was I Daddy’s punching bag? Why did my baby die? What is wrong with me?”

“None of that was your fault Dean. The only thing wrong with you is your reaction to the crisis of your father’s traumatic reappearance. Your mind tried to protect you by disassociating. But I’m here. We are here to help you with that.”

“Is that why I can’t remember pieces? I know you said I was catatonic. Time jumped. I mean, I’ve had that before when I was doped up to the gills, but you guys didn’t sedate me, did you?”

“No, Dean. It is called disassociative amnesia, a reaction to intense fear and trauma.”

Dean hummed. He could accept that. It didn’t sound like he was a complete loon when Victor put it in such calm scientific terms. He glanced upwards, “How long?”

“Sorry?”

“How long will I have to stay here?”

“I’d like to give the new medication regime time. See if it suits you and assess how you are. I would very much like it if you would stay at least another week.” Victor leaned forward. “Once your 72 hour hold is up we won’t apply for involuntary stay.”

“So I could go soon?” Dean shot a look at the door.

“You could,” Victor acknowledged, “but with respect, I think you know that you are not well enough.”

Dean chewed his lip. He nodded. “What about my job?”

“You are on medical leave. Mr Fitzgerald has explained that you are in hospital. Your job is safe.”

Dean betted Zachariah was fuming he couldn’t sack Dean’s ass for being absent. He was still enjoying a fantasy of Zachariah squirming in frustration when Victor said he had to go.

After lunch Dean thought he’d dodged that day’s Group by snagging the sunniest bench in the courtyard with his sketch pad, but sneaky Yilditz held it outside.

Then he was roped into playing Clue with Lien, Jack and a twitchy guy called Orwell. It wasn’t too bad, and they didn’t expect him to make conversation.

Before afternoon meds, Garth showed up to make sure he was ‘happy with the standard of care’. Dean remained defensive until the smaller man got choked up when he said how sorry he was that Dean had suffered such an attack. Then Dean found that he was the one patting Garth’s back and trying to calm him down.

Dean shoveled down the bland evening offering of chicken and beans, anticipation of his visitors making time drag. He watched the clock high on the communal room wall as it neared 6.30pm. Ten minutes before time Dean was waiting inside the ward door, leaning against the wall.

At 6.29pm an older male nurse unlocked the door. The outer doors opened. A shock of messy dark hair emerged. Castiel was first out and marching towards the entrance to the psychiatric ward. Dean’s heart was in his throat as he heard Castiel’s deep graveled voice tell the nurse he was there
to visit Dean Winchester.

Dean flung his arms around Cas’s neck and breathed in the scent of his skin and the freshly laundered aroma from the collar of his open necked soft white shirt.

Castiel extended a hand to cup Dean’s cheek. Dean leaned into that soft gentle touch, wanting Castiel’s essence to flood into him from where they connected, so it would fill up the parched and cracked barrenness inside with a pure clear crystal flow.

“I like the new look,” Castiel ran his thumb along Dean's short ginger scruff.

“No proper razors here,” Dean muttered. He’d give his right arm for a weekly barber visit, like ACIC in the later years when he could get a hot towel shave. When he got home he was going to shave so close his skin would be like a baby’s bottom. “You wanna come sit?”

Castiel wrapped their fingers together. “Sam is coming. He wanted to give us some private time.”

“They, huh, cut off your Da Vinci tee shirt,” Dean confessed as they sat next to each other on a bench in the courtyard.

Castiel’s eyes flashed, “I don’t care a damn about some old tee shirt. I care about you.”

Dean ducked his head. Difficult things needed to be said. He hoped Castiel wouldn’t interrupt. That he would let him have his say.

“This is me Cas,” He looked skywards for divine strength, then made a sweeping gesture towards the ward, “This is who my father and my life made me. I’m broken… fractured. I can’t promise that I won’t be hospitalized again. I can’t say I won’t freak out and stop speaking. I’m not a… not a whole person. There’s chunks of me ripped away.”

Castiel lightly wiped away the stream of tears with the back of his hand. When Dean dared to peek, he could see Castiel’s eyes were shining and wet too.

“Dean, how can you say such things? You are wonderful and kind. You told me when we met that you are a survivor, a fighter, and you are everything to me.”

“Every day is a battle,” Dean gulped, “I fight every day. But sometimes when I see Sam is happy, or when I am with you… I dunno… The struggle disappears.”

“Let me join you. I can be your companion in arms, your partner. We’d make a formidable fighting duo? Hey?” Castiel’s lips curled upwards in a tender smile, “You are so much more than your illness or your past. You know you already have my heart.”

“Don’t.” Dean protested. His own heart burned, warring with desire to respond in kind versus the suffering he would expose it to, if he opened up now, only to have Castiel leave him.

“Don’t what? Tell you how much I love you. I don’t give a damn if other people hear me. I want to share everything with you, Dean. Good times and bad. I want to share your life, if only you will allow it.” Castiel reached for Dean’s hands, but instead linking fingers he covered Dean’s wrist cuffs, “When Sam called me, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. I had to return his call a few minutes later and drill him on what had happened and if you were going to be OK. Then the hospital told me I couldn’t visit because I wasn’t family. I have, sorry Dean, I don’t know what other way to put it, I have been going out of my mind. It all hit me. How much you mean to me, how deep my feelings run, and I can’t let you go. I won’t let you go.”
Dean surged forward, shutting up the emotional speech with a hard pressed kiss. Castiel’s fists grabbed hold of the shoulder material of Dean’s tee. He growled possessively into Dean’s mouth as they sought to prove how strongly each other felt.

There was the sound of a throat being cleared above them. Dean almost snarled that a nurse would attempt to part them from their public display of affection, but when they did come up for air, it was Sammy with a sheepish grin who had been trying to get their attention.

“Hey guys,” Sam laughed, “I see you’re feeling better, Dee.”

“Peachy,” Dean grinned. Sam’s beam at the sound of his brother’s voice, and Castiel’s arm wrapping around his shoulders, made that simple one word answer the God’s honest truth.
One day seemed to segue into another. Dean gained a new appreciation of how almost seven years of his life had been left behind in Arkansas, where each routine filled day had folded in on the previous one. There were periods that went tortuously slow, like those few minutes after evening meal and before visiting hour. Other hours flew by too rapidly. Saturday and Sunday’s lengthy visiting afternoons had been blinks of an eye.

Sam worked on Saturday, giving Castiel the opportunity to spend the extended visiting time with Dean. Cas showed up with a beaming grin, carrying a soft backpack over the shoulder of his faded grey Cornell short sleeved tee. Dean quirked a smile at the sight of his lover in his comfy top and low slung jeans ripped at the knee. It contrasted with the suited and trench coated student teacher he had first set eyes upon. He like both Castiels, the professional determined man and this loving tender version that would give up his day to spend it in a psych ward with his damaged boyfriend. His casual attire spoke of something else to Dean too. Amid other visitors done up in their church best (Carol Ann’s older mother was wearing a hat for God’s sake), Castiel had chosen the unconventional and relaxed. Dean knew this was because when they were together there was no need for pomp and formality. They fitted together hand in glove. Without discussing it any, they both felt the same, that what mattered was not outer appearances but the person inside. It proclaimed confidence in each other’s affections. Having formulated his thoughts on the matter, Dean also admitted to himself that Castiel was a mighty fine sight to behold.

He supposed that such analysis, in that parcel of time before Castiel crossed the communal room to take Dean in his arms, led to his daring suggestion that Castiel might sit for a sketch.

Castiel’s grin broadened, “I did wonder how you were planning to fill our day without breaking any rules about inappropriate hospital touching. Could we sit outside? I’m amenable to being your muse, as long as we can enjoy such a nice day.”

“Let me get my charcoals.” Dean gestured towards the open double doors, “Snag us a good spot, Cas, before all the families get the same idea.”

When Dean joined Cas, his breath caught and his hands trembled. Cas had taken the corner bench, propping his bag on the side reserved for Dean. His head was tilted back, eyes closed, sun worshipping, with the long line of his throat exposed. Dean was struck by how lucky he was and resolved that he would never let Castiel forget how much he meant to him. Luckily he was granted the few moments he needed to regain his composure, because Castiel only cracked open his eyelids when Dean bent down to plant a sweet tingling kiss on his pink parted lips. Castiel shuffled over for him, pushing his bag into the shade under the bench.

The day moved on, easy and relaxed. The sketch wasn’t Dean’s best work, especially with his bandaged fingers, but he felt he’d captured a decent likeness of Castiel’s profile in the sunlight.

Dean’s 72 hour hold had ended the previous evening, meaning he had full voluntary patient privileges. If they had wanted they could have taken a walk around the hospital campus or gone to the café on the ground floor. Once Dean had declared his initial sketch complete Castiel arched his back like a cat and stretched his arms over his head.
“Can we get coffees on the ward, or do I need to take a jaunt over to Beans for some takeout?” Castiel asked.

Dean swallowed to hide how the exposed soft skin underneath Castiel’s ridden up tee made his mouth water, wishing they were at home, where he could suck marks along that stripe of skin and feel Castiel’s fingers digging into his scalp.

“Dean? Coffees?” Castiel asked in a deep jovial tone, “Where did you just go?”

Dean coughed and whispered for privacy, “On my knees for you, your hands in my hair.”

Castiel’s mouth dropped. He panted breathily in sibilant response, “I want that so much.”

“Me too.” Dean promised, “When I get outta here.”

“It’s a date.”

“Rock solid.” Dean gave a cheeky wink, “I can get us a couple of tall Dixie cups from the dining room, if you wanna have it out here. It’s not too awful, but it’s instant coffee powder.”

Castiel shuddered, “Heathens.”

“I know. Coffee deprivation is cruel.” Dean chuckled.

Dean used three sachets of coffee in an attempt to give his barista boyfriend a stronger beverage. He weaved his way out between newly arrived guests, thinking they were all douchebags for only showing up halfway through visiting time. Castiel was extracting two Tupperware boxes from his bag. Dean eyed them suspiciously.

“Just wait. It’s a good surprise I promise.” Cas quirked one side of his lips and lifted the lid of Box A.

There was a thickly sliced half-rye bread sandwich with torn turkey breast and a healthy dollop of mayo. Dean moaned around his first bite. Castiel took the other half of the sandwich and tore off a corner, popping it into his mouth.

“Mmm Thanks,” Dean managed. Lunch had been a half-eaten unappetizing soup and white bread. A blessing in disguise now, because there was plenty of room for Castiel’s treat.

Castiel sat back, eating slowly, observing Dean’s exaggerated chewing and half-closed eyelids. He was sipping his coffee when Dean finally came out of his food orgasm.

“I think we have an audience,” Castiel laughed, cocking his head towards a young teenage girl, who stood apart from Carol Ann’s crowd, watching Dean with her own mouth agape, exposing a terrifying looking train-track brace.

Dean winked at her, making her blush deep puce and turn back to her family.

Castiel dug his elbow into Dean’s arm. “You are a flirt.”

“Uh-huh,” Dean confirmed and took a long drink of his cooling coffee. “What’s in Box Number Two?”

Castiel’s expression epitomized the word ‘smug’. He lifted the lid and let Dean look in on a slice of apple pie with the most buttery flaky crust.
“Oh My God. You love me.” Dean gasped.

Castiel just laughed and stole a quickly pecked kiss. He apologized that his cutlery had been confiscated as ‘sharps’ and he could only offer Dean a hospital plastic fork to eat the deep filled pie. Normally Dean wanted to crush psych ward disposable cutlery in his hand but he’d gladly use it for Castiel’s pie. Proving he was no shabby mean boyfriend, Dean lifted his fork to feed Cas the juiciest morsels.

They had more coffee. Castiel asked Dean’s opinion on a funny noise the engine of his Taurus was making. Dean asked how Balthazar and Tamara were doing. For a while they didn’t talk at all. They ended the day, simply holding hands, Dean’s head resting on Castiel’s shoulder, until finally it was time for Cas to go.

On Sunday storm clouds rolled in and Cas had to barista in Beans. Dean noticed not only the bakery box in Sam’s hands when he arrived, but also how his little brother’s proud growing bump was stretching the buttons of his old blue/white plaid shirt. The bakery box contained single serving round pecan, blueberry and cinnamon apple pies. If pie was love, then Dean figured he had the best boyfriend and brother in the known universe.

The brothers took a corner table in the communal room and gorged on sweet goodness while playing gin rummy for flavor choosing rights. A few of the more skittish patients, who had no visitors that day, disappeared to their rooms as thunder rolled and lightning flashed outside the windows. Dean didn’t flinch. Storms never bothered him. The tremors of anxiety worming under his skin had nothing to do with the weather. Victor had explained that his new medication would take a while to kick in. In the meantime the hitched sensation in his chest and the additional adjusting side effects of lightheadedness and mild drowsiness were not pleasant.

“You OK, Man?” Sam asked with narrowed eyes.

Dean rubbed his temple, “Yeah, fine. Just, I wish my body would hurry up and get with the program.”

“Huh?” Sam wrinkled his nose.

“New meds… with a side order of dizziness and feeling like sleeping is the best idea ever.” Dean scratched at his wrist cuff, “Along with having to ‘employ breathing techniques’ when I’d have popped a Xanax before.”

“You know, Dean, if the meds aren’t working for you, maybe you should tell Victor?”

“No. No freaking way! I am going to adjust to them.” Dean sucked in his bottom lip as Sam raised his palms in apology, “Sorry. I just… I need to… I want these pills. I didn’t ask for ‘em, but now Victor’s got me on Buspar, well the generic buspirone, I’m determined to make ‘em work for me.”

Sam folded his cards and laid them down. “Why?”

“The dizzy feeling will fade, and Victor says they’ll be efficacious within two weeks.” Dean attempted to impersonate his shrink. “And I’ve said sayonara to the dry mouth.”

“That’s great and all, but why’d you want to put yourself through this? Weren’t your old meds just fine?”

Dean plucked at his black tee, “I was on ‘em too long really. Being here, staying in, it’s a good opportunity to y’know change things up. Victor says that I was doing great before…”
“You were, Dean. I mean you are. I’m real proud of you,” Sam choked up, “I wish… I wish so much that Dad had never shown his fucking face…and I don’t know if calling Victor was the right thing to do.”

“Hey,” Dean smiled. He didn’t want Sam to feel bad about his hospitalization, “I really didn’t want to be here. Hell, I still don’t, but what were you meant to do? I was a mess. You did good, Sammy. Honestly.”

Sam’s voice dropped, reminding Dean of when his brother was a little kid, “So you’re not angry with me?”

“Geez Sammy. No way. Not at all. Not a smidgeon.”

“A smidgeon?” Sam laughed at the expression. “So what’s so good about this Buspar? Is it some super drug?”

“Naw,” Dean returned a huffing laugh, “It doesn’t work so well for some people, but back in ACIC…” Dean paused. He could feel a flush of nervy self-exposure spreading upwards heating his neck and cheeks. “Pregnant guys on my ward, they’d try to take ‘em off everything because, y’know, mutant babies.”

“Dean!” Sam blurted and laid a hand over his bump.

“Sorry,” Dean winced, “But some guys were too ill, things got too bad, and they’d have to medicate.”

“I get it. This new drug is OK for pregnancy.” Sam nodded, then got a wide-eyed concerned look. “Wait, don’t put two and two together and get freaking sixty nine.” Dean held up a hand, “Me and Cas, I mean, we aren’t planning anything, but if we have an accident, now it’s more likely the baby’d be OK, and even more important, I probably wouldn’t miscarry due to my meds.”

“Oh Dean.” Sam got all dewy puppy eyed and came around to catch Dean in a hug so tight it pulsed through his fractured rib. “It never occurred to me how your drugs could hurt a baby. Geez, good thing it wasn’t your condom that broke when we messed up the Penandrocol.”

Dean eye rolled over his brother’s shoulder. He was about comment about clingy princesses when the duty nurse made the call for afternoon meds. Dean patted Sam on the shoulder. He was glad they had been interrupted before Sam got too caught up in the prospect of becoming Uncle Sammy. He could feel Sam’s eyes on his back as he went up to take his 5pm dose. The glare made him queasy. He had a feeling that Sam wouldn’t like to see this aspect of his daily routine. They had been in a world of their own for the last few hours and the medication queue was like a splash of cold water. When Dean retook his seat, Sam did a reasonable job of looking nonchalant, but Dean could tell he was discomforted.

“So what’s new with you?” Dean cringed at his lame attempt to reboot their conversation but Sam didn’t tease beyond quirking his lips. “I mean how are you really?”

“Eye’s getting better,” Sam rubbed his yellowing cheek where the bruising from his father’s hits was fading. “My BP was elevated in the ER. What do’ya expect, if all that wouldn’t elevate someone’s blood pressure I don’t know what would? Nick’s taking me to see Dr Grainger tomorrow before work. I mean, I’m fine now, but no harm in getting checked out right?”

Dean nodded. He licked his dry lips, “And Dad? He’s gone yeah? Cops are sure?”
Sam’s shoulders slumped, “Like a bullet.”

“Good.” Dean said firmly.

Sam’s head shot up, “What?”

Dean took a deep inhale and admitted a fear that had been troubling him, despite Nick’s news of the restraining order and Victor’s relaying of the police saying that John had left the state. “Means he’s not hanging round. Not gonna show up when I get outta here.”

“God, Dee, no way.” Sam’s jaw jutted forward, “And you did it.”

Dean gave a look of disbelief.

“You got him to clear out. You dialed 911. Don’t you remember?”

He had. That was why Dad had smashed his cell phone and stomped on his fingers.

“He knew the cops would get involved,” Sam continued, “And if there is one thing John Winchester is allergic to it’s…”

“The law.” Dean finished.

Sam nodded, “So… he’s wanted for domestic battery on you and they want to charge him with third degree aggravated assault on me but it’s probably not a serious enough felony for another state to extradite his ass back to Cali. We’ve been granted a temporary protective order encompassing personal conduct and stay away.”

“Could we start again in English?” Dean huffed, “Are the cops gonna come calling here?”

Sam managed to look both shamefaced for his legalese and concerned about Dean being worried that San Mateo County deputies would show on the ward.

“The deputies have photographic and forensic evidence. Nick and I gave statements, and they interviewed Alastair about how Dad showed at The Gates.” Sam paused and ran his hand through his hair, “Honest, Dee. I don’t think they’re gonna get him. He has a previous outstanding warrant for DUI from when we hit the road out of Irwindale, but I guess he thought coming for the ALMS race was worth the risk. If he is arrested, then they’ll need your evidence to build a case for court, and you’d be called by the prosecution… but they might only prosecute on the felony.”

“Say again, Sam,” Dean agreed about John being a fool to return and risk charges. “Why the difference? He hit us both.”

“Dee, he laid into you with his boots. You came off way worse than me.” Sam licked his lips, “But it’s the baby. Because of her, I mean. Dad knew I’m pregnant, fuck it, that’s what set him off. Nick’s legal advisor called it reckless indifference when assaulting a pregnant person. It brings the assault and battery charge up to a felony rather than a misdemeanor, even though he didn’t use a weapon and we got some hits in.”

“We did. Didn’t we?” Dean smirked. “You threw him some hook.”

“And you stopped him from beating on me.”

“I guess I did. I couldn’t let him do that to you, Sammy,” Dean dropped his chin, “I’m sorry I lost my shit.”
“No, Dean. God, you were amazing and brave.” Sam blew air through his nose, “I wish the cops had got him. He always gets away with crap. How many jobs did he lose? How many towns did we blow out of because he got into shit? Or threw a drunken punch?”

“Too many,” Dean sighed, remembering how moving on had always impacted Sam the harder.

“I don’t think he’ll come back.” Sam blew a puff of air, “Anyhow once Nick’s contacts serve him with the restraining order, if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay the hell away.”

“Contacts?” Dean snorted, “Your man got underworld connections?”

Sam guffawed, “Not that sort of contacts. But you should see him, Dee. Nick is magnificent when he is on a mission. He’s handled cops and lawyers. He’d gotten the restraining order papers while I was still reeling. Once we knew Dad had vamoosed, Nick called one of the trustees of his father’s will. The head of security at Alighieri is helping us on the QT so Nick’s brother Michael doesn’t hear of it. I called Bobby for leads, and he got Dad’s latest mailing address from Elkins. We’ve gotta serve Dad with the restraining order papers, or else we can’t get a permanent one. But don’t worry, Dean, he’ll get served.”

Dean nodded his agreement with Sam’s conviction. If the might of a huge corporation’s security division was gunning for John, then no matter what rock he crawled under, they’d find him. Also John wasn’t that unpredictable. He jonesed it for a gig with a race team, and there were a few high profile automobile collectors who ignored John’s flaws, repeatedly hiring him every few years to give their prized classics an expertly executed service.

Dean had enough of talking about John. He pushed thoughts of his father to the back of his mind and asked “Tell me. How is my niece?”

The question worked wonders, bringing a soft smile to Sam’s face. “She’s good. We got another sneak peek at her, y’know, when they did the precautionary scan. She was turned round with her tushy pushed out. Nick said she’d done it to show Dad what she thought of him.”

Dean chuckled, “That’s our girl.”

“I was thinking of names,” Sam mused.

“Yeah?” Dean was fiercely curious about what names were under consideration, but Sam had been playing it close to his chest.

“I called Jess. Brought her up to date on everything. She sends her love. You shoulda heard her squeal when she found out I’m having a girl.”

“Bet she did.” Dean shook his head with a smile, imagining Sam’s friend’s reaction.

“She told me that Jessica is a brilliant name.” Sam laughed, “I’d already beaten off Brady’s suggestion of Tyson, when we didn’t know the sex. I mean, really, Brady hates his name so much he doesn’t use it, and he wanted to inflict it on my child.”

Dean leaned his chair back onto two legs, “Well, whatya got? And don’t say Green Olive.”

Sam clicked his tongue. He took a breath. He raised his brows in anticipation of Dean’s response, “Cameron.”

“You can’t be serious?”
“Why not?” Sam protested, “Cameron is a strong name.”

Dean snorted, “No way, Dude. Ferris Bueller’s friend!”

“Dean that was Slane or Sloane or something Petersen.”

“Nah-ha,” Dean intoned deeply, “When Cameron was in Egypt land, let my Cameron go.”

“Well, Shit,” Sam slapped his palm onto his jeans clad thigh, “You’re right. Damnit.”

“It mightn’t be so bad. She could grow up to steal Nick’s Ferrari and lie in bed all day.” Dean couldn’t keep the grin off his face seeing Sam’s look of horror.

“How about Marcia?”

The legs of Dean’s chair slammed back down as he bent double in spilling mirth. He sing-songed, “Marcia, Marcia, Marcia Brady.”

Sam bitch-faced when Dean finally regained his composure save for his twitching lips.

“OK smart alec. Suggestions?” Sam crossed his arms, “I yield to the esteemed representative from Kansas.”

“What about Anna Nicole?” Dean tried, “Or Arwen?”

“Seriously Dean? Anna Nicole Smith? Tolkien?”

He knew he was grinning like a loon, but Dean was going to push his luck, “Lois, Diana, Elektra or Sif.”

“You keep your comic book heroines to yourself, Dee.” Sam waggled his finger at him.

Dean chewed on the inside of his cheek, “Come on. It’s nearly mealtime. Spill. What ya really got?”

“No Daisy Dukes or Wednesday Addams.” Sam laughed.

“Sammeh! Come on.”

“I really liked Cameron,” Sam bleated. “Nick likes Melissa, but I don’t.”

“Any common ground?”

“Maybe,” Sam confessed, “We both want something positive and strong for her. I guess we’ll know when we hit on the perfect name.”

“Hmm, don’t discount Elektra. She’s a ninja, y’know.”

“Hilarious, Dean,” Sam said with sarcasm. He rose to go. “No ninja, no girls in brightly colored tights and capes, and no porn stars.”

“Shucks, and Belladonna was my next shot.” Dean slung his arm around Sam’s shoulders. “You gonna walk me to the dining room?”

“Sure.”

“You’re a good brother, Sammy. Braving the smell of boiled cabbage.” Dean nudged Sam’s arm
and put on his own sarcastic tone, “Pork, cabbage and mash tonight. Yummy.”

“If you knew how that rolled my insides you’d be nominating me for an award.” Sam replied. “See you Tuesday, OK Dean?”

Dean gave a short nod. He knew Monday night was a work one for Sam and that Castiel would take his turn to visit. “You take care, Sam.”

The pork wasn’t half bad and the cabbage tasted better than it smelled. Lien’s parents had headed home too. She slid into the seat beside him.

“They washed smelly guy.” Lien jerked her head towards the twitchy freshly shaved and hair-trimmed newcomer. “He was coming out of my shrink’s office when I was going in. Overheard he’s homeless. Caused a scene over at Abercrombie and Fitch.”

Dean hummed his agreement. He didn’t like to make rapid perhaps prejudiced judgments about other patients. He had been on the receiving end of too many assumptions that he was deaf or intellectually impaired. If he was judging anyone it would be Lien for being young and immature, even though he appreciated from what he had learned in group that Lien was in fact close to his own age but had been raised in a closely knit sheltered family.

“He’s pretty spaced out. You think they’ve got him dosed up?” Lien stole another glance to where the man was shoveling food inelegantly into his mouth.

Dean took a drink of water and cleared his throat, “I hope not. I guess now that he has calmed down, he might be thankful for food on his plate and a safe place to rest his head.”

“I guess,” Lien said absently, “Imagine not having a home. It must be awful not to have family there for you. I don’t know what I’d have done if they hadn’t….”

Her voice trailed away. Dean nodded. “My brother is there for me.”

“Your brother is hot.” Lien licked her lips.

Dean choked on a bite of meat. “And taken. And pregnant.”

“Hey, a girl can admire.” Lien winked suggestively.

“Me too. I mean, I’m taken too.” Dean wiped his hand across his mouth, damning his jumpiness for producing uncool utterances.

Lien threw her head back and laughed, “I know. I’ve seen you with your boyfriend. You are tooth rotting saccharin overdose level sweethearts. The way he looks at you, Dean, I hope someone sees me like that one day.”

Dean gave a close mouthed smile. Her comment warmed him from his toes up. He knew Cas loved him but it was something else to hear a virtual stranger recognize their bond. The high carried him through the evening and the boring day that followed.

The nightmares came back Tuesday night. There was no reasoning why. Dean spat mouth fuzz into the toilet bowl in the early hours wondering what caused the image of his mother’s nightdress aflame, pushing Sam’s limp body into his arms, being told to run as fast as he could, his arms aching, his small legs unable to work fast enough, getting out of their home, his words lost in the cold night air as his mother died in Sammy’s nursery.
He was back under the covers when the night nurse checked in on him. He could have asked for a sleeping pill or a Xanax, but he wanted to deal without medication. He curled on his side, yearning for Castiel at his back, or he was four years old and his mother’s blond hair would fall over his form while she sang him back to sleep. He breathed deeply, ignoring the hospital smells. If his mind was conjuring up Mary, then he’d guide it to happier times of trips to the park, sandwiches with crusts cut off, baking with Pawpaw, being shown how to hold Sammy’s bottle, and his mother’s arms hugging him. He visualized how delighted his Mom would have been to know her younger son was going to make her a grandmother and pictured Mary cooing over Sam’s daughter’s bassinet. The precious memories and imaginings worked their magic. Next thing Dean knew it was morning wake up call.

At group later that Wednesday morning, Dean deliberately sat next to the newcomer, Patrick. He empathized with the way the thin man scuffed his disposable hospital slippers on the tiled floor. In Dean’s opinion Patrick would scrub up well with a better haircut and a nice suit instead of hospital scrubs. He also suspected they had Patrick in the wrong group. Patrick’s ticks and non-verbal noises made Dean, as an expert layman, suspect psychosis or extreme PSTD. He might be struggling to communicate but boy could Patrick play poker. After group, Dean and Patrick drew quite an audience as they silently played best of five, then best of seven. Dean was on top after seven but behind at best of nine.

“Dean! Dean!” Orwell called from the phone alcove, “Call for you Winchester.”

“Well shit, Patrick,” Dean shot over his shoulder as he abandoned his three aces, “Rematch tomorrow?”

“You… you bet Dean.” Patrick forced out with a head nod and a tight blink. “I’m counting on it.”

Dean was feeling reasonably smug that he’d been the one to draw the first intelligible sentence from the new guy. However that feeling faded as he reached to pick up the handset. He was struck by a thought that the only reason he’d be getting a call was if Sam was cancelling his visit for that evening. Castiel was closing Harmonies for Balthazar so he couldn’t come. He’d been spoiled the evening before by having both visitors. Feeling tension tighten the back of his neck, Dean ground his teeth and chided himself for being ridiculously needy. He’d survived years with no real visitors. He could man up and spend one visiting hour alone.

“Hello?” Dean asked tentatively.

“Dean. That you boy?” Bobby’s grumpy tone made a smile break across Dean’s face. The tension leaked back out of his muscles.

“Yeah, Bobby. It’s me.”

“How are you doing, Son?”

Dean tucked his body nearer to the wall, turning a shoulder to anyone passing by. He unconsciously scratched the back of his neck, “Good…” He corrected to, “Better. Hey, Bobby, you seen any sign of Dad?”

“I got both barrels of my shotgun loaded if that bastard is dumb enough to knock on my door.”

Dean made a grunt of understanding. Bobby and John taking pot shots at each other wasn’t something he wanted to hear about. Ice slid down his spine at the thought of it. “What about you, Bobby? How are things up there?”
“Same old, Kid.” Bobby huffed, “Gotta few projects with buyers waiting for the finished result. There’s a sweet flame red mustang, I bet you’d love to take her on. Reminds me of that ‘vette you singlehandedly tuned up back in the summer of ’94.”

Dean smiled at the memory, “She was cherry red and purred as smooth as a contented cat.”

“That she did, when you were done with her.”

“Hey, Bobby?” Dean asked gingerly.

“Yeah? What’s eating ya?”

“Did Sammy help you out some? Like I used to? Did Dad leave him with you sometimes? Sam didn’t give you any hassle did he?” Dean chewed on his lip wondering if Bobby could paint in these details of Sam’s teenage years.

“You asking me if Sam was a rebel teen?” Bobby guffawed. “I couldn’t get that boy’s head out of a book. He was taking AP classes, mathlete tourneys, debate captaincies… Hell, the worst troubles he got into were his red cards for foul play on the soccer pitch. And I guess the tension and anger that boiled inside him when John was around.”

“It was bad, huh?” Dean winced, knowing he’d played peacemaker and diversion so many times as Sam got mouthier and cheekier in their Dad’s presence.

“Like you wouldn’t believe, Defcon three on a good day.” Bobby sighed, “John wouldn’t bear mention of your name, and Sam was struggling with keeping his secrets; being a carrier and his high school crushes. Hell, I knew the boy was gay, though he didn’t tell me. There are more than two brain cells knocking about up here. If John had paid more than a scrap of attention to what was really going on with Sam, he’d have figured things out.”

“I don’t know,” Dean clicked his tongue, “He was pretty much in denial around me. Do you think, Uncle Bobby, if I’d been braver, if I’d risked a whupping and told Dad… before… Do you think it’d’ve been easier for Sam?”

“What in tarnation are you spouting? That don’t make a lick of sense. This is John Winchester you’re talking about, winner of homophobe and carrier-hater of the year, every damn year. Boy, you’d’ve been outta Sam’s life even earlier.”

It went unsaid, but the memory that Dean had shared with Victor of when his father had almost beaten him to death, rose in his mind. He knew Bobby was right, and it was an illogical thing to have felt guilt about. That didn’t stop him wishing things had been easier for Sam. His quietness led Bobby to speak again.

“Hey Dean, tell me about this baby girl your brother is incubating. All I can get out of him is that everything is good.”

“He tells me that too,” Dean said companionably, “She’s a tad on the small side and Sam’s blood pressure is still hovering on the borderline of too high, but their obgyn isn’t worried. Sam and Nick are so excited about the baby, I can’t even tell you.”

“And Nick? Is he a good man?”

Dean hummed. “I think so. I was real anxious about the age gap, y’know, but the way he looks at Sam. Like Sammy hung the moon or something. He’s been nothing but good to us both.”
“Well he’d better stay that way,” Bobby growled, “Or he’ll get an ass full of my buckshot.”

They shared a chuckle over their shared protectiveness of Sam.

“And what about your beau?”

“My beau?” Dean spluttered, “Seriously? Are we in Gone With the Wind?”

“Answer the darned question, y’idjit.”

“Cas is….” Dean struggled for the words, “He’s there for me and I think…”

Bobby made an encouraging uh-huh.

“I don’t know what to say without channeling a chick flick.”

“Guess he’s the one then?”

Dean’s smile was audible, “See! Told you. Chick flick.”

Bobby gave a wry nasal huff, “Who’d’ve reckoned on New Year’s Day when Sam took off like a bat out of Hell to find you? Look at where you boys are now.”

Dean knew Bobby wasn’t referring to his hospital stay, rather the bigger picture. “You’re a wise owl.”

“Well this owl’s gotta get a shake on. I’ll call you again soon, Son.”

“I might be back at Nick’s place.” Dean added quickly and in hope.

“Is that so? Well good on you, Dean.” Bobby said with pride that made Dean glow inside. “Take care now, and don’t you worry none about John. I got my contacts on the lookout. He shows at Elkins place or contacts Jim, Jefferson or that douchebag Creaser, I’ll send word.”

“Thanks Bobby, you take care too.” Dean said as farewell.

After the call with Bobby and a positive session with Victor, Dean had a genuine Cheshire Cat grin when Sam came for visiting hour. Sam brought clean clothes with him and swapped them for ones that needed laundering. For Dean’s pleasure, Sam produced the cutest kitten all-in-one designer sleeper suit that he’d picked up in a tiny baby boutique in Menlo Park. He refused to say how much it had cost, but admitted it had gone on Nick’s Amex. Dean was reluctant to hand back the fleecy soft baby suit. He ran the material through his fingers as he told Sam about his counseling session. Victor was really pleased with his progress, coming from where he was only a week earlier. The initial side effects of the buspirone had faded and they had discussed techniques Dean could use if he felt anxious rather than relying on the crutch of Xanax. He was proud to tell Sam how Victor would give him a script for a lower dose of Xanax and trusted Dean only to medicate as a last resort.

“He says I can go home next Tuesday. Would have been sooner but he wants to make sure I’m stable on the new meds.” Dean beamed.

Sam leaped from his chair and swamped Dean in a hug. “Oh my God. That is the best news.”

“I have to come see him every week for the next few, but yeah, I’m good to go in a few days.” Dean pulled apart, “He is good at his job though, Sam. Y’know, he gets me to talk about crap that I don’t know is bothering me. Like, we went through what I remember about Dad in the kitchen, and
I was getting worked up because I was angry that I didn’t jump in before he hit you, and Victor
stopped me and asked why the anger wasn’t towards Dad, whose fault it really was.”

Sam snorted disgustedly, “Damn right it was his fault. Hope you know that Dean.”

“Yeah. And I did already, but only logically. Kind of obviously Dad’s fault, but I’d felt it was mine
too, and it wasn’t, was it?”

“No way.” Sam insisted.

Dean nodded. “Victor’s going to certify me off work for an extra week too. Fucking Greengoods.
The guys sent me a Get Well card, but I’ll have to face their sympathies and their questions when I
go back.”

“You could pretend to be mute.” Sam said with a quirked lip.

Dean reached over and lightly whacked his brother’s wrist. “Naughty Sam! Don’t tempt me.”

The following evening was a Castiel only visit. Anticipation made Dean antsy. He picked at his
bland meatloaf, leaving the dining room before the others. He sat with his back to the TV and
listened to his walkman trying not to look at the time. When Castiel arrived Dean pulled him
outside for a little privacy, carrying his walkman in his hand.

“What were you listening to?” Castiel asked as they took their now regular spot in the corner.

Dean chuckled, “Nothing high brow. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I don’t know. You could try me.” Castiel bumped his shoulder. “Pick a track.”

Dean considered his options for a minute. He skipped forward to his chosen song. He untangled his
ear buds cord, offering one bud to Cas, who smiled with a twinkle as he pushed it into his ear.
Dean scooted as close as he could and took the other bud.

“Tell me if it’s too loud.” Dean warned, “I don’t see the point in listening to rock at the level of a
whisper.”

Castiel very slightly head bobbed to the beat. Dean wasn’t sure that his partner was aware that he
was doing it. Perhaps Castiel was naturally musical. As the song progressed Castiel’s hand ran
along Dean’s thigh and he adopted a pensive expression. Dean covered that hand with his own.

Dean began to mouth along, air-singing Metallica’s lyrics to his love, “Never opened myself this
way, Life is ours, we live it our way, All these words I don’t just say, And nothing else matters.”

By the time the song ended, Castiel had entwined their fingers and his eyes were closed. “I can’t
say I care for the genre but I can appreciate that song.”

Dean grinned, “Good thing I picked something slower then. I’ll play you some Ozzy next time.”

Castiel hummed, “We might have to enter music choice mediation. Maybe Sam could preside.”

Dean squawked, “No freaking way. We’d have to listen to Pearl Jam or the Chili Peppers.”

“I trust your judgment,” Castiel chuckled.

“You know what Cas? I miss ya.” Dean leaned back letting Castiel encircle him in his arms, “Miss
you like a hole in my heart. Listen to me being sappy. How freaking bad am I gonna be when
you’re off teaching those Bodega Bay teens?”

“I want to be with you.” Castiel muttered into his ear.

Dean hummed suggestively and reached up to lightly smack Cas’s hand. “Not here.”

“Not like that.” Castiel’s voice quavered with a laugh at Dean’s one track mind. “I miss you too and I need you.”

Dean craned his neck so they could steal a kiss.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about, Dean. I want you with me, not just on the occasional weekend or at the end of the phone.” Castiel squeezed him tight as if he couldn’t bear to let him go, “Come with me?”

Dean was staggered. It was enormous and overwhelming. He couldn’t quite get his head around that Castiel would want his broken damaged self to share his new home. That he would want Dean beside him as he began his career and new day to day life.

He must have been still and silent too long because Castiel spoke up.

“I know you might not feel safe with me, or maybe you won’t want to leave Sam.”

Dean could hear thick sadness in Castiel’s words. He wanted to offer comfort but his heart was pounding in his chest.

Castiel’s breath hitched, “And I don’t mean right after you leave hospital because we’d have to share with Balthazar. But when I start teaching I want you to live with me. I know it wouldn’t be a fancy place, I can’t afford much. It wouldn’t be until school starts. But maybe it is too much too soon? If you wanted we could split it? You could come north after your Greengoods shift on Saturdays and stay until after our evening meal on Tuesdays? Spend your work nights in Palo Alto or Moss Beach, wherever Sam is?”

There was a break to Castiel’s voice. One that Dean’s lack of reaction had put there. The longer Cas had rambled, the scratchier his voice became.

“Fuck Greengoods,” Dean blurted, then slapped his hand over his mouth. That hadn’t been what he meant to say. However it was effective in making Castiel shut up, he was so taken aback.

“I mean,” Dean tried again, “I hate that job. I’m trying to find a new one, remember?”

“Yes, Dean.” Castiel said, deep and low in a holding tone.

“I mean,” Dean tried again, “I hate that job. I’m trying to find a new one, remember?”

“Yes, Dean.” Castiel said, deep and low in a holding tone.

“I’m trying to say that there must be jobs up there too.” Dean squeezed his left wrist cuff for courage. “I could find work there. But you are right. I couldn’t stay away from Sam too long. I’d want to spend nights down here on some weeks, and when the baby is coming, maybe more.”

“Yes, of course, totally,” Castiel nodded rapidly, “But you’ll think about it?”

“No, you doofus. This is me, saying yes.” Dean twisted round so they could touch foreheads, “Yes, Cas. Yes. Let’s find a place together.”

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Chapter End Notes
I want to thank everyone for all their kind reviews. You have no idea how encouraging they are.

Next chapter: Returns to Sam’s POV.
Moonlight spilled through the valley parting the curtains. It was hot and clammy under the blanket making Sam’s night tee stick to his skin. The slender cushion, which Sam had placed between his knees before reclining on his left side, had been kicked to the floor. A mild headache caught behind Sam’s eyes. Nick’s open mouthed breathing announced that he was asleep behind, an arm slung over Sam’s hip. Silently and with tremendous care, Sam slipped from their bed. He didn’t want to wake Nick. His partner had been kept late at The Gates by a birthday party who hadn’t wanted their night to end. It had been after 1am when Nick had wearily joined Sam in bed.

Sam padded barefoot across the top of the stairs to his brother’s vacant bedroom. He eased the door open. The almost full moon painted the room in a silvery glow. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Sam took in the neatly made bed with Marine Corps standard corners. He profoundly wished that there was a Dean shaped lump there, and that his brother wasn’t sleeping on a ward in Palo Alto. The bad taste in his mouth was more than early morning breath.

“Hey Lola,” Sam whispered to his daughter, trying out his new favorite name. “This is Uncle Dean’s room.”

Sam didn’t turn on a light, happy to steal a moment where he could feel Dean’s presence. The dresser displayed an open sketch pad with a half finished beach scene. Spider seemed kind of droopy. Sam hoped he wasn’t going to get a dressing down for over-watering Dean’s beloved plant.

There was a quivering in his belly, “You don’t want a pissed Uncle Dean either do you, baby?”

Sam rested his hand over his navel. He could feel her movements more every day and knew it wouldn’t be long until she was announcing her existence with kicking and head butting.

“Another few nights and Dee will be home.” Sam huffed. He turned away closing the door gently behind him. “For the next couple weeks.”

A fervent wish, a prayer, pulsed through Sam’s body, the fingers of his right hand curving into a fist with force of will. Mentally he beseeched whatever powers that might be listening to let his brother find happiness with Castiel. He couldn’t deny how worried he was about Dean moving away with his boyfriend. He needed to talk one-to-one with Castiel before the dynamic duo headed north to find a rental place. Castiel didn’t have nefarious intentions regarding Dean, but Sam wanted to be reassured that the new teacher would stick by Dean if things went skew ways in their new environment. Part of him did want to keep Dean close, perhaps selfishly, but also so that he could watch out for him and be there for him. Dean had already lost almost seven years of his life. Who was Sam to deny him a chance to spread his wings?

Rather than being morosely chewed up with concerns, Sam was mentally cursing his brother’s musical tastes as he descended to the kitchen for a cup of iced water. The synaptic connections in his brain had supplied Mr. Mister’s ‘Take These Broken Wings’ on maddening repeat, made even more irritating because Sam could only recall a fraction of the lyrics. He tried to push it out as he wandered aimlessly into the den. On the side table, lay the post-it where he had noted his
appointment time at Stanford on Monday.

Lots of things about his life had been clarified and crystallized by John’s attack, not only how amazing his resilient brother was, but how his daughter would always be his priority. He had felt that before, but having her very existence threatened had made Sam face the fact that he had been living in a bubble, thinking he could put his mind and body through his normal grueling schedule when college resumed.

The final cracks that had broken his rose tinted glasses were angry words he and Nick had exchanged a few days after John’s visit. It hadn’t been a fight, or a blazing argument. Nick had not raised his voice once. Sam might have shouted some, mostly about how he was not incapable or weak. Nick remained calm, earnestly pointing out that Sam was working full shifts, spending each visiting hour he could with Dean, stressing out about his brother, and worrying about having the restraining order made permanent. Once his initial flare of rage had abated, Sam knew he wasn’t angry at Nick. He admitted that he was consumed with ensuring Dean would be safe from John. He confessed that he had been pushing himself but it was hard to ease back when he had been taking care of himself since he was twelve years old. Nick took his hands in his and conceded that Dean, the baby, proving himself, would always be central to Sam, but that he wanted Sam to reevaluate his list of priorities. He didn’t want Sam to put himself last. That led to a more reasoned discussion of what Sam expected for the first semester of his junior year. The illusion of being able to take a full program of classes in his last trimester fell away. It was coming up on a month until the enrollment deadline. They’d both took some free advice from Luther, the dour gender rights lawyer, who called into the restaurant. On the spur of their counsel, Sam requested an appointment with the financial aid office about how changing his attendance would impact his scholarship. There was no space for movement within the regulations of his specific award, but he hoped there were adaptations that could be made for his pregnancy. It was pointless to mentally rehash it in the early hours of Saturday morning. Letting anxieties build was like a recipe for elevated blood pressure and no way did he want to have to add another dizzy spell or chest tightening incident to the notebook he was keeping for Doctors Milton and Grainger.

“You agree? Huh, Lola?” Sam asked as a tumbling sensation rolled through his middle. The first time that the unique motions had occurred they'd been deeper inside. Sam had thought his body was readying for the mother of all gassy expulsions, and it had taken him a few moments to realize that this was the ‘quickening’ he had read about in all those baby books and ‘Cameron’, as he was calling her then, had announced her presence. There had been long hours between flutterings, but entering the 22nd week, Sam had been delighted to sense his little girl move with increasing frequency.

Turning back from the long windows Sam noticed how Nick had drawn the armchair recliner closer to the glass earlier that day. A poetry anthology lay face down on the small side table. Sam trailed his forefinger along the well creased spine of the paperback. Sinking into the comfortable seat, his eyes sought once more the gibbous moon. The corners of his lips perked up, as a snapshot memory pinged his mind. Sitting in the middle of his grade school class as every child erupted in titters when Miss Taft had used the phrase ‘pregnant moon’.

Sam reclined, relaxing his muscles and placing both palms over his tum. He eased out his neck and took some deep expelling and inhaling breaths as he had been taught to do if feeling stressed. Twitching butterfly wings told him that Lola was not sharing his relaxation plan. All the same he must have drifted off, because the first hints of dawn light were in the sky when Nick draped a fleecy throw across his now chilled form. Sam cracked open his lids. He smiled at the sight of Nick, barefoot with hair askew, sleepy eyes squinting, backlit with the glow from a single standard lamp.
“I’m sorry. You woke alone,” Sam spoke low, extracting a hand for Nick to hold.

With a soft forgiving smile the older man took the invitation and perched on the wide arm to kiss Sam’s forehead. There was no comment on Sam’s night-walk, just Nick’s bed-warmed body snuggling into his side. Sam shifted his weight so he could rest his head against his partner’s chest. After a pause Nick twisted his upper body. Sam looked up, expecting a suggestion of returning upstairs or the offer of herbal tea.

The poetry book held in the fingers of one hand, Nick tilted his head and quoted to his love: “When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the hand, When subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not, surround us and pervade us, Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require nothing further, I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave, But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied, He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.”

“Whitman,” Sam choked out, pushing his body closer in affection.

Nick nodded.

After a pause for thought, Sam found the words of an appropriate responding poem, “I dreamed you Nick. I dreamed of a future… ‘This is my dream, It is my own dream, I dreamt it. I dreamt that my hair was kempt. Then I dreamt that my true love unkempt it.’”

“Sam,” Nick breathed reverently, reaching a hand over to tenderly muss Sam’s locks. “You know what Dr. Seuss said?”

“Sam I Am?” He suggested with a snorting giggle.

“No, my teasing love. He said, ‘You know you're in love when you don't want to fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams.’ ” Nick promised, “I’ll stay awake with you” Inside Sam was warm and content. Lola had settled too. He visualized her curled comfortable listening to her parents exchanging promises and hopes. It seemed like there was sanctuary in the dawn to be sappy, to expose your soul, your unguarded heart, without fear of rejection or cruelty.

“Whatever…” Sam began, eyes locked on Nick’s melting blue ones, “Whatever our souls are made of…” He ran his hand upwards along Nick’s chest to his collar bone, “His and mine are the same.”

Two kisses, to corner and full lips, pressed with closed eyes, full of heart. Nick stood with hand offered, “Come on Heathcliff, back to bed.”

When next they woke, to a blaring alarm, work beckoned. Sam took his morning tea to the sands below the terrace, while Nick dressed. He breathed deep of the morning ozone. A haze rose from the calm sea, foretelling a day of scorching temperatures.

“Morning, Sam!” Ava waved as she trailed after her scampering dog.

“Hi Ava. How are you?” Sam called in greeting.
“Good. How is Dean? I’m used to seeing him out here sketching as I pass. Is he on vacation?”

Sam wished that was true. He hadn’t discussed what to tell the neighbors, so answered, “He’s good. He’ll be home on Tuesday.”

“Tell him I said hello.”

The sound of the house phone ringing saved him from any further questions. He pointed inside. Ava nodded, being close enough to hear the pealing.

Sam hoped all was well at the restaurant. Alastair was first on duty, letting in the cleaning contractor and Max for food prep, before Meg and Vepar turned up. Nick and Sam would arrive before the lunchtime rush. If Nick was having a luxuriating shower, he wouldn’t have heard his cell.

An unfamiliar deep male voice responded to Sam’s greeting.

“I’m looking for Dean, Dean Winchester? I can’t get an answer from his cell phone.”

“Yes?” Sam said with extreme wariness.

“Is Dean there?”

“No. He isn’t home at the moment. Who is this?”

“This is Samuel. Samuel Campbell.”

“Yessir,” Sam spluttered, instantly respectful of his grandfather, “It’s Sam here. Dean is … he’s…”

“Well, spit it out. I have my Dean here doing head loops wondering why that sweet boy isn’t returning his calls.”

“I should’ve thought to call you both. I’m sorry.” Sam winced. With everything on his plate, his newly discovered grandparents had not entered his mind. “Dean’s cell got broken. He is in hospital.”

“Well darn it.” Samuel’s voice came from a distance, “You were right Darlin’, the boy is sick.”

“Not sick sick,” Sam fumbled to explain, “Our Dad arrived unannounced. He wasn’t pleased to find me pregnant.”

A feral growl erupted from the earpiece, “Did he hurt you boys? Did he? I swear to God, I should have ended him the first time he…”

Sam gulped at the vehemence in Samuel’s tone. There was a clicking sound, then Dean Campbell’s softer lilt took over, “Hello? Hello Sam?”

“Hey Pawpaw,” Sam found that he was blinking back a few stray tears.

“Are you OK? Is Dean badly injured? We have a little vacation nest egg. Do you need us to fly over there to support you?”

“Oh my God,” Sam blubbered. He pictured two seniors attempting to swoop to the rescue, negotiating airports and counting out their dollars set aside for their annual trip away. “No Pawpaw, thank you. Dean and I are good. Only a few bruises and bangs. Dean had a… he had a bad stress reaction. I had to… Pawpaw, I had to bring him to the psychiatric hospital.”
“You poor boy,” Dean Campbell soothed. “I’ll bet that was a hard road.”

“Uh-huh,” Sam managed around a sob that wrenched his chest, “But he’s good. He’s bouncing back. Will be home in a few days. He’s amazing.”

“Deanie was a sweet baby, you know. Mary was a howling terror, but Dean, he was an angel.”

Sam laughed, trying to imagine a mini version of the Mom he had seen in photographs as a screaming infant.

“Our Mary was an independent little soul. So determined she went straight to walking, never crawled. She kept that strong will all her life.”

There was a wistful slant to the older man’s words. Sam knew his grandparents had not approved of John, perhaps memories were surfacing of how they couldn’t persuade their girl to give up her man.

“Is your baby doing fine? John didn’t cause you any problems did he?”

“She’s OK.” Sam was happy to confirm. “I can feel her move now. It’s real weird yet mind-blowing but I’m getting used to it.”

“There is nothing like it, Sam. Your connection to your daughter. I’ll never forget when Mary began to kick. I don’t speak of it, but Samuel and I had lost two in the first trimester. Those kicks were proof that Mary was a fighter.” Dean gave a low sigh.

“Oh Pawpaw, that’s awful,” Sam was glad he hadn’t known. He’d have been totally freaked out. He wondered if Dean’s miscarriage could have been something hereditary or just bad luck. “Do you know does high blood pressure run in the family?”

There was a chuckle, “Well, no Sam, but sometimes your Grandpa’s eyes go out on stalks and it looks like he’s going to pop a blood vessel but no, not on the Campbell side or my side of the family.”

They finished off with his Pawpaw offering to share any of his rusty memories that might help Sam, if he had any questions about carrier pregnancy, childbirth or post-partum recovery. Sam promised to tell Dean that they had called and to get Dean to callback when he got home.

++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++++

After a long day on his feet, Sam was wrecked. During evening service, he had taken an extra break in the staff room. He had become lightheaded with white floaters when he bent too rapidly to pick up a customer’s dropped napkin. Perhaps double shifts were too much. He collapsed into bed and was dead to the world when Nick made his way upstairs.

Next morning, Sam was treated to breakfast in bed. Nick drew back the curtains to a glorious day. They shared eggs and bacon with freshly squeezed juice. Sam took the wetroom shower. He had been so wacked that he hadn’t taken one the night before. When he emerged, Nick was waiting for him, towel around his waist, hair damp from his own quick shower in the bathroom. He had the bottle of herbal vitamin E oil in his hand and a playful glint in his eye.

“You’ve been panting for an opportunity to use that on me,” Sam grinned. The oil had been recommended by Anna, as a way to reduce any stretch marks and to keep Sam’s skin supple.

“You game?” Nick wiggled his brows adorably. “I watched a video online of how to massage your
partner’s bump.”

“I’m riddled with jealousy! How dare you watch pregnancy porn without me!” Sam bent over in a fit of laughter, as Nick’s face went from crestfallen to joining in the teasing mirth.

“Come over here and let me practice my pregnancy porn knowledge,” Nick patted the bed.

Sam removed his towel and got comfortable, propping his shoulders up with all the pillows.

As Nick warmed the oil between his palms he began to hum. “Who'd have believed you'd come along. Hands, touchin' hands, Reachin' out, touchin' me, touchin' you, Sweet Caroline.”

With an affectionate tutting noise Sam shook his head, “Not calling her Caroline. Her name is Lola.”

“Lola, lo lo lo lo Lola,” Nick crooned as he sat sideways beside his love.

“It’s a perfectly good song, Nick.”

“Not denying it.” Nick grinned placing his palms flat against the lower part of Sam’s tum. He gently moved his hands up and down in opposite directions.

A yummy moan broke from Sam’s lips. It felt amazing.

“I sang that song loud and proud as my teenage rebellious self. Tell me Sam. Do you think The Kinks’ Lola was a carrier?”

Thinking wasn’t high on Sam’s agenda as Nick worked his magic from one side of his body to the other. “Maybe the real Lola was.”

The scent of rosemary and mint in the oil combined with Nick’s touches melted Sam’s stresses away.

Low and sweet Nick sang, “Girls will be boys and boys will be girls. It’s a mixed up muddled up shook up world except for Lola… La-la-la-la Lola”

“It’s not just the transgender lyrics. I like the sound of the name too. Lola Winchester.” Sam muttered.

“Lola Alighieri.”

“See, works with both.” Sam winked.

Nick’s palms moved up. Fresh warmed oil smoothed around his darkened nipples. Fingers dragged down over the ever so slightly swollen area surrounding his nubs.

“More,” Sam pleaded, his cock hardening at the stimulation that sent tingling sparks of arousal from his nipples outwards. His skin was on fire with desire. “More.”

“Turn to the side for me my love,” Nick whispered in his ear, taking the lobe between his teeth and tugging just the good side of painful.

As the massage oil was kneaded into the globes of his butt, Sam dragged his hand over his heavy cock. Pre-come beaded and Sam used it to ease his strokes as Nick slid in one oiled finger. Kisses dotted Sam’s back. Nick pushed at the back of Sam’s knee with his own. Sam gasped, squeezing the base of his cock as he lifted his leg. He was gone, as round and round with more oil, another
finger, two more pushed against his rim muscles, easing him open, so slowly. Sam was almost
drifting in muscular relaxation while juxtaposed tremors of arousal threatened to bring him to
release. When Nick entered him without resistance, Sam cried his name. The first moves were
languid. Sam pushed back to take him fully. When Nick hit his bundle of nerves, Sam felt his balls
draw up. He jerked his hips, panting his need.

“So good for me,” Nick moaned, “spread out like a feast.”

“Nick,” Sam keened. His hand stripped his cock in time with Nick’s moves.

Nick’s grunts and heavy breaths combined with Sam’s noises of pleasure. They rocked, building a
rhythm until Sam spilled hard and long, white pearlescence over the sheets and his oiled bump.

Nick’s hot damp forehead pressed into Sam’s shoulder as he shuddered through his release. His
stuttering motions ended with a grip on Sam’s bicep as if he was holding on to him for dear life.
They fell back onto the scattered pillows, too spent and sated to make any energetic moves. Nick
turned to spoon Sam, arm over his hip.

However someone wasn’t so languid and relaxed. As Sam smoothed a hand over the mix of oil and
come on his belly, Lola gave a kick that they both felt.

“Oh my God,” Sam gasped, feeling like he’d been tapped on the inside.

“Was that?” Nick propped up on his elbow, suddenly fully aware.

“Yeah!” Sam cooed, “Did we disturb you Baby? Was Daddy too much of a love machine?”

“Stop,” Nick laughed, “Good God. How are we going to sanitize this for the childhood story of her
first kick?”

“You sang to her.” Sam stated simply.

“I did,” Nick beamed, “To our Lola, Lo lo lo lo Lola.”

+++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++

Furniture removal noises came from the third bedroom. Sam blearily wiped his eyes, still stated
and boneless from his glorious massage and extras. The dried come was itchy on his skin. He gave
himself a whore’s wash in the wetroom, before finding his clean bump accommodating jeans and
plaid button down. When it sounded like Nick was dragging the old closet across the floor, Sam
went to investigate.

Coming from their room, the stairs were to Sam’s left. The landing extended to a short hallway on
the other side with the doors to Dean’s room, the huge bathroom, and directly opposite was the
room where the noise originated. Sam had stuck his nose in there earlier that summer. It looked
like it had been intended as a home office cum extra guest room, but over time Nick had filled it
with a broken rowing machine, old computers, and Christmas decorations that had failed to make it
back into the crawl space.

When Sam pulled open the door, he stood mouth agape. Nick’s back was to him, a V of sweat on
his green tee, cobwebs in his hair. However it wasn’t the sight of his disheveled lover that had him
stunned. Most of the junk was gone. The distressed pine closet was shoved into the corner by
Sam’s arm. In front of him under the west facing window was a baby changing table. A new, or
freshly uncovered, blond pine dresser was in the opposite corner. The strawberry night light sat
proudly on it. In the centre of it all Nick was wrestling with the assembly of a sort of stand; one
made to safely hold a Moses basket or bassinet.

The room was a proto-nursery.

All at once Sam was slammed in the chest with a wave of guilt for ever hazily contemplating leaving this place. He couldn’t understand why he had let the vague presumption of finding accommodation in Palo Alto in September linger. His heart clenched, thinking of shared custody arrangements and only seeing Nick on weekends. Maybe he hadn’t process this aspect of his immediate future because a small part him of had feared that Nick was under the impression that he was staying only for the summer, and it would be expected that he was moving back to Stanford. What kind of person would he be to take Nick’s daughter away from him, when neither could Sam bear the thought of being apart from his partner? He visualized the beige and cream striped wallpaper stripped away, replaced with soft pastels, perhaps with a border of cartoon bunnies. They could paint a rainbow on the old closet, stars on the ceiling and hang candy striped curtains. Maybe they’d get a few shelves to hang too high for toddler’s hands and make a collection of story books for Lola.

“Sam?” Nick stood up, his face lightly flushed, from exertion or from being caught at his secret project. “Do you like it?” Nick’s question was tremulous. “You are upset I went ahead and began to set up the room?”

Sam surged forward, smashing their faces together. Eyes open he could see the Nick’s blue eyed shock. Sam deepened the kiss, hands spread on Nick’s shoulder blades. Arms wrapped around Sam’s waist.

“Sam,” Nick breathed as they parted for air.

“My love, my lover,” Sam responded, “Our nursery…”

Nick nibbled at Sam’s jaw line, “I’m so happy you like it.”

Sam chuckled, “I like what it will be.”

“You want in on the planning stage?” Nick laughed.

“You betya,” Sam’s hand strayed down and he gave Nick’s butt a vicious pinch.

“Ouch!”

“That was for hiding it from me,” Sam pecked his cheek, “And the kisses are for everything you are.”

Nick took his hand. He showed him the room. He pointed out the items already there, ideas he had, and paint colors he liked. Nick talked about how he wanted to buy the bassinet and cot together. Sam chipped in his idea for stars and rainbows. Nick persuaded him that stencils could decorate the walls.

It was with a warm and pleasant feeling that Sam fixed grilled cheese sandwiches for an early lunch, while Nick finished off the bassinet stand.

“I was thinking.” Nick announced as he appeared, slouched in the doorway.

“Hmm, is that a good thing?” Sam ribbed, “You have plans for world domination?”

Nick’s brows rose, wrinkling his forehead. “You’re in a jolly mood.”
“You coming with? Castiel and I are both going in to see Dean. Cas’s is off work today. Dean said
that Castiel is only covering a couple of shifts this week for them before he finishes up at the
coffee shop.”

“I’ll try to join you guys later. I need to go to the restaurant. Perdy’s kids are sick. She’s going to
try and get in for the evening if her Mom will babysit.” Nick sighed.

“What about her useless lump of a husband?” Sam hissed in disgust. Perdy’s husband was a douche
who didn’t lift a finger around the house, and expected his wife to wait on him hand and foot. The
weekend waitress had often groused at work, but Sam, like the others, had learned that she was
never going to do anything about being treated like a doormat.

“You know, Sam, he’ll be watching his shows, drinking beer, and if her mother doesn’t come over,
those kids will be virtually unattended.” Nick pursed his lips. “Bastard.”

Bubbling cheese offerings placed in the centre of the table, Sam took the chair next to his partner.
He shuffled it closer, cupped his lover’s jaw feeling the curve of his bone structure. As he gave
a soft kiss to Nick’s chin and a second to his lips, Sam wondered if Lola would inherit her father’s
features.

“We are going to be great Dads.” Nick announced.

“What brought you to that conclusion?” Sam asked with an amused smile.

“We are going to be polar opposites to our fathers. Your Dad was an ass and mine… Well… My
Dad was a fantastic CEO, and a shit father. The business was number one, then his profile in the
community, Michael, having sons excel at military school… It was like I didn’t have a Dad.” Nick
curled his hand around Sam’s offered palm. “I don’t remember my Mother. I was two. I don’t even
know the details of the car accident, except once when we were teenagers Michael told me I was
screaming in the back seat and distracted her, but he could have been lying.”

“I don’t have any memories of my Mom, except those Dean told me.” Sam said gently. “But she
sounded wonderful. I wish I had known her.”

“Sometimes,” Nick looked out the window rather than at Sam, “I wonder if that’s why my Father
was so distant. Maybe he blamed me for shattering their world.”

“You know,” Sam cleared his throat, “The fire started in my bedroom. Mom came in to check on
me and Dean says the whole place went up like kindling. I don’t know exactly what happened
either, but Dean carried me out of the house, while Dad tried to get to Mom.”

“I promise you, Sam,” Nick paused, sucking in his lips a moment, “I promise to you, always. You
and Lola.”

“Me too,” Sam confirmed his sincerity with a tight squeeze to his partner’s hand. He believed Nick
and he shared in his vow. Whatever bad examples of parenting they had experienced, they would
be the best parents they possibly could for their little girl.

An hour later, Sam collected Castiel at Balthazar’s house. He was amused at the alacrity with
which Castiel appeared when he heard the distinctive rumble of the Impala. Castiel literally
jumped into the shotgun seat.
“You ready to go?” Sam stated the obvious.

“You’re late.” Castiel substituted as greeting.

Sam didn’t explain his morning, just smiled at the memory.

“Oh, I see,” Castiel huffed. “Did you wear Nick out or something?”

“Huh, no,” Sam snorted, “They are a man down at the restaurant. He had to go in.”

At the hospital, Sam put a hand on Castiel’s arm, arresting his drive towards the elevator.

“Can we talk?” Sam gestured towards the entrance to the hospital café. “I know you want to get up to Dean’s ward, but could we have a few words?”

Castiel inclined his head and followed, “You know Dean will be pissed if we are too delayed. But I guess we can spare a few minutes.” He squinted at Sam, “Is this where you give me the protective brother speech?”

“That about sums it up.” Sam confirmed before they both ordered hot chocolate. There was a table for four freshly vacated with the dirty plates and empty mugs waiting to be removed. Sam stacked them to the side, his hands twitching to bus the table and wipe it down.

Castiel waited for Sam to speak, taking long sips of his drink.

“Cas, I think you are a cool guy. I know you care for Dean and all.” Sam bit down hard on his lip.

“You don’t approve of Dean coming to Bodega Bay?” Castiel’s body tensed.

“I didn’t say that,” Sam blew an exhalation so strong it rippled the top of his hot chocolate, “I’m troubled by what might happen, I guess. I’m worried that when you are together all the time you might find you don’t have enough in common… that you might decide…”

Castiel planted his mug on the table, “I truly believe that will not happen, but life is full of risks. Dean and I want to take our chance. We want to try. And Sam, I fear you underestimate your brother. He is as bright and clever as you and I, but life has not given him the opportunities that we were able to fight for. I admire him all the more for his survivor spirit, his dignity, his courage. He shines…”

As his brother’s partner’s voice trailed away, Sam’s confidence grew. Castiel was right. Life was a game of chance. He wouldn’t deny Dean his shot at happiness.

“You don’t have to convince me of Dean’s qualities,” Sam said with a close mouthed sad-tinged smile.

Earnestly Castiel pleaded, “But I do. I need you to comprehend that I am the privileged one. From when we began, he graced me with his returning words, with his touch and his smiles. I fell for him. Hard.”

Sam could only nod in response, thinking of the quotes he and Nick had exchanged a few dawns ago. “How about we head up before Dean sends a search party down to find us?”

Castiel barked a laugh, “He would too.”

“Where were you guys?” Were the first words out of Dean’s mouth, before he grabbed Sam in a backslapping hug and then Castiel in a lingering squeeze.
“Dean,” Sam threw his eyes up, “It’s only twenty after.”

“Yes Sammy. Twenty minutes spent dancing around here like a fool.” Dean gestured to the area around the door.

“I brought you an empty duffel.” Sam handed it over like a peace offering, “So you can start packing up your stuff.”

Dean grasped onto the handle, “Awesome. 48 hours and I’ll be outta here, Dudes.”

Castiel ratted out Sam on their way to the courtyard. “Your brother grilled me about kidnapping you to my Bodega Bay lair.”

“Sammy!” Dean glared. “I’m not going to the moon, y’know.”

“I know, Dee,” Sam sighed in the face of the couple who had linked arms. “I have news about my own living arrangements.”

Dean’s brows rose.

“I’m not seeking a place back here in Palo Alto.” Sam grimaced, hoping he wasn’t about to get a grilling.

Instead Dean fist pumped, “I knew it. I knew you and Nick were together for keeps, as soon as you started talking about ‘your’ bedroom and going ‘home’. I knew it.”

“Well, you knew before me then,” Sam huffed.

“But you’re sure, Sam?” Dean checked.

“Yeah, as I’ll ever be. It will be our home. Me, Nick and Lola.”

Dean clapped him on his arm. “Good. And at least you’ve dumped the lame names.”

“Lola is a very nice name,” Castiel chimed in, “I knew a girl called Dolores who used it as her diminutive.”

“And you know Lola wore yellow feathers and lost her love at the Copa – Copacabana.” Dean sniggered.

“Stop, Dean! You can try and Manilow me out of it, but it won’t work. Your niece is called Lola.” Sam gave his own trademark glare.

Dean combined shame-faced eyes with a cheeky grin. He placed a hand on Sam’s stomach and introduced himself.

“Hello, Lola. Uncle Dean here. The one who is going to spoil you rotten.”

Sam eye rolled at his impossible brother, while Castiel’s wheezing laugh joined Dean’s deeper chuckles.

The next morning, their pleasurable afternoon seemed an age away. Sam came downstairs slightly after 8am, bleary eyed and wondering why the other side of the bed had been cold when he woke. He could see Nick in the family room, still in his sleep shorts and an open white casual shirt. He
was on the landline.

“No, Michael,” Nick’s lips formed a tight angry line, “No, you listen…”

Sam leaned his shoulder against the door frame. Nick could see him there, but something stopped him from coming closer, from intruding on the telephone conversation.

“I am perfectly entitled.” Nick hissed, “I resent your suggestion that I misused company time or resources.”

Sam’s eyes widened as Nick’s fist thumped onto the desk, causing the antique to shudder.

“No. You listen to me, Mike.” Nick’s pitch rose, “The piece of shit upon which I set the company hounds threatened my unborn daughter. He assaulted my partner in our home. And I would be quite within my rights to invoke our personal security protection. But Sam and I do not want bodyguards. I escaped that life.”

Nick’s body sagged. He rolled his eyes at whatever his brother was saying. Sam tentatively approached, running a hand down Nick’s shirt and wrapping his arm around his waist.

“Fine. Be like that.” Nick slammed the handset down and spat, “Prick.”

“I take it that Michael wasn’t pleased that Cain is helping us.” Sam muttered as he pulled Nick in for a hug. His partner was too tense to relax into Sam’s embrace.

“Someone talked.” Nick sighed, “Whispered up the chain of command.”

“Will there be trouble?” Sam cringed. He didn’t want those who were assisting them to face consequences in their employment.

Nick shook his head. “No more than normal. Michael is predictably perched up on his moral high ground. Cain can hold his own. He was never in Michael’s fan club. And I told the truth. We could live in a glass cage of security and bodyguards if we were paranoid enough. Michael doesn’t go anywhere without at least two dicks in suits.”

“That’s a crap way to live.”

“Suppose he needs it as CEO of an arms corporation, but I’m sure he gets a kick out of the image it presents. It’s all power and posturing, and I’ve been sick of it for an age. The one time I use my privilege as an Alighieri and he has a conniption.”

“Fuck him.” Sam said simply.

“Yeah.” Nick’s shoulders hitched twice in silent amusement. He looked to the East, “Fuck you, Mike.”

Nick buried his head in Sam’s neck and took a few breaths that heated Sam’s skin.

“There is some good news, Sweetheart.” Nick finally said in a calmer tone, as if Sam’s mere presence had poured oil on his troubled waters.

Sam hummed in query.

“Michael started his rant with demanding if I was the reason behind one of the security division serving papers on some mechanic in Windom Minnesota.” Nick squeezed Sam’s shoulder. “He’s been served. Once Cain couriers us the proof of service notice, we can apply for the permanent
A ball of stress and worry that had been resident under Sam’s ribs evaporated. He could just about imagine John’s face twisted in hateful disbelief but it didn’t matter if John burned the papers or poured over them with a magnifying glass. They had won this round.

“Come on, let’s get some breakfast before we have to face the suits.” Nick led Sam by the hand into the kitchen. “What would you like?”

“Nothing much. My stomach is knotted,” Sam admitted. “What if they don’t want to accommodate my request? What if they withdraw all financial aid?”

“Pancakes.” Nick declared, taking a vacuum packed readymade stack from the refrigerator. “And I told you, Sam. They have to be officially considerate.”

Sam chuckled in spite of the serious topic. “Considerate would be nice, but I’ll settle for reasonable and accommodating.”

“You used all the wording Luther suggested asking for the appointment. I bet you they are shitting bricks that you’ll sue their asses for gender discrimination.”

Sam planted his elbows on the table and sunk his chin into the V of his upturned palms, “I don’t want to sue anyone. I simply want to reduce the number of classes in my schedule.”

“I know, my love.” Nick rubbed circles into his back. “It will be fine. You’ll see.”

Sam nodded. Nick was looking at things logically. However Sam had been knocked back enough in his short life that he knew he could be faced with a battle. Other students from middle income families graduated without scholarships. Castiel did it on half-time with loans, wages and some aid. Nick had repeated his pledge to guarantee any loan application. It wasn’t only the financial side. Sam also wanted to decrease his class schedule. Long term, Nick would manage his restaurant around Sam’s attendance, so that he could look after Lola while Sam was at class.

“I’m telling you,” Nick added as he warmed the skillet, “You’ll get your degree and be a famous anthropologist. Hey Babe, what do famous anthropologists do anyway?”

Sam reached to smack Nick’s arm. “Cheeky!”

Nick ignored him, “Syrup or bananas?”

“Both.”

In the end Nick was proved right. Nick leaned against the corridor wall and blew an air kiss to Sam as he entered the office that could determine his academic fate. Sam straightened down his long sleeved stretchy red tee over the elastic panel of his black work trousers. The new clothes were more for when Lola grew bigger but he didn’t want to turn up to the meeting looking ratty or casual.

He nearly melted into a puddle of nerves when he was faced with not only a financial aid supervisor, an administrator from the Dean of Students office, but also his Anthropology faculty advisor.

At least one of the three gave him a friendly smile. Mr. Wyatt, his advisor, went so far as to offer baby congratulations as he greeted Sam. Mrs. Bryon from the finance department was grim as she rose slightly to shake his hand. Her face remained stoic with her wire spectacles and tightly scraped
back grey hair. Sam had met Mrs. Fleming, the efficient round shouldered brunette who was known for solving student grievances, when he was trying to get out of sharing with his unbearable freshman roommate. While she had been unable to assist him, she had been kind and listened to his complaint.

Taking a breath, Sam straightened his spine, told himself this was for his and Lola’s futures, and stated his case. He was unable to fulfill the exact specifications of his full scholarship because his baby was due on December 17th. He did not want to leave. He wanted the college’s support. He hoped it was understood that he could no longer achieve the precise obligations of his scholarship through exceptional circumstances. Sam wanted to return on half-time classes for the Fall semester. He was applying for a leave of absence covering the Winter Quarter, returning on a reduced schedule after spring break. Prompted by Mr. Wyatt, Sam outlined his ultimate aim of extending the time it would take him to achieve his bachelors by only one year. To reach the required credits, on a continued reduced number of classes per semester, Sam would enroll every summer, and if accepted undertake a senior research paper. He pointed out that as a student with a 3.7 grade average he was aiming for the honors program.

The three sage adjudicators asked for a recess to discuss Sam’s petition. Outside the heavy wood door, Sam paced a line in the carpet, with Nick offering bottles of water and occasional rhetorical questions as to why they were taking so long. Finally called back in, Nick held Sam’s hand for a supportive squeeze but Sam didn’t let him go, practically dragging him into the office. The older finance department supervisor raised her brows but didn’t comment.

It was Mrs. Fleming who spoke. “Mr. Winchester we have considered your proposal and consulted the relevant regulations. Stanford prides itself as an equal opportunities institution. It has to be recognized that you have exceeded the rigorous requirements of your scholarship in your two years with us. While that prized scholarship will lapse as soon as you enroll as a half-time student for the upcoming quarter, we believe you are an asset to our university and that your bright academic future should be nurtured not impeded.”

Sam’s heart sank as confirmation that his full ride was gone. Nick’s grip tightened to almost painful as the older man steamed righteous anger on Sam’s behalf. Sam attempted to squeeze back, non-verbally communicating the need hear the verdict.

“We do not want to lose you, Mr. Winchester. If you can stay a while, Mr. Wyatt has volunteered to assist you in completing forms for exceptional fees aid, subsidized loans and, as your housing grant will expire, assisted housing at Escondido Village’s on campus accommodation for students with children. Due to your lack of income and of family funding, you qualify for a percentile fee waiver, which I can tell you now will be substantial. If you are willing to commit to time as a teaching assistant in your senior year, we can adjust your aid package beneficially. Finally Mrs. Bryon has consulted your scholarship fund and the small supplementary stipend for college expenses will not be voided by reducing to half-time.” She smiled, “All in all we hope this will mean you can continue with our blessing and if you need further assistance, you are free to apply to us again as your education continues.”

“Thank you.” A smile spread across Sam’s face. “Thank you all.”

Mr. Wyatt grinned, “You might not be thanking me in an hour when we are still here filling out all the paperwork.”

“I’ll stay all night,” Sam huffed, thinking that at least he could forego the accommodation forms.

He didn’t care if they were scandalized. He leaned over and kissed Nick in celebration.
“Told you,” Nick whispered close.

“You did.” Sam responded, “And I am so happy you were right.”

Sam’s high carried him through the quiet evening at work. It lifted him the following morning as he aired out Dean’s bedroom and gave the house a quick once over. Nick returned from the butcher’s with huge steaks which he rubbed with a secret spice mix. He fired up the outdoor grill, while Sam prepped okra and ears of corn for chargrilling. He wrapped par-boiled potatoes in foil ready to be finished on the BBQ. Nick produced a fold away table for the terrace. Sam filled the old green cooler with ice and plunked bottles of beer in it for the others and some non-alcoholic cider for his drinking pleasure.

It was all ready. Sam gleefully hopped up and down on the balls of his feet when Castiel’s Ford turned into the property. He was dizzy with excitement when Dean emerged from the car.

“Sammy,” Dean called as he came round the side of the house to share a tight hug, “I’m a free man.”

“Welcome home,” Nick said as he slung an arm over Dean’s shoulders. “Hope you like spice rubbed steaks.”

“I do,” Dean grinned, “Y’all have no idea how bad the food was on the ward.”

“We do.” Castiel intoned wearily, “We heard.”

Once Dean had dumped his bag, changed his clothes and inspected his spider plant, they shared the delicious food, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. Dean picked the music, in honor of his homecoming, meaning an afternoon of background mullet rock.

When Dean reached out for another bottle, Castiel noticed they were out. He volunteered to head inside for more and to top up the ice.

“I’m glad to see you both taking it easy.” Nick commented from his spot on the edge of the tarp covered hot tub.

Dean hummed, “Even better ‘cause I don’t gotta go to work in the morning. Victor certified me off for another week.”

“You know that means Castiel and Sam will be hovering over you.” Nick teased.

“No hovering.” Dean shook a finger at his brother, “I plan to walk the beach, eat proper food, drive the impala, and go house hunting with Cas.”

Nick met his eye, “Are you certain, Dean, about the move? I hope you know that you are always welcome to stay here with us and our door will always be open to you.”

Dean gulped with emotion as he nodded his head. “Thanks. Thank you.”

Sam moved over to wrap his arm around Nick’s shoulder and lean into his body, “We mean it, Dee. You don’t even have to call. Just show up.”

“Well, maybe you could call and say you are on the way, you know, in case…” Nick wiggled his brows and licked his lips in an exaggerated sultry manner.
They were laughing when Cas returned with the bucket of ice. “What did I miss?”

Dean rolled his eyes, “Nick was suggesting that calling unannounced once he and my baby brother have the house to themselves could lead to sights that would scar me for life.”

Castiel hummed and got a mischievous twinkle in his eye, “Ditto.” He said simply. “We wouldn’t want to ruin Sam’s innocence.”

“Cas!” Dean protested.

“It’s fine, Dean.” Sam laughed, “Glad to know Castiel has thought out the tiny fine-print of your move.”

“I will have you know there is nothing tiny about Cas.” Dean smirked as his lover came and put a hand playfully over his mouth.

“No more.” Castiel wheezed with laughter.

“I second that,” Sam chuckled. “No welcome home pie if you can’t be refined, Dean.”

Dean pulled Castiel’s hand away and shouted, “No fair.”

Taking sympathy on his brother, Sam dragged Nick into the kitchen. He extracted the pecan and salted caramel pie from the refrigerator, while Nick got the plates and tub of Madagascan vanilla ice-cream. Three stolen kisses delayed dessert, but also allowed the ice-cream to soften a touch. Nick carried the extras. Sam went first with the pie held forth, giving him full view of Dean and Castiel wrapped together in passionate embrace. He was reluctant to cough and part them, especially as he and Nick had just been engaged in the same recreation. It was all good, because Dean’s pie radar must have pinged.

With each having plates of pie and ice-cream in hand, Nick raised his fork for a treat toast. “To love found!”

“Hear hear.” Castiel cheered lifting his spoon of ice-cream high.

To Sam no bite of pie ever tasted sweeter than the one he took in agreement with his partner’s toast. The shared kiss that followed tasted of that love.

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Chapter End Notes

Quotes:
Walt Whitman: Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances.
Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights
Ogden Nash: My Dream
The Kinks: Lola
Neil Diamond: Sweet Caroline
Barry Manilow: Copacabana
Oh my Lord, they are in such a good place, that I could end the story here…
But I won’t. There are more chapters to come.
Kudos and comments are love. Thank you for leaving them.
“Jesus Christ on a Taco,” Dean cursed as he thumped down three flights from the fifth and last blow out on Bodega Bay Realty’s printed list. He flung open the glass door and stormed onto the sidewalk. A hand pressed on the shoulder of his tee.

“Dean?” Castiel sighed, “Ignore him. He isn’t worth your ire.”

“Homophobic motherfucker. Betya if we went back to the realtor’s office and complained they’d know already that Old Man Andersen is the town bigot.” Dean fumed, casting an evil eye at the four storey apartment building.

“Take a breath, Dean.”

At the prompting of his boyfriend, Dean exhaled all the bad air. He inhaled deep of sea salted fresh scent. He’d suspected the last property was going to be a no-go when they entered a lobby decorated with religious paraphernalia. He’d hoped it was ‘love thy neighbor’ style Good News spreading and not ‘smite those gays like Sodom and Gomorrah’ proselytizing.

“I’m as disappointed as you,” Castiel’s shoulders sagged so much his carry bag strap slipped down. “There are plenty of luxurious condos here but not in our price range. I’d hoped one of the recommendations would be suitable.”

“Is it too early to meet your friends?” Dean asked, “Maybe they’ll have some ideas better than a weekly rental at the highway motel or a trailer up at the campground.”

“It could be an adventure.” Castiel clicked his tongue as he linked Dean’s arm.

Dean huffed, “Let me tell you, Cas, I’ve lived in both and the adventure soon wears off. A decent trailer can make a nice home, but I bet it gets cold here in winter. I’d prefer somewhere with insulation and piped heating.”

“Me too, Love, me too.” Castiel pushed his brown tinted Polaroid style sunglasses tight to the bridge of his nose. Dean loved those glasses. He’d found them on a stand in the pharmacy and gifted them with the excuse that they’d help with glare when driving, but really the sight of Castiel wearing them stirred Dean with a tingle of arousal.

They strolled towards the main drag. Highway 1 ran through the town. Bars, restaurants and cafes dotted the western waterside of the road. At the northern end the highway curved right in preparation of leaving the urban limits. This loop was the location of the main shopping and
business area. The schools lay a couple of blocks back from the highway and sea.

The first property that Castiel and Dean had viewed, with morning hope, was close to the high school but the little house’s guest room was barely large enough for one person to sleepover and when Dean flushed the toilet it didn’t stop. Another overlooked the parking area of the only town motel with a bar and nightclub. The third and fourth had been condos; one with walls so flimsy Dean joked he could hear the neighbors thinking, and the other already promised to a couple who got there earlier.

Dean’s eyes lit up when they walked through the swing doors and entered Jesse’s Forever, the bar where Castiel had arranged to meet Inias and Alfie. It was like a cross between a cool roadhouse and a laid back beach bar. There was a bleached wood and marine theme alongside stone flagged floor, a stage for bands, and high stools at the long bar. An honest to god jukebox was pumping out Annie Lennox signing that there must be an angel playing with her heart.

“I’ll have a draft Miller,” Dean said, licking his lips, fingers twitching to check out the jukebox playlist.

Castiel noticed the object of his attention and released his arm, “Go on, I’ll get the drinks and text Inias.”

Dean’s estimation of Jesse, whoever he or she was, grew when he read through a decent mix of classics and rock gems. He threw in enough for two selections; Zep’s Whole Lotta Love and Def Leppard’s Animal.

Wrapping his arms around Castiel’s waist, as his partner bent to deposit their glasses on a round table, Dean lay his head against Cas’s shoulder and asked, “Can this be our regular joint?”

A female voice whooped behind them, “Dwight roll out the red carpet. We’ve snagged two handsome dudes.”

Dean jerked upright, swinging around to check for any mocking or cruel taint to the jovial words. An attractive sexy brunette with a wide lascivious grin undressed him from neck to toe with her eyes, before she extended a hand, “Pamela Barnes, owner and bartend extraordinaire.”

Dean coughed and took the offered hand, finding the slender woman had an iron grip. “Dean. Nice to meetcha. Who’s Jesse then?”

Pamela threw back her head and laughed loudly, “Oh boy, he is long gone. I prefer beautiful young men like you to warm my bed.”

Dean spluttered, “And this is Cas, Castiel, he’s my partner.”

“I could see that. Plenty of room in my bed for two.” Pamela winked.

An older cap-wearing friendly looking guy with a beard shouted from behind the bar, “Now Pam. Leave the new dudes alone. You’ll never keep custom if you act like you’ll eat them alive.”

“Can it, Dwight. You’re ruining my mojo!” She made a swatting motion towards the bar and then turned back to them, “What brings you to the harbor? Vacationers?”

“No. We are moving here. I’m the new science teacher at the high school.” Castiel replied in a formal tone, as if he was slightly offended by the bar owner’s over familiarity.

“Well we would be, if we could find somewhere to live,” Dean grumbled under his breath.
Pamela raised one eyebrow. “Having trouble?”

“You could say that.” Castiel sagged onto the wooden chair. “We have spent today apartment hunting, but nothing…”

With a hum, Pamela turned back to the bar, “I might know someone. Let me make a call. You got references and credit and all?”

Castiel nodded, “All present and correct, had them for the realtor’s office.”

“OK. Give me a few. Enjoy your drinks. I’m not promising, but I might be able to help.”

“Thanks,” Dean smiled at Cas when she moved away. “Looks like the town is not full of douches.”

Castiel’s cell pinged. As he checked his text, Dean used his new phone to send a quick update to Sam. His comments on each crap property had obviously amused his brother, whose last message had included a plea to make him stop laughing so much that he had emitted a little wee. Dean hadn’t dignified that with a response, excusing his brother’s over-sharing due to his pregnant condition.

“They’re on the way.” Castiel informed. He spread his papers on the table, sorting them so he could hand them easily to the prospective landlord who Pamela Barnes might set them up with.

“What was on the card?” Dean asked after taking a swallow of cold beer. He pointed to a business card that Castiel found included in the envelope from Beans. On their way to Bodega Bay early that morning they had called into the coffee shop to pick up Castiel’s pink slip, last pay slip and a character reference Mrs. Kormos had forwarded. Castiel handed it over. The back of the card held contact details. Dean flicked it between his fingers. The front was plain save for the embossed name, B Lafitte: Entrepreneur, and a concise note from Andrea –

*Told my Ex-, Benny, that I’m losing my best barista to his neck of the woods. Don’t hesitate to call if he can help.*

“What does that mean?” Dean asked, “Help with what?”

Castiel shrugged. “The address is Jenner. That’s about ten miles north. Maybe Mr. Lafitte would know of rentals in his town, but I’d prefer to live close to the school. Tamara said that when they divorced, Mrs. Kormos kept the business and her husband withdrew to a hideaway.”

“So he’s a mystery? Maybe he is a hunchbacked recluse in a haunted mansion like Dr Frankenstein.”

Castiel slammed his glass onto the table. Once he had stopped laughing he answered, “For that flight of fantasy we are going to have to call him once we have settled in.” Castiel’s arm shot up, “Inias, Alfie, here we are.”

Dean stood to greet Castiel’s friends. Inias looked different with a summer tan, dressed in surfer shorts and an open buttoned salmon pink shirt. Behind him Dean looked down on a sweet-faced young man with a pixie brunet hair style pushing a three wheeled stroller.

Inias gave Castiel a backslapping hug. He shook Dean’s hand before introducing his husband Alfie and daughter Poppy. Dean was concerned that the loud music would wake the slumbering infant but Alfie gave a tinkling laugh saying their girl would sleep through emergency sirens. Dean peeked in, pulling back the light over blanket with his finger. He noticed she had a teething flush to her cheeks and wondered if she was fussy when awake.
“Massively improved since Inny’s sister Gail suggested chilling the teething ring in the freezer so she can cool her gums as she chews.” Alfie leaned over to admire his daughter with Dean.

Inias and Castiel went to the bar to get a round of drinks. Dean lifted his hand to tell Castiel he was good. He was only half way through his beer. Alfie ordered an iced tea, mentioning he was still breast feeding but weaning Poppy before he returned to work.

“How are you going to manage when you return to the school?” Dean asked. He hoped he wasn’t overstepping the mark, but he was curious about child minding arrangements in the town.

“I’m not returning full time,” Alfie told him, “I used to cover band and some social science classes, but this year I am purely the art teacher. I feel she is too small for the combined schools day-care. We have a very good neighbor who’s a stay at home Mom. She sits for her sister’s two kids and will take Poppy for the few hours I’m at work each morning. I don’t mind telling you that it’s going to be tough leaving her. I wept buckets when Gail took her so we could have a ‘romantic’ weekend away.”

Inias pecked his surprised husband’s cheek, “You telling Dean how we drove back from Clearlake after one night?”

“I was,” Alfie pressed his own kiss to Inias’s lips, “And how understanding you were.”

“Hey I missed Poppy-boo too.” The taller man leaned over the stroller to check that their baby was still content. “So Castiel tells me you’d no luck.”

Dean shook his head. “There’s plenty of vacation rentals and swanky architect designed properties.”

“Dean’s right.” Castiel added, “We could look further afield, but I want to be close to work. Ideally so I could walk or bike it, and I might be a farm boy but Dean has always lived in an urban setting. We’d like to be in the town.”

Dean quirked a brow at Cas’s summation of the anecdotes he had shared of his wandering upbringing. He was more comfortable amid people and buildings, but he preferred smaller towns and cities. Castiel’s words also glossed over his years in The Ozarks. To be fair to Castiel, Dean had neither shared the finer details of his life at ACIC, nor had he ventured beyond its gates to explore the mountains.

When Dean’s attention returned to the ongoing debate about living arrangements, Castiel was complementing the beauty of Bodega Harbor and admitting he was quite envious of the Faiths’ panoramic view from their hillside home a couple of miles out on Bay Flat Road.

“How about you, Dean?” Inias asked, “Are you as impressed or do natural vistas leave you cold?”

Dean grinned and bumped off Cas’s shoulder, “Only here a few hours and I’m grating on Cas’s nerves with my repetitive mentions of what a great sketch I could do. The place is awesome. I can’t imagine getting tired of the views.”

“You’re not grating,” Castiel smirked, “but I’m glad you didn’t bring your charcoals. We wouldn’t have seen any properties cos you’d still be on that rock with your sketch pad outside the realtor’s.”

“Would not,” Dean denied but he bumped Cas again playfully.

“Are you an artist?” Alfie asked with delight.
Dean raised his palm to cool the young father’s gusto, “Amateur. Very amateur. It’s my hobby.” He coughed, “I find you can communicate a lot through art.”

“That’s wonderful.” Alfie shot a look at his husband, “I’m always trying to impart that lesson to my students. Even a still life seen through different eyes can communicate meaning.”

Dean had intended his comment more literally. His sketches had been his words for so long, but he totally agreed with Cas’s new colleague.

“You’ll have to show us your favorite pieces,” Inias suggested, “Alfie helps organize the annual local artists’ show. Perhaps you’d contribute.”


“Dean,” Castiel said solemnly, “You underestimate your talent. I wish you wouldn’t put yourself down. Your pictures are wonderful.”

Flushing under praise given honestly, Dean bit down on his lip before addressing Alfie, “I guess once we are settled you and Inias might like to call for a coffee and I could show you a few drawings.”

“I look forward to it,” Alfie smiled. “And I hope you and Castiel will find somewhere great to settle.”

“Can I repeat our offer, Cas?” Inias chipped in, “You are welcome to bed down in our cubby room until you find somewhere.”

Dean drained the end of his beer to cover how sucky an idea he thought Castiel moving up here on his own was.

“It is very kind of you both,” Castiel tilted his head, “I may need to accept your kind offer for the present, unless our approaching barkeep has news.”

Pamela planted loud kisses on Alfie’s cheeks and attempted to pinch Inias’s butt when she greeted them as old friends while chiding them for not socializing enough since their little one was born. Standing upright she then blew on the back of her fingers and faux-polished her invisible medals. “I gotta lead for you guys.”

“You did?” Castiel blinked.

“You guys coming? It’s nearby.” Pamela asked them, throwing her bar-rag on the counter. “Dwight hold the fort. I’ll be back in ten.”

“We’ll let you go,” Inias said, “You don’t want a troop at your viewing.”

“I think Poppy needs a change,” Alfie said as he headed in the opposite direction towards the restrooms, “But let us know how it goes!”

Dean was glad all his mobility issues were a thing of the past, as they scrambled to follow the confident bar owner. They crossed Highway 1 at the lights and walked by a small strip of independent stores, then turning right to the starting point of Bay Flat Road.

“Inias lives further along.” Castiel extended his arm to point at a distant row of single storey beach style houses overlooking the water.
“Nice homes,” Pamela hummed.

The narrow road rose leading to spacious residences and a view of the marina below to their left. The first two properties on the right were businesses extending the commercial district outwards. Each had a wide parking lot and was set back a touch from the quieter road. The corner store was a deli, then a sign advertised Cut’n’Dye hair salon. Pamela halted them at the floral embellished sign for Celestine’s Creations. In the centre of the tidy lot was a double height brick faced florist store with two small upper storey windows that had yellow painted lintels and sills.

Castiel whispered in Dean’s ear that the windows looked like cheery eyes. Dean wasn’t sure if that was freaky or cute. He didn’t have time to decide. They had crossed the short distance from the sidewalk. A bell rang as Pamela pushed open the door. The store was full of color and scent. There was a sloping rack of buckets each with a different variety of bloom. On the other side of the floor were shelves of pretty gift items and a swivel display of greeting cards.

“Celle?” Pamela raised her voice.

The florist looked up from braiding some raffia to go around a bouquet. She was a handsome woman with caramel skin, a long face, and a wide stretchy white band holding back her long curls. When she smiled broadly in greeting, crinkles danced next to her lips and eyes, making Dean revise his initial impression upwards to a lady in her late-forties.

“Pam? To what do I owe the pleasure, and you bringing two fine guys into my store?”

“Celestine Belmonte, this here is Dean and Castiel. And they’re looking for someplace to live, and I know you have that cute upstairs apartment lying idle.”

“Pam,” Celestine hissed with a glare, “You know I use the kitchen.”

Pamela threw her head back and laughed, “Buy an electric kettle already and pull your finger out. You’ve been harping on about subletting for an age.”

“Have we been misled?” Castiel drew his brows closer together. “Is there not an apartment for rent?”

Celestine double blinked. She recovered rapidly, “My apologies. Pam is right. I have been talking about finding tenants. My daughter, Sandra, lived above. She moved to Sacramento two years past. Been meaning to clean it up and let it out. It is small but she was happy there. I’d be glad to show it to you.”

“Well, if you’re going to be a pillar of the community then I had better grab the keys.” Celestine reached under the counter. “Pam you want to stick my ‘Back in 10 minutes’ sign on the door?”

“Yup” Pamela slid the hand written piece of card into the sign holder on the glass. “Good luck. Treat’em right, Belmonte, they’re my new regulars.”

“Less of your cheek, Barnes,” the older woman snarked with a grin. “Follow me. We’ll duck out the fire door.”

Dean took point in front of Castiel, glancing at mounds of oasis, vases, ribbons and cellophane wrap. There was a chill room door to keep the flowers fresh, like the ones at Greengoods. They emerged to the rear where there was parking for another six vehicles. At the moment the lot only contained a hatchback van with the florist’s logo.
“Free parking,” Celestine commented, “So long as you keep to the back corner, so my deliveries and customers can park near my doors.”

Dean caught Castiel’s eye. Private off street parking was a bonus, especially if Sammy was visiting. Keeping the Impala safe from covetous and vandals’ eyes gave the yet to be seen apartment a tick on Dean’s wish list.

“Come on up,” the florist beckoned, opening a strong heavy door, “No direct access from my store. Good for security. All the utilities are functioning but you’ll need to give it a good scrub. Also if you want to give any room a paint job, I’ve no objection. I hope Sandra’s pink bathroom won’t send you boys running.”

They both murmured that it wouldn’t, as they followed in her wake. There was a second locked door at the top of the steep stairway, which Dean found reassuring, not that Bodega Bay seemed to be a hot bed of crime. It was a squeeze for three people to stand comfortably in the small landing area. Luckily Castiel had no problems about personal space, pressing his body into Dean’s back. Four white painted doors faced them. Dean felt as if he was in the story from Arabian Nights with all the doors to choose from.

Working from the left, next to the stairs Celestine gestured, “Bathroom, Living, Bed one, Bed two. Let’s start with the best.”

She opened the second door. The cream-painted living space was by no means large, but not the smallest they had seen that day. It was dusty from seldom use, but bore no tell tale stink of dampness nor signs of mould. The long window had an attached fire ladder and a deep interior windowsill.

Spider would like it there.

The room was bare of furniture and carpet but the floorboards had been buffed and polished. The old scuff marks from a sofa showed how it would fit nicely at an angle near the window, which overlooked the lot and land beyond. A dark wood unit beside it would hold a TV, their DVDs and music. One of the two deep alcoves, either side of a fire breast fitted with a faux stove heater, had inbuilt shelves over two low closet doors. The other was empty but when Castiel mouthed ‘desk’ at Dean, he could tell that the proportions would be perfect for Cas’s work area and computer. The opposite wall was one long fitted kitchen area with worktop space to each side of the basin.

“How are you leaving the stove topped oven and the refrigerator?” Castiel inclined his head towards the well used but functioning appliances.

“Sure,” Celestine nodded, “Place never had a washer dryer and I’m afraid there’s no plumbing for one but if I wasn’t Sandra’s laundress she used the reasonable launderette over at the strip. Anyhow I think the space is too compact to fit much more in than some seating, a coffee table and a dining one.”

Dean nodded. He could see with his mind’s eye that once those items were in, there wouldn’t be much floor space.

Next they visited the powder pink bathroom, which in addition to needing an urgent color change before Sammy would see it, was absolutely tiny. Almost a deal breaker for Dean, with its mini wash basin, mirrored cabinet, towel rail and shower over hip bath, all in avocado green to clash with the pink. Sharing shower time would be a contortionist’s feat.

Neither was blue painted bedroom two going to win prizes for spaciousness. Dean figured a
standard king bed and maybe a slim dresser and closet would fill that one up.

Celestine looked apologetic, “If you want it, one of you is gonna get the short straw.”

Dean didn’t know where to look as Castiel laughed, “Dean and I are a couple. The only time someone will get a short straw is during visits from his brother or my cousin.”

“Oh! Oooh!” Celestine looked them both up and down, “Such a waste.”

Dean was on the verge of bristling when he caught her cheeky smirk.

He wiggled his brows, “Lead on to the master bedroom, M’lady.”

She laughed heartily and joined in the levity, “Why yes kind sirs.”

The main bedroom was the best they had viewed. It had two smaller windows overlooking the junction and more importantly the harbor beyond. Considering it had been Celestine’s feminine daughter’s room, Dean was happy to see lemon walls. There was a neutral toned carpet that needed a shampoo. Using his mental imagery Dean reckoned they’d fit Cas’s bed and bedroom furniture easily. That would leave his futon for the other room and they could pick up a cheap clothes rail for any guests.

“I like it,” Dean hissed to Castiel while Celestine was pointing out an extra couple of power points near where the dressing table used to be.

“I’m very glad you do.” the florist proved to have excellent hearing. “You seem like a very nice couple at first impressions. Of course I’ll need to check out your references, but pending all that being kosher, if you decide you’d like it, I’m happy to offer you the place.”

“Thank you,” Dean answered, “We’d like to take a closer look about, but thank you too for being so welcoming.”

She laughed at his extra appreciation but then a shadow fell over her features, “Wait. You didn’t look at Olaf Andersen’s place did you?”

“We did,” Castiel’s guttural tone transmitted his lingering fury.

“I see,” Celestine jutted her hip and planted a hand on it, “I hope you boys will not judge us all by that ornery bigot. Bodega is a great community.”

“Oh we’ve been informed,” Castiel responded readily, “Inias Faith and his husband are friends of mine.”

With a gooey sweet expression, Celestine gushed, “Oh my Lord, isn’t their little girl the cutest baby? I sent a display of Californian Poppies when I heard her name. Told that darling art teacher that I’d steal her away and eat her all up.”

They laughed politely but Dean thought he’d warn Sammy that their potential new landlady was a baby-maniac. When they accompanied the florist back outside, she directed their attention to the drop down fire ladder that came from the living area window and to a small wooden shed which leaned against the building. She explained that she kept her storage inside and only had a few seasonal holiday props in the shed. If they were willing to leave her items there, then they were welcome to use it too. Castiel whispered about his bicycle as they ascended for their second look around.
“If we buy a bike for you we could explore the area on two wheels. When I was at the summer school, I heard there are great local bike trails.”

“Uh-hum, yeah,” Dean contorted his face before divulging, “Ah Cas, I… I’ve never had a bike.”

“But you can ride one, yes?” Cas swerved sideways before the top of stairs door so he could incline his head and examine Dean.

“Not really,” Dean twisted his lip, “Dad wasn’t really the go biking with the kids kinda guy.”

“That’s fine. You can learn.” Castiel resolved firmly.

Dean barked a laugh, “Only if you want the display of a 24 year old man weaving and flailing on a bicycle.”

“A benefit of a private rear parking area after business hours.”

“I’m not going to get out of this, am I?” Dean moaned.

“Nope,” Castiel pecked his cheek before they re-entered the four door almost-a-corridor.

Dean switched into his childhood accommodation auditor mode. He knew from bitter experience how to spot droppings, silverfish and cockroach infestation, damp spots, suspicious plumbing and dangerous wiring. Although the kitchen needed sterilizing and they could sell dust bunnies to collectors, it got the ‘Sam can sleep here’ teen-Dean seal of approval.

Inspection changed into making a list of what they’d need and what was already there. All the kitchen utensils and crockery could be got at the dollar store. Dean gave a passionate embrace when Castiel spoke of ultimately collecting an artisan potter’s range for lifetime dining.

“We found our place.” Dean whispered after pacing out the dimensions of their prospective new bedroom. It wasn’t a snap decision. Dean had experienced a good feeling as soon as they had been introduced to Celestine, which was compounded by the homey atmosphere and the suitability of the apartment. No place was perfect. Dean mentally ran through the oil paint color chart choosing ones that might mitigate the avocado bath set; pale cream tinted Naples yellow, a warm grey, or go all out with a deep sea green.

Castiel was looking out the window to the street below and the glimpse of blue between the trees beyond. Dean came behind and wrapped arms around his waist, kissing softly to his jaw.

“You like it?” Castiel asked when they parted.

Dean picked up on the tremor of hope that they were both of one mind, “I do.”

“Time to gird our loins and face the music,” Castiel straightened his spine adding a firm nod towards Dean.

Expelling a long breath Dean agreed, “Let’s go fess up.”

He took Castiel’s hand, remaining joined together as they returned to the store and waited in the sidelines for Celestine to complete a transaction with a customer.

Once she had waved farewell to the woman, who balanced a premade bouquet over heady warm scented bags from the corner deli, the florist asked, “Verdict?”

“We’d very much like to lease your apartment, Mrs. Belmonte,” Castiel answered, “But my partner
and I have agreed on complete disclosure with the potential landlord of any place we favor.”

Celestine raised her brows suspiciously. “You’re not secret bagpipe players or wanted by the FBI?”

“No, Ma’am,” Dean gave a nervous laugh. He opened his mouth to confess that he came with a back-story, a welfare check, a restraining order, and a history of mental illness. All that emerged was a choked noise as if he had a piece of bread caught in his throat. Castiel gave his fingers a squeeze before letting go to fish out the papers from his carry bag.

With profound solemnity, Castiel first tilted his head to check that Dean was alright, then he spoke, “My partner has lived a tough road. Until early this year he had an extended hospital stay and recently his father violently attacked him and his pregnant brother.”

Celestine’s eyes widened showing the whites. She took the offered papers.

“This is a copy of a restraining order against John Winchester. Also you have our character references, including Dean’s ones, but the majority of the information pertains to me, my credit score etc. as intended named leaseholder. Dean is in receipt of welfare which I understand is off-putting for some landlords. However if you do accept us as tenants I promise we are both responsible and committed people.”

Castiel chewed on his lip. Heart in mouth, Dean tried to steel himself for rejection or censure.

“How long were you in hospital?” Celestine asked.

Of all the questions possible, that was not one Dean had anticipated. He gulped, “Ah-hem, almost seven years, Ma’am. It was the medical ward of a care home. I have an anxiety disorder.”

“That’s a long time,” She hummed sympathetically, “And now you boys are in Bodega. Welcome. Thank you for your honesty. It is a fine and rare quality. Now, Dean, Castiel, you must call me Celle. None of this Celestine, or Heaven Forbid, Ma’am or Mrs. Belmonte. Yes?”

“You’ll rent to us!” Dean exclaimed.

As she nodded, Castiel thanked her and asked her to call him Cas.

Over three cans of Coca-Cola, chilled from the flower storeroom, between intermittent customers, Dean, Cas and Celle sorted out the amount of rent, terms and conditions, utilities and the length of the lease. Celestine requested a month deposit, a damage deposit, and a month in advance. She asked that they wire the rent to her business account. Dean and Cas asked that they jointly make out the inventory of items, to include access to parking and the shed, and that their free reign to redecorate was in writing. It transpired Celestine was open minded about Castiel’s pet owner permission. Which led to a startled Dean hissing a reminder that he was allergic to cats, not a fan of snakes and slightly canine-phobic.

He had a vastly better reaction when Celestine glanced through the legal papers, declaring that should that bully, John Winchester, darken her door, she had Sheriff Framingham on speed dial.

The only hiccups were due to Celestine not having the lease on the rental market. She hadn’t a pre-written tenancy agreement to hand and as it was after five on a Friday it would be the following week before the local law firm could draw one up. Also Celestine wished to commence the lease from 1st September. Castiel had two staff days on 25th and 26th with the student year commencing on Wednesday 27th August. He would call in to read over and sign the agreement, and set up the monthly wire transfer.
The gap between Castiel’s work date and their moving in day preyed on Dean’s mind. But it all turned out peachy when Celestine tipped her nose about allowing them to clean and bring their stuff in the days before, and Inias reiterated his offer of a bed for Castiel in the waiting period.

Having called Inias and Alfie, they popped into Jesse’s Forever to thank their new friend Pamela. She clapped them on the back and declared them neighbors, then extracted promises to call in and say hello, before they hit the road.

Riding shotgun to the surging sound of Vivaldi, Dean mused that this was going to be a regular commute. He had a brother to visit and he wasn’t changing psychiatrists. Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, Dean expounded his thoughts on paint colors and sofa placement. Castiel talked of measuring his desk and the furniture from his bedroom in Balthazar’s that his cousin was gifting to them. They agreed that Dean’s futon was a good choice for the guest room. It could be set up as a seat unless guests were expected. Dean joked that if Sammy’s giant feet hung over the end of it, he’d just have to curl up to sleep there.

Soon they were pulling in alongside the Impala at Sam and Nick’s home. Sam greeted them at the door, full of enthusiastic questions about the place they had found. He asked Castiel to stay for a meal. Nick was working but would come home for an hour break. Baldur would cook whatever they wanted. Castiel regretfully declined as he had a cousin who was also dying to hear the news. He did stay for a coffee. Dean broke out the Jamaican Blue Mountain to celebrate and frothed the milk for Sam’s hot chocolate on the coffee machine. Castiel teased that Dean could find work at the Light Up Your Beans in Petaluma.

“No you don’t,” Dean slapped his arm, “I’m gonna find a job I’d like.”

“I am so pumped for you guys,” Sam beamed. “Lola is too.”

“Did she tell you?” Castiel kidded.

“Yep,” Sam answered with a nod and a smile, “She’s kicking with joy.”

“She’s not hurting you, is she Sammy, banging against your ribs?” Dean checked, thinking of complaints he had heard from guys who had claimed they had bruised ribs.

“Naw, she’s down here,” Sam rubbed over his navel area, “One of the benefits of being tall. She’s still too tiny to inflict any damage on her daddy, aren’t you baby?”

“Could I?” Castiel asked hesitantly, extending his hand.

Sam nodded, moving his chair back so Castiel could lay his hand flat on his rounded belly.

“It’s firmer than I thought,” Castiel breathed in awe.

Dean watched with his own brand of awe, at how tender Castiel was being. He blinked back emotion, imagining a future where he could be in Sam’s position.

Meanwhile Sam guffawed. “What were you expecting? Jello?”

“No.” Castiel grinned, moving his hand to the lower curve.

“Get me my phone will you, Dean? I must text Nick.” Sam pleaded, “I have a craving for Gummies.”

Castiel let out a whoosh. “She kicked. I felt it.”
“Ah, Cas, she likes you,” Dean planted a kiss to the forehead of his stunned partner.

“In that case, you have to see the proto-nursery.” Sam insisted.

Discussion of Sam and Nick’s plans for Lola’s room merged and mixed in with Cas and Dean’s thoughts on improvements to their new place. Predictably Sam nearly pissed himself laughing over the powder pink bathroom. Somehow by the time Balthazar called to ask if Castiel had changed his plans, Dean had been wrangled into a commitment to adorn the walls with painted rainbows, bluebirds, stars and bunnies. Silver-tongued-Sam seemed to have promised them the slender pine closet and dresser for their small guestroom in exchange. There was something mentioned about a cute child’s bedroom set Sam had seen in an indie furniture store in Menlo Park. Dean tried to shake his head to clear the bamboozling as he walked Castiel to his car.

Kissing Castiel against the side of his Ford Taurus, Dean pressed the line of their bodies together.

“I’m sorry you have to go home.” Dean didn’t mean to sound like a whiney bitch. He understood Castiel wanted to share their news with Balthazar.

“Soon when we come home, it will be to each other.” Castiel spoke into the warm skin of Dean’s neck.

That truth would tide Dean over until the day arrived.

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Chapter End Notes

Note on Celestine: I’ve been employing canon characters except for a few peripheral OCs (like profs at Stanford, guys at ACIC and Mitchell at Greengoods). I pondered Missouri Mosley for their landlady but not psychic, not so sassy, and not having a tendency to smack Dean with a wooden spoon. However I realized it was too out of character for Missouri, so have invented Celestine/Celle, who has that protective Momma Bear vibe but is an OC.

Still Dean’s POV for the next chapter. The following one is Sam POV.
Chapter Notes

For Blackrectangle: Happy Birthday.

Sticking his head round the office door, Dean knocked a second time. The dull small space was illuminated by his grinning social worker.

“Hey, Dean. Looking good Dude. You got me curious. To what do I owe the pleasure of an unscheduled visit?” Garth asked, moving two piles of files to totter on top of a third.

Dean supposed he looked better than when Garth visited him in hospital on the day of his release. A tee and jeans in black with Sam's Rufus Turner crafted belt didn’t merit comment in his opinion. He didn’t dwell too long on the blithe compliment because his eyes were riveted in horrid fascination on the tall unstable pillar of files. As the social worker pulled out his chair to lean over and shake Dean’s hand, the tower swayed and went down, but Garth proved to have surprisingly rapid reactions, wrapping his arms round it so only three chunky manila files slid to the floor. Dean crouched down, pushing in escaping papers before handing them over.

“Thanks,” Garth said with a bashful cringe. “I really should watch what I am doing.”

“You’re OK, Man,” Dean nodded, taking a seat.

There was a pause. Dean chewed the flesh of his cheek, formulating his thoughts. “I called to see Mr. Adler.”

“You did?” Garth raised his brows with a slow nod.

“I gave in my notice.”

“Did you?”

“Yep. I offered to work next week, but Mr. Adler said they hadn't known when I was due back. My shifts were covered. He was civil but had to get the boot in.” Dean huffed.

“Tell me.” Garth’s normally cheerful face darkened. Adler was on a final warning regarding the Ticket to Work scheme. While Dean didn’t want to rock the boat for Carsten, who loved his hours at the store, he felt he could save future beneficiaries from dealing with Zachariah.

“It wasn’t epically bad. He thanked me for my time, promised Nancy would forward my paperwork and payment for any vacation time due.” Dean could see the douche’s bald head gleaming under the office lights and the sneer on his fugly mug. “Then he said he knew I wasn’t loyal employee material, gave himself the backhanded compliment of being a rare employer who would keep a job open when one of his staff ended up in the nuthouse, and politely ‘suggested’ that I not disturb his workforce by saying goodbyes while they are on duty.”

Garth expelled an angry breath, grabbed a pen, and took down what Dean said. “He used the word
‘nuthouse’ and asked you not to speak to your colleagues.”

“Uh-huh.” Dean confirmed, “The asshat. But I was cool. He’s a small petty-minded man. Mitchell followed me outside. I told him news that I have to tell you. He’s arranging something so I can say farewell to the gang.”

“News?” Garth beamed, “Have you found a new job? Is this why you finished up at Greengoods?”

“Nope.” Dean smirked, knowing he was jerking Garth’s chain.

“It must be good news from your expression.”

“I’m moving in with Castiel. We’ve found an apartment.”

When Dean told someone, he could picture living in their new place, legs up on the sofa reading some Vonnegut, allowing him to indulge in a side profile of Castiel correcting assignments at his desk.

“Can I note your new address?” Garth asked.

“Sure. The Apartment, 1501 Bay Flat Road, Bodega Bay, 94923. Our landlady is Celestine Belmonte. The lease is from Labor Day. Cas signed it yesterday.” Dean could feel a flutter inside as he imparted the details, “You should see it, Man. It’s way cool. Private ‘coz it’s just us living above a florist store. And it has two bedrooms and you can see the bay from our bedroom, and Cas can bike or walk to the high school.”

“I am very happy for you. I always am when my clients move on with their lives. Not wanting to be discouraging, but you’ll be far from Stanford.”

“You mean from Sam and from the hospital?” Dean checked. It wasn’t a new thought. The one drawback was going to be his distance from Sam. “My last weekly appointment with Victor is this week. Then we’re going back to twice a month, and I’ll drive down to see him. And Sam’s not moving back to Palo Alto. He’s staying with Nick for keeps.”

“I see. You have thought it through.” Garth tapped on his desktop, “You know if you are permanently residing in Sonoma County, I’ll have to transfer your file to their social services.”

Dean ducked his head, “I don’t know that I still need a social worker. No offence.”

“None taken.” Garth met his eye. “Listen, I know you are leaving the Ticket to Work Scheme but your social worker can be your advocate with the welfare system, medi-Cal, and if you are ever hospitalized again.”

“You think I’ll end up back inside.” Dean accused with a touch of hurt.

“I did not say that. Don’t let what Zachariah Adler said cloud your view. My job is to make sure you have back up if you need it.” Garth explained, “I’m going to find out who handles carrier and/or reintegration cases in Sonoma, and I’ll set you up with an introductory appointment, and I’ll explain that it is my opinion that at this stage you would benefit from a hands off approach, where except for minimum welfare required check ins. You are the one who can make contact, if and when you need assistance.”

“Suppose that’s cool.” Dean conceded. There might be some help for job seekers, and it would be good to have a contact who was an advocate on his side.
“I’ll forward your file, including the restraining order. Has there been any progress in extraditing your father?”

Dean huffed in disgust, “Nick’s family’s security division couriered all their findings and the proof of service notice to the sheriff’s office. The deputies got the paperwork started to send to Minnesota, but warned Sam that the charges may be considered too minor to merit extradition. Cherry on the mud-pie? Creepy Creaser told Bobby that he heard John’s got a gig with a stock car team for the rest of the season. Means he’ll be on the move, crossing state lines.”

Garth nodded knowingly, “You’d be surprised how many domestic violence cases never get to court.”

“Do I need to fill out anything for welfare, y’know, about moving?” Dean checked.

“I have one form here that you might sign for me, but no, Dean, I’ll handle the red tape. You’ll need to make an appearance in person… let me check…” Garth wrinkled his nose and tapped at the computer again, “at the offices in Santa Rosa, but I’ll set that up so it can be done the same day as you check in with your new social worker.”

“Thanks, Man,” Dean scrubbed the back of his neck. It was awkward but he wanted to say this. He cleared his throat, “Thanks for everything. For all this and y’know, when I landed fresh from Arkansas and helping me out at work, and coming to see me in hospital and all.”

“It was all part of my job, but it was a pleasure, Dean. I’ll be sorry to transfer your file. But I doubt I’d have had you on my books much longer. I can see your file being closed and sent to archive soon.” Garth rose, leading Dean to stand too, “Don’t be afraid to use the services available to you, and don’t hesitate to call me. Keep my number in your contacts. If I can oil the cogs for you, I will.”

Dean didn’t know what to say except to thank Garth again. He found his goodbye handshake being transformed into a hug. An hour earlier leaving Bag-of-Dicks’ office Dean had been overcome with fuming anger. Now he walked out with bittersweet feelings of leaving a good person who had been there for him behind. He knew that even if he resolved to stay in touch with Garth, he was part of his past now. He’d sent a couple of postcards to ACIC. Often one of the guys would pop into his mind, especially Chuck, Kit, and Aiden. Layla’s and Deacon’s advice remained sound. Alfie looked nothing like Mr. Donohue, but meeting the young father had brought remembrances of the forbearing semi-retired art teacher who’d helped him with his GED. All these people had meant so much, but the river of time flowed on. Nevertheless that stream had brought him to Castiel and returned Sammy to his life, so he had zero grounds for complaint.

His pondering took him out of San Jose and on the road back to Moss Beach. He dutifully popped into The Gates of Hell. Alastair’s disapproving glare was ignored as Dean marched straight to the kitchen and snagged the lemon cheesecake that Max had made specially to sate Sammy’s craving. He made good time in light traffic, glad the cake would still be chilled when he got home.

“Cheesecake’s Up,” Dean called as he shut the door behind him. “And what is that noise?”

Sam’s voice shouted from the living room, “That noise is Beyonce: Crazy in Love. And you can shut your piehole because I like it and I might just have it on repeat.”

Dean rolled his eyes for Sam’s benefit when he entered the room. His brother was bopping his head disgracefully to the pop song.

“No chance of changing to Motorhead?”
“No.”

Dean made an over the top slouching huff, just to rib Sammy.

“If I wasn’t 24 weeks pregnant I’d get you in a headlock.” Sam warned.

“You could try.” Dean scoffed.

“You could get forks and plates?” Sam said with his shoulders shuddering in amusement.

“You could get forks and plates,” Dean parroted a lame retort.

He happily escaped from the pumped up Beyonce volume to ready the cheesecake for Nick’s arrival home. Nick eschewed spray can cream for reasons Dean could not fathom, but there was left over whipped fresh cream from the night before. As he filled the filter with coffee for the drip maker, Dean heard the Lexus pull into the property. Dean had thought he would call Castiel before Nick arrived, but he put it off until they’d finished their treat. Cas was heading north on Sunday to spend the first school week with Inias and Alfie. It was too long to be apart, plus Dean wanted to wish Cas luck before his first day in front of the students, so they had tentatively planned to meet somewhere for dinner on Tuesday evening. While he’d miss Cas, Dean was glad of an extension at Moss Beach. He was going to relish his final days living with Sam, and if he had anything to do with it there’d be a much better soundtrack to those days.

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“Dean!” Sam called from downstairs. ”Are you ready?”

Dean stuck his head out his bedroom door, avoiding boxed up piles of novels and sketch pads.

“Hold your horses. I’ll be down in a few.” He roared.

Patting down his pockets to make sure he had his wallet and the Impala keys, Dean was ready to head out to meet Castiel in Novato, very roughly halfway between their starting points. They had a reservation at 7pm in a casual restaurant, a step up from a diner according to Nick who had heard good things about The Wheat Store. It was deliberately early enough that Castiel could return to Bodega Bay in preparation of the following morning’s first day in front of classes. Dean picked up a gift wrapped box before heading to the kitchen. It was a surprise for Cas; a token that he could wear during that day knowing it had come from Dean.

“Whoo hooo. Looking smart.” Sam turned from the sink, drying his hands before adding a wolf whistle.

Dean looked heavenward for guidance on dealing with annoying little brothers, but he was pleased with the approval of his choice. His final pay settlement hadn’t been much. He’d gone to the ATM to withdraw some of his savings before heading to the outlet mall in Milpitas. Massively discounted George Foreman grill, duo of nightstand lamps, and set of stackable soup bowls later, Dean found his feet taking him into the Calvin Klein outlet store to find Castiel’s new job gift. On the way back to the Impala, he had indulged in a treat for himself, an American Apparel burgundy red shirt with two pockets and long sleeves. He’d rolled back the sleeves exposing his leather cuffs and had teamed the shirt with his tight black denims, black Henley and boots.
“Do you have five minutes? Can we talk?” Sam asked.

“Sure,” Dean agreed. He pointed at the fridge with a half nod to communicate an offer to get a soda for each of them. He hoped Sam didn’t want to delve into emo-feelings or have a delayed freak out about his move, just as he was due to leave for his date.

“I’m good,” Sam answered the silent question, “Had a juice when I came in from my walk.”

Dean went to take a seat but Sam jerked his head for him to follow. Expecting to cross the hall to the den and perhaps the sunny terrace beyond, Dean was surprised to trail after his brother out the main door. The top step of the few that led up from ground level was wide enough to seat both of them. Sam extended his long legs. Dean clicked back the tab on his soda and took a refreshing slurp, waiting for Sam to begin his, no doubt prepared and rehearsed, speech.

“Nick wants to buy us a Prius as our family car.”

Dean’s brows popped up. He hadn’t expected that utterance.

“Soooo,” Sam drew out the word. Dean waited. With twitching lips Sam continued, “We don’t need three cars.”

Dean moistened his lips. His mind wanted to leap to the logical conclusion, but he didn’t dare. He choked out a “Yeah?”

“I want you to have her.”

“Baby?” Dean gasped, eyes drawn to the gleaming black surface. “Mine?”

Sam delved into his zipped up hoodie, extracting the title. “Nick says it’s better if you pay me a dollar for her.”

Dean dug out his wallet and snapped a stiff new dollar from the slot into Sam’s hand. His brother laughed, “You didn’t have to actually give me the dollar.”

“Huh? Right. I got it.” Dean didn’t retrieve the greenback. “You keep it, Sam. I’m keeping our car. We used to sleep in the back when you were so small that I’d fling your dirty diapers out the window as Dad drove, and I’d think that she’d be mine one day. I’ll take good care of her.”

“I know you will,” Sam said with misty eyes.

“Better than you did.” Dean joshed to cover up how affected he was by Sam’s generosity, “I had to give her multiple waxings when I got to Palo Alto.”

“You did not. You only did that to re-bond with her, Jerk.” Sam snorted.

“She missed me, Bitch,” Dean chuckled, getting up and with long strides covering the few paces to the sun warmed car. He ran his hand along her flank, “You and me Baby. Don’t listen to Sammy. He’s jealous of our bond.”

“Okaaay, If you’re going to start talking to her, I’ll wish you well and return inside. Say hi to Cas for me.” Sam waved.

Dean lifted his hand from his car. His Car. Waving back he yelled “Thanks, Sammy.”

Sliding into the driver’s seat was sweet, almost as good as the day he first drove her under his new
license a few months back. The Impala was his. It belonged to Dean Michael Winchester of Bodega Bay California, partner of Castiel Fletcher, soon to be uncle to Lola Winchester.

To Dean it seemed that the Impala soared along the highway north. Stopped briefly in the evening business traffic around San Francisco, Dean texted Bobby with his news, only to get a quick response, he checked at the next hold up –

*Took the young idjit long enough*

Laughing at Bobby’s affectionate jibe at Sam, Dean turned up the volume on Creedence Clearwater Revival. He made good time, arriving at Novato just on seven. Nick said The Wheat Store was easy to spot. It was, with plenty of space around it and a huge swinging sign depicting a sheaf of wheat. He parked where he could see his car if he peered out the window.

Straightening his new shirt Dean entered the bright restaurant. It was a large square space with a vaulted faux-barn ceiling. The spaciousness could have been clinical but ambient music, large scale prints of Grant Wood farm paintings, delicious aromas, and rising steam from the open kitchen area, balanced the atmosphere to friendly and relaxed. The wait staff wore crisp white shirts with a waist apron embossed with the wheat sheaf. The many tables were in an orderly grid pattern, all able to seat four but a few had been pushed together. There were a scattering of early diners, but no Castiel. Dean surreptitiously backed out of the restaurant before a hostess came to welcome him. Checking his new Nokia, there was a missed message. Castiel was a few minutes out and apologized for the delay. Dean retreated to lean against the Impala, facing the entrance to the parking area. He couldn’t wait to tell Cas. He was still wrapping his head around the Impala being his. Sharing the news with Castiel would help make it real.

The ugly curved front of the Taurus turned into the lot. Dean gestured for Cas to park her next to Baby, only a fraction of his reasoning was the petty thought that Baby would look even more gorgeous next to the monstrosity that was Cas’s car.

As soon as Castiel was out of the vehicle he grabbed Dean in a tight squeeze. “Hello, Dean. I’ve missed you.”

“Me too, Cas.” Dean responded. “You look great.”

Castiel laughed pulling back to look down on his dark suit and white dress shirt. “I doubt it. I wanted to change but lost time when Principal Harrington called Inias and I for a meeting about my new physics class.”

“Not bad news?” Dean grimaced taking Cas’s hand for the short walk to the door.

“No,” Cas shook his head, “But he is an astute man. I was very glad I’d completed my initial lesson plans. I will have five exceptional students.”

“What’d he call Inias for?”

“As he is biology and my role is primarily chemistry teacher, we’ll share lab time. It’s also possible that our students may draw on both of us for cross-discipline science fairs, projects etc as the year progresses.”

Dean hummed his understanding. Once they were shown to their table and given neat book-like menus, he asked, “What are the other teachers like? Any douches? Any eye candy?”

Castiel pursed his lips, “What would you say if I told you they were all fine eye candy that made me drool?”
“I’d have to do a 21 Jump Street and enroll to keep an eye on you!” Dean teased.

“Ha! I know that was a TV show about two way older cops undercover in a school.” Castiel said proudly.

“Well done,” Dean said with a rapid grin, guessing Cas had never actually seen the show. “So do I have a lot of competition?”

“Not at all. There are eleven full time teachers, two job shares in the language department and our principal. I haven’t had time to get to know them all. Marv, the librarian history teacher, and Gordon who instructs shop class, were welcoming, but they are both an older generation. I can appreciate that there a few aesthetically pleasing female teachers.”

Dean snorted, “You are 100% gay, aren’t you?”

Castiel tilted his head, “Yes, Dean.”

At that moment their server, a young pink cheeked woman with a long ginger braid over her shoulder, came with a pitcher of water and asked if they were ready to order. As they had yet to open their menus, Castiel politely asked for a minute.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean pointed at the rear page before the drinks menu, “They’ve sharing plates.”

“You wish to indulge in your love for large mounds of food.”

“I’ve all good, babe.” Dean winked.

Castiel sighed benignly. “Which do you favor?

After limited negotiation they agreed on to start with the Nachos for Two, with sour cream and melted Jack, and to share their dessert later. However Dean wanted the T-Bone Steak with sweet potato fries, while Cas ordered the chicken pot pie for main.

Dean scrubbed his hand over his mouth, “So… Sam gave me the Impala.”

Castiel’s face lit up, “Wow. I am so happy for you. That’s great news. It’ll make things much easier having two cars. Wait, what about Sam?”

Dean huffed, “Nick’s buying one of those new hybrid cars, but I guess Sam is happy about it, and we get to have my gorgeous beast.”

“I’ll have to text him,” Castiel announced. “He is a good brother.”

“He is.” Dean agreed. “I got us a few smaller things too.”

Their nachos arrived while Dean filled Cas in on the purchases he had made for the apartment. He also expanded on the gift voucher that his former colleagues at Greengoods had handed to him at the end of their Sunday afternoon farewell coffees. He’d been flattered so many turned up at Starbucks and even more when they handed over the result of their collection for Dean’s send off. It was for an independent home store in Redwood City. Dean confessed he had already spent it on a kitchen table and five chairs that were in the ‘seconds’ offer area out back of the store. The table had a flap that could be raised to accommodate six chairs. Its normal state of seating for four would suit their limited space. The missing chair and a repair sanded gouge on one of the table legs meant Dean had gotten a bargain. It was being delivered to The Gates of Hell, in readiness for their trailer pick-up on Labor weekend.
Munching on savory corn chips, Castiel filled Dean in on signing up for utilities and trash collection, Celestine’s offer of a couple of side tables that Sandra had dumped back at her mother’s place, and how Pamela Barnes had linked him up with a patron selling his TV. The sports-mad guy was replacing his relatively new 28 inch TV with one of those huge plasma screens.

While they waited for their coffees and shared Profiterole tower with homemade Chantilly cream and chocolate sauce, Dean produced his long flat gift box.

“What is this?” Castiel asked as Dean slid it across the table.

“Something for tomorrow.” Dean dropped his eyes, “For your first day teaching.”

He peeked through his lashes, keeping his anxiousness that Castiel would like it at bay by rubbing the pads of his thumbs and forefingers in circles. He’d suspected Castiel would be a careful gift unwrapper, one who folded gift paper precisely and eased back sticky tape, but he was wrong. Castiel ripped into the packaging, triumphantly extracting the long slender dark blue tie. He smoothed his hand down the slightly ribbed texture, over the subtle pinstripe, with a sense of wonder.

“Dean?”

“I know I know, how could I afford it? It was discount Cas, but I thought of your own chosen teaching uniform, and I wanted you to have something special from me to wear in front of all those new high school kids.”

With a tender smile Castiel placed his palm over the hand Dean had brought up to rest on the table, “Questioning the price wasn’t my intention. I love it and will wear it with pride tomorrow morning.”

“You’ll be great Cas. They’re gonna love ya.” Dean promised.

“Thank you, Dean. I’ll be pleased if I earn their respect and attention.” Castiel answered with a puff of air at the prospect of the morning.

“You will, Cas. I know you will.” Dean imparted his confidence with a kiss, looking forward to when they could send each other off to work in the mornings with a parting embrace.

Moving weekend was one of the craziest things Dean had ever experienced, and he’d lived on a psych ward. Their circle of friends old and new appeared in multiples to offer help, grunt work, and housewarming gifts.

In retrospect random images and moments would lodge forever in Dean’s memories. There was Castiel’s shocked face when Meg pinched his bottom. The DHL delivery-woman’s slack jawed adoration of Meg’s brother Tom’s bare chest when she handed over the huge package of beautiful linens from his grandparents in Kansas. Nick swearing like a trooper about disassembling and reassembling the closet and dresser. Sam presiding over the organization with a clipboard, like some demented wedding organizer, made Dean make a mental note to elope if he and Cas ever tied the knot. Pamela’s come on to his pregnant brother and Nick’s laser-eyed glare led to thinking of how Pamela and Balthazar suspiciously disappeared for a couple of hours. Unpacking Castiel’s suit carrier and their shared laughter when Dean found his tie-tree-hanger full of all blue ties. There was a shared indoor picnic on furniture moving Saturday, with Celestine and Inias providing extra sandwiches from the deli. Dean would never forget the adorable sight of Poppy Faith rolling...
between the seat cushions of their new sofa. Castiel, in paint splattered ripped jeans and tee, with a bonus plop of deep cream bathroom paint in his hair ranked up there for cuteness too.

Sunday was cleaning and unpacking day. Andy Gallagher called Sam out of the blue to meet up. His parents had relented on dorm accommodation and he was looking for a place in Palo Alto for himself, Brady, Ash and Tracy. That was how Ash and Andy ended up spending three hours wearing scrubbing gloves and scouring the bath, oven and refrigerator. Balthazar followed them north again, bringing his offerings of a Ganesh statuette and Tibetan purge bells. By afternoon Sam was wilting. Dean noticed and offered to assemble the futon in the guest room for him to lie down. Sam refused on the principle that he shouldn’t be the first one to sleep in their new place. Instead the younger Winchester was excused from lifting and cleaning duties. Sam spent the afternoon wrestling with setting up Castiel’s computer, printer and modem. Once he was satisfied all was operational, he teasingly checked by visiting the high school website and displaying their ‘deer in headlights’ picture of the new chem teacher. Castiel threatened to ban him from the apartment when Sam hovered the mouse over the ‘print’ icon.

As the rooms took shape, Castiel and Dean both began to experience the space as their own home. By evening Balthazar was getting maudlin. He claimed he wanted a breath of air and volunteered to add to their store cupboard food boxes with fresh groceries to tide them over until they could shop locally. As he was going to the supermarket, Castiel added a couple of things they had forgotten, like a cheese grater and trash can liners.

On their worktop area, Dean lined up the powerhouse coffee maker that Sam and Nick had given to them, next to the beloved bread maker that Castiel brought from Balthazar’s kitchen.

“Caressing metal again, Dean?” Castiel chuckled.

“Listen, Cas. These are important. Good coffee and homemade grilled burgers, what could be better?”

“I’ve given pride of place to something important too,” Castiel jerked his head towards the windowsill.

Spider had the left side to catch the late afternoon north-west sun. On the other side Castiel had placed his framed graduation photograph; the one with Balthazar and Dean on each side of the beaming new teacher.

Dean pecked his cheek, lips tingling on light stubble.

“You’re really getting the place perfect.” Sam commented from the desk chair.

“I’m nesting. OK?” Dean grinned, standing proud with his arm around Castiel’s waist.

Sam smirked, “Dean, isn’t that what birds do in preparation for a clutch of eggs?”

“Shush,” Dean glared. “That’s for me and Cas to discuss.”

Castiel squinted at him, “Discuss what?”

The heat in his cheeks made Dean suspect he had flushed beetroot red, “Huh stuff.”

“Birds’ nests, Cas.” Sam volunteered with a freaky nasal snorted laugh.

Castiel tipped his head, “Dean?”
Dean opened and closed his mouth like a fish while Sam’s shoulders continued to heave. “I can’t,” Sam choked out, “I just can’t.”

“Thanks for your support, Bitch!” Dean yelled as Sam disappeared to ‘help’ Nick, who had undertaken the job of assembling Dean’s former bed in futon seat position.

“Dean?” Castiel repeated.

In recovery mode, Dean grounded his emotions and tremulous anxiety about risking Castiel’s disapproval, by carefully wrapping his arms around his partner’s upper body. Effectively he had pinned Castiel’s arms so it was mostly a one-way hug. Cas used his thumbs to rub circles on Dean’s hips.

“Dean, Babe, you’re worrying me now.”

“I sorta joked with Sammy that I’m nesting.” Dean paused to nuzzle into the soft skin behind Cas’s ear.

“Okaaaay, I heard that. And?”

“I wasn’t really joking. I like this. I like us. Love you.” Dean choked on the final word. How could he ask for more? Dare he risk asking for more? Cas had given him so much already.

“You know I love you too,” Castiel kept his voice level as if he feared spooking Dean.

“I wanted to talk about this when we were alone.”

“We’re alone now.”

Castiel shifted so he could free an arm to rub Dean’s back, transmitting warmth and support.

“Sam and Nick are a wall away. Balthazar’ll be back soon.”

“It’s OK. Go on.” Cas urged.

“I want…”

Words failed.

Castiel’s lips barely brushed his skin.

“I want something I thought I’d lost forever.”

Castiel waited patient and immobile. It was the right decision. The words were so fragile that Dean thought any movement would sweep them away.

He gulped. Keeping his voice too low to drift any distance he began, “They’d come with their rounded bellies, or post-partum tears with infants crying for them a floor below.”

Cas’s hand moved softly circular in support.

“And my baby was gone. For a long time I was kept too insensible to know more than an aching loss, a phantom limb called Sammy and a life that never was.” Dean tucked his head into Cas, eyes fixed on a grime mark along his collar and the fine hairs on his neck above, “In the dark of night in that skivvy Batesville motel, a hope had seeded of a little tot that I’d call Emma, of my voice free to sing her lullabies… When it was all torn away from me and I lost Sam, I couldn’t go on.”
“It’s alright, Dean.” Castiel whispered, hand still circling.

“No it isn’t. I wasn’t jealous, Cas. I wished the best for every guy and their adorable kids, but it hurt.” Dean pushed out a long exhale, “It coiled around inside. It pushed and sliced and scorched until I was splintered and couldn’t conceive of ever being whole.”

Castiel opened his mouth but Dean planted a finger over his lips; *Let me say this.*

“It’s different now. Layla helped, then Victor. Having you. Having Sam in my life. Lola coming.” Dean smiled. It never stung to think of Sam’s pregnancy. “Meeting Alfie’s family... This time my mind didn’t supply ‘you can never have that’ or ‘this is a picture of you, Aaron and Emma in a life that never was’. This time I thought that could be my future.”

Castiel hummed.

“And it didn’t come on me all sudden like. I’ve been thinking and hoping that we would. And not to replace the baby I lost. Never think that Cas.” Dean emphasized by meeting his lover’s eyes. “Our family, Cas. With you, my Cas. I... I bought f-folic acid.”

Dean had a visual memory of his shaky hand pushing the tub into his polka dot vanity case.

Castiel’s lips turned upwards.

“I’m trying to say I want a baby. I want your baby.”

“Our baby?” At least Castiel’s quizzical tone did not verge on bewildered or disapproving.

“Uh-hum,” Dean confirmed, “I want us to try, soon.”

Those few words were said around a huge pulsing lump in his throat. Trying was very different to succeeding.

“There are no guarantees that I can carry a baby to term,” Dean’s pained whisper was only audible because his mouth was in close proximity to Cas’s ear.

With sudden shocking force Castiel broke out of Dean’s hold. He caught his stunned boyfriend in a vice-like gripping embrace, as if he believed that he could heal all the broken parts inside him with his touch.

“You can.”

Dean blinked. Was that Dean’s thought that Castiel’s touch could heal, or was it Castiel telling him he believed Dean could carry their child?

“You will.”

It was Cas. It was Cas saying yes.

Dean did not cry. He didn’t whoop with joy. He didn’t take out a full page advertisement telling the world that Castiel loved him.

His cheeks spilt with a huge toothy grin. He pecked Castiel’s cheek and whispered, “Not a word to Sammy.”

“You don’t want to steal his thunder?” Castiel wrinkled his brow.
“No. Naw. It’s not that. I don’t want to worry him. If trying works, Cas, I don’t want him stressed about a miscarriage.”

“OK, Dean. I think I’m going to enjoy the trying.” Castiel rubbed Dean’s arm, “And you know when we are blessed, we’ll have to think about a different apartment.”

“Good thing we signed for only a year then, hey?”

Cas hummed, “If we get busy, maybe that dresser and closet will be used in a nursery after all.”

“I’d like that.” Dean fistfed a hand in Cas’s grimy tee and pulled him closer for a rougher kiss than normal, with a clash of teeth and a push of tongues as each used their body to say that they meant their words.

“Get a room!” Sam yelped when he and Nick reappeared.

“Sammy!” Dean whined. “G’away.”

“And get me food. I’m a hungry pregnant person!” Sam continued as if Dean hadn’t made his complaint.

“Do you know the supermarket on the highway sells locally caught fish?” Balthazar said as he entered with three bags of supplies. “Hello? Are we watching my cousin and Dean perform the dance of lurve?”

“No you are not.” Castiel rolled his eyes as they reluctantly parted.

“It’s a preview for tonight’s private performance.” Dean winked at the three other guys.

“Right. Too much information.” Nick poked in the paper bags.

“Nick and I have plans too.” Sam added with baby-brother competitiveness.

“Sam!” Nick scolded.

“They include handcuffs.” Sam said smugly.

“Well I’m wearing pink satin man-panties.” Dean smirked.

“As if.” Sam chortled.

“Good one, Sammy,” Dean shook his head in amusement. His certainty that Sam was pranking him against his own truth, was shaken momentarily when he caught Nick and Castiel exchanging knowing looks, but he shrugged it off. He preferred either the fantasy that Sam was vanilla or not thinking of Sam’s sex life at all, ever.

“Well, Darlings, my bed will be cold tonight and my house empty,” Balthazar said with exaggerated mournfulness, “But tomorrow…”

“Stop!” Castiel pleaded. “I can imagine. We can all imagine. What’s in the grocery bags?”

“Milk, butter, eggs, bacon, bread, flour, salt, pepper, coffee, and OJ,” Balthazar emptied the bags while Nick put the cold items in the newly cleaned refrigerator. “The things you asked for and some of that breakfast tea you like, Cassie.”

“Are we having breakfast?” Sam wrinkled his nose.
Balthazar smiled indulgently, “Not for you, dearie. For the boys in the morning. I thought I’d treat us to takeout after all our hard work. So I called into that dinky looking Indian place by the water, and ordered their mixed banquet. They’ll deliver in…” he looked at his watch, “twenty.”

With that news, Sam moved to clear and wipe down the kitchen table. Cas ensured they had hygienic plates and glasses. Dean tried to make order out of the items that had piled up on the kitchen chairs. Nick went to find a liquor store that stocked a Mexican lager he liked to match with spicy food. Balthazar finished setting up the stereo, but got booted out of the way by Dean before he could commence any nefarious plans for the first sounds in their new home to be pop music. Instead their food arrived to the classic sound of The Rolling Stones’ Paint It Black.

Sam hadn’t lied about being hungry. He ate his portion of Chicken Madras before polishing off the ends of Nick’s Korma and Balthazar’s Vindaloo. It was only his food inhalation eating style that saved Dean’s Beef Satay from his brother’s grabby hands.

Once dinner was done, it was time to part ways.

Dean had a hard knot in his gut as he walked Sam and Nick to the Lexus. It was official. They were living apart again, but the tinge of melancholy was only a hangover from the past. They exchanged hugs. Sam reminded him that he’d see him Thursday when he came south to see Victor.

Back inside, Castiel pulled him by the hand into their new bedroom, promising more as he pressed Dean against the door frame, rutting his hardening cock into Dean’s responding groin.

“Huh, Cas.” Dean interrupted the passion. He pointed at the bare mattress, “We forgot to dress our own bed.”

With smiles, laughter, and a measure of building sexual frustration they spread out the high thread count Kansas linens. By the time Castiel looked up from tucking in the last corner Dean was stretched across the comforter, panties tented and arms reaching for Cas to join him. Cas’s eyes darkened to pools of midnight blue as he pulled off his clothes, impatient and eager. In contrast Dean tormented his lover gradually easing off the dampened pink satin. Then Castiel was on him, biting and sucking marks as if it was crucial to their survival. Dean raked his nails into the meat of his shoulders, blissed out on the scent of Cas’s skin. He closed his eyes. Castiel traced the pattern of Dean’s freckles, with feather light touch of lips and fingers. When neither couldn’t take foreplay a moment longer, Dean heard the click of the lube cap. He opened his eyes, panting Cas’s name. Mutterings of love accompanied Cas’s fingers as they stretched Dean, who willingly arched his hips, communicating his want with pleas to hurry and strokes to his stiffened cock. The missing ripping of the condom packet was loud in its absence. Dean took the lube and lovingly decorated the heated skin of Cas’s cock with the slick. When Cas entered him, Dean gasped at the sensation of skin on skin. Cas threaded their fingers together, squeezing hands as they moved together, joined in body, mind and union. Desire and passion built in a crescendo, Cas’s hand pulling and tightening just as Dean liked until they came one close after the other. Castiel pressed a deep kiss exploring Dean’s mouth, coming back to nip at his bottom lip.

“Perfect,” Cas sighed.

Dean agreed.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++

After the first few days, Dean believed he would grow to love Bodega Bay. He found the small independent stores a treat. The subs at the deli were to die for. Pamela’s place was his favorite watering hole. He did drive to Petaluma to buy some decent picture hooks, so he could avoid going
into Bigoted-Ass Andersen’s hardware store. He’d sketched a sandpiper on the shore and the sunset from the hood of the Impala. Castiel was getting along famously at the school, coming home full of brio and enthusiasm for his new job.

On Friday evening they took a stroll along the length of the sand spit which formed Doran Regional Park. Others had the same idea, with some families enjoying the warm evening on the sands. Dean’s attempts to comment on how picturesque the scenery was, and Castiel’s efforts to name the species of bird he spotted were disrupted by interposed, “Hello, Mr. Fletcher” and “Hi, Mr. Fletcher,” by several of Cas’s students. They were stopped by an amateur ornithologist who joined the list of locals to tell them that Hitchcock’s The Birds was filmed there. While Castiel discussed passing through migrating rare eastern birds, Dean mentally sized up an area with a west facing bench as a good spot to return with his sketchpad.

Back at home, Dean produced pork chops that he had marinated in oil, herbs and garlic. Castiel fixed some bell peppers and zucchini to join the meat. Dean had cheated and bought premade mashed potato at the deli. He tipped the tub into a pan to heat it up when the rest was ready.

It was a simple meal, ate in pleasure with little talking. Castiel washed up, because he said Dean had done most of the cooking. As they cuddled on the sofa, they discussed looking for a cheap microwave in an electrical store when they headed south on Sunday to see Sam and Balthazar. After Dateline there was a showing of Blade Runner. Castiel had never seen it.

Dean muttered sadly for all the popular culture Castiel had missed out on, “Harrison Ford, Cas. Young Harrison Ford in a long coat.”

“I trust your judgment.” Castiel nodded with a smirk, “Wasn’t I wearing my long trench when you used to stalk me from the window on Cowper Street?”

“See,” Dean laughed, “Long coats. Look at The Matrix. It’s all about Keanu’s coat, I’m telling ya.”

Dean made a grab to the side table for his cell phone, as its ringing overlaid the beginning of the movie.

“This better not be Sammy unless he is reminding me that Blade Runner is starting.” Dean huffed.

“I thought he was working.” Castiel commented, adding a mouthed, Chips? as he headed for the six pack of Doritos.

Dean saw Nick’s name highlighted, “Hey.”

“Dean?”

There was an urgency there that Dean plain did not like.

“Yeah?”

“Sam collapsed.” Nick blurted out. “Hang on Dean. Hang on.”

There was some shouting in the background. The blood drained from Dean’s face. What did that mean? His hand shook so much he couldn’t hold the cell. Castiel rushed to his side. Dean shoved the phone at him.

“It’s Sam.” He choked out. “Put it on speaker.”
Castiel pressed his side into Dean’s. He held up the cell with one hand and gripped Dean’s fingers tight with the other.

“Dean?” Nick’s voice asked.

“We’re here.” Castiel answered.

“I can’t stay on the call. They’re letting me ride in the ambulance with him.”

“What?” Dean ground out. “What happened?”

“We are headed for Lucille Packard.” Nick spoke as if he was too shocked to comprehend Dean’s simple question. “Lucille Packard, you got it?”

Dean quaked. He could feel tremors under his skin, but he couldn’t lose it. He had to stay strong. He had to get gas for the ride to Palo Alto, and change for the toll booth…

“We got it.” Castiel answered. “Nick, what happened?”

Nick spoke rapidly, “He was complaining of pain on his right. Thought it was trapped wind. I sent him to the staff room. But Sam came back out to the floor. Said he was fine. Then sorta faltered, put out his hand as if he was dizzy, and he went down. They are ready to move him. I gotta go. Sorry, Dean. See you there?”

“Cas?” Dean pleaded.

“I’ll drive.” Castiel said firmly. “Come on. Let’s go.”
They brought him water in a small white plastic cup with non-slip ridged bands. Sam didn’t drink it.

With his eyes closed against the bright glare, Sam tried to ignore his pounding headache. He tried to imagine he was at home but he couldn’t conjure the sound of breaking Pacific waves over the din of a busy obstetric and pediatric ER. He knew he was there because of his own foolish behavior. It was suggested in pointed questions from the harassed doctors on duty. Had he been resting? Was he under stress? Had he ignored slight symptoms of hypertension?

An ER technician parted the curtains coming to check his readings. She clucked at him in an attempt at comfort. Sam tuned her out. He concentrated on the warmth of Nick’s hand in his. He thought it was the only thing holding him together. If he let go he might fall apart. His eyes focused on the weave of Nick’s loosened tie, his rolled up shirt sleeves. Somewhere Nick’s suit jacket had been lost.

Sam had come to in the ambulance, strapped down on his left side, Nick’s pale bloodless shocked face half hidden behind the EMT. Blinking into awareness, foreign medical words mingled with dreaded numbers and statements. The oxygen mask and his own terror stole Sam’s ability to ask for more detail. A jerk in awareness made him empathize with his brother, who must have experienced a similar wordless fear many times.

Nick stayed as close as he was permitted, as they were rushed through the ER doors to the waiting team.

20 year old, male carrier, 25 weeks gestation, loss of consciousness, chronic hypertensive, suspected pre-eclampsic seizure, BP 185 over 110, reported right anterior abdominal pain

Then Nick was gone. Sam pleaded but they were firm. Family had to wait. They stuck him with needles, drawing blood for a chem. panel. His mask was replaced by a nasal cannula. He tried to tell them that he had fainted when they asked if he had seized. How was he meant to know if he had experienced a fit, when he had never had one before? He’d had a lingering headache all day. Then had become lightheaded, dizzy, a sensation of vertigo and then his vision went black at the peripheries. He didn’t remember falling. They cut off his black shirt but helped him ease out of his pregnancy trousers. When finally Nick was allowed to rush back to his side, Sam’s chest was dotted with sticky cardiac monitor pads. He wore a belt to monitor Lola’s heartbeat and a BP cuff on his arm. A clinically professional nurse had tactfully ignored Sam’s blushes when she raised his
legs in stirrups to first take a quick smear and then inserted a catheter attaching the tube to a bag on a hook. Watching his urine protein levels was a vital test.

Declared settled, able to offer Nick the comfort that he felt OK, and propped on an extra pilfered pillow, Sam heard Nick’s version of events. Dean was on his way. Sam would be happy to see him, but worried that the situation would be distressing for him.

“What time is it?” Sam asked Nick.

“Quarter after eleven,” A tall imposing black man in a white coat answered as he entered the curtained off area. “Mr. Winchester, I’m Doctor Firman, the attending.”

“When can I go home? Are you finished the tests?” Sam asked, hopeful that he wouldn’t have to spend the night. They could make up a bed for Dean at home. He was sure it would be better for Lola if he could snuggle up to Nick between their own sheets.

The doctor’s cheerless smile reflected a negative answer before he spoke, “We need to keep you nice and still for a few hours to get definitive readings. We’d like a 24 hour cross sample for proteinuria. You will be moved to a room on our pre-natal floor soon. Anna Milton will see you on her rounds.”

“How long?” Sam repeated.

“I cannot say. I would not attempt to estimate.”

“Should I bring a bag from home with changes of clothes for Sam?” Nick asked. Sam admired the practical question which might pin the evasive doctor.

“Yes. That would be wise. If your BP drops to manageable levels we will not keep you unnecessarily.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“There are treatment options. However 25 weeks is very early to deliver Baby.”

“What?” Sam squawked. His heart, stomach, guts all seemed to lodge under his ribs. Licking his lips he implored Nick with his eyes, “I can’t lose her, Nick. She’s too little. She won’t survive.”

“I know,” Nick gulped. He addressed the doctor. “What can you do?”

“We are taking Sam for a CT to rule out other causes of your loss of consciousness and probable seizure.”

The doctor picked up Sam’s chart to peruse the latest readings.

“If I’m OK, I’d prefer to be at home,” Sam half mumbled. He didn’t know how to transmit his aversion to hospitals. It would be different arriving in labor with the prospect of joyfully holding their daughter in his arms for the first time. Being in the ER made him itch with uncomfortable memories of fractured bones and bruises on Dean’s skin, not that they had run the risk of hospital treatment all that often. He looked towards Nick for help.

“Once Sam is stable, surely he can be cared for at home?” Nick enquired. “If he needs ongoing treatment we will attend all appointments. I can hire a private home-stay nurse if necessary.”

Clipboard rehung, Dr Firman took in the eager expressions on both fathers’ faces. “OK I see. Plain-
speaking is called for.”

“We would appreciate your honesty. We want the full picture.” Nick said.

Sam nodded his assent with his partner’s comment.

“Dr Milton will answer any questions in the morning but here are the cliff notes Mr. Winchester. Left unchecked Pre-Eclampsia will result in seizures, fetal cardiac distress, parental multiple organ failure and can be terminal to both child and parent. If BP cannot be lowered then delivering your baby is the only treatment option.”

Sam thought the lights flickered and darkened as if reality itself couldn’t cope with such a pronouncement, but it was his own eyes blinking and unfocused at having the cards laid on the table. He knew this, academically. His family physician and obgyn had both told him the consequences. He had read up on hypertension in journals, Stanford Medical Library, and a trashy magazine self-help page in the unisex hair salon. The printed word informed him but there was a distance, and a belief that the worst case scenario happened to other people. Yet that is what the doctor was telling them. Sam was in, or at least on the edge of, that worst case scenario and if they didn’t do something that nightmare would be his reality.

Sam motioned his head towards the IV. “What are you giving me to drop the pressure?”

“You are receiving Hydralazine and Methyldopa via the IV. It a short term intervention to lower your BP to normal levels.” He paused, “You may experience headaches, bodily aches, and be lethargic from the medication, but those are normal expected side effects. You will be asked how you are feeling, please be honest. It is tempting to say you are fine or feeling better, but we need as much information as possible to assess your condition.”

“I will,” Sam promised. Thinking of the catheter and the indignity of bed pans, Sam asked, “Am I confined to bed?”

“We need continuous monitoring while you are at rest. You can sit up soon, and when you are moved to the ward, you will be on what used to be called ‘bedrest’ for an extended period. The risks of deep vein thrombosis mean we recommend you would be inactive, with some movement and periods of very gentle exercise. You understand I am not your consultant but you should prepare that this will possibly be recommended for the foreseeable future, perhaps until the fetus is deemed viable for delivery.”

“What?” Sam wanted to shake the wax out of his ears because he couldn’t parse that he had fainted at work and now was being told he might have to do nothing for months if he wanted to save his daughter’s life.

“If her heart is strong and her lungs developed, then we can consider delivery at 34 weeks but that requires your commitment to ensuring there is no pre-eclampsia.”

“What?” Sam gasped. He felt Nick’s shaky hand hold onto the back of his own. There was a fluttering pressure in his belly as if Lola was joining in on their shock.

“If you are at risk we may have to intervene sooner, but the closer we can get to 37 weeks, the better for you and your child. We have state of the art premature neonatal intensive care at Lucille Packard. You and your baby would not be in separate hospitals.”

Sam’s movement was restricted but he managed to curve his body marginally over, instinctively trying to protect Lola.
The doctor’s voice softened from clinical to sympathetic. “Your BP has fallen since initial in situ readings and the EFM shows the fetal heart rate is not under stress. However it is vital that you stay and receive inpatient treatment.”

“OK,” Sam agreed, wrapping his fingers around Nick’s hand, as the doctor moved on to his next patient.

It was a lot to take in. He knew he had pushed himself all week. He’d done it to himself, even more horrible, he had done this to Lola. Nick would figure it out and look at him with disgust. Sam ducked his head so that his hair covered his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Sam’s voice cracked.

“Hush,” Nick breathed, “What are you sorry for? Hey, my love, this is a medical condition. You don’t need to apologize.”

“I did this.” A spiked metal ball of self-hatred pushed into his solar plexus. “I forced myself to keep going. Helping Dee. Kept going when I was fatigued.”

“You fell asleep in the passenger seat on the way home,” Nick interrupted.

“Don’t try and mitigate it.” Sam hissed. “I should have stopped but I didn’t. I’ve been busy all week, sourcing my textbooks, organizing my reading list and class schedule. The last three nights in the restaurant have been busy and hot.”

“That’s my fault.”

Sam gave a dry laugh, “How can the weather and a thriving business be your fault?”

“I should have noticed…”

“… No.” Sam protested, his anger peaking but all self-directed. “Noticed what? That your boyfriend is a wilting fragile flower. I am not weak.”

“You’re not. You’re one of the strongest people I know.” Nick attempted to soothe Sam’s ire, “We are a partnership and I failed to take care of you.”

“I don’t need taking care of.” Sam cried. “I can take care of myself. I always take care of myself.”

“You do. But I can too, if you’ll let me. We can take care of each other. It doesn’t make you weak or less. If we rely on each it makes us whole.”

Sam listened. He lined up Nick’s loving softly spoken words against the brick wall he had built out of years of self-reliance and emotional hurt. There was a door in that wall, to which he had permitted Dean and Nick entry, but behind it was a twelve year old boy curled in on himself, lost without his beloved Dee and clenched tight against a world where he was left in the poor care of a cruel father. Nick’s affection and love made inroads to crumbling the putty between those bricks. When Sam tried to soak up the solace offered, the immature voice inside piped up with taunting of all he had to lose. If Lola didn’t make it would Nick even want him?

His doubts and fears must have reflected in his eyes because Nick carefully created a space on the trolley bed so he could plunk his hip there and curve his hand on Sam’s cheek, “I love you Sam. I’ll always love you. No matter what.”

They were silently holding each other, eyes dampened when the orderlies came to wheel Sam
down for his CT scan. Nick held his hand all the way.

After the weird Sci-Fi experience of the scan, they took Sam upstairs to the At-Risk ward. It took a while to set up all his monitors. He was glad to see that there was a comfortable chair for Nick. He ignored that those chairs were used for nursing in the rooms where parents held their newborns, and that the room was of the type they had been shown during their tour of the hospital. There was some measure of solace in seeing the consistent print out of Lola’s taciography. She planted a solid kick against the monitor strap. Sam placed his hand on top of it, silently telling her not to be scared.

The door burst open, flung back with force. Dean burst into the room, denim jacket hanging off one shoulder. His eyes were wide, wild and red-rimmed.

“Dee,” Sam sighed with relief at the sight of him, ignoring the twinge of guilt at dragging his brother all the way from Bodega Bay.

Castiel trailed in behind Dean. Nick stood and shook hands with Cas, who spoke, “We are here a short while but there was confusion about Sam’s location and if Dean was permitted to see him.”

Nick huffed a laugh, “I wouldn’t like to be the clerk who tried to stop him. Sam’s only just settled here. We were in the ER and they had tests to do.”

Dean pushed his way beside Nick and caught Sam by the shoulders with grave concern.

“I could have lost her, Dee,” Sam choked.

Dean’s eyes glistened but he bent over, pushed Sam’s hair back, and pressed his lips to his forehead.

“I’ll be alright,” Sam attempted some vain comfort that he didn’t have any faith in, “My BP shot up and I collapsed. But I’m getting the best treatment.”

“What is going on here?” A terse voice called from the door. A grey haired plump nurse planted her hand on her hip. “It is the middle of the night. No visitors. Anyone who isn’t one of the baby’s fathers – Out.”

Dean didn’t look at her. He pursed his lips and nodded firmly at Sam, who grabbed his hand and squeezed. “I’m glad you are here, Dee. I’ll see you later.”

With a tight smile, Dean let Castiel tuck him under his arm. Castiel met Sam’s eyes, “I’m glad to find you resting and not in dire straits. We will wait in the family area until there is news or we are permitted back in.”

“I’ll come find you as soon as we know anything,” Nick promised.

It only dawned on Sam when they were gone, that Dean hadn’t spoken a word. The foul sensation that rose with that realization, matched the sourness of bacon that had turned bad and the acrid smell of clothes hung to dry in a damp squat. Ending up here had put Lola’s existence under threat and had sucker punched Dean so hard he couldn’t speak.

“Nick.” Sam’s voice trembled, “Go check on Dean will you?”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sam waved his hand at the bed, monitors and room, “I’m not going anywhere.”
Worn out, Sam leaned his thumping head back and closed his eyes. They’d given him paracetamol for the headache. May as well have been M&Ms. In fact a bag of M&Ms would have made him feel better.

He could feel Lola. She was moving, active as if her swimming and kicking could counterbalance her father’s enforced stillness.

“God.” Sam prayed. “You haven’t heard from me for a while. Hell, I don’t know if I believe you exist, because if you do you’re doing a piss poor job of looking out for your children. You never answered my cries in the night, but I guess I’m in a corner now and if you are there, if there is anyone listening, I’m not praying for myself. Dear God, please watch out for Lola. Don’t let her come too soon. Don’t let anything bad happen to her. I’ll make a deal with you. You keep her safe and Nick can have her baptized Catholic. I won’t even bat an eyelash when she comes home from confession or wants to wear a white dress for her first communion. Just don’t take her from me God. I’ve lost too much. I don’t think I could cope. Please. Amen.”

The improbability of having slept a few hours after his heartfelt prayer, was contradicted by dawn hinting through the window and a new cheery blonde nurse in pink scrubs announcing it was a good day. Nick was slumped in the chair by the bed. When he lifted his tousled head, Sam could see his cheek had pressure marks from the creases of his shirt sleeve. Breakfast was a tray of eggs and biscuit with a faintly synthetic concentrated OJ, accompanied by a side order of sleep deprived Dean and Castiel.

“I’m sorry, Sammy,” Dean sighed.

The joy of hearing his brother speak was dulled by the heavy guilt in Dean’s unnecessary apology. Sam took in how Dean leaned his weight on one foot and fumbled with his left wrist cuff. Sam couldn’t bear to see Dean take any of this on his shoulders.

“You worked so hard helping me and Cas to move.” Dean continued.

“Stop there.” Sam curled his lip pointing out, “that was last weekend. None of you would let me lift a box. Since then I’ve been at work, repainted the nursery, delved into the madness of textbook shopping. If anyone is to blame for overdoing it, then that person is me. It’s on me, Dean. Not you.”

“I got ya.” Dean nodded reluctantly. Sam guessed his little speech hadn’t waved a magic wand but maybe the words would sink in later.

“You’ve never even joked about it, Bitch.” Dean’s cheek twitched in an almost wink.

“It was my turn, Jerk,” Sam used his boyhood playful whine.

“I don’t believe it.” Nick snorted, inclining his head towards Castiel, “They’d josh over anything.”

“It must be a brother thing,” Castiel commented as an only child.

Nick nodded with a modicum of regret. Sam noticed and held his hand out. He didn’t know the full story of the bitterness between Nick and Michael but he knew the younger Alighieri was sore and raw in places.

The same nurse returned with some meds. Her name was Laura and her cheeriness persisted. When Cas asked her if they could all stay with Sam, she clucked her tongue in an easygoing fashion
saying that if the powers that be tried to limit contact with pregnant people and stop extended families welcoming newborns there’d probably be a riot. While she replaced Sam’s IV with a new bag, she expressed a hope that he wouldn’t need the ICU, where there were strict regulations.

It wasn’t long before Anna Milton arrived.

“I came as soon as I saw Sam on the admissions list.” She said shaking Nick’s hand. “I am glad to see your BP is dropping back, Sam. You must have had quite a scare.”

“We all did.” Nick huffed.

“Well, let’s see how baby girl is doing.” Anna smiled as an attendant wheeled in a portable ultrasound.

“Can Dean stay?” Sam asked.

Anna nodded as she removed the fetal cardiotocograph belt. Sam noticed Castiel backing discreetly out of the room, until Dean grabbed his wrist to make him stay.

“Looks good,” Anna gave Sam a reassuring nod, “There she is.”

Every time Sam saw Lola via ultrasound she had become more developed. Her facial features were clearer now. She was awake and moving as Anna pushed the transducer along Sam’s skin.

“She’s a real little person,” Dean gasped.

“She is.” Sam said proudly. Suddenly he was overcome with emotion that if things had gone differently and his BP had continued to rise, he might be giving birth to his little mite this morning. He tried to gulp back tears, thinking of his tiny daughter fighting for her life in the NICU. He vowed to do everything he could to keep her in the best place possible as long as he could.

“No placental abruption.” Anna said in a pleased tone. “And her heartbeat has been strong all night. She is looking good.”

Nick leaned over and they shared a kiss of pure relief.

“And Sam is OK?” Dean asked.

Anna put away the ultrasound equipment and handed Nick a wipe to clean the residual gel. She folded up the EFM strap to put it aside. Sam pulled up the bedclothes.

“Would you like privacy?” Anna asked.

Sam shook his head, “Anything you say I’ll tell afterwards.”

“You have mild pre-eclampsia.”

“I have it?” Sam blinked. “I thought I was in danger of it.”

“Your pressure was dangerously high when you were admitted. It has come down, but it is still elevated above your normal levels. I say your normal levels because they are chronically higher than the general population. You have been resting and have received medication, yet your diastolic is still elevated at 150/105. Your proteinuria is borderline.”

“What can I do?”
“I’m putting on my preaching hat.” Anna tried to alleviate the gravity with a spark of humor. “Unchecked you could develop severe pre-eclampsia and toxemia. We have spoken about this. Your baby’s life is at risk, as is your own. I want to monitor you for another 24 to 48 hours.”

“And then?” Sam breathed deeply through his nose in an attempt to calm his nerves. He could see Dean edging closer in support.

“Bedrest.” Anna pronounced. “Perhaps here. No work. No university. No exercise or strain of any kind. My duty is to get that little girl safely into the world and keep you in good health. If you are stable I will sanction bedrest at home. But you are not to lift a finger.” She turned her upper body, “Do you hear me Nick? If I see Sam Winchester crossing the campus or in your restaurant, there will be hell to pay.”

Nick bobbed his head, “Of course. Definitely.”

“I’ve only enrolled in five classes.” Sam mentioned. He wasn’t expecting everyone to jump down his throat with vocalizations of protest.

“No, Sam.” His doctor had a powerful glare, “No classes. No going to campus. No walking around and attending lectures. No stressing about papers and studies. You will be resting.”

“I can make contact with the appropriate departments on Monday,” Castiel volunteered. “I am sure a deferral of the quarter will be possible under the circumstances.”

Anna left to continue her rounds, promising to return later. Sam took a minute to express his gratitude to Castiel. He was the perfect person, as a recent graduate, to know all the correct channels and people to be consulted at the university. While deferring was an unpalatable option, Sam was glad the weight of dealing with the red tape involved had been lifted from him.

“Would you like something from the café?” Dean asked. “Cas and I had a coffee early, but we’re going to get some breakfast.”

Sam caught Dean’s sleeve. He whispered his admission of self-reproach to the person he thought could understand the most. “I put her in danger.”

“Don’t you worry about that now, Sammy. You just concentrate on getting better. Hey? Winchesters are fighters. Nothing’ll beat us. Yeah?”

“Yeah, Dee.” Sam puffed, “You’re right. I can do this.”

“You sure you don’t want anything? A Danish?”

“No, Dude. I’m wacked out.” Sam sank back into the pillows. “Nick, you haven’t eaten.”

“I’m good.”

“No you are not. You can’t make me worry about you.” Sam chided.

“That’s blackmail.” Nick quirked a grin.

“No I think it’s bribery.” Sam chuckled, “Go on. I know you all want strong brewed coffees. Have some food too.”

“Oh I’ll eat.” Dean piped up.

Nick blew Sam an air kiss from the doorway.
“And don’t let Dean eat everything.” Sam called after them.

Sam tried to rest, but the concept seemed completely alien. It was morning. He’d woken up with a diminished headache and the feeling he should be doing something, anything from having a shower, a run on the beach, getting ready for work, to driving north to see Dean in Bodega. He had never been one to lie in bed for hours on end.

A knock on his open door prompted him to look up. There was a dark haired slim woman in her early thirties, dressed in a pant suit with a shell pink top. She held some paper files against her chest.

“Sam Winchester?”

“That’s me.” Sam offered a cautious welcoming smile.

“Hi,” She strode across to offer her hand, “Deb Rutherford.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I’ve brought you some reading material.”

Sam took a pamphlet entitled ‘Coping with Bedrest.’ Glancing inside he saw a list of recommended in-bed activities on one page with some psychological advice and tips on the opposite.

“And how are you coping?” Deb asked, “It is a difficult time, yes? And your partner is here with you?”

“My partner, Nick. Yeah. He is gone for breakfast.” Sam furrowed his brow, suspicious of the non-medical small talk “Excuse me, Dr. Rutherford but…”

“Deb, please. I’m not a doctor.” She gave a slight smile. “It is important to draw on all the support available, family and professionals.”

“Who are you?” Sam glared.

“I am the family counselor and liaison with local human services.”

Her smile met with an icy stare. Sam froze. He bit down on his lip. Inhaling deep through his nostrils he asked, “Why have you been sent here?”

“Sam, we are all here to help. A young single father on the at-risk ward, your file was top of my pile this morning.”

“I’m not single.” Sam ground out between closed teeth.

“Sometimes relationships are strained in difficult circumstances. I can offer joint counseling.”

Sam could hardly believe it. Did she know she was putting her foot in her mouth with the sub-text that Nick wouldn’t be there for him? Was she offering her years of experience in dealing with relationships that broke up over the strain of a miscarriage? Why would she even hint at any of that? Was it meant to be a comfort that the system would ‘be there’ for him if his lover deserted him and his child died?

“Joint counseling?” Sam repeated.

“We offer a full range of group and one-on-one sessions to help you as you deal with restrictions,
health issues, and we are there after your pregnancy ends no matter what happens.” Deb nodded slowly as if she had faith that these words would offer a measure of comfort.

“You listen to me, Ms. Rutherford. You come in here offering me break-up counseling and grief counseling!” Sam’s guts twisted at the mere suggested notion of Nick leaving him. It left a foul fetid rotting taste in his mouth.

“Wait, Sam. It’s not like that.”

“My baby is not dead.” Sam exclaimed.

“Oh. No. Please don’t take me up that way. I merely meant that the whole spectrum of services is at your disposal.”

Sam pulled his body so he could sit up as straight as he was able. He could hear the bleeping of his monitor speed up with his rising temper. “No way. No system. No social workers. No interfering do-gooders poking their ineffectual noses into my life, my family’s lives. Get out.”

The counselor raised her palms in a peaceable surrendering gesture. “I apologize for causing you distress.”

“What. Is. Going. On. Here?” Nick’s slow question was delivered with deadly calm.

Sam could see Dean had also arrived back.

Proving there was no end to the ways Deb Rutherford could put a foot in her mouth, she addressed Dean, “I’m sorry. I came to offer your partner access to the hospital counseling services.”

“That’s my brother.” Sam seethed. “Nick is my partner and Lola’s other Dad.”

“But?” She huffed.

“One word about our age difference and I’ll get out of this bed and push you out the door.” Sam yelled as she scurried past the others.

“What did she say to you, Sammy?” Dean took one side of the bed while Nick went to his other.

“I bet she was trying to help but I don’t want that kind of help. I won’t have it. I will not be in the system. I’ll check myself out of the hospital if that woman comes near me or my baby again. No fucking way.”

Tears of frustration ran down Sam’s cheeks. Dean passed him a tissue. Castiel appeared in the room but Dean flagged him away to give Sam a few moments of private freak out.

“Take me home, Nick.” Sam knew it was pathetic and impossible but he pleaded anyway.

“I can’t, sweetheart, you have to stay,” Nick stroked his hair as if Sam’s anguish was breaking his heart.

“I won’t let them. I won’t see her again. I won’t have her telling a social worker about me, about us. What did they ever do for me?” He turned towards his brother, “When I was cold and hungry? When you were crying yourself to sleep covered in bruises from Dad’s fists, where were they then? And when the dogcatchers finally netted us, what happened then? They ripped you away, locked you up and tortured you.”

“Hey,” Dean gulped hard, “There are good people too. Layla, Garth, Deacon, Victor…”
“What about before them, Dean? What about the sleazy school counselor in Ohio who wanted to know why I lived in a motel room alone and then turned up late at night looking for more.” Sam fumed.

“He didn’t.” Nick gasped.

“He did but I had a double lock and a double barreled shotgun.” Sam glared through his fourteen-year-old self’s fear, “You all hear me. I want nothing to do with any official support network. How dare she talk about what would happen if we split up? I’ll tell you what would happen. I’d take my daughter and go live in the Winnebago out back of Bobby’s salvage yard. I’d get my own fucking shotgun and I’d blast any goddamned suit who tried to get near us.”

Dean placed a hand on Sam’s tensed arm muscles.

“Sam, your blood pressure.” Nick begged.

A nurse ran into the room alerted by Sam’s heightened reading causing an alarm to sound.

“My BP? My BP? I get a visit from the gateway to CPS and you say my BP.”

“Mr. Winchester, please calm down.” The tall long-faced nurse, Veronica, leaned over to seat the oxygen cannula under Sam’s nose. Her name pin dangled in front of Sam’s eyes.

“Don’t let that woman back in.” Sam implored as she removed the extra pillows to get him to recline in the bed.

“You don’t have to see anyone who you don’t want to.” Veronica soothed. “Now how about some quiet time? I can turn down the lights and you try and relax?”

“OK,” Sam agreed. There was something about her bedside manner that made him compliant and reassured him.

He knew Dean left to find Castiel. Nick made comforting murmured promises that he wasn’t going anywhere as sat in the seat beside the bed. Sam could see his morning stubble in the low light and wished he could run his hand along the tingling surface of his skin. However he obeyed the nurse and kept his breathing regular and deep to get his systolic to drop back down.

The rest of the day moved slowly. There was a TV in his room which offered some distraction. Castiel and Dean disappeared for a time to go to Balthazar’s house for a shower and some lunch. When they returned with the Saturday edition of the San Francisco Chronicle to keep him entertained, Sam sent Nick home for his own shower and change of clothes. He went under protest, saying he would be back with a bag for Sam. True to his word, Sam received his cell phone, current novel, bag of M&Ms, his nightshirts, socks, and a soft fleecy hoodie, when Nick came back a couple of hours later. His cell phone was full of messages from his colleagues at the restaurant. Nick said he had been mobbed when he popped his head in to The Gates on the way back. Crowley had the place under control, freeing Nick to devote all his attention to where it mattered most. With permission Nick slept in the room that night. Dean and Castiel bedded down on sleeping bags in Balthazar’s newly emptied spare bedroom.

The next day Sam took a mid morning nap. There were few doctors on duty, being a Sunday, but nurses came and checked on him periodically. He wondered how his body could fall back to sleep only hours after waking, especially when the only activity he had participated in was a shower and a change of night shirt. At least the catheter had been removed, but he still had to piss in a cup each time he went. He had lain on his left side as instructed, covered his bump with his hand, singing
under his breath to Lola that there would be happier days ahead.

Castiel was speaking when Sam woke from his doze.

“It was an error. He is only twenty.”

Sam guessed they were talking about yesterday’s stupid counselor’s presumption that Dean was his partner.

“I know that,” Nick sounded weary. Sam wondered if Nick was putting on false cheer and forced strength when they conversed, and perhaps his lover was struggling more than he showed.

Castiel’s voice was deep and low. “But do you remember, because I do, how it felt to be 19, to be 20? In love, in college, and then to have it all fall apart. Plunged into complete turmoil.”

“What was his name?” Nick asked carefully.

“Ephraim, but that doesn’t matter. I am talking about the fears and anxieties that you both are facing now. I certainly didn’t have the maturity to deal. Did you?”

Nick huffed. Sam could visualize Nick’s downturned lip and shrugged shoulders. “You’re right. I don’t remember specifically being 20 but I’m not Methuselah. I was alone too. No family. Fly by night friends and the bottom of a bottle for company. I’m not saying I was miserable, because I wasn’t. I partied and explored the world. Tried to fill a void inside. Over the years I patched that abyss over. Sometimes the ache of it was background noise, but you know what Castiel? I’d been missing a piece. And now…”

“And now you are not.” Castiel finished with an understanding that Sam immediately also applied to the teacher’s relationship with Dean.

“Sam is everything. I won’t let him down. I’ll do better, pay more attention to his needs, be less blasé, whatever it takes. I won’t lose him. I refuse.”

Sam cracked open his lids, jolted by the dual meaning of parting ways by breaking up and that Sam wasn’t permitted to die. Sam hadn’t been sure that Nick could understand the depth of his troubled mind and the pit of emptiness dug out of him by the prospect of losing his already much beloved daughter, but one look at his haggard face told him that Nick was going through his own hell.

“I heard you.” Sam confessed as Nick pressed a soft kiss to his bottom lip. “What if?”

“I’m not going anywhere. 100%. I’ll keep repeating it until you believe me.”

Sam nodded. “I’m not either.”

“Good. Then we are in agreement.” Nick grinned.

“Where’s Dean?” Sam asked.

“He went to feed the meter and he wanted to make a phone call.” Castiel said.

As if speaking his name conjured him, Dean appeared with his cell against his ear and a Dunkin Donuts bag in his hand. He mouthed *Pawpaw* and handed the cell to Sam.

“Sam? How are you doing today?”

“Good. Better. I’m still wired for sound.” Sam plucked at the BP monitor cuff.
“They got you stuck in bed, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ve said already. No Sir. Call me Pawpaw or Dean.”

“Yes… Pawpaw.”

“That’s better. How is my great-granddaughter doing?”

“Better than her Daddies, I’d say.” Sam sighed, looking down at his bump.

“And Deanie? How is he coping?”

Sam bit back emotions. He met Dean’s eye. “He’s a good brother. He’s been here since the start. He probably would have slept in the hospital again, if Cas hadn’t taken him to his cousin’s place.”

“Damn right.” Dean muttered.

Dean Campbell hummed. He asked gently, “Is it hard for him to be confronted with the possibility of your loss?”

“It’s hard for all of us, but maybe because y’know…” Sam couldn’t say much with Dean in the room but he knew his grandfather would understand about Dean’s memories of his miscarriage.

“I see.”

“We are all holding it together.” Sam tried to reassure but that truth was borderline and dependant on his condition continuing to improve.

“I’m on the 8.15am flight from Lawrence Municipal. I’ll be there by lunchtime tomorrow.”


Dean was waving his arms, asking what they were talking about.

“Samuel’s cousin Charles has a daughter, Gwen. She helped me find cheap return flights, and she’ll check in on Samuel, make sure he eats when I’m not there.”

“Thank you.” Sam choked out. He didn’t know what else to say. “You can stay in our home and Nick will pick you up at the airport.”

“I will?” Nick raised his eyebrows.

“Pawpaw’s coming?” Dean gaped, turning to beam at Castiel.

“I’d better pass the cell back to Dean before he explodes in anticipation.” Sam laughed, “See you tomorrow, Pawpaw.”

The glee with which Dean grabbed the phone made Sam laugh. It felt good to let mirth bubble up. A sweet iced donut helped improve his mood too. Sam gladly avoided hospital meals. They weren’t too bad for mass catering, but Castiel’s offering of takeout pizza from his and Dean’s favorite joint, The Pizza Cave, was much better. They shared the giant wheel on the bed. Veronica took a wedge with a finger pressed to her lips and a smile at their secret pizza party. Nick found the US Open final on TV, and placed a winning bet over the phone with his bookie on Andy Roddick in straight sets.
Before her shift ended, Veronica told them that Sam’s BP had continued to stabilize. The monitor’s readings were averaging close to 138/97 which was a vast improvement on only two nights ago.

Sam was sorry to see his visitors go, but Castiel had work in the morning and they had come in the Ford Taurus. They headed back to Bodega for the night. Dean would be back, driving the Impala in the morning. Castiel reminded Sam that he’d contact Stanford for him when their offices opened. Nick was sent off to sleep in a proper bed for the night too. Sam had an ulterior motive. He wanted their home presentable and Dean’s old bedroom made up for his grandfather’s stay.

“I can’t wait to see Pawpaw,” Dean confessed as they prepared to go.

“Me too.” Sam added. “I have no memories of them, but your stories and talking on the phone. It makes me feel... I dunno like I’ve butterflies, good ones.”

“Probably Lola puking at your girly talk.” Dean teased.

“Hey!” Sam put on his best bitchface. He truly hoped that they’d have a good reconnection with their only blood family, as John plain did not count anymore.

“I hope he won’t be disappointed when we meet.” Dean chewed his lip, “I was this cute little kindergarten kid when he last saw me.”

Sam snorted in derision, “You could be a hunchbacked dwarf with a drinking problem and a sharp tongue and he wouldn’t be disappointed.”

Nick laughed, “I should have left my copy of A Storm of Swords at home.”

“I don’t understand that reference.” Castiel tilted his head.

“It’s an ongoing series of books. I read ‘em in ACIC. Sam, the jerk, dubbed me Tyrion Lannister. Come on Cas. I’ll explain in the car.” Dean rolled his eyes. “See you tomorrow, Sammy.”

“Tomorrow.” Sam smiled. He shared a passionate goodnight kiss with Nick before attempting to settle comfortably in his hospital bed. It was good to have the prospect of their Pawpaw’s visit to look forward to. He could sleep easy with positive hopes instead of nightmarish scenarios floating across his drowsing mind.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus Research trivia:
I looked up what the name of the medieval weapon that comprised of a spiked metal ball on a club, to use in the sentence when Sam is feeling guilty near the start. It is called a Morningstar, but I just couldn’t use it, it made it sound like I was over-Lucifer-ing the story, but that is the weapon I imagined.

Next – Dean Campbell Arrives.

You should not have so long to wait as my muse is being more co-operative about the next chapter. I hope to post at the weekend.
Sam couldn’t have been happier to see Dean when he turned up before noon with 6” Chicken Mayo subs and single serving cartons of cloudy apple juice. It was like his big brother knew psychically that Sam was having a ‘hungry day’. Sam had snagged a granola bar by asking a student nurse to go to the vending machine for him, but it was like Lola was sucking the food right out of his stomach. Dean unwrapped his offerings and stood by the over-bed table to eat with Sam.

“Divine,” Sam hummed around his first bite.

Dean chuckled. “Was gonna bring homemade. I put the ingredients by the bread maker last night, but Cas and I got delayed this morning. He was nearly late for school, ran out the door with his blue tie undone.”

“Delayed? Or The Laid?” Sam snorted at his own joke.

“Huh, the second one.” Dean grinned.

“You are insatiable.”

“Naw, I’m adorable. But Cas does a pretty good job in the ‘sating department’.”

Sam rolled his eyes.

“How you doing today? What are the vital stats? And… any new delectable nurses?”

“Good. Had a nosebleed last night after y’all went home.”

“Geez.” Dean gritted his teeth and hissed.

“Hold up. It wasn’t the end of the world, though you’d think it was from the way Nurse Laura ran to get the doctor on duty. It stopped all on its own and I’m fine.”

Sam watched while Dean rooted in his open duffel to find the blood stained nightshirt. His brother held it up in silent condemnation of Sam minimizing his condition.

Sam shrugged his shoulders, “Seriously, Dee. I’m good. BP is stable this morning. Honest. And, dude, there is a new student nurse, but she’s shy, so no flirting.”

“Ah, Sammy,” Dean whined as he folded and replaced the soiled clothing. He was letting Sam off the ‘lecture’ hook. “I’m in a flirting groove.”

“No, you are not. You are hopping from one leg to the other. You can’t even mention Pawpaw’s arrival, can you? You are so keyed up?”

“So what if I’m eager to see him.” Dean said defensively.

“I’m not criticizing, Dee. I’m nervous too.” Sam blew a long exhale. “I don’t even have any memories of them, but hell, he’s our family, y’know, Lola’s great-granddaddy.”
“Unless he’s had a personality transplant, you have no reason to worry. Pawpaw is… I dunno. Memories of him and Mom… You’ll see.”

Sam nodded. Dean might not be able to find the words to express his loving memories of their Pawpaw but Sam could read Dean’s face like a book, and he saw childhood adoration of a beloved kind grandparent.

Their anticipation was interrupted by the arrival of a huge bouquet of flowers with attached balloons. Sam stared at it quizzically, unable to believe it was for his room, but the card was from all the guys at The Gates of Hell.

“Sheez,” Dean huffed, “Celestine asked me if you were permitted flowers in the room. I think she wanted to do you up an arrangement. But I didn’t know.”

“That’s real nice of her, but tell her to wait until I have Lola in my arms.” Sam responded.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’ll fly. She liked you Sam and according to Inias they couldn’t move from flowers when they had Poppy.”

“Hmm, well, fingers crossed I’ll be gone home before she gives you some. Ooof.” Sam winced.

“You alright?” Dean hovered over him, brows clenched.

“Fine, fine.” Sam reassured quickly. “Big kick. I’m telling ya, she’s gonna win soccer medals.”

“Maybe she doesn’t like chicken.” Dean worried.

“She might be a vegetarian.” Sam teased knowing his brother’s love of meat.

“Don’t even say it.”

“Nick used to be vegetarian, for ecological reasons.” Sam stirred the pot.

“You saying its hereditary? Like floppy hair and huge feet?”

“Dean!” Sam yelped, “Don’t you curse my daughter with huge feet.”

“You know what they say about huge feet?” Dean teased.

“What?” Sam asked with extreme suspicion, “Manhood for guys? Width of pelvis?”

“No… hairy toes.” Dean chortled before running for the door.

“Get back here.” Sam yelled. “That’s not fair, Jerk. I can’t get out of bed.”

But Dean had disappeared, like a hyperactive kid.

“Don’t listen to your silly Uncle Dee.” Sam rubbed a hand over his bump, “I’m sure you’ll have beautiful toes.”

Veronica, the nurse, had come to check in with him and had left with his urine samples before Dean gingerly stuck his head around the door frame.

“Is it safe?”

Sam harrumphed. “Come on back in. I should throw a pillow or a bucket of water at ya, but get in
here and keep me company.”

“Judge Judy’s on.” Dean suggested, making a grab for the remote.

Sam looked skyward for inspiration, “That’s always on. None of your soap operas either.”

“Dr Sexy MD is not a soap opera. It is a television serial medical drama.”

“Ah-ha, that’s why it’s on in the middle of the day after The Bold and The Beautiful?”

“What’d you want to watch then? And don’t say rolling news.”

“I dunno. Leave it off. They’ll be here soon.”

Dean cell started up with Led Zeppelin’s ‘The Rain Song’.

“Hey Cas, you on break?” He asked, “Yeah.. hummm, no I’m not sore.”

“Take it outside,” Sam hissed, “I don’t want to know about your ass.”

“I’m with Sammy.” Dean said with a hand raised to acknowledge that he was ignoring that directive. A flush rose on his cheeks. “I’m wearing them. No don’t. Stop, Cas. I hope you’re in the staff restroom.”

“Dean!”

“OK,” Dean nodded briskly, “And then?... Yeah... You are ace... I’ll tell him. Thanks babe. Yeah Sam’s good. Pawpaw will be here soon... See you on Friday. Oh I put the leftovers in the refrigerator for you so you don’t have to cook tonight. Yeah. Me too.”

Sam approved of Dean’s plans to stay for their Pawpaw’s visit, but he knew he’d miss Castiel during the week.

“Cas says hello. He made it on time for first class. He was checking I was good.”

“I gathered that much.” Sam pursed his lips.

“He made some calls to Stanford in his free period. All sorted. He talked to someone he knew in the Dean of Students office and they gave him the extensions for Anthropology and Admissions. I need to call over and collect an ‘Emergency Deferral Application’ and your doctor’ll need to fill a section of it, but it’s all good.”

Sam sank back into the pillows. It was a relief. He didn’t like the idea of falling behind in his degree but Lola was a damn sight more important, and he would catch up even if he graduated a semester later than his most recent life plan.

An orderly came with the lunch Sam had selected off the choices sheet at breakfast. Dean snorted at the salad plate but everything was fresh and the lettuce was crunchy as Sam preferred. Dean stole slices of cheese. Sam tactfully ignored the furtive grabby fingers.

Sam’s phone rang with the generic ringtone. Wondering if it was their grandfather calling from arrivals, and hoping that Nick was waiting as promised to collect him, Sam answered the phone to Brady’s voice. When Dean crestfallenly realized it wasn’t Pawpaw he gave Sam some privacy to chat. It seemed that someone at The Gates had called Brady about Sam being in hospital. Sam could barely get a word in to tell Brady the crisis was over, between being scolded for not telling his friends, reprimanded for not taking care of himself, and Brady threatening to come back a week
early to punch ‘Lucifer’ for overworking ‘Samael’. Finally, Sam was able to ask for an update about Brady’s boring summer job at his father’s law firm. Brady’s droll exaggerated moaning about being a glorified filing clerk and his plaintive whines about his immediate supervisor’s hay fever and sniffling allergies, had Sam knotted with laughter. When Brady had to return to his work, Sam thanked his friend for doing him good and extracted a promise that they’d meet up when Brady got back to California.

When he ended the call Sam saw he’d missed a text from Nick. He was trying to find parking.

“Dean! They are here.” Sam drew his brother back into the room. “Do I look alright?”

“What are you Sam? A big giant girl?” Dean laughed as Sam wet his hands on a wipe and tried to tame his hair with damp hands.

“The last time our grandfather saw us, I was in diapers.”

“Probably a stinky one. You had the stinkiest diapers.” Dean wrinkled his nose.

“Dean!” Sam yelled in protest. He was delighted to see his brother in such high spirits. Dean could tease but he had dressed up for the occasion, in his new burgundy shirt over his flattering brown Henley and dark blue jeans.

A single knock on the door announced the arrival of Nick, whose arm was linked by Dean Campbell. Sam smiled brightly at the grey haired gentleman who leaned more on Nick than on the walking cane in his other hand. Pawpaw was shy of six feet tall, maybe 5’ 10”, Sam estimated. He was slender and had an upright carriage despite the cane. He wore a brown tweed suit which didn’t look new but was well cared for. Under that he had a crisp white shirt, a green and brown striped tie, and brown wingtip oxfords polished to a high shine. Quick as anything, he handed Nick his cane and held his arms open.

“Deanie.”

Dean made an audible emotional gasp as he flew into his Pawpaw’s embrace. The older man stroked the short hairs on the back of Dean’s head and kissed his cheek. Then he pulled out of the hug and gripped Dean by the shoulders.

“Let me look at you…. never lost our freckles I see.” He tipped the side of Dean’s nose and then pressed a finger along his own cheek from his eye crinkles inwards, “but this scar is new and I know there are more, my poor darling boy.”

Tears welled up. Dean wrapped his grandfather in another longer trembling hug. Their joyous reunion was shadowed for Sam by the bittersweet fact that for so many years grandparent and grandsons had been denied any contact.

Still held, the elder Dean said, “It feels so good to have you in my arms, Deanie. Although I could pick you up and carry you on my hip the last time I saw you.”

“I re...remember.” Dean choked out. “I lo...loved that. Felt so tall.”

“And then Samuel would take you on his shoulders and tell you that you were ‘King of The Castle.’”

Dean swallowed hard again, in the way Sam knew signaled he was battling his emotions for speech. “Or you’d le...let me sit on the kitchen dresser while you cooked.”
“Shush, Deanie.” Dean Campbell smiled widely, “Don’t rat me out to the new parents. Grandparent spoiling is an indulgence.”

Nick approached Sam’s bed, visible affected by the two Deans’ reunion. Sam tugged on Nick’s arm to get him to lean in for their first kiss of the day.

“Your grandfather gave me the ‘talk’. I’m a little scared of him.” Nick whispered. “As it should be.”

“And Baby Sammy,” Dean Campbell said as he took a step towards them, “having his own baby. How life flies by.”

Nick moved to offer the walking cane, but the senior shook his head, “Thank you, but I only use it to lean on when the pins get weary. Samuel says it is for show, to make me look regal. A load of baloney.”

Sam could see the faded freckles on his Pawpaw’s face as he got closer. Dean pulled over a chair for him. Pawpaw had told them how Samuel was bald as a coot. Sam was glad to see there were other genes on his family tree because although Pawpaw’s forehead was high, he had a full head of grey hair in that natural ash blond grey that suggested he had been ginger or dark blond in his youth.

“How are you, Sam?”

The question was asked full of concern and sympathy. Sam’s hand was taken and patted. It was a simple gesture but the warmth of the touch brought a lump to Sam’s throat.

“Improving. Honestly, Pawpaw, I’m hoping they won’t keep me in much longer.”

“And the little one?” He reached a hand over tentatively.

Sam nodded and lowered the hospital blanket so his Pawpaw could place his palm over the rounded bump. Lola was not co-operating with the perfect reunion script. She didn’t kick on cue. Sam wondered if she was asleep, as she hadn’t been active for a while.

“Show Pawpaw the latest ultrasound pics.” Sam said to Nick, who rooted in Sam’s bedside stand for the print outs.

“She is a swell little girl.” Dean Campbell held the photograph close to his face, suggesting he used reading glasses. “Isn’t technology amazing? To know the sex of your child, to be able to see them before they are born, and with newborn boys they can do one of those MRI thingies now to see if they are carriers.”

Sam agreed that it was.

The afternoon flew by. Nick had to disappear to Menlo Park for a spell to deal with financial matters at the restaurant. Dean Campbell was happy to take the nursing chair and chat with his grandsons. The nurses were charmed when the older gentleman was introduced as Lola’s great-grandfather. An extra portion of the afternoon snack was delivered specially for him. Dean and Sam were regaled with stories about extended family members they never knew. They had two Campbell cousins, Mark and Christian, serving in Iraq and a branch of Pawpaw’s distant family lived in Argentina.

“Coming here, Pawpaw?” Sam asked a question that had been preying on his mind. “Has it scuppered your annual vacation?”
“Coming here was mine and Samuel’s decision. You didn’t ask me. I’m the one imposing my presence on you.” He twisted to look at Dean. “I was this close to asking Gwen to book flights when you boys were attacked by John, but Sam convinced me he had the support of his partner. You had Sam and your own partner, Dean, and we could only have visited you for an hour each night. I hope you don’t think badly of me that I came now but not then.”

“No, Pawpaw.” Dean gasped. “No way. You being here is awesome.”

“Well I am glad.” Pawpaw smiled tenderly at Dean’s expressive face, “Vegas will have to suffer the loss of the annual Campbell Pilgrimage for one year.”

“You go to Vegas?” Sam grinned, conjuring an image of Pawpaw in a tux at the card tables.

Dean was opening and closing his mouth in wordless awe. He proceeded to ask at least twenty questions about the Nevada resort. Sam thought he’d warn Castiel of Dean’s interest in Vegas. His own mind drifted as Lola moved round causing some lower pressure. When he returned from the restroom with his obligatory sample, the two Deans were talking about a cabin set in pastures.

“Where?” Sam asked as he carefully wheeled his IV pole to a stop. He threw his legs back on the elevated mattress. Dean helped to fix his pillows and to slip on the fingertip pulse oximeter that had replaced the cardiac monitoring.

“The Campbell Cabin.” Pawpaw explained. “It’s an old farmstead that’s been in the Campbell family for generations. I was telling Dean that Samuel and I will most likely take a week there before the weather turns, and reminding him that we all went there one summer when he was a toddler.”

“I don’t remember it,” Dean grimaced as if he was trying to search his uncooperative brain for any memories. “I never knew I went on a vacation with Mom and Dad.”

“You were so cute. Samuel took John hunting. Mary and I taught you how to make mud pies. You wanted to eat them and got upset when you couldn’t. Then you kept your pudgy little hand in a fist for ages until Mary convinced you to show her the mud you were saving to give John when he got back. Those pies are a cabin tradition. I always brought play clothes for Mary when we’d go as a family. She and her cousin, Gwen’s Dad, used to end up covered in mud and Samuel’d hose them down. I swear those two did it just for the hosing on baking hot Kansas summer days.”

Dean had his hand pressed to his chest at that story. It evoked such feeling in all three of them and poignantly told Sam that there was a time before his mother died when Dean could hope for a more loving reaction to trying to please John. He imagined Dean brimming with happiness at giving his Daddy his gift and maybe John thanking him and kissing the little blond toddler’s forehead. It was a jarring portrait when held against the violence of later years.

The heavy silence that had fallen was broken by Dean Campbell coaxing his grandsons to entertain him with their stories of how Dean had met Castiel and how Sam had met Nick. His eyes misted up when Dean revealed how he had been able to speak with Cas right from the start. Pawpaw gripped Sam’s hand deathly tight when he spoke of how supportive Nick had been when Sam had returned from Arkansas with Dean.

By early evening Sam could tell his grandfather was flagging. The older man must have risen at the crack of dawn for his flight to San Francisco. Sam had learned that Pawpaw usually took an afternoon nap, when they discussed his own enforced bedrest.

Taking control of arrangements to guarantee considerate and premier hospitality, Sam sent them on
their way, with instructions to stop for a meal at The Gates and settle Pawpaw in at the house. He extracted an easy promise from Nick to look after their treasured guest, before Nick headed out first save Pawpaw’s legs by bringing the Lexus close to the hospital door. That gave the elder Dean a chance to finish his story of how Deanie wanted a blue cake and tipped his crayon into the batter when Mary and he were distracted. Dean was blushing but eyes were fixed devotedly on his Pawpaw.

Sam reflected that this lovely elderly gentleman was a new person in his life, almost a stranger, but if family was something tangible, then Dean Campbell evoked that sensation. As when talking on the phone together, there was some sort of magic that made Sam feel comfortable and a sense of belonging. He had very little reference for it in his life. Dean had been his everything growing up. Bobby was like a surrogate uncle, but he was Bobby Singer, unique onto himself. When Sam had made good friends like his college mates and at various schools, there had grown a companionable affection between them. It was different with Nick too. He and Nick fitted together, slotted pieces into place and fused whole. Sam figured that with Pawpaw he was getting to experience something Dean had known and lost, the unconditional kindness and love of an elder family member.

On Tuesday morning, Sam could hardly believe his eyes, and was very glad he’d been permitted to shower and change into clean PJs. Mr. Wyatt arrived to see him almost immediately after breakfast had been cleared away. The anthropology lecturer bore a fruit basket against his sweater vest. He came with the best wishes of the other faculty members who knew Sam.

“When I returned Mr. Fletcher’s call, he filled me in on your drama, Sam.”

Sam hadn’t known that Cas had sought out his faculty advisor to update him personally. He resolved to thank Castiel for being so conscientious on his behalf.

“They have me under control now.” Sam jerked his head towards the monitor and IV. “As long as I do nothing, we hope for the best.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” The academic pulled over the chair Nick normally used. He looked towards the door, “I’m not taking your visitors’ chair?”

“No. They are due here soon. My grandfather flew in from Kansas yesterday and I made them promise to give him a good breakfast. I’d say there’s a kitchen battle between my brother’s French Toast and my partner’s Huevos Rancheros.”

“Sounds like a great argument.” Mr. Wyatt chuckled.

“I’m real sorry we won’t be working together, Mr. Wyatt.” Sam offered a regretful grimace of a smile.

“First, we are going to be working together. I will ensure I can take you on when you return for the spring quarter. Second, please call me George.”

“Thank you, George.” Sam felt slightly awkward using his advisor’s first name, but he guessed they would build a strong working relationship. Mr. Wyatt was already his favorite lecturer and he had been chuffed to get his agreement to supervise his degree.

“From my limited understanding of bedrest, I gather you can’t engage in any physical activity, but I would wager that you’ll keep your mind active.”

“Oh Lord I hope so.” Sam huffed, “I already fear I’m turning to mush with daytime TV and
boredom, and I’m only three days in.”

“I guessed you’d feel that way,” George grinned. “Maybe you’d like to keep a toe in.”

Sam drew his brows together in question. He presumed the man knew he couldn’t attend classes.

“I mean keeping up to speed. Perhaps you’d like to subscribe to academic journals.” George dipped into his book bag. “I’ve brought you the latest copies of American Anthropologist and Anthropological Quarterly.”

“Oh,” Sam exclaimed with reaching hands, “Thanks. I mean, wow. Are these your copies, Mr. Wy…George? I can get Nick to mail them back to you.”

George ran a hand through his dark hair and laughed, “No Sam. They are faculty staff copies that I am reallocating as I see fit.”

“I never thought of getting journals for myself. Y’know, I think of them being in the library, but it’s a brilliant idea. I’d like to take a few more titles.” Sam bit his bottom lip trying to think of the ones most relevant to his preferred areas of study.

“I can e-mail you a list of the best in each anthropology discipline.”

“That would be great.” Sam beamed.

“There is no pressure here, Sam.” George clarified. “This isn’t a requirement from your advisor. If you don’t read a word until you return to Stanford, I’ll help you get back up to speed. I’m suggesting this for your pleasure.”

“Oh I know,” Sam was quick to respond.

“Good, because you have given the impression that you have a love for anthropology and I think you will find some very stimulating papers in the latest journals.”

“I’ve been thinking of doing an undergraduate thesis.” Sam confessed.

“You have?” Mr. Wyatt’s eyes widened in enthusiasm. “Have you thought much about the area you wish to address?”

“I have.”

“It’s a great idea. You can be doing some research at a relaxed pace as your health permits. Are you ready to tell me your topic?”

Sam was slightly reluctant, even shy, to put it out there, but this was his advisor. “I have the title and roughly where I want to go with it.”

“Sam, I’ll be available if you want to e-mail me questions or ideas. You don’t have to reveal your title today. And you certainly don’t have to stick to anything discussed at this early stage.”

“Anthropology of the Road.” Sam said with more confidence than he felt, then blew an audible huff.

“Like Kerouac?”

Sam shook his head. “No. More like families and people with no fixed abode.”
“The homeless?”

“Not that either. Kind of military brats, seasonal farm laborers in developing countries, diplomatic corps families, travelling musicians, theatre groups and roadies.”

“Carnies? Circuses?” Mr. Wyatt suggested.

Sam shuddered, “Ah, no circuses. Sorry no clowns. I can work around the lack of circuses.” He recovered his composure. “I mean, Dean and I, we were raised on the road.”

“I like it,” Mr. Wyatt rubbed his chin in thought, “It is original and you have a unique perspective. I can see you could have a lot to say. My main role may be helping you to cut and edit, rather than like many students when I help source material for them to include. You may find the word limit constraining, but that will be the challenge.”

The reception to his academic hopes had been good so far. Sam risked a further admission of his dreams, “I might want to develop it. For maybe my Masters, I hope.”

“Don’t stop there, Sam. Your Doctorate.” Mr. Wyatt smiled sincerely.

Nick spied the journals as soon as he entered the room. He whispered a question of if Sam had sent one of the friendly nurses into the campus for them, when he bent to plant a good morning kiss on Sam’s cheek. With amusement Sam noticed that Dean had dressed smartly again while Dean Senior wore a different classic suit in cream.

“Looking snazzy, Pawpaw.” Sam complemented.

“I told him he looks like Peter O’Toole,” Dean said.

Pawpaw inclined his head at the repeated compliment. “Says the young Guy Madison.”

“Who?” Sam asked, feeling slightly like Castiel must when he didn’t catch on to the Winchesters’ multiple TV references.

“The most delicious star of the 1940s in my humble opinion. You should have seen him in ‘Honeymoon’ next to Shirley Temple.” Pawpaw gave a half smile.

Sam sat up straight to receive one armed greeting hugs from Pawpaw and Dean. Then Sam filled them in on Mr. Wyatt’s visit. Without prompting Nick warmed Sam’s heart with his comment that the mailman would be kept busy. Sam knew that meant Nick would help arrange all the journals he wished for. His whole situation made Sam feel pretty helpless but at least he could help by doing nothing. He figured Nick must be chomping at the bit for ways he could help or ease the way. If he was a manipulative fiend, Sam reckoned he could ask Nick for a Bugatti or a top of the range Rolex and he’d find either waiting for him when he got home. However Sam would have everything he wanted if they could get Lola safely into the world.

Nick sourced another supportive chair so that Dean Campbell could relax comfortably. Dean flicked on a morning rerun of Dr Sexy MD, for background noise, he said. Sam gave him a look, heavy with the unspoken knowledge that with the sound muted and his chair turned at the right angle, his brother wanted to ogle Dr Sexy.

“You have a lovely home, Sam. As a landlocked Kansan, I must admit dropping off to the sound of the ocean was as exotic as the chocolate martinis that Nick made for our nightcaps.”

“Crème de Cacao, Grey Goose, and a wisp of Baileys.” Nick explained.
“OK.” Sam licked his lips. “I want to know why I never got one of those and for you to put me down for one later.”

“Much later,” Nick breathed into Sam’s lips as he rubbed their noses together.

“I’d say get a room,” Dean snorted, “But I guess we’re invading your room, Sammy.”

“Did you call Grandpa Samuel?” Sam enquired.

“I did.” Pawpaw nodded, “He has managed to reheat tuna casserole and make a bowl of cornflakes without blowing up our kitchen. He sends his thoughts.”

“I made pancakes for breakfast.” Dean chipped in.

Sam gifted Nick with an appreciative smile, as he thought of his earlier pondering about what was going on in their own kitchen.

“They were swell.” Pawpaw patted his waistband. “I overindulged.”

“Can’t have too many pancakes. ‘S impossible.” Dean grinned.

Movement at the door made Sam turn his head to see Anna and a younger blonde junior doctor who had come on rounds before.

“I need a few minutes with my patient.” Anna declared.

Anxious heated trembling caught Sam’s breath. Each person looked up in surprise.

“Dr Milton this is my grandfather, Dean Campbell,” Sam introduced, “Pawpaw this is my great obgyn, Anna Milton.”

“Please to meet you, sir,” Anna reached out for a handshake but Dean Campbell smoothly turned her hand and kissed the back of it.

“Charmed to meet you, my dear. Sam says good things about you.”

Pawpaw was a charmer. Sam watched as his professional consultant melted under old-time manners and charisma.

“Mr. Campbell perhaps your other grandson might like to take you for a coffee?”

“Please my dear, call me Dean. I won’t be scandalized by anything you say.” Dean Campbell laughed lightly, “I’m their birth-grandparent.”

“You’re a carrier?” The younger doctor blurted.

Anna glared at her.

“Odd man out,” Nick spoke up jocularly, breaking any tension by pointing an obvious finger at where his slight paunch rounded his tee, “Good living bump only.”

“Come on, Pawpaw,” Dean picked up the walking cane and offered his elbow for the senior to link his arm. Sam smiled. It was something to see Dean standing tall, walking confidently, in the role of assisting their grandfather.

Nick stayed but took a spot leaning against the wall out of the doctors’ way. Sam was subjected to
what felt like a full health check, everything from listening to his chest and Lola’s heartbeat, to taking more bloods.

Just as he was empathizing with lab rats and guinea pigs, Sam saw Anna make some notations on his chart and send her junior away with the samples. Dr Milton took a seat, flicked her red hair over her shoulder and placed her hands hanging between her knees.

“I’m satisfied that you have sustained improvement. I think it is time to make a deal,” She smiled relieving Sam’s nerves. “You follow every instruction I give you down to the fine print, and you give me back that bed for a new patient.”

“I can go home?” Sam beamed, catching Nick’s eye.

“Don’t have any doubts, Sam, that if you are in danger, we will re-admit you and deliver your baby. Each week, each day, you stay below dangerous levels will increase Lola’s chances as a preemie newborn. But yes, I’ll discharge you tomorrow. I want another 24 hours monitoring to be on the safe side. Only, and I mean this, only if you promise me faithfully you will take bedrest. Every day, Sam. The mornings you wake chock full of energy, you must use it playing Tetris on your laptop, planning all you’ll have to do when Lola arrives, or making phone calls to your friends, all while staying at rest. You understand?”

“We do.” Sam and Nick both promised.

“OK then. Ground rules.” Anna clasped her hands together. “Bed. Bed. Bed. Preferably in the left reclining position, but you can be propped up with pillows and use more cushions to elevate your legs simulating how we deploy the hospital bed.”

“Got it.” Sam nodded.

“No stress. No working yourself up about anything. Be prepared for boredom and feeling tetchy because of it.” Anna looked pointedly at Nick, “And be prepared for a frustrated partner. The grumpiest patients I’ve known have been those on bedrest.”

Nick hummed and squeezed Sam’s shoulder.

“Do you really mean I’ve gotta stay totally in bed?” Sam checked. “Like I can shower right? Putter around for a short while if I’m feeling good?”

“Yes. No.” Anna responded. “Yes, you can shower, go to your dining room for a hot meal, sit outside on a recliner to get some fresh air, and maybe take a very gentle stroll for 15, 20, minutes. I’ll get physiotherapy to call in and show you some in-bed muscle and joint exercises. No way will you putter around, cleaning, going shopping, washing your car, mowing your lawn, cooking, socializing, visiting Stanford…. None of that. Are there stairs in your home?”

“Yeah.” Nick answered.

“In that case I want you to limit the number of times you use them, Sam. A couple of times per day preferably and not running up them. If you are going to lie on the sofa, then bring everything you need. No taking trips back to the bedroom. Same if you are in bed. Some people use a mini-fridge or cooler, so you don’t have to trek to your kitchen for snacks or lunch. A phone and a set of take out menus are good too. If you are home alone, you should have our number and that of a neighbor or friend on direct dial as well as Nick’s in case of need. And never be afraid to call 911 in emergency.”

“OK.”
“And it may be tempting to do more if you are feeling well, but you’ll end up back here, either on inpatient bedrest or in the delivery suite with a very small preemie girl fighting to breathe and live.”

Sam puffed at the blow her words delivered. His hand strayed to rest on his bump. “If you said lie there and have Nick give me bed baths, I’d do it.”

Nick quirked a sneaky grin at Sam, who suspected there might be an X-rated version of a bed bath in their future.

Sam cleared his throat, “What about, huh, about sex?”

“No.” Anna looked between both men, “Off the agenda.”

“What if I take care of Nick?” Sam asked.

“Sam!” Nick objected, “You make me sound like some jerk who’d take pleasure where none can be given.”

“What if it gave me pleasure to take care of you?” Sam ducked his eyes from Anna’s gaze. He wasn’t embarrassed per se. Anna was his doctor. He’d lost track of the number of times Nick had gotten on his knees and blown Sam’s mind. If they’d been keeping tallies then Sam playing that role was surely overdue. “Could I give Nick a BJ? Oh my god that sounded so cold. I mean, if we were in the mood could I use my hands or my mouth?”

Talking about this was cringe worthy, but he needed to hear Anna’s answer.

“You are not to exert yourself, Sam, and intercourse could bring on labor, but in the privacy of your own home if you can ensure that you work around these limitations it is between you and your partner.”

“Good.” Sam nodded satisfied with the response.

“We are going to talk more about this.” Nick spoke low into Sam’s ear. He didn’t sound all that pleased. Sam guessed it wasn’t very romantic that they couldn’t mutually get aroused and come, but he didn’t see why Nick should have to suffer blue balls.

“Any other questions? Similar ones?” Anna wiggled her brows.

“Will I have to come in for tests often?”

“I’d like to see you twice a week at the moment. I’ll have my secretary pencil you in. If need be we can schedule daily checks or as I have said you can return as an inpatient. You be sent home with a set of urine sample jars, and a Home BP kit, which I want you to use every two hours. They don’t give exact calibrations but you will notice an increase in readings, perhaps before you become symptomatic. When you come in for your appointments bring a book or some music as you’ll be lying down for three hours for monitoring.” Anna made eye contact with each of them, “Any reservations?”

Sam licked his lips, “I don’t want to be a burden on Nick or Dean. I don’t want to be babysat.”

“Never a burden.” Nick muttered as he squeezed Sam’s arm again.

“I didn’t say you needed a sitter. You’ll need help and you’ll need to allow your family to do a lot of small everyday tasks for you. But I have explained what to do if you are alone for a time.” Anna stood to go, “Any symptom however slight you must call or come straight to the hospital. And
avoid diuretics so no coffee.”

Sam huffed wryly, “No sex, no coffee, no exercise. I’m gonna be one of those parents who regularly embarrasses their children with unending pregnancy and birth stories.”

“I look forward to it.” Nick laughed.

They exchanged a smile both imagining a teenager flouncing off to her bedroom when they’d begin to reminisce with rose tinted glasses about the trials they currently faced.

“Sam,” Anna stood to go, “Anything at all. You contact us. I can’t stress this enough. Racing heartbeat, nausea, swollen feet, dizziness, headaches, or a nosebleed. Let me or the doctor on duty decide if you need to come in.”

“I promise.”

“We promise.” Nick added to the departing doctor.

“I can go home,” Sam gulped. “I can come home while Pawpaw is with us. I’m stoked. I mean, I’m dreading bedrest, but being able to spend time with Pawpaw and Dean out of hospital. It’s magic.”

Sam sank into Nick’s sideways embrace.

“My Sam.” Nick shuddered against him. “I had such nightmares. You can’t imagine.”

Sam could. He’d had them too. He gulped back a wave of emotion, “I get to come home. I get to sleep in our bed and curl into you, my love.”

Nick made soothing noises as he promised they would be OK. Sam felt both drained and contented when the others returned. They were all overjoyed at the news that Sam was well enough to be discharged. Dean whipped out his cell to text Castiel.

Pawpaw rubbed his hands together at the prospect of being able to help out at their home for the few days before he headed back to Kansas. Dean had taken him out give him a guided tour of the Impala and all the memories Baby held in her metallic frame. Dean did a hilarious impression of Pawpaw’s face, the previous evening when he recognized the Impala as John’s car. Sam got a stitch in his side from Dean’s take off of Pawpaw’s repetitive “Oh My” while he had related how important the car had been as his lodestone growing up.

It was Pawpaw who was perceptive of Sam’s dip in energy and suggested giving Sam a break. Sam blamed the anti-hypertensive drugs’ side effects for his lethargy, although they started to lower his dose and phase them out over the previous day. He didn’t think he was believed, judging by the squinted eyes of his family.

“Perhaps we’ll go for that coffee now?” Pawpaw suggested to Dean. “What was the name of the place you met your man?”

“Light Up Your Beans.” Dean grinned, “But I call it Beans. I’d love to show ya, and I’ll drive the ‘Pala round Cowper Street to show you Sam’s old student house too.”

Nick followed Sam’s direction to pack up his soiled clothes and items he wouldn’t need again before going home. Sam asked him to dim the lights, then he was sent off to throw the duffel in his trunk, drop off the ‘emergency deferral application’ at Stanford, and to buy Sam’s hastily scribbled list of green and organic produce to restock the kitchen.
Sam couldn’t nap. He reclined on his left but his mind raced with the prospect of going home. Pawpaw was the first to return and check if Sam was awake. Dean was down the corridor, having a fight with the vending machine over a bag of chips.

“I don’t know how he can eat chips out of vending machines.” Sam huffed, “It’s like getting ‘em out of a fridge.”

“He has a healthy appetite, doesn’t he?” Pawpaw commented, “We had portions of pecan pie at the coffee shop.”

“I think he has a second stomach especially for pie.” Sam chuckled.

Pawpaw sat close to Sam’s bed. “You would be offended if I asked some pointed questions, while we have a moment alone?”

His mind rebooting to full awareness Sam shook his head to the enquiry.

“You know, Sam, that I’m of a different time.”

Sam snorted. “Sounds like you’re out of a historical novel.”

Pawpaw smiled gently in affirmation, “In my day, carriers and their partners would come before a judge, or their pastor if their religion recognized unions, and formulize their standing before commencing a family.” He raised a palm, “Don’t think for a moment I am criticizing your relationship, Son. I’m planting seeds that you might think of for the future. Would you like to be married, Sam? Are you nervous about Nick being an older man?”

Sam tried to keep his face calm but he could feel the stretch of his skin as his eyes widened and his nostrils flared in irritation.

“Now don’t fuss. Please. I’m not condemning you or Nick. Who am I to do that? Samuel and I faced our own critics, as did my parents. I can see your love for each other and I pray you’ll be blessed with many years of happiness.”

“Thanks, Pawpaw.” Sam breathed, all annoyance draining away.

“Good,” Pawpaw smiled softly as Sam relaxed, “I’d hate to have distressed you. There are challenges in every relationship and maybe your age gap will prove to be one, or maybe it never will. You’ve told me how your love grew for Nick, and he has told me how he fell for you in a sudden rush. The conventional love story of teen sweethearts being forever in love, certainly doesn’t always end in real happiness.”

“Like my parents.” Sam mumbled.

Dean Campbell nodded sagely, keeping his soft voice low and an eye out for Dean’s return, he admitted, “I was thinking of Mary.”

Sam could see that pain was as fresh now as twenty years ago.

A hankie was produced. Pawpaw dabbed at his eyes. “You know, you have a look of her. Deanie does too in different features, like you both inherited parts of my girl.”

“What was she like, Pawpaw?” Sam dared to ask.

“She was bright. So bright and beautiful. Headstrong and stubborn. Caring. Sweet. A wonderful
mother. I was proud of her. It tore at my heart when she’d turn up at the door with Deanie on her hip because John was drinking or…” Pawpaw bit his lip.

Sam couldn’t ask. He didn’t want to know if his Dad had been violent before Mary died. He didn’t think his grandfathers would have allowed spousal abuse to continue, but he was left pondering how much Mary told her fathers.

Dean entered displaying his bag of Fritos like a trophy. Pawpaw caught Sam’s eye. The older man was just as good as his namesake at silent communication. It was plain he did not want to upset Dean by evoking long lost unpleasant memories. Instead Pawpaw changed the subject by engaging Dean in a lively debate as to the best pie that they could bake together to treat Sam when they were back at Moss Beach. Sam didn’t get a word in edgeways, but that didn’t matter. He’d eat any flavor and enjoy every bite just to see and hear, Dean and Pawpaw with their eyes sparkling and laughter sounding.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed!
I am making good progress on the next chapter, so there will be a midweek update.
:-)
Chapter Notes

OK so this has more angst than I expected… I thought it was going to be solid fluff… but having Pawpaw there brings up the shadow of our boys’ childhood…

Also thanks to Blackrectangle for beta-ing the last chapter and her really helpful suggestions for this one.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Coming home was a sweet dream. Stepping from the car, the sea breeze blew strands of Sam’s hair into his eyes. He reached up to push them behind his ear. Seeing Pawpaw and Dean come around from the terrace to greet him, he changed his hand movement into a wave of greeting. Sam grinned like a loon. Walking on air, he didn’t protest Nick taking his arm to steer him towards his family, nor that Nick held his duffel. Nick was under determined orders from Anna to hustle Sam into bed, but this was modified when they saw the sun-recliner laid out with cushions at an angle sheltered from the breeze and lunch already prepared on the outdoor table.

Sinking into the cushions, Sam sighed as a layer of tension drained from his body.

“It’s good to be home.” He expressed, “I hate hospitals.”

“I hear ya,” Dean curled his lip and handed Sam a cold Sprite.

“I am glad to see you looking so well, Sam,” Pawpaw said, “and it is lovely to have you here. Nick and Dean have taken good care of me but having you home is a blessing.”

Sam drew a breath, “I want to thank you. Thank you all,” He caught Nick’s eye as he came back through the open French windows, “You’ve all put your lives on hold for me.”

Hands were raised and mouths opened to protest but Sam continued, “Let me say this. I appreciate it. I know you miss Cas, Dean, and Pawpaw flying cross country to be here. I, I mean it, ‘kay?”

“’kay Dude,” Dean huffed with affected faux-nonchalance, “You’re home two minutes and you gotta open with feels. You been watching Dr Phil in that hospital?”

Sam rolled his eyes able to decipher the underlying emotion in Dean’s words.

“Now leave your brother alone,” Pawpaw chided, “He’s a good honorable boy.”

Dean rolled his eyes behind Pawpaw’s back and stuck his tongue out at Sam. Wanting to josh Dean about his childish but funny response, Sam refrained because that would have ratted out his brother’s bad manners to their Pawpaw.

“Have Dean and Nick shown you the beach?” Sam asked instead.

Pawpaw nodded, “We have walked down to the water at low tide.”
“Nick and I have a running route that I could show you.”

Nick hummed and raised his brows.

“No running, Babe,” Sam corrected. “Down on the sands for the easy stroll Anna said I could take. I can show you my favorite spot to sit out too, Pawpaw.”

“That will be nice, Son, but tomorrow maybe? I think being discharged from hospital is enough excitement for one day.”

Sam chewed on his lip. He’d have to adjust to this. He felt capable of donning his running shorts and taking to the beach. He was a touch on the tired side, but would normally have run through that until endorphins kicked in and propelled him further and faster. Running to the bathroom to relieve his shrinking bladder was the most strenuous exercise he’d have for the foreseeable future.

“I am however a great believer in the benefits of fresh clean air,” Pawpaw continued, “While the days are warm, taking some time out here or having your wonderful long windows open, will blow any cobwebs of inertia away.”

“Much better than a hospital.” Nick agreed.

Dean gave a bark of a laugh, “You’re all the opposite of me. On sunny days, they used to have to threaten to drag me out by both arms to get me to leave my room at ACIC.” His face darkened, “Course that was because I tried to leave without sanction at the start and faced the consequences.”

Nick looked at Dean with sympathy. Sam winced at how their simple conversation could trigger Dean’s memories of his hellish period.

Pawpaw paled. “The consequences?”

Dean shook his body like a dog shaking its coat after emerging from a lake. “Not good ones. I got this,” He ran the pad of his middle finger over the lunar cheek scar that his grandfather had caressed on the day of his arrival, “for resisting. I was wild, with grief and rage, until they broke me.”

“Jesus.” Sam swore. He threw the cushion by his side onto the timber decking, but Pawpaw was faster to rise. The senior had a quaking Dean in his arms.

“Hold on to me, Deanie.” Pawpaw consoled. “You are not broken, you beautiful boy. I’m so proud of you.”

Dean gulped and turned his head into Pawpaw’s body with a sob, “How can you say that? I’ve had to claw and fight my way out, but I’m flawed and marked by it. I can’t speak if… I couldn’t speak from when Nick called to say Sam had collapsed until the next day… and I could… I could… You never saw me like Sam did, and Nick too, when I couldn’t walk right, couldn’t talk…”

“Hey,” Pawpaw tilted Dean’s head up with a two gentle fingers under his chin, “Look at me. I know. Believe me. While Sam was in Lawrence ICU and John was being detained for questioning. While Samuel rang relatives and undertakers, I washed the smoke and stains off your body. I laid you down in my bed and covered you with our blankets. I stroked your forehead while your eyes relived the nightmare. And neither of us could speak a word, but your small hand squeezed mine. You always were a beautiful person, Dean, and I don’t believe for a moment that the years have changed that.”
“Listen to Pawpaw,” Sam had been biting down on his lip.

“You took care of me.” Dean’s voice was small and young.

“I did. You and Sam, and I would have done it every day with pleasure.” The deep regret in Pawpaw’s words tore at Sam’s heart.

Dean’s mask slipped back up as he said, “Would have been a different childhood, hey Sammy? Being in one place? With someone to raise you with love?”

“I had someone who raised me that way. I had you, Dee.” Sam’s eyes bore holes into Dean with conviction.

Dean dropped his eyes as if he had reached his limit for ‘emotional’ discussion. He tugged at the fastenings of his wrist cuff. Sam almost expected a ‘Good Talk’ comment but Dean was mindful of his Pawpaw’s presence and instead picked up on a comment that the older man had made. “You said Dad was being questioned about the fire?”

Pawpaw nodded. “It was accidental. Final verdict of the fire officers. But they had to investigate. John had a record of misdemeanors. It also didn’t look so good that his four year old rescued his baby son, while he was comatose with alcohol on the sofa.”

“Mom gave me Sammy.” Dean’s eyes glistened. “She told me to run, but I followed her through the heat and smoke into Sammy’s nursery. And she put him in my arms but it was too hot. There were flames everywhere. I ran as fast as I could but Sammy was really heavy and when I looked back the whole upstairs was ablaze and Mom was… Mom was gone.”

Nick disappeared to get the box of Kleenex and shared them around. When Pawpaw had dried his eyes he touched Dean’s arm, “Thank you.”

“What?” Dean blinked.

“My mind has conjured horrific ghastly versions of my baby’s last moments for twenty years. I’ve seen John beat her, seen her die screaming for her boys… woken with night terrors of her death. The truth is dreadful but she put Sam into your arms?”

“She did.” Dean nodded slowly.

“She held her boys at the last.”

Dean nodded again.

“Thank you.” Pawpaw gave a little sigh, “Samuel told me, you know. He would say that Mary must have had a hand in getting you both out of the house. Would you mind very much if I called him?”

Dean and Sam both spoke together that they understood.

“I’ll close the windows. Give you some privacy.” Nick said rising to accompany the elder Dean indoors.

“Sonvabitch.” Dean muttered.

“Huh?” Sam raised his brows.

“I mean. I never thought of Pawpaw not knowing about when Mom died.” Dean ran a hand over
his jaw, “I guess I was the only eye witness. I’d told you I carried you out, but I never told any
details, until one of my drawings prompted a talking session with Layla.”

“You, you and Mom, saved my life Dean,” Sam gave his brother a sighing smile. “Pawpaw is so
proud of you, and you did a good thing there, telling him.”

“I guess.” Dean huffed.

Nick came out with fresh drinks. “Your Pawpaw is an amazing man,” He said as he pulled his lawn
chair close enough to hold Sam’s hand.

“He is,” Sam agreed.

“How are you holding up?” Dean asked.

“Besides Lola jabbing me with her elbow, I’m great. My BP is normal, well normal for me, and
I’m home.” Sam answered.

“There’s flowers in your room and a huge bunch in the den.” Dean said, “from Sarah, Jess and
Ava. The weird bonsai thing with charms is from Balthazar.”

Sam chuckled, “I’ll have to look at that one.”

Nick flicked his eyes upwards, “He dropped it into the restaurant. Told Lilith they are known
healing charms, before trying his charms out on hir. They’ve a date next week.”

“She’ll devour him.” Sam whooped.

“Who?” Pawpaw asked as he returned.

“Castiel’s cousin has a date with Nick’s trans bartender.” Dean grinned. “How’s Grandpa?”

“He’s fine.” Pawpaw obviously didn’t want to speak about the discussion with his husband, but his
eyes were red-rimmed.

Nick cleared away their lunch remains while Dean took out his sketch pad to show Sam and
Pawpaw what he had been working on. The latest works were really impressive. They were scenes
from Bodega Harbor that had been quick line drawings. Dean was fleshing them out and re-
working them in his spare time.

“You could sell these.” Pawpaw said as he turned the page back and forth.

“Someone’d want to pay hard earned bucks for ‘em?” Dean asked doubtfully.

“You bet.” Sam replied.

“Definitely.” Pawpaw added.

Dean huffed and went to put the pad away. Sam noticed the swagger to his walk with a private
smile.

The day was catching up with Sam, but he was reluctant to make his excuses and leave the others.
When Nick came back out, Sam quipped, “I think I might go upstairs to my new kingdom.”

“I’ll come with you.” Nick stood.
“It’s the start of the Bed-In.” Dean chuckled. “Who’s John Lennon and who’s Yoko Ono?”

“Sam’s Yoko. His hair is longer.” Nick joined in the fun.

“Yeah Yeah,” Sam snorted, “Pick on the poor invalid.”

“That should be Yeah Yeah Yeah.” Pawpaw added with a smirk.

“Oh my God. This is surreal. I’m being teased with Beatles references by my Grandfather.” Sam wheezed.

Nick linked his arm to take the stairs at an obligatory slow pace. He sang his own adaptation into Sam’s ear, “I thought I lost my love, but I saw him yesterday, it’s you I’m thinking of, and I know just what to say, I love you.”

Sam twisted to peck Nick’s cheek at his silly but adorable singing and to take the furtive chance to flip Dean the bird.

When they got to the bedroom Sam took a quick shower hoping it would lessen his fatigue but he stumbled as he emerged from the wet room. Strong arms surrounded him. He pressed his head into Nick’s chest. Limp and drained, Nick held him up and without a word moved him to their bed. It was like Nick was his anchor.

“You’re my port in a storm,” Sam giggled with the hysteria of overtiredness.

“I hope that means I’m your safe harbor and not any port in a storm,” Nick chuckled. He eased Sam down onto freshly laundered soft sheets. He slipped a pillow between Sam’s knees and settled him on his left. Light kisses were pressed to Sam’s lips. Sleepily Sam touched his lover’s stubbled cheek and whispered an early goodnight.

Drifting and drowsy in the luxury of their huge bed, Sam snuggled into the light summer comforter. It was later when the mattress dipped and he felt Nick climb in behind him. He’d felt the lack of this intimacy over the past few nights. One night was too many to go without. Nick pressed their bodies flush together. Sam responded by pushing back against him. Spooned with Nick’s hand stroking his flank and bump, Sam breathed, “Love you.”

“Me too, my sweetheart, now go to sleep.”

“Mmm, ‘kay,” Sam mumbled before doing just that.

++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Sam didn’t mind that the bedroom was his center of operations. He followed Anna’s advice and begrudgingly had to admit that the pamphlet Deb Rutherford had given to him was full of helpful tips to keep life interesting. It was early days. Sam had his partner and brother in attendance. Also he was glad to have these few days getting to know Dean Campbell. Saturday, the day of Pawpaw’s departure, was rushing towards them too quickly.

Having his Pawpaw come check on him, bring him sandwiches, and sit with him on the terrace in the evening was a joy. They stuck to stories that lifted Sam’s spirits. Pawpaw rifled through Nick’s music collection and selected classic favorites to fill their home with Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. There was an aura and a presence associated with the older man, a great majority of that was Pawpaw’s warm personality and unconditional love for the boys he had lost. A portion too was something Sam had seen in movies and in school mates’ homes. Dean was the one who named it. It was the sacred connection of Family with a capital F and Blood with a capital B.
Sam watched in fascination as Dean Campbell bustled around the house, magically making small chores vanish before Sam could begin to feel a twinge of guilt at having to leave them for the others. It was difficult to believe his Pawpaw was seventy four years old, until the gentleman would nod off to sleep in the armchair. He was constantly forgetting his walking cane and reading glasses, laughing heartily when Nick or Dean reunited him with them.

On Thursday afternoon Sam heard the distinctive rumble of the Impala announcing Dean’s return from his appointment with Victor. Within moments Dean popped his head around the bedroom door.

“Pawpaw resting?”

“I guess so if he’s not downstairs,” Sam answered. “I got second helpings of Pawpaw’s homemade tomato rice soup.”

Dean clutched at his heart over-dramatically, “Thief.”

Sam smirked and offered him the empty bowl and spoon to bring back to the kitchen.

“Hey, Sammy. Can I use your laptop?”

Sam closed down the window, not really wanting Dean to see the Angel spoilers message board. Dean had gotten enough teasing material when he’d spotted Sam’s ‘Badass Wesley’ boner during the last season.

“You only need to ask. Checking for Cas sent smooches?” Sam smacked his lips obscenely as he lifted the laptop tray towards Dean.

“So what if I miss my nerdy teacher?” Dean puffed, “Now Imma gonna delete all your vids of frolicking puppies and kittens tangled up in balls of twine.”

“No way. Hand it back, Dee. They’re for Lola.”

“I was kidding,” Dean sniggered, “Y’mean there are kitten videos? What folder?”

“Not telling.”

“Ve haf vays of making you tok.” Dean eyes popped.

“Geez, I’m quivering.” Sam laughed.

Dean tapped on the keyboard for a moment, then blew a raspberry. “Huh.”

“Is that a good huh or a bad huh?”

“I dunno.” Dean scratched at the back of his neck.

“Spill.”

“Aaron.”

“Aaron Bass?” Sam squinted.

“No Aaron the freaking Yoda Jedi storm-trooper. Of course Aaron Bass.”

Sam waited.
“He’ll be in The States for Rosh Hashanah.”

“Sydney’ll be over the moon,” Sam commented. “When’s that?”

“Do I look like I know?” Dean said tetchily. “He wants to meet up before Yom Kippur.”

“Do you want to meet him?” Sam asked slowly.

“How do I tell Cas?” Dean said as if he hadn’t heard Sam’s question.

“Just tell him.”

“You crazy dude? Just tell him? Seriously?”

“Yeah, Dean. Just tell him. Cas is cool.”

Dean clicked his tongue, unconvinced.

“Dean, you can’t keep that a secret. It would hurt Cas.”

“Might hurt him, me seeing Aaron.”

“Worse if you do it behind his back. Telling him is the decent thing to do.”

Dean hummed, “I’ll think about it.”

Sam sighed, hoping it was a case of Dean needing a little time to decide if he wanted to meet Aaron, and how to approach telling Castiel.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++

The following afternoon sounds of laughter and the beat of Led Zeppelin IV drifted up to Sam’s bedroom. Dean and Pawpaw were cooking up a storm in preparation of Castiel’s arrival that evening. Nick had gone into The Gates for the shift changeover to avoid World War 3 breaking out between Crowley and Alastair. Lola was doing a tribal rain-dance against Sam’s stretched stomach muscles. Sam threw the Terry Pratchett, he was tired of reading, across the bedcovers. He was bored, uncomfortable, sore and feeling out of the loop. However he was under another set of instructions to stay at rest because he had a nosebleed that morning and as a result was told over the phone by Anna Milton to take it extra careful that day.

“A bird in a gilded cage,” Sam muttered partially to himself and partially as a grouse to Lola. “Your Daddy is sick of this Lola Petal. I’m allowed to go downstairs and I’m damn well going.”

He threw on soft lounge pants and his Cardinals hoodie. Descending the stairs slowly rather than stomping two steps at a time, Sam gained the advantage of arriving at the kitchen unnoticed. Steam and delicious aromas greeted him. Pawpaw had his sleeves rolled up and was wearing Nick’s ‘Kitchen Devil’ apron. He was pressing a homemade pie crust into their large fluted tin. Dean was seated at the table, juicing lemons on the glass squeezing gadget.

“Sammy!” Dean’s head shot up, “What ya doing up? You coulda shouted if you wanted something.”

Dean jerked his thumb towards the baby monitor on the huge dresser. Nick had raided their Lola hoard for the monitor. Sam had shelved any indignity about making use of the device when he’d gone back to bed without his cell phone and had wanted to call Jess.
“As if you’d have heard me over Stairway to Heaven.”

“T’d’a heard you.” Dean protested with a grin that showed he knew Sam was ribbing him.

Sam pulled out the chair at the opposite end of the pine table, “What you making?”

“Baking,” Pawpaw corrected, “My special Peach Pie.”

“It’s awesome.” Dean added.

Pawpaw smiled indulgently, “You haven’t tasted it yet.”

“I’m a specialist. I can tell.”

“I believe you.” Pawpaw ruffled Dean’s hair.

Sam snorted at Dean’s surprised gape. Pawpaw kept moving, getting his warmed sugared peach slices off the stove and asking Dean to pour the lemon juice over them.

“Should you be up?” Dean tried again.

“You’re not shooing me back to bed. I was bored. Monumentally bored.” Sam pouted. “I’m not meant to use the stairs much and if I go back now, I’ll have to come down again when Cas gets here.”

“I see a flaw in your logic.” Pawpaw pointed a spatula at him, “relating to descending at this time.”

Sam did his best to look sheepish but he was too happy to be in the midst of things.

Pawpaw came over with a small bowl containing an egg. “Why don’t you fork this up for the glaze, while Dean assists me with the pastry lattice?”

Whisking an egg made Sam feel foolishly useful. Pawpaw brought the perfectly lattice topped pie and a pastry brush over for Sam to coat the strips.

He took off the apron and replaced it on its hook. When the pie was in the oven he proudly declared, “Now we can say the pie was truly a family affair.”

Dean looked like he was fit to burst with glee. When he came around to pass Sam on the way to wash his hands in the sink, Sam laughed loudly at all the flour on the end of his black tee and down his jeans. “Dude, did more flour end up on you than in the recipe?”

Dean looked down at the mess and attempted to pat some of it off. “First I did the pastry rolling, flour’s a hazard. Second, there’s no recipe.”

Sam raised skeptical brows.

“Pawpaw made the sweet pastry using his hands as measuring cups.”

The senior ducked his head, acknowledging Dean’s truth.

“No way,” Sam said, “Impressive, Pawpaw.”

“The bake will take the bones of an hour. Why don’t we sit outside with some iced tea?” Pawpaw suggested.
Sam wasn’t sure if iced tea was a diuretic but he wasn’t going to pass up the chance to try a single glass made by Pawpaw.

They remained on the terrace as the afternoon cooled into early evening. Pawpaw had checked the pie just under the hour mark and declaring it done, left it to cool in the pantry. Nick returned and took control of the kitchen to prepare the main course of their last dinner together.

Dean had kicked off his boots and was leaning back on the two-seater with a long necked beer when Castiel’s Ford Taurus pulled into the property.

Leaping to his feet, Dean crowed, “He’s early.”

Castiel must have left immediately after his final class of the week, a fact confirmed by his rumpled dark suit, white shirt and askew blue tie. Dean threw himself bodily around the startled teacher, pushing him back against the open driver’s door of his car, running his hand though Castiel’s dark hair and sharing repeated kisses.

“That’s Cas.” Sam informed their grandfather redundantly. “Anyone would think Dean hadn’t seen him for a year.”

Dean practically pulled Castiel by their linked hands onto the terrace. He cleared his throat and stood tall. “Pawpaw, this is my partner Castiel Fletcher. Cas, this is my Pawpaw Dean Campbell.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Sir.” Castiel leaned forward with his hand extended.

Pawpaw clasped both of his around it, “As am I.”

“We’ve got pie.” Dean blurted.

Sam laughed and shook his head slowly.

Nick appeared leaning against the frame of the open windows with his arms crossed. “Dinner first. Pie later.”

Dean slumped in defeat. “Good God, Sam he’s gonna be a great Dad.”

Nick puffed up like a peacock at that remark. He came over and shook Castiel’s hand. “Welcome back, Cas. How is the school?”

Cas removed his jacket and sank into the two-seater, patting beside him for Dean to retake the spot he had recently vacated. “Tough but brilliant. Brilliant but tough. They handed back their first homework assignments this week. I burned the midnight oil doing corrections. I’ve learned my lesson about spacing out submission days for different classes.”

Pawpaw nodded in amusement. “I remember it well. Mind you I taught the youngest grades. Dean tells me you are teaching honors chemistry and AP physics.”

Cas sneaked a glance at Dean. “I have freshmen to seniors of all abilities, including the sophomore biology class that clashed with Inias’s schedule.”

“Inias is Cas’s friend that I told you about,” Dean volunteered, “He’s the social science and biology teacher.”

“Do you like the school?” Pawpaw asked.

“I do,” Castiel leaned forward, “It is not too big. Not overwhelming for my first school after
graduation. Everyone has been very welcoming. I think Dean and I will enjoy living in Bodega Bay for a long time.”

Pawpaw smiled. “I’m glad to hear that. And it is great to have another teacher in the family.”

Dean beamed at Castiel’s inclusion in Pawpaw’s definition of family. Sam beckoned Dean over and whispered to him. “I think Cas is a hit.”

“Me too,” Dean replied, “Honest to God I wasn’t worried. I mean Cas is awesome, of course Pawpaw was gonna love him.”

“Can I get a hand with the table?” Nick called from inside, “Not Sam!”

Castiel and Dean both rose to go but Pawpaw asked Cas to stay.

“I got this.” Dean said, heading in to assist Nick.

“As,” Sam spoke up, “before I forget. Thank you. You really came through with Stanford. You cut through it all so I only had to get that form submitted.”

“It was nothing.”

Sam wasn’t having that. “It wasn’t. It meant a lot, and my advisor Mr. Wyatt came to see me in the hospital on the back of your phone call.”

“He was very concerned when I spoke with him.” Castiel said.

“You helped take a weight off Sam’s mind.” Pawpaw smiled. “Castiel, could we have a word? You don’t mind Sam being here?”

“No.” Cas replied with a hint of wariness.

“Tell me. You and Dean have moved in together. And you speak of the long term. Do I have any need to worry about your commitment to my grandson?”

Castiel licked his lips. He leaned forward and spoke with intensity, “I love him. He is everything. I never knew how lost I was without him until we met.”

Pawpaw patted his hand. “That’s all I wanted to know. Thank you. Now I think I hear my elder grandson hollering about our meal being ready. Shall we?”

“I could eat a horse.” Sam said as he rose from the recliner. He offered Pawpaw his arm.

“I had a ham sandwich at recess.” Castiel commented, “You could say I have a healthy appetite tonight. We could give Dean a run for his money.”

Sam chuckled, “Naw, Cas. Forget it. There’s pie.”

Before the pie there was a huge warmed serving dish of Nick’s juicy ragu. Rich sauce was tossed with fresh taglietelle, handmade by Baldur and purloined by the restaurant owner. Bowls of freshly grated Parmesan and a long baguette of garlic bread sat to each side of the ragu. It was delicious, so much so that conversation was limited to small talk and Nick’s dilemma of which manager had seniority during his absence.

Sam used the last piece of buttery garlic bread to mop up smears of sauce. He leaned sideways, pecking Nick’s cheek in thanks.
Dean Campbell placed his knife and fork neatly on his empty plate. He nodded toward Nick. “My compliments to the chef.”

“It was a simple ragu.” Nick waved his hand over the table.

“It was delicious.” Castiel inclined his head in agreement.

“Very tasty,” Pawpaw added, “And nice to learn that Sam has found a partner who can cook.”

“Is that a comment about Grandpa?” Sam asked, as he raised his glass of soda.

“Man cannot boil an egg.” Pawpaw grinned, “but my own Poppa said I spoiled him.”

“Was…?” Sam’s eyes widened as he joined the dots, “Did you have two Dads too?”

“You never?” Dean gasped. “Why didn’t I remember that?”

“You were only a kid, Deanie. I might have told you bedtime stories about my Dads but there were lots of family tales. And I simply thought I must have mentioned them already. Please forgive my senior moments. I forget how little you know.” Pawpaw took a sip of the Valpolicella that Nick had matched with the ragu. “My parents had a bakery in downtown Lawrence. Controversially and scandalously they were the only local carrier couple of their generation. You understand? Poppa and Dad were both carriers. Poppa was my birth parent. Dad carried my older siblings Eddie and Sally. We all worked in the bakery. It was quite a conundrum for the town prudes. Who should they condemn for not being a homemaker when Poppa and Dad shared everything?”

“That’s amazing.” Castiel commented. “To think that way back then, they were open about who they were?”

“Yes, they were.” Pawpaw said wistfully. “Everyone, neighbors, school friends, knew they were carriers. They faced problems about being different, being other. But Pops and Dad were brave proud men, and during the harsh times of the Depression people had more to be worried about than which baker was pregnant. Also Poppa had two Dads and a long family history of carriers with loving positive and negative hateful stories down through the generations.”

“For real?” Sam asked.

“Oh yes. We have ancestors who were driven from their villages, even killed. But also ones who stowed away on a ship to the New World to be together.”

“Are there any cousins Sam could meet from your side of the family?” Nick enquired.

Pawpaw’s face fell, “My brother Eddie died at Iwo Jima. Sally never married. She passed in 1981 but I have a photograph at home of her holding Deanie.”

“I’m sorry.” Sam whispered.

“I’d love to see that photograph.” Castiel smiled tenderly at Dean.

“I bet I’m all pudgy and red cheeked.” Dean huffed.

Pawpaw laughed, “You were a darling. If I remember Sally tried to remove your binky for the shot and you sucked so hard on it she gave up.”

“Stop.” Dean yelped.
“Now I must see it.” Castiel grinned.

“I can have a copy made.” Pawpaw offered. “When I get home I will go through my albums and make up a collection that I can gift each of you. After all there’ll be another generation to look back at their ancestors soon.”

Sam placed his hand on his bump, imagining showing little Lola all the pictures of her family. Photos were precious things. He had cherished and guarded his few of Dean during his teenage years. Maybe one of his bedrest projects could be sourcing a high quality album online. He would enjoy organizing and transferring the new photos from Kansas, his treasured ones, and the new favorites taken since he came to California. He’d purchase a thick book so he could leave plenty of pages for future occasions.

“It must have been difficult to lose your brother and sister.” Dean said sympathetically to his grandfather.

“Life is full of losses and gains.” Pawpaw said sagely. “I think we are in a gain time now. And there were always plenty of Campbell cousins to fill the family home.”

“Are there any carriers on that side of the family?” Sam asked.

Pawpaw shook his head. “No, but I wasn’t surprised when Dean told me you are both carriers, especially when you consider the rumors about Henry.”

“Excuse me? Who?” Sam asked, “Henry Campbell?”

“Henry Winchester. Ran off in the night. It was said he’d married John’s mother under family and church pressure to deny his biology, and there was talk that he didn’t leave with nowhere to go.”

“Oh my God.” Sam was goggle eyed. He could see Nick had paused with his glass midway to his lips. Dean had frozen too.

“That’s awful.” Castiel spoke. “Some families cannot accept having a gay or a carrier son.”

“Tragic.” Pawpaw agreed. “I can’t imagine how terrible it must be to have to deny your identity. I know you boys had to hide it from John for your own safety.”

“But to be forced to marry a woman.” Sam shuddered. “I know many men, carriers or not, never come out of the closet. And some carriers are bisexual like Dean, or some prefer women. But I can’t imagine. God, if that is true, I bet Dad knew. That was why he was always banging on about ‘sissy dads’, derogatory abusive crap about carriers, and his speech of chimps living in trees.”

“His what, Son?”

Dean answered, his voice dropping an octave in imitation of their father, “Just because we can climb trees doesn’t mean we have to live in them like chimps.” He inhaled deeply, “All that BS about male carriers procreating with women and ignoring biology.”

“Ah-ha. I see. Complete hogwash.”

“It was.” Sam huffed.

“Damn right.” Dean added.

Castiel stretched his hand across to grab Dean’s fingers. Sam could see Pawpaw’s almost
imperceptible nod of approval at Cas’s supportive gesture.

“Enough talk of John Winchester.” Nick declared, “It will make the cream sour.”

“Pie!” Dean remembered and dashed to the pantry.

Pawpaw produced a bowl of freshly whipped cream and served them each a generous portion. Sam moaned almost as much as Dean around mouthfuls of the delicious treat, redolent with brown sugar and spices. The pastry melted in Sam’s mouth as his taste buds rang with sweet juices and cool luxurious cream.

“You know, Dean,” Sam said between bites, “I think I’mma having my first pie-orgasm.”

“Welcome on board,” Dean smirked. Sam thought that’s what his brother said with his mouth full and hand reaching for the cake-slice to lift a second generous piece of pie onto his plate.

While Nick cleared the table, and Sam twisted his fingers at being banned from helping, Pawpaw changed the subject to how Sam was coping with the pregnancy. They adjourned to the den so Sam could recline on the sofa. Dean and Castiel helped clear up while grandson and grandfather compared notes on indigestion and the growing pressure on Sam’s bladder. Pawpaw chuckled knowingly at the last remark, telling him that the crude saying ‘as squashed as a carrier’s bladder’ was true. In the final trimester male carriers needed to be continually aware of the nearest restroom according to Pawpaw.

When they were all reunited with a tray of coffees and a hot chocolate for Sam, Nick dimmed the lights and put a Rat Pack compilation CD on for background noise. He grazed Sam’s forehead with his lips. Then he offered to top up the coffees with Baileys or Hennessy.

“You know I honestly am not a big drinker,” Pawpaw dipped his head towards the Baileys. “Your partner’s cocktails and ideas are too tempting.”

“You are on a vacation of sorts, Dean.” Nick allayed any protest, “Allow me to treat you. I make a mean Irish Coffee too, but we used up all the cream with the Castiel Welcome Pie.”

With a rocking laugh Dean Winchester poked Castiel in the ribs, “That’s it. Pawpaw’s Peach Pie is gonna be known as Castiel Welcome Pie forevermore.”

“I will have one warm from the oven on the day you both come to Kansas to visit.” Pawpaw promised.

“I’d love that.” Dean looked towards the ceiling for a moment. “I’d take Cas to Lawrence and show him where I was born.”

Sam gulped. “I wish Dad had left us there. Y’know I used to think he dragged us around like a bag of stones slung over his shoulder because there was nothing or no-one else to take us, and he always threatened that CPS would split us up and send Dean to a home. But there was somewhere for us. Our grandparents wanted us.”

“Sammy,” Dean choked, “No point wishing on the past.”

“Geez, Dean, when I think of all the nights we went hungry, couldn’t sleep from the cold, the sound of his belt hitting you. Why? Just why?” Sam sobbed, feeling the pressure of Lola moving, “How could he do that to his own children?”

Nick pulled Sam into a hug, permitting him to bury his nose in the warm skin of his love’s neck.
“Son,” Pawpaw intoned with his hand pressed against his heart, “There is no fathoming John Winchester. You could twist yourself into knots attempting to.”

“I know,” Sam sagged further against Nick. “I’m real sorry for being a downer on your last night here.”

“Shush, now. Don’t talk trash. We’re all a tad emotional.”

“I think I want to go to bed,” Sam whispered to Nick. He was drained. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Castiel said. “I came here thinking we’d all be eating out of cartons around your bed.”

That was an obvious exaggeration but Sam was grateful for the remark.

Dean asked if he wanted anything brought up with him. Sam shook his head. He pocketed his cell phone off the table. Nick would bring up a carafe of water. Everything else was waiting in the room.

Pawpaw kissed Sam’s forehead goodnight and said “You go and lie down nice and quiet-like. That little girl is not ready to come into the world. She’s nice and snug in her Daddy’s belly. You’ve got to hold on to her for another couple months.”

“I will.”

“I know you can do it.” The older man nodded, “You’re a good boy, Sam. You’ll take care of her and cherish her, and when she arrives your life will change in the most wonderful way. I promise.”

“I believe you.”

Pawpaw was leaving. His bag was packed and sitting by the door. The day was cloudy. Earlier had been fine. Sam had taken his Pawpaw for a short stroll on the sands, before Dean made a blast of cinnamon and syrup drenched French toast. Now rain threatened as if the weather was matching the Winchesters’ mood. Sam had remained on the sofa storing up precious last minutes with his grandfather. Dean headed into Pacifica to fill up the Impala’s tank. Castiel, in the Taurus, would follow Dean and Pawpaw to the airport before their two car convoy continued on to Bodega Bay.

Sam excused himself from Pawpaw, Nick and Castiel to use the downstairs restroom and get a glass of iced water. Dean had left the baby monitor on the kitchen dresser from when he had been cooking and Sam had lain on the couch post-walk.

“I wanted to talk to you before I leave,” Dean Senior’s voice came through the monitor. “Both of you boys.”

Sam froze. It was like eavesdropping, but he couldn’t help listening.

“Nick, Castiel, I have seen my grandsons with you both and the affection between them and you. I want to know your intentions towards them.”

A puff of air blew out of Sam’s lungs at his grandfather’s bluntness.

Both Cas and Nick jumped in, speaking over each other to say they loved their partners.

Dean Campbell hummed, “I believe you but let me tell you that love is not enough.”
The unspoken history of Mary Campbell and John Winchester being in love and marrying over her father Samuel’s protests weighed on Sam’s chest.

“For almost twenty years I woke every morning with an ache in my heart wondering where Deanie and Sam were and if they were alright and if John Winchester was treating them like the princes they are. And every day I knew deep inside that it wasn’t so, because if it was, he would have allowed the boys to be in our lives. I won’t rehash the bitter cruel words that were exchanged after Mary’s funeral but when John left Lawrence, he stole our family and the future we wanted Dean and Sam to have.” He paused to wet his throat. No-one spoke until he continued. “We tried private investigators, the church, CPS, everything… until it wore me down and Samuel had to, what do you young people call it?... Stage an intervention before I broke down completely, but I never gave up that kernel of hope… I can see the questions in your eyes. Why am I telling you this? It is partly a warning not to hurt them, but it is also to tell you that you never know what life will bring. Samuel and I have been married for over fifty years. We’ve fought. He can be a cranky demanding sonuvabitch and I can be a moany whiny bastard. Mary was the light of our lives. When that light went out and we lost the boys too, it was the hardest road we had to travel, but I never doubted Samuel’s support and we are each other’s rock. My question is, will you be there when the ‘shit hits the fan’, when the storm comes, when businesses fail, when your children rebel, when life seems monotonous and the days long?”

Castiel’s graveled deep tone said a simple, “Yes.”

Then Sam’s heart leapt as he heard a break in his Nick’s voice, “We’re facing a storm now. A slow brewing one. I promise you, Mr. Campbell, that I am not turning away from Sam, no matter what. I can’t bear to think of losing Lola, but if we end this year in mourning instead of in joy, my arm will still be around Sam’s waist. After many years I found him. I don’t care about being sappy, Sam is my soul mate, the one. I’d do anything for him.”

“And I for Dean.” Castiel said.

Sam picked up the monitor receiver and moved across the hall back to the den. Blinking back his tears, which must have been hormonal, Sam placed the monitor reverently into Nick’s hands. “I heard everything. And right back at ya.”

Nick beamed, putting the monitor aside.

Castiel and Pawpaw smiled indulgently at them.

“You heard everything?” Nick double checked with hands spread in a gesture of open embarrassed apology, or seeking of acceptance.

“You are a sap.” Sam punched his open-mouthed partner in the arm, “But you’re my sap.”

“What’d I miss?” Dean asked, swinging the Impala keys around his finger.

“Nothing,” Castiel said coming to wrap him in a hug, “But how much I love you.”

Dean bopped his head and dragged out his first word, “Ri-ight. I go out for ten minutes and this whole house turns click flick.”

“That’s right.” Sam grinned.

“And sappy. Don’t forget sappy.” Nick added.

“You young people have done me a powerful good.” Pawpaw laughed. “I feel ten years younger.
Samuel won’t recognize me at arrivals.”

That was the moment Sam treasured, rather than the heart tugging, tight hugging teary goodbye that followed. It was a scene to be remembered in soft focus. Pawpaw with crinkles of happiness on his face, Dean smiling with his head on Castiel’s shoulder, and Nick relaxed and contented after all their stress. This was the home and the family where he would be proud and fortunate to raise his daughter.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
The folded piece of paper with Alfie’s directions was kept safe in Dean’s jeans pocket. Dean attempted to keep his bearings without checking the concisely written instructions. Having only traveled this back roads route once, in bright sunshine with Alfie and Poppy as distraction, Dean was pretty chuffed with his sense of direction when he saw the vegetation open up to the unofficial parking area. The Impala crawled to a stop. Dean backed her up to where beaten down earth was packed solid. He gave himself a mental pat on the back for making it without any wrong turns to the tiny cove nestled between low cliffs.

“Are we here, Dean?” Castiel asked with the thrill of being kept in the dark about Dean’s surprise.

Dean nodded. He leaned across, cupping Castiel’s jaw, and nibbling biting caresses to his lover’s lips. He hummed into their shared breath, “My Cas. Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you,” Cas breathed back.

“Let me show you this place. It’s cool.” Dean grinned. He pulled on the lapel of Cas’s jacket for a final kiss before leaping from the car.

They unloaded the flower crate that Dean had co-opted from their landlady under the thrown glow from the Impala’s headlights. It was amazing to be apart from civilization. There wasn’t the deserted silence like some inland places he had taken off to on the spur of the moment with Sam during that year or so when he’d had his license. Instead there was the crashing of breaking waves. Sea birds called as they returned to their evening roosts, and in the distance the background low level hum of Highway 1 drifted westward towards them.

It was getting dark. The sun had set while they traveled the few miles north. Vivid pink spread with iridescent coral set the backdrop for Dean’s birthday gift. In deference to his special day, Cas had been permitted within reason to choose the music. Thin Lizzy’s Dancing in the Moonlight fitted their mood.

It wasn’t the only present of the day. Dean had woken his partner with a lazy sensual blow job that had morphed into a steamy and tremendously cramped shared shower. As it was a workday Dean didn’t have time, which was shortened further by the shower, to cook Cas a special breakfast but he’d sliced fresh fruit while par-baked croissants were in the oven. The mailman brought cards from Balthazar, Tamara, and Sam and Nick. At school lunch recess Castiel was excused from his turn on the hall supervision rota. Inias led some of their colleagues in organizing a takeout meal with a cake for which Castiel was not allowed to put his hand in his pocket.

Dean spent the afternoon packing up picnic food, filling the cooler with beers, calling Alfie to check if he took a left at the fork in the road, and soothing Sammy over repeated phone calls.

Sam’s BP had been higher during his Tuesday appointment and they had kept him at the hospital until late evening when it began to normalize. There was a lingering sense of freak out two days later. Dean willingly paused from making calzone to let Sam get his worries and frustrations off his
chest. Everything was ready when Cas came home, but the gift of this special spot wasn’t planned until twilight. In the meantime, Balthazar phoned. Then Dean and Castiel had one celebratory drink in Pamela’s bar.

When Dean was satisfied that all his offerings were spread across the old army blanket, he gestured for Cas to tuck in.

“This is delicious.” Castiel reclined on his side, propped up by his elbow, devouring the calzone.

Dean beamed proudly. “I made it and the apple pie and the mini choc muffins. I bought the sausage at the deli.”

“Yum.” Cas answered with a toothy grin. “This is the greatest gift.”

“You haven’t seen the best yet. Wait until it’s proper dark. We’ve no light pollution.”

Castiel leaned back, “I’d do this. I’d climb out my bedroom window and run through the fields. Lie on the flat of my back in summer and watch the stars move across the sky. It was proof to my family of my oddity but I’d lie there knowing the universe was so much bigger and more fantastic than the small world I lived in.”

Dean scooted over. He wrapped his arm around Cas’s shoulder, “Me too. Dad kicked me out one night. Told me he couldn’t stand my silent staring and go sleep in the Impala. But we were down south and it was baking all night. I lay on the grass beside Baby and saw those stars too. Other nights I’d escape for a while when Dad slept. Not if we were in a bigger town and not for too long but those stuffy stinky rooms would cave in on me and I’d need to see the sky. Then when I got my license, if I had the Impala, me and Sam would take off and we’d find an empty field, pull her over, and sit on the hood.”

“We could sit on the hood?” Cas suggested.

Dean took two fresh beers from the cooler. He turned off the lights to save the battery and helped Cas to climb up.

“There.” Dean pointed beyond the quarter moon. “The big dipper. I used to think it was like a big ladle scooping out candy stars.”

“Ursa Major.” Cas’s gaze tracked Dean’s arm and far beyond.

Dean poked his elbow into Castiel’s side, “No science names. No Aquirigas or Starrius Maximus.”

Castiel chuckled, “You should apply to NASA to name new discoveries.”

“I should. I’d be awesome.”

“Pie-i-us Nom-Nom-us.” Cas sniggered.

“Don’t forget Impala Grandus over there,” Dean said picking The Swan out for re-naming.

“And that there is The Hunter,” Castiel pressed their sides together, “He is a green eyed Adonis, true of heart, handsome, starlight promised to me by my childhood self. I name him Dean.”

“Awh, Cas,” Dean choked hoarsely, “Come ‘ere.”

It was a lengthy kiss. Dean’s hand strayed under Cas’s shirt making meandering strokes to his smooth warm skin. Cas massaged the back of Dean’s neck, moaning small sounds into the caress.
“I want you,” Dean panted, “Want you here and now.”

Castiel twisted his fist into Dean’s tee and pulled him off the hood. They tumbled tangled together onto the blanket. The fall jarred Dean’s kneecap. He pushed the pulse of pain away, concentrating instead on stripping off his jacket and jeans, all the while trying to keep contact with Cas by lips or fingers or rubbing their bodies together. He needed to feel Cas, like an addiction, a want that only he could sate. Dean made a low whining noise when Castiel parted from him. Twisting to push away containers and balled up napkins, Castiel pulled his shirt over his head. Dean’s mouth watered as Cas’s back muscles rippled. Shirt thrown aside, Cas turned back, gazing down on Dean as if he wanted to feast on him. The stretch of Castiel’s scar dappled skin made Dean want to taste every mark. Lick and suck purples and deep magentas over them to make them his own.

“Lube?” Castiel growled, desperately patting around in the almost darkness.

Dean retrieved his discarded jacket, diving into the pocket for a small tube. He flicked the cap and handed it over. Lying back on the blanket he breathed out and let his eyes linger on the night sky.

“What?” Castiel snorted, “Are we doing missionary position?”

“I’ll missionary position you,” Dean scissored his legs in a ninja impression, catching his descending partner around the hips so that Cas had to plant both hands on either side of Dean’s head to stop his fall. Their faces smashed together, teeth clacking and lips smushed. Fire rose as they ground against each other. Dean jerked his hips, trying to cross his ankles behind Cas’s back. The slide of their cocks together stole his breath. Cas’s too by the way he arched his neck and hissed Dean’s name. Black hair filled Dean’s vision. Teeth pulled on his nipple, the drag increasing sensitivity with each pass. Castiel wrapped a hand around Dean’s sack and kneaded with the heel of his palm.

“Cas.” Dean whined. It was too much. Pin pricks danced in his vision.

Castiel’s finger was cool with lube as he tapped and swirled teasingly around Dean’s entrance. Dean pawed at Cas’s chest. Not knowing where to put his hands, he clawed into the blanket beneath them. He was burning up, hips rising, breath shortened, a wonderful tremble in his center.

“Cas, come on.” Dean pleaded. He was hard and weeping, hoping he’d last until Cas was seated inside him.

“My birthday. My present.” Castiel smacked the top of Dean’s thigh.

“Kinky.” Dean laughed before he became incapable under the attentions of Cas’s long slender fingers.

“More. Now.” He panted hard, “Please.”

This was a delicious torture. Dean bit down on his lip to prevent begging. He reached for the base of his cock to hold back his release.

“Patience, Dean.”

“Fuck patience.” Dean yelped in spiking arousal, as Cas found his prostate, “Fuck me.”

With one hand pressing down on Dean’s hip, Castiel steadied himself and pushed home. Dean felt every inch but there wasn’t much burn. He was still stretched from their morning enjoyment. Castiel gasped above him.
“Can I move?” Cas checked.

“Already.” Dean pushed against Cas’s restraining hand to encourage him. He squeezed his thighs. Castiel pulled back and then he drove forward. It was fast and just the right side of rough. Cas’s hand joined Dean’s in stripping his precome slickened cock. Unintelligible noises came from both. Dean got lost in the moment. Time seemed to fly with rapid blood rushing in his ears, while simultaneously seeming frozen in their sweat and gasping climaxes. Dean arched up as he came, shuddering and painting them with come. Castiel yelled Dean’s name into the night air, guttural and wanton.

“That was spectacular.” Castiel was careful as he pulled out. He pressed kisses to Dean’s thighs and helped him lower his legs.

“Stellar,” Dean quipped. He sagged back. His muscles ached in a good way. He felt that awful after-sex emptiness but Castiel distracted him with a touch to his cheek and featherlight kisses. An illusionary glow surrounded them as if their auras mingled in the darkness. Dean basked in it, admiring lazily as Castiel ran his hand through his sex mussed hair. It was peaceful here. Dean curled sideways, tucking his head into Cas’s chest. Arms held him close. Their breathing slowed and deepened.

When Dean opened his eyes, he was chilled and sticky. He cracked his neck, remembering where he was.

“We need a shower,” Cas grumbled sleepily. “And turn on the heat. ’s cold.”

Dean grinned. “Hey Babe. We’re not at home. We’re under the stars.”

“Huh?” Castiel’s eyes opened taking in the sight of Dean’s smile and the progressing night. The Milky Way spanned them in all its glorious colors unseen in under urban light pollution.

“I’ve got showering covered.” Dean rubbed his hands on Cas’s cooling arms to warm them. He unfastened his wrist cuffs. Then he gave his lover a hand up. “Follow me.”

Dean’s legs woke up as he stretched them. Castiel stumbled over a rock or something, issuing a puff of surprise. Gravel and stones bit into their soles but Dean set a brisk pace over the short distance. They reached the lower edge of the cliff. Dean curled his toes in the scrub grass. Waves lapped against the low cliff walls, heard but unseen under the light of the half-moon.

“Come on, Cas. Let’s swim.”

“I’ve no trunks.” Cas protested.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve been snoozing butt naked for God knows how long.” Dean bounced on his heels. “Let’s skinny dip.”

Cas cleared his throat, “I’m going to be the first local teacher arrested for indecent exposure.”

“Ha ha, Cas,” Dean plunked a hand on his hip, “No one here, only you and me and the call of the siren. If there is a merman down there seeking a mate, he might steal me away… if you don’t come in to protect me. Or he might leap out of the waters and take you from the cliff edge while I’m below.”

Castiel huffed, “Your imagination!”

Gripping Dean’s hand with fierce strength, Castiel ran for the edge. They plunged into the bracing
sea. Hands parted on impact as their bodies dived under. Kicking hard Dean rose above the surface. For a shocking second he thought he’d lost Castiel in the darkness but not more than a few feet away, Cas’s face bobbed up, smiling like the cat who got the cream. Dean’s laughter was partially due to the shocking chill. He flicked his head spraying Cas’s heaving chest with droplets. A wave lifted them and they swam towards each other.

Teeth chattering Cas caught Dean’s shoulder, “It’s outrageously cold. I’m not sure this is good for the baby.”

Dean rolled his eyes at Cas’s playfulness, “There is no baby, Cas, not yet.”

“There could be,” Cas hummed into Dean’s ear.

With an indulgent smile thrown over his shoulder, Dean swam south around the outcrop of rocks. The sands lifted up to the sheltered cove where he and Alfie had sat with Poppy in the shallows.

Catching up, Castiel wrapped his arms round Dean from behind, both treading water with their legs. Castel displayed his characteristic persistence. “But there could be a baby. You cycled after our move, it’s possible.”

Dean’s chest was heavy with reluctance to disappoint, “I don’t feel pregnant, Cas. If anything, I’m horny.”

He twisted out of Cas’s hold and swam in toward shore with long strokes. Cas chased after, unable to catch up this time, weakened by laughter. Dean’s feet found the gritty sea bed. He stood in the tide and waited to catch a startled Cas’s arms. He ran his hands down to take Cas’s palms in his. Trilling with mirth Dean dragged Cas along walking backwards while Cas kicked his legs.

“What was that?”

Dean gave Cas an are-you-serious look. “A drag. Have you never been dragged in the sea? I used to do it when teaching Sammy to swim if we landed by a beach or lake for a while.”

Cas shook his head, flicking water through the air, “No, I learned to swim in the school pool.”

“Well it’s my turn, so you better catch on quick.” Dean extended his arms.

There was a moment of hesitation before Castiel gripped his scarred wrists firmly. It was like they were being kissed in the crush. Dean didn’t like touching them but this being held and pulled along, trusting in Cas, weightless in the water. It was magic.

Out of the water, they bumped shoulders on the incline back to the parking area. Dean pulled their bath towels out of the trunk.

“You planned this,” Castiel accused from under his towel.

Dean admitted as much as he gave his hair and body a brisk dry. The clock in the Impala told them it was after midnight.

“It’s the nineteenth,” Dean said sadly.

“Guess we’ll have to celebrate my unbirthday then.”

They packed up quickly, making sure there was no evidence of their al fresco intimacy. Dean bumped up the Impala’s heating for the journey home. As he reached to turn the ignition, Castiel’s
hand stilled his.

“Thank you.”

Dean ducked his head. It was nothing. If he was rich he’d have flown Cas to the Caribbean or some rich dude crap like that, but he didn’t say that. He didn’t need to.

“I have something I need to tell you.” Castiel’s tone was grave and serious.

Dean missed a beat. God, was it time for confessions? He couldn’t imagine anything Cas could want to say that would warrant such gravity. Maybe he was sick. Oh God, don’t let him be sick.

Dean shook that idea out of his head. It must be something Cas wanted to do or somewhere he wanted them to go together. On the other hand, Dean had a gnarly secret. His upcoming meeting, reunion, date, not date, with Aaron weighed down on his sternum.

“I want to tell you something too,” Dean held his breath.

“You first.” Cas nodded slowly.

But Dean wasn’t ready. The words were doing their golf ball in throat gig. He’d go second. It would be easier. He shook his head and motioned for Castiel to proceed.

“I need to tell you this. Please hear me out, Dean.”

Blue eyes pierced him with their intensity. Dean swallowed hard and nodded, steeling himself for any eventuality.

“Do you have any conception of how much you mean to me? How much I care about you? You came into my life like a lightning bolt. From the beginning in the coffee shop, my skin sparked. I was sure you’d notice how I trembled.”

Dean’s lips parted, eyes wide, taking in Cas’s words. He could hardly believe that Cas would have been nervous or so impacted when they met. Cas had seemed so composed.

“As we got to know each other and you peeled back your layers to permit me to see the real you, I appreciated how fortunate I am, that a beautiful handsome man like you would want an oddball like me.”

Dean couldn’t stay silent and let his gorgeous partner demean himself, “Cas! You’re stunning and …”

“Please, Dean. Your Pawpaw, wonderful man, spoke with Nick and I. With no hesitation I could tell him of my commitment to you. He charged me not to hurt you.”

“Sheez,” Dean winced. He should have known that Castiel would get a version of the ‘Don’t hurt my boys’ talk.

“But he also welcomed me with open arms into your family. You have no idea how affected I was by that. My own family turned their backs on me.” Cas gulped and reached over to hold on to Dean’s arm. “Coming after our few days apart when I’d missed you so bad, it clarified for me how much I love you. I want to make you happy. I want to be with you forever. You’re my forever.”

Dean blinked. He tried to parse that. It wasn’t what he expected. He choked, “And you’re mine.”

“I love you, Dean.”
“And I you, Cas.” Dean squeezed Castiel’s thigh. “For real.”

Castiel chuckled. “We knew that didn’t we?”

Dean grinned. “I guess so.”

“Doesn’t hurt to say it out loud sometimes.”

“Yeah but not all the time, ‘Kay Cas? No PDA’s and all that.”

“Ha!” Cas barked, “You love it when I kiss you in public, so everyone knows we’re together. Part of your secret possessive side.”

“My growly hands-off-he’s-mine side?” Dean wiggled his eyebrows.

“Yeah that one.” Cas grinned. “Y’know what too? I’d love if we could take a road trip next summer. Depending on the baby.”

Dean smacked Cas’s bicep. “I’m telling ya there’s no baby.”

Castiel ignored the backhand, “I’d like us to road trip to Kansas. Maybe Nick and Sam and Lola could fly out and join us for some of it.”

Gulping back burning emotion at the thought of a family reunion, Dean nodded.

Castiel chuffed. “Is that a nod of liking the idea or is that a yes?”

“It’s a yes. I think it’s an awesome idea.” Dean did some mental route calculations, “We could head north through Wyoming and check in on Uncle Bobby in Sioux Falls for a couple of nights, before we head to Eudora.”

“It would be our vacation.”

“A swell one as Pawpaw would say.”

Castiel huffed in amusement, “Between your awesomes and his swells, I’m telling you, anyone would know you are related.”

Dean sat up a little straighter at that gratifying comparison.

“Did you have something to tell me?” Cas asked.

There was no way Dean could talk about Aaron now. It would ruin the mood and taint the memory of Cas’s birthday. Dean drew his lips into a close mouthed smile. He leaned over to run his hand down Cas’s arm. “Nothing that won’t keep, Babe.”

“Will we go home?” Castiel’s eyes shone and his inclined his head with an affectionate gaze.

“I have something to do first.” Dean scooted closer. He held the back of Cas’s neck while Cas tightened an arm around his ribs. A flush rose on Dean’s skin as they lengthened their caresses, tongues exploring familiar territory, a final kiss before heading home that danced with the sparks of a perfect night.
Dean threw his body sideways onto the sofa, propping his feet on the armrest. His eyes roved to Castiel’s graduation photograph on the windowsill. He quirked his lips at his memories of that happy day. Another framed picture was in his field of vision. It had arrived with a short thank you note from Pawpaw and remembrance of his promise to make copies of a selection of family ones. Dean wasn’t sure what Pawpaw had to be thanking them for. He and Sam were the grateful ones, but he figured it was old time manners for a guest to send a thank you letter on their return home. Sam had gotten a photograph of his newborn self being held in Samuel’s muscled arms with Mary leaning against her father’s side. In Dean’s one, Mary leaned against the Impala, sun catching her hair, heavily pregnant with Sam. Four year old Dean had one arm wrapped around her thigh, the other reached up to touch her bump. It was like Sam was there too. Thinking that made Dean thankful once more that the panic about Sam’s blood pressure was over. It had knocked Dean when Sam had been rushed to the ER. He’d drowned in visions of trying to support a grieving brother through a miscarriage. It had almost been too much to bear. Now Dean was full of admiration for how Sam was showing how mature and responsible he was for a twenty year old. Maybe it was part of having to grow up too soon. Maybe it was proof of Sam’s essential good nature. Dean’s little brother was following all the doctors’ advice and making sure that his daughter was going to get the best start to life.

With a final look at the new photograph Dean dialed Sam’s cell.

“Sam?”

“Huh Dean?”

“Did I wake your lazy ass?”

“Hum? Yeah. No. I was resting my eyes.” Sam mumbled.

“How are ya? No headaches or crap?”

Sam huffed, “No crap. How was the birthday night?”

“Cas and I had a talk.” Dean chewed on his bottom lip nervously.

Suddenly Sam’s voice was clearly awake, “You told him about Aaron.”

“Ah, no. I didn’t.”

“Dean!” Sam hissed.

“I was going to. Honest. But he wanted to tell me something first and then I forgot completely, like Aaron wasn’t even real, and I didn’t think, and we were home and then it was morning and I had to take off Cas’s tie and re-do it, and then he left for school and….”

“You’re rambling.” Sam commented drily. “Spit it out.”

Dean huffed nasally. A moment of deflection would be good. “Are you OK?”

“I’m good. Twenty seven weeks and counting. And I mean counting. And by the way before I extract your news from you, please remind me never to allow Ava to visit me in the bedroom with her yapping dog.”

Dean hissed a short laugh, “Was there a dog poop accident?”
“No.” Sam clicked his tongue, “The pup is trained, but the yapping, Dean. And she wouldn’t go. An hour, a whole hour of her nail technician and the hair salon and her sister’s graduation… Nick finally rescued me.”

“Poor Sammy.”

“I get it. No sympathy.” Sam sighed. “You ready? Tell me what Cas had to say that was so important you dodged telling him about Aaron again.”

Dean coughed. “My birthday surprise went down awesome, and he got all sort of ‘I love you’ and that. And he had a cool idea of us all going to see Pawpaw and Grandpa next summer.”

Sam huffed, “Dean, that’s great. I mean, I’d love to go to Kansas if we can arrange it.”

“Awesome,” Dean puffed up. “Cas and I are gonna road trip in Baby and go see Bobby too. And I might get a night in Vegas on the way back after we’ve talked to Pawpaw and Grandpa about it.”

Sam took a moment to respond. “I’m happy for ya. Sounds great.”

“Don’t tell Pawpaw.” Dean blurted, “’Cause I wouldn’t want to get their hopes up in case it doesn’t work out.”

Dean mentally added that it was also in case he was as big as house and waddling around unable to drive with a ginormous baby bump.

“I won’t.” Sam promised. “So then, you’re all super cheery chirpy person after last night.”

“Yeah,” Dean grinned. “We were laying in bed this morning. He was still sleeping. I looked at him and I thought that sexy guy is mine, and then I bit him.”

Sam spurted a laugh. “I presume I’ll be roaring TMI if I get you to continue that story.”

“Ya might,” Dean conceded. “I’m gonna go, Sam. Errands to run.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m happy your surprise worked out,” Sam paused, “But you need to tell Cas about Aaron.”

“I will. Tonight.” Dean responded. “Chat later.”

Dean cradled the cell in his hand. Sam was right. He had thought to tell Cas the previous week after they got home from dropping Pawpaw at the airport, but they’d had fantastic coming home sex before meeting up with their new friends at Pamela’s bar. Then Dean convinced himself that he needed to decide about seeing Aaron first.

Tuesday a flurry of e-mails between California and Israel firmed up their arrangements. Aaron was flying via Amsterdam. He’d booked his inbound flight to San Francisco and then one home to Indianapolis for the following morning. He was flying back via JFK. One night in an airport hotel. He’d meet Dean at the bar. They could have a meal. Catch up, Aaron said. Trembling with the prospect of meeting him after all the years and the pain that had gone by, Dean had typed his agreement to their appointment. It wasn’t a date. It was two guys who knew each other in high school meeting up for a beer. Yet if that was true, then why was a small voice telling Dean that he was doing wrong by not telling Cas? He didn’t want to worry Cas. He never wanted to hurt him. Telling him could make Cas think bad stuff, like that Dean was choosing to spend time with his ex-, with the father of the baby he had lost, over spending the evening at home. It wasn’t like that, but if Cas didn’t understand it, then Dean figured he wouldn’t know how to explain it. He needed to
see Aaron. He needed to close the door on the future that never was. It would be mega difficult to tell Aaron about the baby, but he needed to do that. He hoped Aaron would hear him out. He needed to explain what had happened and what prevented him for staying in touch like they had promised. Other thoughts stopped him too. What if Cas wanted to come with? And then Dean would have to refuse, hurting him more, because this was something he had to do on his own. Another stray thought caused his guts to clench. Sam was going to kill him when he found out Dean’s plan to shelter under the alibi of staying south to visit his bed-restricted brother.

Pushing his Aaron dilemma away, Dean called a new number.

“Singer’s Salvage Yard. What’s your problem?” Bobby’s business patter could use work.

“Hey, Bobby. It’s Dean.”

“You got two spare hands and an extra hour in the day?”

“What?”

“Old man Strachan’s laid up with influenza. There isn’t a soul here who trusts Walt and Roy. Hence yours truly is the one stop shop for every oil change, bust tire, and dead battery. I’m seeing folks who haven’t demanded my services since I did this job wearing flares.”

Dean grinned, imagining the joyful sight of Walt and Roy in an empty auto shop. He didn’t wish any ill on their Dad, but the sons had been bullies who’d taunted Dean for his silence whenever the Winchesters spent time in Sioux Falls. His smile was the result of a second visualization with Bobby coordinating flared bell bottom trousers with his baseball caps.

“You still there, Dean?” Bobby’s voice lost the gruffness. Dean had been quiet too long, and made Bobby wonder if there was the type of bad tidings that resulted in Dean’s muteness. “Is Sam OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, Bobby. He’s good. Bored out of his girlie haired skull but good.”

Bobby grunted in response.

“I wanted to ask you.” Dean drew a breath. “If Cas and I wanted to vacation some in Sioux Falls next summer, would that be alright with you?”

“What, ya idgit? What part of my door is always open hasn’t penetrated that thick skull of yours?” Bobby sighed, “Well, at least I’ll get the chance to run my eye over him before you drag him through my door like a stray kitten.”

“Hey!” Dean protested, “Sammy was the one with the stray baby animals. Wait. What do you mean you’ll get to see Cas before then?”

“I’ve asked Jodi Mills to keep an eye on the dogs if I have to go at short notice. I’m coming when Sam pops out that little one. And I need to see your bones with my own eyes too, y’know?”

“Thanks,” Dean sniffed.

“Yeah, well. I’m coming. And I want none of that maudlin weepy crap either. The only one crying will be the new baby.”

“I hear ya.” Dean nodded into the cell, not believing a word and remembering a grease smeared cotton hankie that Bobby used to keep in his back pocket for rare eye leaking emergencies. “Thanks, Bobby. You’re awesome.”
“And you’re keeping me from Mrs. Kwan’s toy that she calls a car.”

They said their goodbyes. Dean could hear Bobby muttering about automotive designers who should be strung up by their goolies before he hit the end call button.

With a bounce to his step, Dean left the apartment. He waved at a couple of Pamela’s regulars from his spot at an outside table of The Bluebell Café. A line drawing of a cheeky trash can raiding gull filled a sheet of his postcard sized sketchpad.

After his coffee Dean stopped at the office supplies store to Xerox his resume. There were a few stores along the main drag and out at the highway that seemed friendly to shop at, with staff who didn’t look like it killed them to work there. Dean dropped his resume into each one, but drew a blank. One chatty manager told him that September was a bad time of year for hiring in the touristy community. He filled out a multi-page application form at the supermarket to be kept on file. He didn’t let his fruitless afternoon get him down. He knew he’d find something sooner or later. At least he could faithfully report to his new social worker that he was searching. Also with Sam’s condition precarious, Dean was glad not to be tied down by a five day working week. He was hoping to find something part-time, that would allow him to spend a couple of midweek days at Sam’s place. He was considering asking Pamela about bar work, but he was nervous that he would become tongue-tied around strangers when he was meant to be a chatty bartender.

Back at the apartment Dean unpacked ingredients for homemade beef patties. Sam would be proud. He had a salad planned too. As he sliced and then chopped onions, Dean’s teeth clenched at the thought of telling Cas about Aaron. He wasn’t sure if he could go through with it, or if he should. Buttering Cas up with homemade burgers to soften the blow seemed like a good plan.

The plan went up in smoke when Dean heard more than one set of footsteps on the stairs.

“Hey, Dean. Nice to see you. How is your brother?” Inias greeted.

“Hey, man,” Dean smiled, stowing away his prepared opening words. “Sam’s good. I was talking to him earlier.”

Castiel dumped his book bag on the sofa and came over to wrap his arms around Dean’s waist from behind, “You cooking? Thought it was my turn. You’re spoiling me.”

Dean nodded. He eye rolled towards Inias about Castiel’s affectionate gesture. They didn’t have a regimented schedule about who cooked versus washed up, but often did take turnabout.

“Is there enough for Inias too?”

The other teacher raised his hand. “No Cas. I’m good. I’ll eat with Alfie when I get home.”

“We have plenty.” Dean pointed his knife towards the pack of ground beef.

“Thanks, but I’m not staying long. Castiel and I wanted to go over the sophomore biology lesson plans.”

“We could have stayed on a while in the staff room.” Castiel’s splayed fingers across Dean’s front were making no sign of letting go.

“But to be honest sharing space with Marve’s self-praising verbal diarrhea wasn’t very attractive. Castiel suggested a much nicer venue.” Inias winked, “And I would say your presence was an incentive for him too.”
Castiel hummed an affirmative before finally easing back from his partner. Dean poked him with his elbow for the sappy sentiments.

“I’ll make coffees.” Castiel tipped Dean’s arm to get his attention, “You don’t mind if we spread our papers at the other end of the table? My desk is a bit cramped for two to work at.”

“No. Go ahead.” Dean moved his wallet and the few groceries still sitting out.

Inias picked up the rough sketch of the gull. “Dean, this is really good.”

“Huh? Thanks, Man.” Dean held out his hand for the pad.

Inias kept hold of it and turned it this way and that. “You know. I get to see a lot of Alfie’s students’ work. This is great. You have to show Alfie. Have you ever thought of art classes?”

“I took Art in every high school.” Dean answered.

“Alfie runs a class for adults over the winter. It’s starting up soon. It’s part of the adult education program at the school. There’s concessionary rates and you get to use the facilities of the art room, like paint, but I think you have to buy your own blank canvases and stuff like that. You should ask Alfie the details. Every year the town art exhibition picks pieces from his class, and you’d meet others into art.”

Inias’s enthusiasm made it sound attractive. Dean had enjoyed the chance to use oils and acrylics in ACIC, but he had neither the space nor the greenbacks to build up a palate of colors and works since then. “I’ll definitely have a word with him.”

“I love the idea.” Castiel said from where he was operating their coffee machine. “Evening classes are a great way to get to know the locals. And they’ll all be blown away when they see Dean’s work.”

“I dunno about that.” Dean said scratching the back of his neck.

“I do.” Castiel said firmly.

Inias ran out the door an hour later, before Alfie came looking for him, he said. Dean heated the George Foreman and set his patties to cook. He grilled four slices of bacon. There was a jar of tomato chili chutney that came from The Gates of Hell kitchen. Dean smeared some on the base of the buns. He put the salad on a large plate in the center of the table. That way Castiel could help himself and Dean could select a few onion, cheese and tomato slices to pad out his burger buns.

Castiel changed out of his suit and visibly relaxed when he sat down. It was high praise to hear Castiel moan around the burger with his eyes closed.

“I called Bobby today,” Dean said. “Checked with him that he’d be cool if we swing by his way next summer.”

Castiel’s mouth was full. He prompted Dean to continue with his eyes.

“He called me an idjit,” Dean laughed, “He’s cool with it and he said he’s gonna come when Lola is born. Isn’t that awesome?”

“Proof that he is the ‘Uncle’ you and Sam call him. It will be a great surprise for Sam.” Castiel’s use of air quotes went unremarked because Dean was in agreement.
“It will be great to see him. Sheez, it was the summer of ’95 the last time Dad dumped us in Sioux Falls and disappeared for a month. I mean, I know Sam spent time there while I was... was away.”

Castiel extended a hand for Dean to squeeze.

“I forgot,” Castiel said after a moment. “I had a call today too.”

“You did?” Dean raised his brows.

“Andrea Kormos’s ex-husband called during my lunch time.”

“The mysterious B Lafitte?” Dean grinned. “What did he want? Are we invited to a masque ball at midnight in his gothic Jenner lair?”

Castiel chuckled. “In fact, he was looking for you.”

“For me?” Dean huffed, “How does he know I exist?”

“You remember we asked about Ticket to Work vacancies in other branches of Light Up Your Beans?” Castiel explained, “Well Ms Kormos must have told Mr. Lafitte. He doesn’t hold a Ticket, but he’s hiring.”

“Hiring what?” Dean asked.

Cas laughed, “You know. I was so surprised I forgot to ask.”

Dean joined in the laughter adding a sarcastic, “That’s great, Cas.”

“He said you’ve a chance to think about it. He is out of state for a week, but if you want to get in touch the Monday of his return. He is interviewing the end of that week.”

“For a rocket scientist, or an events planner, or maybe the role of Lurch to his Gomez?” Dean stuck his tongue into his cheek, “He hardly has a clandestine produce store in the back of his mansion.”

“Dean,” Castiel shook his head, “The gothic mansion was our fantasy. He probably has a condo and runs a local business.”

Dean clicked his tongue. The story was that after the divorce settlement Mr. Lafitte went off grid. If there was a business, then Castiel’s former boss’s ex hadn’t connected his name to it. Still this sniff of work was more than he’d gotten from his cold calling in Bodega Bay, or the job listings in Santa Rosa Human Services.

Later under their comforter lying face to face, tracing the shape of Castiel’s lips with his eyes, Dean realized another day had gone by without biting the Aaron-meet-up-bullet.

Victor tapped his pen on his clipboard.

Dean fiddled with his cuffs.

“You have ten minutes left, Dean. We have discussed art classes, Sam’s health and how earlier you were forced to shop for his organic groceries,” Victor’s lips twitched in a slight smile, “your ideas for a baby shower, and your prescription renewals. I get the feeling that there is an elephant in the room.”
“Huh?” Dean said as he moved his restless fingers to the bottom button hole of his open plaid shirt.

“Do you have something you want to discuss? Or don’t want to discuss?”

He didn’t want Victor probing into his meeting with Aaron. He couldn’t bear it. Victor would want to analyze what Dean felt about it, piece by piece. Dean didn’t know what he felt about it, nervous, fearful, excited, regretful, hopeful, nostalgic… it was all a big bowl of dumpster soup. Victor would tell him to consult Cas too and Dean hadn’t, yet. Tomorrow he’d meet Aaron again. He’d received a text before his session saying it was the early hours of the next morning in Israel and Aaron was headed to Tel Aviv to begin his mammoth plane journey.

Glancing at his watch Dean saw it was now five minutes to go. Victor looked a picture of concern. Dean had to come up with something quick.

“I might have a job interview.”

“Yes?” Victor gave him a toothy smile, “That is good news. Are you worried about it? Interview nerves?”


“Very good.” Victor nodded. “People often find it easier to interact with new acquaintances, or in this case employers, if they meet by introduction or recommendation. What type of work is involved?”

“I don’t have details yet and I’m trying to figure out how I’d work it.” Dean admitted he had been thinking about the vague job prospect. “I mean I don’t know if I’m ready for full time or a big chatty people person role. Sam needs me, and might need me more depending, y’know. And I don’t want to work opposite times to Cas which would make us like two ships passing in the night.”

“If your interview goes well and the role is one that interests you, then you can see if there is room for negotiation. If not then you’ll need to decide if you can compromise.”

“How do I?” Dean took a moment to gather his thoughts, “How do I tell him about my condition?”

“I presume you mean your anxiety disorder.”

“And crap.”

Victor raised his brows. “If you have been recommended then perhaps this man already knows about your condition. You might disclose it in answer to an appropriate interview question, regarding where you fear it might limit your communication skills.”

Dean was impressed. He wished he was taking notes. “What about being a carrier?”

“Discrimination is illegal. You do not have to disclose your gender.”

Dean nodded. It might be illegal but there was plenty of it out there. On the flip side, if Mr. Lafitte was a decent sort then Dean felt he’d be the one in the wrong, if he began work then showed up pregnant weeks later.

“I’ll look forward to hearing how the interview goes.” Victor said encouragingly as he shepherded
Once Dean had pit stopped at the pharmacy to fill his Buspirone script, he hit the road for home.

Cas was seated at the kitchen table with a coffee going cold as he graded papers. Dean was late enough that Cas had changed into his jeans and sky blue tee with his navy hoodie. He rose when he saw Dean and pecked his cheek.

“How was it with Victor?”

“Same old,” Dean replied, stripping off his denim jacket. “We talked about Sam and I told him about the maybe interview.”

Castiel nodded. Dean moved to make fresh coffee. He needed a pick me up after the long drive from Palo Alto.

“You know,” Castiel said brightly, causing Dean to half turn towards the table, “I think I’ll go with you tomorrow afternoon. I’d like to see Sam.”

Dean dropped the spoon of coffee, grains falling over his boots. “You can’t!”

Castiel tilted his head and examined Dean. That stare was a weapon in his teaching arsenal. Dean figured there were unruly students who crumbled under that penetrating stare.

“I could.” Castiel disagreed. He intoned each word cautiously, “I consulted with Inias. It is not expected that every teacher attend every extracurricular event. I am not needed tomorrow night, and we could both go to the next round of the schools debate contest if Bodega High makes it through.”

“No. You can’t come.” Dean gulped. A trapped panic clawed at him.

“Why?”

Castiel leaned back in his chair. The word hung suspended in the air between them. Dean moistened his lips.

“Dean?”

“OK.” Dean shuddered. His legs were jelly. He sank into the chair opposite Cas.

“What is it? Should I be concerned? Because I’m feeling pretty concerned.” Castiel drew his brows together and waited for Dean to speak.

“I… huh… I…” Dean blinked, feeling sudden sympathy for cornered rats. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I’ve got a…. I mean I’m gonna… meet up with… but not like a date…”

“Who?” Castiel demanded. He jerked forward. “What? I thought we were exclusive. I thought it was just me. Was I mistaken? Dean?”

This was going so badly. Much worse than each imagined scenario. Cas didn’t even know it was Aaron and he already had been stabbed by Dean’s flustered inarticulate damn poor way of saying it.

“Not a date, Cas. It’s not.” Dean bit down so hard on his lip that he tasted copper. “It’s Aaron.”

“Your teenage ex? Aaron who got you pregnant?”
Dean nodded with his bottom lip sucked in.

“And you were not going to tell me?”

Castiel’s voice was small. Dean watched as Cas’s Adam’s apple displayed how hard he gulped, how difficult the news was to swallow. Both looked at each other across the divide of their table. Dean gripped the corner tight with his fingers as if it gave him something to hold on to. He’d bought that table with the parting gift receipt from the guys at Greengoods. He’d bought it for their new home, for his and Castiel’s new life together. Dean wanted to shout out, ‘I love you.’ but he couldn’t. He didn’t know if the words would be met with relief, skepticism, forgiveness, or if he would be rebuffed.

“I guess I’m not invited.” Castiel muttered finally, his eyes downcast.

Dean spluttered, “A catch up. That’s all. Aaron is detouring here on his way home to Speedway. He’ll be gone the next morning.”

“Aaron Bass was part of your past. Part of what made you who you are. I would have liked to have met him. You kept this from me.”

Dean stared, mouth agog. Cas would have wanted to meet him?

“I would have given you privacy, Dean. I would not have intruded.” Castiel kept his eyes away. Perhaps it hurt to look at Dean. “You could have brought him here. I’d say hello, shake the hand of the man who made you happy as a teenager, then make myself scare.”

“You can come.” Dean’s rushed words startled Cas into looking towards him. “Or even better I won’t go.”

There was a lance of regret at how majorly he had fucked up. It was too late for Aaron to change his plans, being already in the air or the departure lounge. He might never get the chance to meet Aaron face to face again. They lived on separate continents.

“You say that now. But what am I meant to think?” Castiel slumped in the chair. “You were going to do this behind my back.”

“Cas,” Dean pleaded. “I won’t go.”

“Dean. My reaction is not because you are meeting him. I know your history. You need closure. You need to tell him your story. That is not what is upsetting.” Castiel pinched the bridge of his nose with ink stained fingers. “It is the deception. The lack of trust in me as your partner.”

“No. Jesus Christ.” Dean protested, heart in mouth, “Freaking hell, Cas. My Cas. That wasn’t it. I couldn’t. I couldn’t talk about it.”

Castiel’s words were low and laced with pain, “Not even to me.”

Castiel got up. He snatched the Taurus’s keys from his desk and he was gone.

Dean watched frozen in place. At the sound of the engine from the lot behind the florist, Dean made his way on shaky legs to the window and watched Cas drive away.

He placed his palm on the glass. “Don’t be gone.”

His breath quickened and a ripping anxiety tore through his chest. He bent double, in danger of
hyperventilating, but there was no nurse here to deal with a panic attack. No shot of diazepam to relieve his symptoms. Blindly Dean stumbled to the bedroom. He fumbled for his emergency Xanax tub. He couldn’t open the goddamned childproof cap. Finally it popped. He dry swallowed two pills. While he waited for numbness to hit, he stood under the shower. Weak with shock, guilt and self-disgust, he leaned against the wall while the water did a piss poor job of washing away his problems.

Towel dried, dread and trembling dulled by the Xanax, Dean closed the curtains against the evening light and climbed into bed. The meds did nothing for his burning guilt, for his worry that he’d ruined everything. He hoped Castiel was having dinner somewhere. Maybe he’d gone to Inias or Balthazar, or he was downing bourbon in Pamela’s.

“Shit.” Dean reached out for his cell. He wasn’t above groveling.

Please come home.

Millennia, eons later, Castiel came in. He didn’t turn on the light. As the mattress sank with his weight, Dean was grateful that Castiel hadn’t decided to sleep in the guestroom.

“Cas?” Dean whispered.

There was a head shake.

Castiel faced the other way. Dean didn’t dare attempt to be the big spoon.

There was no touch. No goodnight kiss. No sweet wrapping embrace.

Dean curled into himself and tried to sleep.

Castiel’s bedside lamp switched on. Dean turned round.

Castiel’s face was drawn with pain. His eyes red rimmed and his breath sour with whiskey, Castiel spoke gravely, “You must go, but come back home to me.”

“I will.” Dean choked out. A magic wand had not dispelled the damage. He didn’t deserve Cas. Dean reached out under the comforter to rub the back of Castiel’s hand. Cas didn’t respond but neither did he pull away. The light dimmed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone for all your kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and comments. Each one brings a smile to my face and encourages me to continue scribbling.

Tread Softly is going on a two week mini-hiatus. I’m going to Asylum12 next week. Real life demands that I work every day including the weekend until I go. Next chapter will be after the convention, i.e. season finale week (if I haven’t melted into a pool of goo from the finale or from meeting Jared, Misha and all).
Dean’s eyes searched the bar stools in the brightly lit lounge. The douchey Coors’ song ‘Runaway’ played in the background. Dean barely registered the affront to musicality. He was late, not by much, but had gotten turned about searching for the mid-range Burlingame hotel. The Airport Lodge was a much nicer place than the forty bucks a night shitholes Dean had grown up in, but not swanky or intimidating. He paused in the entryway of the busy Bar’n’Grill kicking himself for not suggesting a less public meeting point, like the few tub chairs in the small lobby, or that they should have worn rose buds in their button holes. He swallowed hard, straightened the hem of his brown plaid shirt and scuffed the toes of his boots on the back of his jeans to shine them. The guy on the second to last high stool in a green tee could be Aaron. He had lost his scraggly teenage hair style and wore a neatly trimmed dark beard. There was a stonewash denim jacket slung over the back of the adjoining stool as if the guy was reserving it.

A pale faced hostess with a customer service smile, holding a round tray of empty slim jims approached him, “Can I help you, Sir?”

Dean gulped. He moistened his lips and opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Tingling ran down his arms. He closed his eyes and took a breath. He could do this.

“Sir?”

Castiel had left for work before Dean woke. Dean had headed to Burlingame before Castiel came home. Dean hadn’t attempted to speak since the frugal words he had exchanged with Castiel in their bed the night before. He’d stuck to simple sympathetic texts about back ache and indigestion with Sam. He’d been dazed and nauseous during the day, skipping lunch and idly holding his pencil rather than sketching. His mind was caught in a loop between his fear of losing Castiel and his trepidation at meeting Aaron.

“Sir?” Her third attempt was slow and inlaid with concern.

Dean licked his lips again. He gestured vaguely at the bar and coughed hard. “I... I... huh... meeting someone.”

“Oh that’s fine, Sir,” She answered with bright relief, “Let me know if I can be of assistance.”

Dean nodded. He took heavy steps, inhaling and exhaling through his nose. A team of butterflies lodged under his sternum and his palms were clammy.

Aaron turned and saw him. He leapt from the stool, leaving it tottering as he barreled into a stunned Dean and flung his arms around his neck.

“Dean!”

Aaron pulled back a moment to see Dean’s face. Dean offered a slight smile at the joy in his old boyfriend’s eyes. He let out a puff of air when Aaron grabbed him under the arms and squeezed his ribs tight.
“Oh, Dean.” Aaron let out a sigh. “It is unbelievable to see you. You have no idea. I can’t believe it. You are really here. Alive. Looking super fine.”

Dean’s lips twitched as Aaron eased back. He guided Dean’s elbow to lead him to the reserved stool. There was no pressure to fill the brief silence. Aaron was from a time when a whisper between them was a shared rarity. Aaron asked if he wanted a beer. Dean shook his head. Aaron laughed as he suggested a cold Cherry Coke. Dean nodded with a grin, remembering chilled bottles he had corrupted Aaron into shoplifting from the Gas’n’Sip. They had shared them and a bag of Lays behind an abandoned house at the end of Aaron’s street.

As Aaron ordered, Dean took the chance to look at him. Dean was noticeably the taller one. When they were 16 and 17, Dean had a couple of inches on Aaron, like Sam had on Sydney, but Aaron must never have had a final growth spurt. The single dark earring stud, and low beard with ‘tache were new too. Aaron’s big dark eyes and his slight lit up smile brought a recollected affection to warm Dean’s chest. Then Aaron did another remembered action, he gave a closed mouth smile with his brows raised high in amused questioning of Dean’s expression.

“What? I got lettuce in my teeth?”

Dean snorted and dropped his head shaking it. He was beginning to relax. While their location was foreign and a river of time had gone by, there was a familiarity to sitting beside Aaron.

“Aaron,” Dean said hoarsely, “Could we sit somewhere quieter?”

Aaron’s huge puppy eyes swiveled rapidly to Dean, “Oy, Dean. I’d forgotten you’re talking. I mean, it’s awesome you’re talking.”

“Thanks,” Dean did a small throat clear, “It’s good to see you, Man.”

Aaron clapped him on the arm. He pointed to a vacant round table in the corner where the lighting was dimmer and less intimidating.

“How’s Sydney?” Dean forced out without too much effort. As he relaxed and felt less exposed, it was easier to speak.

“Great. He’s gonna design the first space shuttle to Mars.” Aaron guffawed. “Dads are good too. They all send their best. How’s Sammy?”

“It’s Sam now,” Dean smirked. “It’s a difficult pregnancy but boy am I proud of him. It’s a freaking miracle he’s in such a good place after years with just him and John.”

“I used to admire you so much, Dean.” Aaron confessed as they sat down.

“Huh?” Dean blinked at the sudden praise.

“The way you stood tall. The way you raised Sam. I used to think I’d never be able to take care of Sydney like that.”

“I dunno, Aaron. If circumstances were different…” Dean’s voice trailed away.

Aaron made a negative grunt, “It was you. You were so cool, so caring yet so tough. Like when you’d give the finger to douches and bullies. Remember every time Mr. Erbil turned his back to write on the board in class and you’d flip him one too.”

“He was a prick.” Dean wrinkled his nose.
“He was.” Aaron agreed after a swig of his beer, “But you know it inspired me to speak up for what I wanted, in the end.”

“What do you mean?” Dean raised his brows.

Aaron huffed, “It’s great to hear you talk.” He leaned over and squeezed Dean’s wrist cuff briefly, “I was a mess. Your death was part of it. I didn’t deal very well.” He threw his eyes up.

Dean chewed on his lip feeling a tendril of guilt for not trying to contact Aaron and the Bass Family when the opportunities had been there.

“It’s not your fault.” Aaron’s tongue bulged in his cheek, doing his processing mannerism.

“I got something you gotta know about back then…” Dean trailed off. Aaron hadn’t finished telling him how he had spoken up for himself, but it seemed a good point to begin to share his story.

“Go on, Dean.” Aaron’s eyes focused on him.

“’S about when, when Dad upped sticks outta Speedway.” Dean paused.

“That awful hour at the arcade while your Dad glared at Sydney and Sammy, and we clung to each other like superglue in the dirty restroom cubicle?”

“After that,” Dean let out a long stream of breath.

“I missed you so bad, Dean. When Sam called Sydney saying you were in hospital…. And then at the end of November we got that call from Pastor Murphy on Sam’s behalf saying you’d gone… I was devastated. I’d held out hope that your Dad would get another stint at an Indy Car factory, or once we were both 18 we’d meet up,” Aaron huffed wryly. His eyes were glazed, which brought a lump to Dean’s throat. By that November Dean didn’t know where he was, but he’d grieved too, for so much, including Aaron and their child.

Aaron’s hand reached over again, patting Dean’s apologetically, “You wanted to tell me what happened to you.”

“Yeah,” Dean moistened his bottom lip, “I missed you too, Man. I did. I missed ya straight off the bat in Batesville. Sam was a little moody shit,” Dean blew a short raspberry, “But I knew he was without his best bud Sydney. It was hands down the crappiest relocation ever. And I was sick, so sick. As the days passed I was either sweating or puking my guts out.”

“Jeepers,” Aaron winced.

“Yeah,” Dean quirked his lip humorlessly. He took a deep inhalation. “It wouldn’t shift. Dad gave me a bundle of notes from his first paycheck. Y’know the ‘housekeeping’ money. I bought a test. Did it in the high school restroom.”

Dean could see the instant that Aaron’s brain computed what Dean was leading up to. The dark haired man’s jaw dropped.

“It was positive,” Dean told his wrist cuffs, unable to face Aaron’s saucer-like eyes.

“Oy, Dean, ooh.”

Aaron sounded fucking heartbroken, and Dean hadn’t even told him yet.
“I…. I… was… I was… alone.” Dean choked out.

“Why didn’t you call? Dad would have driven down to collect you. You and Sam. We’d have taken you in. I know it.”

Aaron sounded convinced, positive. He believed that is what would have happened. Dean recalled that in his teenage confusion, he was equally unsure about the reaction of Aaron’s perfectly nice professional white collar parents to the prospect of a shotgun wedding to an indigent non-Jewish mute whose father was a drunkard.

“I couldn’t,” Dean shook his head, “I couldn’t speak about it, even in private, even to Sam, to myself. A week later, Sam and I had a terrible fight. I was at the end of my patience. I’d like to think if I hadn’t been carted off to hospital… I’d have had to do something soon. I’d like to think I’d have contacted you, or else ran away with Sam. But I guess we’ll never know.”

“And what?” Aaron gasped, wheezed the words. His hand hovered, indecisively midair between his beer glass and Dean’s arm. Dean reached over and grabbed his fingers. Aaron nodded, “What happened to our baby?”

Dean gulped back a sob as the words lanced through his chest, “I miscarried. The ba- The ba- Our baby died, Aaron, our baby died.”

Tears poured down Dean’s cheeks. He lifted his free hand scrubbing hard at his face, never so glad to have taken the seat facing the wall. Small feral noises escaped his throat. He ducked his head, forehead connecting with the warm material of the shoulder of Aaron’s tee. Aaron’s chin rested on his head, his arm covered Dean’s heaving shoulders. Fingers grabbed into Dean’s shirt as a low keening noise came from Aaron’s throat. They clung on, heavy shuddering breaths heating the pocket of air between Dean and Aaron’s body.

“Dean, Ah crap,” Aaron’s hand unclenched and he stroked Dean’s back gently.

Dean sniffled, the torrent of grief was easing back to the dull ache he had lived with since the 5th May 1996. He whispered some sort of noise that intended gratitude for the comfort and apology for every fucking thing.

“Were you? Were you alone?” Aaron spoke with fear of the answer.

Dean gulped. He grabbed the flimsy bar napkin and poked the corner of his eyes. Aaron raised his brows and offered an actual Kleenex from his pocket.

“Thanks,” Dean gave a sobbing laugh, “Look at us.”

“So what?” Aaron challenged the room with a glare.

Dean twisted round, but they weren’t the object of attention he’d feared. “It happened after, in the hospital, after Dad had taken Sammy away… Left me there because of the baby… after he’d had me committed. I lost my baby and that was it. I’d lost everything and everyone. I tried to check out.”

“Dean,” Aaron voice cracked, “I’d have come. I can’t imagine my shock. But I would have come.”

“I know.” Dean nodded stiffly.

“We made a baby,” Aaron smiled tenderly. “You and me.”
Dean went with the alleviation of tension. A tiny smile broke across his features, “We did.”

Aaron’s head drooped. His eyes looked up towards Dean. “I am sorry. I got totally self-absorbed in my own teenage loss… end of the world… my one true love ripped from me like some novella romance tragedy… I didn’t try hard enough to persuade my Dads to find you… While I wallowed feeling sorry for myself…”

“Stop.” Dean gritted his teeth. He could see a sulky Aaron flinging himself on his baseball themed bed covers while he was in ACIC being flung and restrained against his will. The thought didn’t bring bitterness or envy. It was the way things had played out, and Aaron beating himself up over it wasn’t going to help. “I won’t lie. It wasn’t a good place, the psych ward. For four years it was a hell on earth. Then it got a redo. Things changed. I never forgot you. I used to dream of you, me and our little tot. Stupid daydreams, but Gingerbread, you have nothing to be sorry for."

Aaron grabbed Dean’s wrist as the pet-name slipped out. “Not stupid. I did too. I imagined you hadn’t died and we went to Art College together, owned our own gallery, and had a troop of mini-Dean Bass kids.”

“We were so naïve,” Dean grinned, “But look at you, you’re living the dream. Aaron Bass, Sculptor.”

It was Aaron’s turn to duck his head, “I had a rite of passage first. Went off the rails. Dutifully followed Dad into dentistry but hated it. Instead of facing them with a rational explanation of why I wanted to pursue Art, I lived on weed. Pot partied my way to a giant ass fail.”

“Sheez, Aaron, your Dads were cool. Remember I wanted a swap?”

“I know!” Aaron exclaimed, “I was a schmuck. They would have listened. After I wasted the college fund, and I mean Wasted, they still listened. I got shipped to our cousins in Israel but not as a punishment. To get clean. To find a place at the community of Ein Hod. To make my name.”

Dean puffed, “Wow.”

Aaron shrugged, “I know and poor Dad didn’t get a dentist outta Sydney either.”

“You got anyone waiting for you in Israel?” Dean asked before finishing his now warm Cherry Coke, diluted from melted ice.

Aaron leaned closer. His hand cupped the back of Dean’s neck. A “No” was whispered in his ear and Aaron’s lips caressed his cheek.

Dean froze. He hadn’t meant his question as a come on or to sound seductive. Had he given the impression that he was open to this?

“Aaron?”

His old boyfriend kissed the soft skin under Dean’s ear. “Still gorgeous, Dean.”

Dean couldn’t deny that the praise and affection pulled at him. He raised his hand to push Aaron away, to tell him in detail about Castiel. Aaron took his hand and squeezed it against his own chest. It reminded Dean of the other side. The little things he hadn’t liked about dating Aaron. That raised hand was Mute Dean’s way of refusing and too many times Aaron had held it, pushed against it, ignored it. Times Aaron hadn’t given him an opportunity to answer, when they’d end up doing what Aaron wanted, when Aaron wasn’t mindful of his bruises, or when the other teenager didn’t prep him enough and didn’t pull out in time… Not that Aaron was a jerk. They’d been fumbling
racy teens in lust. Dean had liked the burn. He’d been happy to let Aaron add his own layer of bruises to his hips. And when Dean would make a superhuman effort to speak, Aaron did listen.

However Dean knew better now. He knew he deserved more. Being with Cas was world of different. Cas was who he wanted, needed, loved. He pulled out of the embrace. He met Aaron’s eyes and gave a rueful smile.

“Not doing it for you?” Aaron quipped.

Dean squeezed their hands tighter, not falling for the false cheer Aaron employed to cover the sting of Dean’s rejection of his overtures. “I have someone.”

“Castiel?”

“Uh-huh. He’s special.”

“And he’s OK with you being here?”

“No so much,” Dean huffed, “But I fucked that up all on my own. We live together now.”

“Do you want to stay over?” Aaron blurted.

“Huh? Didn’t you hear? I’m with Cas.” Dean stared wide-eyed.

“No. I didn’t mean… Sorry, sorry. I’ve got twin beds in my room. You could. I wouldn’t try anything. It’s a long ride home, yeah?”

Dean let the tension out of his bunched shoulders, “No, Man. It’s cool. I’m gonna head home. What time is your flight to Indy?”

“Early,” Aaron sighed.

“You’ll say hi to Eli and David for me?”

“Sure will.”

“And your Grandpa Isaac, and Sam would end me if I didn’t pass on his thoughts too, especially to Sydney.”

Aaron nodded, “Thank you.”

Dean raised his brow.

“Thank you for meeting me. For letting me atone. For telling me about our child.” Aaron’s voice broke. He stood and offered his hand.

Dean caught his wrist and pulled Aaron in for a hug, clapping his back hard. “You take care, Gingerbread.”

“You too, Winchester.” Aaron stole a final kiss at the corner of Dean’s lips. “Safe journey home.”

“You too. Safe flight, and I’ll email.” Dean promised as he planted a few bills on the table.

“Let’s not wait seven years again.”

Dean mirrored Aaron’s smiling nod, but they both knew it wasn’t at all certain that they would
ever meet again. Then Dean found himself pulled in for a final crushing hug, one he reciprocated with his chest bursting a caldera of emotion. Stepping back he felt something was cleansed or a door had swung gently closed.

A bittersweet press of cheeks as a farewell embrace in the lobby, stood to Dean as he crossed the parking area to the Impala. He took a moment to press his forehead against his Baby’s wheel. The bounce of that closing hug didn’t last. Tremors snaked down his arms under his skin. He was shaken as adrenaline, endorphins, serotonin, or whatever drained away. On the highway he white-knuckled the wheel. He was so frigging tempted to turn for Pacifica and crash at Sam and Nick’s place, but he didn’t know how Castiel would react if he didn’t come home. He might not even believe that he’d stayed with his brother. He stuck to the speed limit and didn’t hop lanes.

Bits and pieces of his conversation with Aaron replayed, rewound and replayed again. Delivering his news, their joint grief many years after the little life had gone, the memories, the residual affection…

North of San Francisco Dean’s stomach grumbled loud enough for him to realize he hadn’t eaten. The Impala flew by roadside diners and burger joints. His guts were lodged under his ribs. What if Castiel wasn’t there when he got home? What if the lights were off and there was a cold stone facsimile in their bed?

All Dean’s apprehension seemed prophetic when he mounted the steep stairs to a dark apartment. He swung back the living area door. The lamp on the desk was on. Castiel’s form was silhouetted against the window, elbow extended against the frame.

Dean swallowed hard, making deliberate noise depositing Baby’s keys on the table.

“How did it go?” Castiel’s voice was broken glass.

“You don’t want to know.” Dean kicked himself. He hadn’t meant to say that, to let any of his own hurt leak out.

“I do,” Castiel sighed so deeply, it was evident in his slackened posture. “I care. Did you talk?”

“I did. It was….” Dean tried to find a less mushy word but failed, “It was emotional.”

“Did you tell him about the baby? About Emma?”

The fact that Cas remembered the fantasy name Dean had given his baby punched him in the midsection. He didn’t know what to say.

“Yeah. He cried,” Dean gulped and tried for honesty, “We cried.”

Castiel’s silhouette nodded. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah. I’m good.” Inside Dean refuted that. He wasn’t OK. He was a mess of acid and worries and fears. He wanted Castiel to hold him but he couldn’t make his tree trunk legs move. “What about us?”

“I’m trying, Dean.” Castiel half turned around.

Part of Dean rejoiced that Cas had said his name and no longer had his back turned. However Castiel looked wrecked, like the outer manifestation of what Dean felt. In low light, Castiel looked older, worn, unshaven and unkempt.
“I’m trying to understand why I wasn’t trustworthy. And I’m trying to reconcile reasons why you felt it was better to keep this to yourself, but then I speculate what else you might think is a secret I should not be privy to? Financial woes? Work concerns? Your health? The health of our children? I don’t need to be protected from reality. I thought we were a unit, facing trouble together. I don’t feel like that. I feel out of the loop, put aside.”

“No, Cas.” Dean ground his teeth with distress at Cas’s pain. “Not like that.”

Castiel nodded unconvinced. “I’m glad you came home.”

It sounded stilted to Dean’s ears. He bit his lip. He wanted to rage against the doubt implied, as if there was a question hanging over whether he’d have cheated in any way on Castiel. He hadn’t been tempted. The other side of him wanted to get down on his knees before Castiel and thank him for sticking by him, for remaining in their home, after Dean had hurt him.

“Well,” Castiel moved around the other side of the sofa. “I am to bed. Please don’t have the TV too loud. I’m helping out with the home softball match tomorrow.”

“I… I won’t,” Dean promised. Castiel walked by, at least three feet of space between them. No touch. No kiss. Dean’s fingers itched but he didn’t initiate anything.

Dean stared at the black TV screen until he could no longer hear Cas in the bathroom or moving around their bedroom.

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Days followed in a fog of weird tension. Neither man seemed able to make a move to breach the divide. Castiel was polite, even concerned about Dean. He checked if Dean had eaten. He asked about Sam. He wanted to know if Dean wanted turkey or chicken fillets in their grocery shopping. But there was no intimacy or gentleness. Dean struggled to find a way to address Cas. His felt queasy and as if his skin didn’t fit. He refused to medicate it, stuffing the Xanax at the bottom of his meds, and vowing to do this without drugs.

Several times Dean thought he caught Castiel begin to move closer, almost lean over for a kiss, fingers twitching to touch his arm, but the other man halted each time as if he remembered he was meant to be on the outs with Dean.

It was worse at night. Dean lay awake not knowing how to fix the creeping crawling coldness between them. It was like some Japanese Anime evil with black tendrils and smoke, pressing down on Dean’s chest, robbing him of words, stalling his brain from figuring out what to do. He thought of calling Victor but he hadn’t divulged the Aaron meet up to his psychiatrist either. He reckoned he’d need a whole session for processing his conversation with Aaron. Dean had no reference for how normal healthy relationships worked. He had no clue on how to apply first aid when a relationship faltered. He even thought of asking his Pawpaw but he was too ashamed to admit how he’d inflicted such hurt on Castiel.

Dean was hyperaware of the time that he and Castiel spent apart. He wasn’t sure if Castiel was avoiding him. Saturday Castiel spent the early part of the day helping out at the softball event. Dean spent a few hours in Moss Beach, thankful his brother understood that a bare synopsis was all Sam was going to get about the reunion with Aaron. Sunday Dean made pancakes which Castiel complemented before they separated again, Dean to Sam and Castiel leaving for Palo Alto to see Balthazar. In the evenings Castiel was glued to his desk chair, watching TV from there instead of pressed against Dean on the sofa.
On Monday with Castiel at work, Dean ate a half slice of peanut butter on toast for his late breakfast. He thought about walking by the harbor but he lacked motivation and a decent rain jacket. He was going stir crazy. He’d vacuumed and washed out the already clean refrigerator. He couldn’t go to Moss Beach again. He was spending a fortune on gas (although Nick had slipped him two Benjamin Franklins as a contribution and wouldn’t take them back). He’d go again the following day to support Sam after his hospital appointment.

Dean had an apple for lunch. He was throwing the core in the garbage bag when got a text.

*I don’t know what you’ve done to Cassie but if you don’t fix it I’ll curse your pert arse. B.*

Dean cringed at reprimand from Castiel’s cousin. He didn’t reply. How could he explain in such few characters that it wasn’t an easy fix? From Balthazar’s words Dean gathered that Castiel hadn’t shared any details the day before. He put his phone aside. He’d face Balthazar when he saw him again.

He took clothes to the laundrette and handed Castiel’s shirts in for pressing. He made lasagna from scratch using both their oven dishes. When cooled he divided one into two huge portions and froze them. When the rain let up, he waxed the Impala until Sam could have styled his hair in the mirror-shined surface.

Castiel was late home, book bag bulging with the latest submitted homework assignments. There was a cleaned plate and a thank you for the meal before Cas took cleaning duty. Dean stretched out on the sofa. He channel flicked until CSI Miami came on, one eye on Castiel’s motions at the sink and then at his desk.

A few times that evening, Dean scrubbed his hand over his mouth and chin but got no farther in any effort to break the glass wall. Dean felt like there was an exoskeleton growing over his body. The thorny atmosphere seemed to affect Cas too, as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Something was going to have to happen soon, be said, or done because living like this was miserable.

Dean went to bed after midnight, having taken Pepto Bismol for his psychosomatic digestive system. Suddenly it was daylight, overly bright and menacing in its exposure. He could feel his skin pinking up as his feet skittered from under him. Tall glass buildings loomed with threatening mirrored fronts. He knew it was absolutely life or death that he get to the bottom. The sidewalk sloped perilously, too steep for his old track shoes to hold on. The ground began to buck and heave like a super-earthquake, morphing into a racing rolling escalator. He couldn’t find purchase on the cracking concrete. Flinging his hands sideways, there was no-one to hold on to. Dean opened his mouth to roar for help but nothing came out. He tried to shout, to scream…

“Dean, Dean.”

A hand pushed his hair back, gently smoothing the skin of his forehead.

“Dean. It’s a nightmare. Wake up.”

He sucked in air like a drowning man, “Cas?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s me.” The hand moved down to cup Dean’s cheek.

“Stay please,” Dean pleaded. He hated how needy it came out but he thought he’d crack inside if Castiel pulled away.

Cas’s hand withdrew but he did not move to the far lip of the mattress, instead he shuffled his
pillow closer and lay on his side facing Dean’s prone body, aligned with his knees touching Dean’s leg and his hand on Dean’s side.

“Like this, Dean?”

Dean nodded blearily into the darkness, slipping his hand to Cas’s hip. It was fine, good. He could slip back down into slumber. Cas wasn’t going anywhere.

In the morning, after-tremors of his nightmare produced jitters and acid tones. Dean was disappointed that he woke too late to see Castiel and to breakfast together in the aftermath of comfort offered and taken. He tried to put a positive spin on his partner’s actions, preferring to think Cas had been reluctant to disturb his second sleep.

He sat at the table, with Blue Oyster Cult on the player, pencil idling between his fingers, blank page open waiting for the graphite to be pressed to the sheet.

He felt empty. He needed to do something. With a sudden confidence Dean pulled open the drawer where they had put their takeout menus and trivia. In seconds he held the business card for Mr. Lafitte. Without giving time for anxiety or doubts to cluster his mind, Dean dialed.

“I am looking for Mr. Lafitte.”

“Benny speaking,” was said in an unexpected southern states drawl.

“This is Dean Winchester.” It came out in a rush but at least Dean hadn’t paused or stuttered.

“Well, hello there.” A friendly easy tone came with an audible smile of greeting.

“You contacted my… contacted Castiel about a vacancy?” Dean sucked his breath.

“Sure did. I’m looking for a well rounded assistant. Gotta bunch of suit-wearing anally retentive graduates sent to me by an agency. I got all bug-bite itchy looking at the toy soldiers.” Benny laughed. “I want someone to organize me and give me a helping hand.”

Dean huffed a whoosh of air. Vague could be Mr. Lafitte's, Benny’s, middle name. “I mean, what sort of assistant? What kind of work?”

“I’ll give you the full lowdown if you come for interview. I told the agency I was looking for a PA.” Benny clicked his tongue. “When Andrea bought me out of the Light Up Your Beans chain. She thought of the name by the way. I wanted to call it Float Your Beans.”

Dean smiled to himself, he’d truncated the name almost immediately, thinking it too long. He didn’t say anything though, unsure of what would seem fawning and what would offend.

“I got the Jenner home in the settlement and prepared for the good life.” Benny gave a self-mocking laugh, “I was bored in a month. I took back up the camera. I’m a photographer.”

“Wow.” Dean blinked.

“This time I don’t need to earn bucks doing weddings, bar mitzvahs and commissions for local newspapers. I shoot freelance with some requests for my services. I need someone to make sure I don’t double book or flit off to Louisiana forgetting I’m expected at a location.”

“And you thought I might be suitable?” Dean was incredulous.

“I need someone who won’t hand in their resignation if I decide I can’t shoot until the yard is tidy.
Someone who won’t throw a snit if I ask them to get my Harley fixed, so I can ride it along the coast looking for landscapes.” Benny chuckled.

“I could probably fix it for ya,” Dean’s brain spewed out with a grin before he could censor it.

“Could you?” Benny hummed. “You game to come up to Jenner? Friday?”

Dean smacked his lips together. He’d discuss the nitty gritty, like Victor advised, when he met Benny, but he didn’t want to waste the man’s time. “Only thing, Mr. Lafitte…”

“Benny.”

“Benny.” Dean nodded into the handset, “I’m looking for part-time work.”

“Suits me, Sugar. I need my space.”

Dean took directions to the address down and promised to be there promptly at two, with his mechanics’ tools to look at the Harley. From Benny’s enthusiastic reaction, Dean had a feeling he’d been hired.

He momentarily forgot they were estranged and texted Castiel:

_Called Mystery Boss. Looking Good._

He had his jacket on and was preparing to leave for Moss Beach when his cell pinged.

_Gr8. Knew you could._

Dean braced his hand on the back of the chair. He swallowed hard. How could Castiel have such faith in him? It gave him a faint glimmer of hope.

_Thanks. Off to Sam._

_Drive Safely._

Dean gave the phone a squeeze as if it was Cas’s hand.

A couple of hours later, in Sam’s bedroom, Dean let the story of his brother’s appointment wash over him. He hid winces at how it hit home that Nick and Sam were so close and obvious in their affection. Sam told his silent brother how Nick remembered a cushion for Sam’s time lying down with a blood pressure monitor, how they’d bounced the values of McLaren strollers versus the Bugaboo Frog while Nick massaged his belly, and how Sam was using his laptop time to source a signed copy of Nick’s favorite childhood storybook. Dean picked his nails while Sam talked about Brady, freshly released from Chicago Law Hell, popping into the hospital to meet for coffee before they headed home. He chewed on the inside of his cheek while Sam ran through an article on the sewers of ancient Knossos.

“What’s wrong, Dean?”

“Huh?” Dean jerked his head up.

“What’s wrong?” Sam pulled himself up to sit straighter in the bed. “You’ve been like freaking Eeyore since you met up with Aaron. Did something happen with him? Should I get Sydney to give him a noogie?”

Dean shook his head. “Naw. ‘S Cas.”

Dean held up a hand. “Cas did nothing. He’s trying to… trying to… “

Dean couldn’t say ‘forgive me’.

“Take a breath, Dee,” Sam urged. “Stay calm. Look I’m calm.”

Dean chuckled. He could almost see steam coming out of Sam’s nostrils.

“I never told him, y’know, that I was meeting Aaron, until he said he wanted to come with to visit you….”

“Jesus, Dean!” Sam hissed.

“Yeah and then I was cornered and everything I said came out all wrong, as if I was keeping it from him.” Dean sighed.

“You were keeping from him.” Sam pointed out.

“I know!” Dean blurted, “but not the way he thinks, like I couldn’t trust him or crap.”

“Dean.” Sam bitch-faced. “But you have explained now?”

“Not so much.” Dean winced as he admitted under his brother’s glare.

“You have to apologize.”

“I apologized.”

“Apologize again, Dean!” Sam huffed. “Explain yourself. Castiel isn’t a mind reader.”

“I feel sick.” Bile rose up threatening to send him scurrying for Sam’s wet room.

“Dee,” Sam’s voice softened on his name before speaking with emphasized diction. “I’m not taking Cas’s side. If there are sides, I’m on yours all the way. But you need to chew a Xanax, find your balls, and put your head on chopping block. Isn’t Cas worth fighting for?”

Dean was shocked. Sam was vehement in his urging. When had his little brother got so wise? If he did nothing and the estrangement didn’t lessen, he could lose Cas. He couldn’t contemplate it. His chest tightened and he gasped for air.

“Crap!” Sam threw back the light bedclothes and swung out of bed. “Breathe, Dean. Come on. Breathe with me, Dean. I didn’t mean Cas was leaving you.”

A few beats later, Dean’s pulmonary system got with the program. His eyes watered as he raised his head to Sam’s concerned eyes. “Sonvabitch, Sammy.”

Taking another deep inhale he added, “I know. Cas hasn’t left. But he could. I’ve seen it in movies, read it in books, couples stop talking and being affectionate, and they drift apart. Their love dies.”

“You won’t let that happen.” Sam vowed. “You’ll fight. You get up off the mat and you fight.”

“What?” Dean furrowed his brow.

“You have to fight for Cas. Never give up. If something is important to you then you fight for it.”
Dean puffed with a nod. “You’re good. You shoulda been a coach.”

Sam threw his head back and laughed. “Can you imagine me coaching Lola’s grade school soccer team?”

“Yep.” Dean grinned. He could see it. A flock of little girls no higher than his brother’s waist and Sam directing play. “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

“Who’s crying?” Nick asked pushing in the door with his foot. “Sam! Why are you up?”

“I’m not up. I’m crouching next to Dean.”

“A technicality.” Nick snorted. “You promised you’d lie down when we got home.”

Sam made a face behind his partner’s back but slipped back into the bed.

“Would you like a coffee, Dean?” Nick asked. “I’ve some Key Lime Pie from the restaurant too. It’s yesterday’s but still good.”

“Awesome.” Dean agreed.

“Sam?” Nick asked coming over to kiss Sam’s forehead and receive a pat to his arm.

“I’ll have some of the pear juice and a little pie for Lola.”

Nick chuckled with raised brows as he departed, “For Lola?”

Dean hinted at having a baby shower while they waited for Nick to return.

“I don’t know, Dean.” Sam twisted his lip. “I’m not meant to get over excited.”

“Remember your birthday? I thought we’d could do it like that. A few people over in the middle of the day. Have it here. Weather good on the terrace. Cool day in the den? The guys are back at Stanford. We could do it on a weekend. You use your charms on Nick to make sure Brady can have the day off?”

Sam was giving his conditional agreement to Dean’s pleasure when Nick arrived with coffees, juice and pie. Dean got the small trestle table and unfolded the legs. He was sure it was another restaurant reallocation. It was a useful one for guests in the bedroom. Nick settled Sam’s over-leg bed table and they tucked in. The pie was good but Dean wasn’t all that hungry. He was buoyed by Sam’s agreement to the shower and had a new determination from Sam’s directive to talk to Cas, but he still wasn’t right. There was a low grade anxiety. A background hum that came from being ill at ease. He put down his fork and moved to the long windows.

Nick followed him. The older man put his hand on Dean’s shoulder.

“Go home.”

“What?” Dean half turned.

“Go home and sort out whatever problems you are having.”

“Nick’s right.” Sam piped up.

“You’re both right.” Dean admitted.
This time the drive north was a blank. Dean was in a state of suspended animation. It was as if the world was on hold until he could clear the air with Castiel. He planted his feet firmly on each step as he called out for his partner.

“In here.” Castiel called from their bedroom.

Dean entered as Castiel half zipped his blue hoodie. His teaching suit and tie were draped over the end of the bed. Jeans were on, but Castiel’s toes moved in his grey socks.

“Cas, Can I talk?”

Castiel perched on the edge of their heavy wood dressing table.

“I mean,” Dean tongued the inside of his cheek, “I need to say this and I need you to listen.”

“OK,” Castiel changed his posture, hands hanging open and receptive.

“I fucked up,” Dean opened. The skin on his face tightened. His heart raced. Castiel continued to look on. “I’m saying sorry here, Cas. And I fucking mean it. I got myself tangled up in knots. Every time I wimped out on telling ya about Aaron’s meet up, it got fricking harder to step up to the plate.”

“I would have understood. I do understand.” Castiel gulped.

“I know. I know, Babe.” Dean took four paces to fall on his knees at Castiel’s feet. Castiel gasped above him, as Dean pressed his head against Castiel’s thigh. “I’m sorry. Please don’t leave me. Don’t push me away. Please Cas. I love you and I do trust you with every motherfucking thing. You, Cas. You’re my everything.”

“Dean,” Castiel sobbed, “Dean please get up.”

Castiel bent over to try and lift Dean under his arms, but either Dean was dead weight or the emotions were weakening Castiel, because it didn’t work. Castiel’s hands moved to embrace Dean, who fell into his hold. He shuddered and breathed the scent of Castiel’s skin. Slowly somehow they ended up sitting on their butts against Dean’s side of the bed, foreheads touching and arms over shoulders.

“We’re dumbasses.” Castiel whispered.

“Speak for yourself.” Dean quipped.

“I’m sorry, Dean.” Castiel’s voice was low and guttural with feelings, “I know it is hard, damn difficult, for you. But there are things, relationship and family things that are difficult for me too. Trust is the killer. I trusted my family, my childhood best friends, Ephraim… with my heart and it was stomped on. I trusted too blindly and was left with nothing.”

“Oh, Cas.” Dean’s heart twisted. He gripped on tight to Cas’s bony shoulder.

“I’ve opened myself for you and I apologize that in the last few days… which I’ve hated… I found myself turtle-like ducking inside a shell. I’m sorry Dean. I shouldn’t have made it worse for you.” Castiel looked down, “I was stung and stunned by the shock of it all being planned behind my back. But I should have let you tell me. I should have listened before now.”

“No. No, Cas. I hurt you. I’m the dick here.”
Castiel snorted.

“What?” Dean elbowed him.

“We can’t even apologize without smut.”

“Huh?”

“I opened myself for you and you’re the dick.” Castiel laughed.

Dean’s chest heaved with laughter. It was contagious, not all that funny, but they shared laughs of healing, relief and reconnection their bond, until Castiel caught his hand and pulled him to his feet.

They ate takeout together on their sofa lap trays. Castiel texted Balthazar so he wouldn’t make a Dean voodoo doll. They watched Ferris Bueller. Castiel tried to prep for the following day’s classes while Dean told him about Benny, Sam and the nascent baby shower plan.

In bed that night, Castiel played big spoon to a very satisfied and warm Dean.

“Did you really leave some pie on your plate at Sam and Nick’s?” Castiel asked before sleep took them.

Dean laughed low and pushed his body back against Castiel’s. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure there is no baby?”

Dean spat a loud guffaw, twisted round and smashed their lips together. Deepening the kiss, tasting mint and Castiel, Dean thanked God and Sam and Castiel’s true heart that he was here, beloved, forgiven and understood.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter is back to Sam’s POV.

The finale killed me… killed me I tell you!

Btw the con was amazing. If you get a chance to go to one, grab it with both hands and don’t let go. FYI Jared is the nicest sweetest person. I’m still floating 6 days later.
Twenty Eight

Chapter Notes

All of you. Thank you again.. when I started this story never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it would exceed 450 kudos.
And all who have commented.... you're awesome!

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++

“Sam Freaking Winchester,” Brady huffed unceremoniously.

The blond student caught a giant box of diapers from the armchair and plunked it onto the floor beside the sofa. He’d just descended from the step ladder, where he had unpinned the huge ‘Baby Shower’ banner that had run along the wall over the fireplace. Brady, Nick, Dean and Castiel were the dream team dealing with the clean up. Sam itched to be able to help, but once he had admitted to Nick that his headache was back, he’d been relegated to the bench, aka his throne-like (according to Dean) sofa in the middle of the family room. The ache was like a band tightening inside his forehead, persistent and annoying, but not approaching migraine pain levels. He supposed he could have ducked out of the shower for a rest earlier, but he hadn’t wanted to vanish on his guests. Entertaining his friends had taken its toll, and he was wrecked, but satisfied after a wonderful day of friendship and receiving best wishes for Lola’s safe entry into the world.

Looking at Brady slouching in the seat, Sam grinned at his dramatic posture. Anyone would think Brady had run a marathon.

“Tyson Fricking Brady,” Sam flung out his arm to catch Brady’s bicep in a teasing whack. Then he leaned back into the cushions. As guests had taken their leave, he had opened the buttons on his plaid pregnancy shirt revealing his plain white tee. He had kicked off his shoes too. He wriggled his toes where they were poked in between the seat cushions and arm of the couch.

Brady ran a hand through his floppy hair, laughed and stretched his legs out to use the top of a diaper box as a footstool. “Man, I am beat. Whose idea was it that I serve drinks for the Baby Shower To End All Baby Showers?”

“Yours, I believe,” Nick said dryly from his corner bar shelves, where he was attempting to return his bottles of liquor to their previous glory. “Two broken crystal glasses and I don’t you how you’ve jammed the screw top on the cocktail shaker.”

“Sorry, Lucifer.” Brady said with a nervous titter.

“Awh Nick, play nice,” Sam twisted his head round to make sure that his partner wasn’t truly angry, “Brady’s helped all day and he brought us the cute Beauty And The Beast fleecy blanket.”

Nick muttered something about that choice of Disney movie having better not be a comment on their relationship. He cuffed the back of Brady’s head in jest, then bent over the back of the sofa to kiss Sam’s offered cheek.

Straightening up, Nick rubbed his chin, “I thought Dean was staying to help the clear up? How
long exactly has your brother been *showing Castiel the nursery*?

“Ugh,” Sam protested, “Just coz you’re grouchy after having the house filled with visitors doesn’t mean you can tarnish *showing someone Lola’s nursery* as smut.”

“Once they’re gone *I’ll show you the nursery*.” Nick laughed raucously at his own joke.

To Sam’s mild chagrin Brady laughed too.

Dean returned, oblivious to their talk and with suspiciously swollen bitten-on lips. Castiel’s hair was tossed as if Dean had tried to style it as a haystack. Seeing Castiel’s hand gripped tightly in Dean’s encouraged Sam to join in the mirth. It gave him joy to notice little touches in his brother’s mended relationship.

“What’s up?” Dean asked, which only made their laughter increase in volume.

“Were you in the nursery all that time?” Nick flicked his tongue playfully, suggesting the activities they all suspected had occurred.

Dean shifted from one leg to the other, “Well, yeah, I wanted to show Cas where we are putting the stencils, and we stacked up the gifts we carried to the room.” He shrugged under their gazes, “Mighta gone to the guestroom to chill out for a few minutes.”

“Praise be to the heavenly choir,” Nick sniggered, “You’ve dodged Sam’s wrath.”

Dean scrunched his brow. “Huh, Sammy?”

“Oh ignore him,” Sam waved his hand dismissively towards Nick, “He’s in a weird mood and wanted me to think you were getting a blow job in the nursery or something.”

Dean gaped, “We wouldn’t.”

One corner of Castiel’s lips twitched upwards, “Not in the nursery, Sam, Nick.”

There was a cracking noise of Brady slapping his own thigh with his hand, “You guys, I don’t even know.”

“Well I don’t know what you are all laughing at,” Dean squared his shoulders with mock bravado, “But my Cas is a pillar of virtue.”

Unfortunately that declaration was ruined when the pillar of virtue smacked him on the butt, with a huge toothy smile and responded, “Meh, not so much.”

Sam leaned back into the seat, truly enjoying seeing Castiel and Dean back to their adorable partnership with no more of the lingering tension that had initially been apparent. In the three weeks since Aaron’s visit, Sam could see that Dean and Cas had begun to re-find their feet and their trust in each other. The first time they’d come to Moss Beach together after Dean had bravely talked things out, they both were clearly making an effort to be considerate and conscious of each other’s presence and feelings. Now all that seemed to be coming naturally again. Sam had woken in the night more than once caught in a fear that Dean would let Cas slip through his fingers. It was a massive relief that those worries were unfounded.

“Penny for them?” Nick said low into his ear.

“Just Dean and Cas,” Sam whispered back, lifting his hand over his shoulder for Nick to give a
quick squeeze.

“OK, Demonic Minion Brady,” Nick announced with a quirky grin, “Give me a few minutes to parcel up some leftovers for your housemates, and I’ll run you back to Palo Alto.”

“By all means your satanic majesty,” Brady ribbed back. “You want help in the kitchen?”

Nick shook his head.

“We can drop Brady before we head home.” Dean offered.

“Thanks, but I want a sneaky glance in at The Gates,” Nick replied from the doorway, “I won’t be long, Sam.”

“Is it always jovial like that at the restaurant?” Castiel asked, picking up the last couple of lonely roasted peanuts from a bowl on the side table.

“Naw,” Brady answered slouching more comfortably into the chair, “’s too busy. ‘cept for Meg.”

He glanced at Sam and then in unison, but without the volume for fear of startling Nick at the other end of the house, they did a whining impression of Meg’s normally roared, “Luuuuuccfferrrrrr.”

“Poor Meg,” Castiel scolded, “after she gave you all those baby wipes.”

Sam managed to look partially shamefaced while simultaneously grinning with Brady.

Brady leaned forward, “Before I go, you’re looking great, Man. I mean we didn’t get a chance to talk much in the melee.”

“You mean Jess and company’s bump watch.”

“That’s a good name for it.” Brady laughed, “Don’t forget Meg’s protective hissing when your neighbor tried to bring her dog to the shower.”

Dean did his own version of hissing at the memory of the yapping Pomeranian. “It snapped at my ankles.”

“Poor baby,” Castiel smirked and rubbed Dean’s hand. Dean leaned into Castiel’s side.

“Poor Ava.” Sam winced. He raised a brow at Castiel for indulging Dean. “So Brady, what is it like being a Junior?”

“Manic, Man. They are loading us up with assignments, like you wouldn’t believe, and the pre-law reading list, sheez, I’m almost wishing I was back in Dad’s law firm.”

“That bad, huh?” Sam tried to suppress a grin.

“And it’s not the same without you.”

“Sap.” Sam teased.

“Honestly, Sam.” Brady’s smile dropped. “I miss your sorry ass.”

“I’ll be back.” Sam promised.

“Yeah,” Brady said with melancholy, “But it won’t be the same.”
“No it won’t.” Sam intoned seriously.

It wouldn’t. Brady was right. He’d go back to Stanford, but he’d have his daughter waiting for him at home. There’d be much less comedy nights, lacrosse team celebrations, and late night library sessions. Also he’d be almost a year behind his best friends. He covered the top of his bump with his hand, knowing he didn’t regret any of that for a moment. No way would he trade away his life with Nick and the arrival of their little girl. Lola was quiet at the moment. She’d kicked for America under the excited hands of Jess, Sarah and Ruby earlier. Sam silently thanked her for giving her Papa a rest.

Looking back at Brady, Sam offered. “You know you can always call me if you want to moan. I’m confined to bed but I have full phone access.”

“I don’t moan.” Brady said with indignation.

Sam threw back his head and laughed so hard a tear leaked from his eye, “Seriously, Man. You do me good. You’ll have to come over more often.”

“Brady?” Nick called. He’d changed into his dark suit and black shirt.

Sam narrowed his eyes, “You seriously only going into the restaurant for a glance?”

“Uh-huh, my love, a pit stop. There weren’t many reservations for a Sunday, but with Brady, Meg and Fergus having been here, I want to show my face.”

Sam nodded with understanding. Brady clapped his back in farewell and Nick pecked his cheek.

“So, Samantha,” Dean said when they were gone, “Who gave you the grotesque piñata?”

Sam snorted, “Andy, and that awful puce blanket was sent from Max. Both destined for the crawl space I think.”

“You should burn them.” Dean suggested. “And that weird mobile Balthazar gave you.”

“Hey,” Castiel poked Dean in the ribs and glared at him.

Sam grinned at their exchange. “I know the astrology symbols might not be cutesy but it’s actually quite attractive. And I don’t think it’s a mobile. They are wind-chimes.”

“Jesus, Sam. Wind-chimes? That freaking worse.” Dean protested.

“Balthazar was very charming and he promised to do a special newborn chart for Lola if I can give him her exact time of birth.”

“You’re not getting lured in by my cousin’s new age spiel, are you, Sam?” Castiel’s brow furled.

“Naw,” Sam huffed lightly, “Don’t worry, guys, I’m still rational and relatively sane.”

“You know,” Dean grinned gleefully, “You got a fuckton of gifts.”

Sam looked to where a pile of presents were displayed on the coffee table. He had been wowed by how kind and generous everyone had been.

“I know. And I mean, we didn’t register a shower list or anything, because…” Sam shrugged his shoulder, “like we had stuff got already, but everyone… Geez Dee, all those diapers and soft towels, and the colorful play mats, the little cardigans and hats…”
“You could open a baby store.” Dean teased, “Sam’s Baby Emporium?”

Sam pursed his lips and rolled his eyes. “Really?”

Dean clutched at his chest, “Help! The force of Bitch-face number eleven.”

“I’ll Jedi power-up a number one if you’re not careful, Bitch.” Sam teased.

“You wouldn’t dare, Jerk.” Dean smirked.

“Number one?” Castiel asked, bemused at the brothers’ antics.

“Number one, as in, Dean is being a giant ass. All other expressions are derivatives.” Sam interpreted.

“You’re a derivative.” Dean pouted with a snort.

“Hopeless.” Sam exclaimed and rolled his eyes at the lame comeback.

“It was very nice to meet all your friends.” Castiel tactfully changed the subject before fraternal verbal jousting ratcheted up to physical hand slapping.

“It was cool to have them all here,” Sam smiled at his memories of the day, “Between Jess, Madison, Sarah, Andy and all from Stanford. The guys from The Gates. Our neighbors… Those cookies Jess baked were divine. Guys, do you think we’ll need all those baby socks?”

Dean answered, “You’ll be surprised. All the diapers and clothes and stuff. People were clever too, they’ve given all different baby sizes.”

“I think this might be my favorite gift.” Sam pulled his prize out from where he had wedged it between his leg and the sofa back. It was a small, oh-so-soft, comforter with a plush little polar bear cub head topping it off. He’d been brushing the blankie part whenever he’d needed a speck of blood pressure reduction during the day.

“Who gave you that?” Castiel asked.

“It was in with the gift bag from Crowley, along with pots of diaper rash cream and binkies.” Sam said stroking the polar bear part.

“Lola’ll be lucky to pry her Papa’s hands away from that one.” Dean commented.

Sam reached over and fake punched Dean with the toy.

“Oy!” Dean protested with a grin, “See how I’m unappreciated. I’m going to collect our leftover pie from the pantry to make sure we don’t forget it.”

“I don’t understand how a whole cherry pie is a leftover.” Castiel shook his head at Dean’s retreating back.

“That’s Dean Logic.” Sam surmised succulently. He turned his attention on Castiel. “You know, Cas, I never get a word with you on our own.”

Castiel tilted his head and squinted his eyes, “Do you want to talk about Dean?”

Sam didn’t deny it. However his query was; “How are you?”
“I am fine, Sam, thank you for asking.” Castiel’s head remained at an angle as if he was trying to figure Sam out.

“I mean,” Sam paused, “How are you and Dean now? From your point of view?”

Castiel took a moment. He nodded slowly. “We are bruised, but good. And bruises fade, Sam.”

Sam got it. He lifted the corners of his lips in an appreciative smile.

“You know,” Castiel dropped his voice, “He never told Victor.”

“Huh?” Sam’s eyes widened.

“Dean didn’t tell Victor about Aaron until afterwards.”

Sam gave a nasal huff and a slight headshake, “He is so….”

“Frustrating?” Castiel supplied.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, matching Castiel’s tender tone and tagging on a breathy chuckle.

“But we love him.” Castiel continued with an intense meeting of Sam’s eyes.

“Yes we do.” Sam affirmed.

“We do what now?” Dean asked as he reappeared, cradling the aluminum foil wrapped pie.

Sam felt better having exchanged those few words with his brother’s partner. Castiel was whispering in Dean’s ear. Sam let his worries about them ease back another notch, knowing Dean and Cas were on their way back to a good place. He had enough concerns about his own health and helping Lola get as close to full term as possible.

Before Sam knew it, Nick was back. Dean and Castiel hit the road for Bodega. They both had work in the morning. If the baby shower had been on Saturday they would have stayed over, but Sunday had been a better day to hold the afternoon party, meaning more friends could make it. Nick saw them off at the door, with Dean promising to return during the week to paint the stencils.

Sam twisted round on the seat, to try to get a snug position. He tucked in his knees and stuck a cushion under his bump.

Nick asked “You OK?”

Sam rolled his shoulder with a wince, “Trapped wind, I think.”

“Let me.” Nick came behind him and massaged into Sam’s muscle.

Sam closed his eyes. It felt really good. Knuckles dug in, easing out the bunched muscle. Nick got him to rotate his arm before kneading in with the heel of his palm.

“Good?”

Sam nodded. It had eased out. He gave a relieving belch.

His sheepish smile met Nick’s amused one. “Thanks, my love.”

Nick came round and crouched down to take Sam in his arms. Leaning into the hug, Sam let any
hanging tension drain away. He pushed his hands up under Nick’s suit jacket to feel the heat of his skin through the cotton of his shirt.

With a kiss pressed to Nick’s jaw, Sam murmured, “I miss sex but snuggling is a good substitute.”

Nick hummed into his hair, “My sweetheart, I must concur.” He pulled back, “Now, Sam, my love, are you hungry?”

“You know what I’d love now?” Sam looked off to the middle distance.

“Leftover savory pies and sandwiches?” Nick grinned as he stood up.

“Nah,” Sam licked the inside of his lip, “Gianni’s parmesan crackers, girasoli, and deep fried polenta fries.”

Nick leaned back on the balls of his feet with arms folded. “I could have made those for you if we had the ingredients, or got Baldur to whip them up.”

Sam wrinkled his nose, “It’s not the same as from Gianni’s”

“Huh,” Nick turned out his bottom lip and narrowed his eyes, “Gianni’s in The Castro...”

Sam gave him a quizzical look.

“...That doesn’t do takeout.” Nick added, “I’ll call ahead.”

“Wait.” Sam protested, “I didn’t mean... I was talking hypothetically.”

“I’ll be back in an hour.” Nick promised. “Will you be OK? Do you want to move to the bedroom before I go? Are you tired after everyone?”

Sam laughed partially in disbelief that Nick was actually going into San Francisco. “I’m good, not too wrecked. Pass me the remote and I won’t move from here. If you want to detour back to The Gates I’ll be fine too. After all Lucifer needs to rule Hell.”

Nick grabbed his car keys while chuckling. “They were fine a while ago. Baldur’s ruling from the kitchen in Crowley’s absence. And Lucifer would much prefer to make sure his soul mate is safe and well.”

“This soul mate will be fine.” Sam quipped.

He wasn’t annoyed by Nick double checking on how he was feeling. Sometimes being on bed rest and Nick going into hovering mode could be claustrophobic, but Sam tried to beat down any snarky moodiness. Nick didn’t deserve that, and he was trying to do his best to take care of Sam and Lola.

He tacked on a few more words, “Listen my sweet devil, I know. I get it. I’m good but hungry. Drive safely.”

Nick hummed, “Your wish is my command, your highness.”

“Good answer. I won’t change the locks while you are gone.” Sam retorted at his partner’s retreating back.

Sam channel surfed and might have drowsed off for a few minutes. Nick returned saying the food was with Gianni’s compliments and that the chef expected there to be a family outing to his
restaurant when Lola was ready for her first adventures. Not only did the cartons contain Sam’s requests but also a portion of that night’s special for Nick and a tiny tray of green and black marinated olives wrapped in slivers of parma ham.

Any tiny fleck of guilt at making Nick go on the food quest was quelled when they shared Gianni’s sublime food. Sam thought it might have been even more delicious than their dates at La Cucina Dolce. Every bite melted in Sam’s mouth, tastes exchanged by deep kisses and lingering in softly nipped lips.

“We’ll be alright won’t we, Nick?” Sam checked as he popped a green olive into his partner’s open mouth.

Nick smiled around the salty offering. He pecked Sam’s lips and breathed into the air between them, “Always. Together.”

The following Thursday afternoon, Dean appeared with small pots of tester paints in pastel shades and the stencil sheets he had made with his friend Alfie’s assistance. It was a non-Victor Thursday. Dean had plenty of time to work on his project. Benny needed him the following day, so he was hoping to get the room finished.

Sam was pathetically happy to see him. He’d had an awful day at the hospital on Wednesday. He had gone in with some concern about his persistent low-grade headache, but ready to celebrate getting to 33 weeks. However, the protein in his urine was up. His ankles were swollen. When Anna got his three hour averaged BP read, it was creeping up too. She’d considered admitting him, but with Sam’s faithful promise to follow her orders, he was sent home on strict bed rest. She told him that he should bring his staying-in hospital bags with him to each appointment from then on, and if his BP didn’t stabilize by Monday, she was going to give him steroid injections for Lola’s lungs in preparation of an early delivery.

Confined to bed, with his worries for company, and the toilet his only journey, to Sam it was like a holiday having Dean in the house. Sam didn’t even care that Dean had fussed around him when he arrived, checking if he wanted him to cook, or clean, or get a movie for him. Sam had finally got him to breathe and calm down by insisting he was fine. He’d turned his face to the bright side of things for Dean’s benefit, insisting they should be breaking out the confetti to mark getting to 33 weeks and counting. Saying it out loud made that truth sink in. Maybe there was something to those positive affirmation books that Balthazar peddled.

Over cold sodas, Sam approved the teddy bear shape and the daisy head to go in an alternate pattern around the window and spreading out along the wall. Dean was going to do a few freestyle flowers and stars too.

Sam opened the latest edition of American Anthropologist. Dean occasionally shouted updates of how the rainbow mural was developing on the far nursery wall, and the benefits of using a sponge for his first application of the stencils. Dean’s deep brown thrift store painting tee was splattered in pinks and rainbow flecks when he arrived bearing the butler’s tray. Sam craned his neck to see steaming mugs. He pushed aside his paperwork.

“Decaf coffees and some of The Bluebell Café’s famous giant pecan choc-chip cookies.” Dean
announced with aplomb.

“Dude, why didn’t you tell me you brought cookies?” Sam reached to help settle the tray on his bed-table.

Dean pulled a chair close to the side of the bed. He answered Sam’s question with big brother smugness, “Cos I wanted to make a start on the painting and I know your hormones are demanding instant gratification.”

“You’ve been watching Oprah again,” Sam chuckled.

“You only know that because you musta seen it on Tuesday too.” Dean retorted.

“Caught red-handed.” Sam rolled his eyes, “I mean, what kind of excuse is ‘instant gratification’ anyway.”

“I dunno.” Dean hummed around his treat, “A tasty one?”

“Tastes are important.” Sam agreed feeling a spot of melting chocolate at the corner of his lips.

“I still can’t believe you got Nick to drive into the city to get you a pasta dish.” Dean wiggled his brows.

“He volunteered,” Sam shrugged coyly.

“He is so whipped.” Dean chortled.

“Hey, Dean,” Sam said after a joint pause to drink and eat. “I’m happy things are good with you and Cas.”

Dean put down his mug. He chewed on his lip for a moment. “Yeah. They are. Real good, and I think we’re both a bit more aware of each other’s history, and I dunno, our reactions, a bit more freaking careful, and that’s…” Dean huffed, “Y’know before it was like we were in the middle of a beautiful guitar riff. Like we could soar up with the musical interlude and then belt out the chorus together. And we still can but we’re counting out the beats now.”

Sam nodded. “You saying things are still awkward?”

“No. Not awkward, but…” Dean paused as if he was searching for a way to explain it, “Like I know you like salad crap, even when you were a tween-age shit. What twelve year old wants to eat greens? Anyway, sidetracked… I used to throw a load of leaves in a bowl for ya and you’d enjoy it and I’d love seeing you enjoy it. But now it’s kinda like if I felt I should check if you’d like arugula or iceberg lettuce, and you’d need to tell me how much you’re loving it, but you still enjoy it and I still love seeing you enjoy it. Do you get it?”

“I get it. Are you worried about it?” Sam twisted his lips at Dean's meandering ramble.

“Naw. It’s cool. We’re cool. Give us a bit of time. We’re solid.”

“Good.” Sam said with meaning. “And how’s the job? You do any office work this week?”

“What is this? Twenty questions?” Dean ribbed Sam with a grin. “I don’t do much clerical crap. But I bought the man a diary.” Dean laughed, “Benny’s crazy. He’s paying me to make sure things are organized, fix his bike, help him move logs for photograph composition, and run into Bodega to buy shrimp for his gumbo.”
“He must think it’s worth it.” Sam commented.

“I think he was getting lonely in that big rambling house,” Dean mused. “He’s a decent boss too. He filled out that bible sized stack of forms I brought him from social services, so I could keep my welfare on the sliding scale, and he’s cool about having Thursdays off.”

“That’s great.”

“Benny doesn’t have a big ass car collection like some of those super-rich sonvabitches who used to hire Dad for tune ups, y’know, but he has a few treasures. I get to spend a while in the garage.” Dean quirked his lips, eyes bright. “Benny brought me lunch both days this week. We ate sandwiches over his T-bird engine, and hot dogs on the back porch.”

“Are you sure it’s a job?”

Dean laughed, “It is, all tax compliant and crap. And I mean, I’m confirming his bookings, sourcing props for him, and making reservations too. And a shit load of that is over the phone, but it’s cool, coz Benny’s not watching me like a hawk. As long as it’s sorted, he’s easy.”

“You think he needs a second PA?” Sam joked, joy-filled at Dean’s enthusiasm.

Dean shook his head, “My gig, Sammy. Hands off.”

He stood up and took Sam’s empty plate and mug. “Once I’ve the final color on the stencils, I’ll head. You want anything before Nick comes home?”

Sam couldn’t think of anything. He put aside the journal and picked up his yellow papered legal pad. He flicked it open and prepared to jot down notes, not on his anthropology research this time but from the chapter on breastfeeding in his treasured copy of “First Time Carrier Dad and Baby”. As he read he admitted to himself that he found the strains of Led Zeppelin coming from the nursery quite soothing. After a while he put his reading material to the side and lay back into the pillows.

The front door slammed. Footsteps taking the stairs two at time, jerked Sam back to full awareness. Sam heaved a sigh. He had just got comfortable.

“Sam?” Nick called, “Sam, darling?”

“In here,” Sam couldn’t help sounding slightly peevish. Where else did Nick expect him to be?

Nick burst into the room. He had loosened his tie and opened the top button of his blue pinstripe shirt. Sam raised his brows.

Dean followed in, looking around for the emergency.

“I got a call.” Nick sucked in a breath. “Your Father has been arrested.”

“What?” Sam pulled himself upright, tossing aside his papers. “You mean to get extradited? Why didn’t the cops call here with the news?”

Nick shook his head.

Dean had pushed back against the wall by the door with his arms folded across his chest. He was barely breathing, staring at Nick, waiting for him to continue.

“Not the cops.” Nick added, “Cain called me. They’ve been keeping tabs on him.”
“You’ve had someone shadowing John?” Sam gaped.

“No, no, not like that,” Nick shook his head, “Cain got an alert put out with our, I mean ADL’s, contacts in Minnesota. He was arrested yesterday.”

“For what?” Dean took a deep breath.

“Spousal abuse. Felony, Cain said.”

“But that makes no sense. Is there another John Winchester?” Sam’s gaze darted from Nick to Dean, who looked as confused as he felt.

“It was him. Cottonwood County Sherriff’s deputies took him into custody at his home in Windom last night.” Nick paused.

Sam shot a look at Dean who had taken a step closer to the bed. Sam could feel a tremble under his skin at the news. He couldn’t imagine what Dean might be experiencing.

“Cain’s source says the extradition warrant proves he is a flight risk, so he’s unlikely to get bail. Minnesota will charge him, and if he’s convicted, he’ll have to serve his sentence before any extradition.”

“So he can’t just turn up here again?” Dean asked pointedly.

“No, Dean.” Nick said firmly. “They got him.”

Dean and Sam shared a look of pure relief. It wasn’t a nice feeling to be glad your Dad was facing a jail term, but Sam thought a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest.

“What about the person he assaulted? Did he have a girlfriend? Is she going to be OK?” Sam asked.

Nick made grimace. “His wife, Kate. I understand her injuries aren’t life threatening.”

“His what?” Dean choked out.

Sam couldn’t speak or think beyond the buzzing noise in his brain.

“His wife. I don’t know any more details, but she is pressing charges.”

“Good.” Dean spat.

Sam took a couple of deep breaths. The vein was pulsing in his temple. He couldn’t believe it. He wouldn’t believe it until they heard that John was convicted. Sam knew only too well how his father could blow out of a state as soon as he was released, or turn on the charm to convince others of his innocence. Although if this poor woman, Kate, had been seriously assaulted, perhaps there was no escape this time. Keeping her existence a secret was typical John Winchester behavior. The thought crossed Sam’s mind that perhaps John was ashamed to admit he had carrier sons. He decided it didn’t matter. He didn’t care about his father’s motivations. He did hope that this woman, his step-mother who he’d never met, would recover from her injuries. John had kept this life separate from his sons, but that was okay too, because Dean and Sam had forged new and better lives for themselves.

“Sam? You alright, my love?” Nick sat sideways on Sam’s side of their bed.

“Where’s Dean gone?” Sam looked around. He’d been lost in his thoughts.
“School’s out. He’s calling Castiel with the news.”

Sam grunted his understanding. “Does it make me a bad person that I’m happy about this?”

Nick pushed Sam’s hair back behind his ear, trailing his hand down to rest it on his shoulder. “No, Sam. Not at all. It makes you human. It makes you a good parent.” Nick smiled sadly, “I love you.”

“And I you,” Sam swallowed around a lump in his throat, soothed by the shared sentiment.

“He can’t hurt you now. And I swear he never will.” Nick ground out the last words with such assertion that Sam believed them with every ounce of his being.

Sam massaged his temple. He’d turned off his music and the laptop. From the kitchen below sounds drifted of Nick clearing up after their early evening meal. They’d shared a selection of Baldur’s party treats on a tray in the bedroom. It was Halloween. The crazy fancy dress Gates of Hell Annual Samhain Bash would be in full swing later. Nick was home for the gap between lunch and dinner services. It was a shame that Nick was going to close and lock the gate across their driveway when he left. There was no way Sam would be able to answer the door and give candy to trick-or-treaters. He thought that next year, he’d make up for it by finding a costume for their baby girl and decorating the entryway to their home, so that local children would see they’d be welcome to call.

It hadn’t been a great day. Sam had been achy and uncomfortable, shifting between the sheets and unable to concentrate on his anthropology texts or the plot of the thriller Ava had loaned to him.

It wasn’t in Sam’s nature to moan or harp on about his problems, no matter how many jokes Dean made in his direction about click flicks and feelings. Wondering if Dean had filled their grandparents in on the previous day’s news about John, and wanting a sympathetic ear, Sam picked up the cordless landline and dialed Kansas.

“Hello?”

“Hi Pawpaw. How is Eudora?” Simply hearing his grandfather’s voice poured balm on Sam’s queasy equilibrium.

“Samuel! Can you finish the wash up? It’s Sam.” Pawpaw’s distant voice faded momentarily. Then there was a settling sigh. “That’s better. I’m in the den, so us carriers can have a private conversation. Tell me, my dear, what are your readings?”

Sam sucked in his lips, “My protein was up, and diastolic raised a touch again. But I swear, Pawpaw, I am glued to the bedroom.”

“I know you are, Son. It will all be worth it. How are feeling? Headaches gone?”

“Honestly, no. I’m achy.” Sam shifted his hips. He lay his hand on the top of his bump. “I know she is still small, but it’s like… I dunno… like there is more pressure?”

“Where?” Pawpaw asked.

“Everywhere.” Sam huffed wryly. “I don’t think I should have eaten pepperoni pizza. My chest, nipples…”
“Yes. It is about that time.”

Sam could visualize Dean Campbell nodding sagely.

“Your bladder too?” Pawpaw asked.

Sam chuckled. “I’m thinking of calling a plumber to move the toilet closer, like next to the bed.”

“I used a chamber pot.”

“A what now?”

“Under the bed. Samuel proved his good husband credentials by emptying it.”

“Ugh, Pawpaw. That’s gross.” Sam grimaced.

“You won’t be so squeamish after you have dealt with sticky dark green diapers. The newborn ones. Luckily my own Poppa warned me, but I’ve known Moms and Pops call for medical assistance over those ones.” Pawpaw laughed lightly.

“I’ve read the Poo chapter in my baby book.” Sam confessed, thinking of green to yellow to milky diapers, without any dread at all. “But thanks for the heads up. Anyhow I’m going to make sure Nick changes his fair share.”

“Only right too.” Pawpaw chortled.

“Pawpaw, we got other news this week.” Sam took a beat. “About John.”

“Go on.” Pawpaw urged.

“Nick heard through his Alighieri connections. John was arrested in Minnesota and it looks like he’ll face jail. He really injured his wife. We didn’t even know he was remarried.” Sam held his breath.

There was a low ‘Oh’ sound.

Sam felt his anger rising. He exhaled and then inhaled through his nostrils, sorry that Pawpaw should be discomforted by hearing about John. How must it seem to John’s father-in-law that there was a new Mrs. Winchester? Maybe Sam could have broken the information more considerately, but he hadn’t thought about how it might sound to his mother’s parents.

“Pawpaw? I’m sorry. Dad kept it a fucking secret from us. We didn’t know.” He bit down on his lip, “Damn, sorry for using the F-word. Sorry, Pawpaw.”

“Sam. I’m not a fragile flower. I’ve said plenty of Fucks, Goddamns, and Craps over the years about John Winchester. It must have been a shock to you boys.”

“Yeah, yeah it was. But at least he is in custody now.” Sam gritted his teeth, “And no way he’ll make bail.”

“I am sorry his tendency for violence has claimed another victim.” Pawpaw sighed.

Sam took another deep breath in an attempt to cool his temper, “I wonder if she knows about us.”

“I am sure she is about to find out. After all, the extradition warrant is for assaulting his pregnant son.”
“Yeah,” Sam puffed. “I’m sorry for laying all my angry on you.”

“It’s not good to keep these things bottled up, Sam. Any time you want to talk, give me a call.”

“Copy that.” Sam smiled into the phone.

“Before you go. Tell me, how is Deanie?”

“Good, Pawpaw. Real good. Him and Cas are too. And his new job is working out.”

“That’s just dandy. I’ll give him a call over the weekend. Your Granddaddy sends his love too, he has appeared here with soapy hands to remind me.”

“Say hey for me,” Sam replied.

“I will. And you call again soon.”

“Take care, Pawpaw.”

“You too, Sam.”

With the call over, Sam spent a few minutes re-reading the pages of the novel he had abandoned earlier. Nick called up that he was leaving soon. Sam knew his partner would appear to say goodbye and check if he wanted anything. He sniffled and wrinkled his nose to dispel an annoying itch. He wiped with the back of his fingers, and was surprised to see a bloody smear. He had no idea that he was having a nosebleed. A single drop fell onto the bed linen. Grabbing a Kleenex, it came away blood spotted too.

“Goddamnit.” Sam grumbled for his own benefit, “Shouldn’t’ve lost my cool.”

Between the ache in his belly and the unquenchable flow, he’d have to shout out for Nick. He dabbed his nose again, hoping in vain it was stopping and he wouldn’t have to alarm Nick, who’d probably call Lucile Packard Hospital.

On top of all that Sam had the urge to pee, again. Stuffing a twisted tissue in his nose, Sam swung his legs out of bed.

Standing up was not a good idea. He blinked back a woozy sensation, took a couple of steps, and braced his hand against the wall.

This wasn’t good. Sam clung to the door frame, white knuckling the ridged wood in an effort to regain his balance. Bypassing the wet room, Sam staggered to the top of the stairs and pressed his palms into the handrail.

“Nick? Nick?”

It was meant to be roar, but came out closer to a whimper. Fortunately Nick had the TV off and the kitchen door was ajar.

“What, Darling?” Nick was there almost immediately, foot on the first step, concern darkening his features.

“I’m bleeding.” Sam gave an apologetic half chuckle.

Nick gasped in horror as he kept approaching, “You are.”
Sam drew his brows together and followed his partner’s gaze, which did not rest on Sam’s face, rather his pajama bottoms.

A bloom of red marred the cotton.

“Oh, shit.” Sam expelled, before his knees gave out.

Nick dashed the final few steps and caught his falling lover, both of them landing awkwardly across the floor.

“Nick?” Sam’s breath hitched as panic imploded and his heart thundered.

Arms tightened around his shoulders, “I’m here. I’ve got you.”
Chapter Notes

Chapter contains some distressing medical situations. Also contains male lactation, so if that squicks you, then you may have to skim some parts.

Also as I have noted before, I’m not medically qualified in any way. I have researched and am drawing on threads of some personal stories. Apologies for any improbabilities that may remain. Mind you, *grin*, mpreg is a pretty big improbability.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ER was bright, familiar and terrifying. They were cut off from the mayhem outside the curtained cubicle, but there was plenty of urgency around Sam’s gurney. Everything seemed to be happening at a much greater pace than before, with more nurses and personnel.

“Lift your hand.”

Sam lifted his eyes to seek Nick’s dilated pupils. There seemed to be a distance between Nick’s liquid eyes and the present reality where a nurse attached his admission bracelet.

One voice said, “Continuous bleed.”

The pink scrubs nurse asked, “How long have you been bleeding?”

Sam swallowed back saliva and shook his head. It swam. Everything was an effort. He was tired, weakened. He blinked in an effort to still the dizzy sensation, while Nick answered for him.

“Any contractions?”

“No,” Sam choked out, “Just pressure. Soreness.”

A sigh of relief broke from Sam. Anna appeared between the curtains, pulling her arm through the sleeve of her white coat. The air of panic lessened to controlled exigency with the consultant obgyn’s arrival.

“Got me on the way out the door, Sam,” She quipped. “Guess your Lola’s keeping her own schedule.”

Sam made an effort to smile through his fear.

Nick moved into a gap near the top of the bed. Sam could hear strain in his question, “What is going on, Dr Milton?”

“Give me a moment,” Anna was handed the chart. She turned to an intern, “Ultrasound and fetal cardiograph. Stat, Monique.”

Sam had already been divested of his clothes and draped in a hospital gown. His delivery bag was
still in the trunk of the Lexus. Sam closed his eyes trying not to see the blood stain he had left on the cream leather upholstery.

Anna pulled down the sheet.

“If I press here, is it tender?”

It was more than tender. Sam yelped an affirmative.

“The ultrasound may hurt.” She warned. As she worked she asked Sam when he had last eaten. Hearing it was only a couple of hours earlier, she nodded a wordless command to the senior nurse, the one in pink, who left the cubicle.

“Is she moving, Sam?” Anna met his eyes.

Sam gulped. He gave a faint headshake. Lola wasn’t. She’d been quiet that afternoon. The thought had crossed his mind that she might be sleeping while he talked to his Pawpaw.

“When did you last feel her movements?” Anna demanded.

“I dunno. Wait, I think a little kick when Nick was taking away our food plates. Yeah, because I thought she was protesting that he was going.”

The strap of the fetal heart monitor was positioned. Sam was so used to it, he helped by hitching it slightly into the perfect spot. Anna had the transducer next to it, still searching on screen. She turned on the sound.

It was wrong. All wrong. Too slow, then the heartbeat was a touch faster, then slower.

_Fading_: the voice in Sam’s head unhelpfully supplied.

Someone said, “Baby is in fetal distress, Doctor.”

Sam froze. Terror gripped him. The slowing heartbeat of his baby was the scariest most horrifying sound.

“Breathe, Sam.” Anna’s voice penetrated, “Don’t hold your breath. Breathe.”

He took a huge gulp of air. Nick lost hold of his hand. Sam watched wide-eyed but helpless to assist, as his partner staggered backwards and slid down the wall.

“Page the surgical team, ASAP, and I want Dr Baker from pediatrics in the OR.”

The monitors were ripped off him. Anna made firm orders. Most of the nurses vanished. The senior nurse returned and handed him a cup of vile nasty medicine to drink.

“What was that?” Sam managed as he licked his lips to try and dispel the taste. Everything was happening too fast. He felt like he was on a runaway rollercoaster cart.

“An antacid,” Anna answered, “Sam, you have a placental abruption. It’s coming away from the wall of your uterus. Lola is not getting enough oxygen. Her heart rate is slowing and she was not moving on the ultrasound.”

“Are you going to induce me? Is Lola? Is she, will she die?” Sam whispered.

“Not if I can help it.” Anna squeezed his arm, “but you must be prepared that Lola is in grave
danger. We are prepping the OR to take you down for an emergency C-section.”

“Nick?” Sam wheezed. Nick had gotten to his feet. He wrapped Sam’s other hand in both of his. The touch was warm.

“I’m here.”

Sam could feel Nick vibrating with dread and worry. He tried to concentrate on his breathing, on Nick’s trembling presence by his side, on pushing away the pain in his abdomen. He couldn’t think of Lola being ‘in distress’ fighting for her life. If he did, he might breakdown and he couldn’t allow himself that luxury.

“I need you to sign consent forms.” Anna said to Sam, “There are risks to an emergency section and your condition.”

“But she’ll die if you don’t take her out?” Sam checked. In his mind he said She’s dying now.

“She has to be born immediately.” Anna said firmly with a curt nod.

Sam held up his hand for the clipboard but Anna held on to it for a moment longer.

“An emergency caesarian is major surgery. I have no guarantees for you, Sam. Placental abruption is a serious danger to both parent and fetus. Before you sign, I need you to be aware that if we cannot stem the bleed, you could go into DIC, Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation. If that happens, in order to save your life, we may have to take your uterus.” Anna outlined quickly, “We need to do the procedure without delay. You will go under general anesthesia. We will do our best to save Lola and you.”

“And me?” Sam repeated, not quite able to parse that his own life was in danger. Nick’s fingers dug into his shoulder.

“We’ll get you set up with a transfusion, and you’ll have a magnesium sulfate drip for your pre-eclampsia.” Anna continued, “At the moment your BP is falling but that is due to your blood loss.”

Sam just nodded. He grabbed the pen and scrawled his name across the bottom.

“They are assembling the team and prepping the OR. I will be paged. We have moments. Do you have any questions?”

“Team?” Nick asked.

Anna gave another curt nod. “Theatre team, anesthetist, and we will have a midwife and a pediatrician for Lola.”

“I wanted to have skin to skin contact with her,” Sam gulped hearing the whimper in his own voice. “Can Nick be there?”

“I know you did, Sam.” Anna said with sympathy. “We will do everything to make sure you can hold her as soon as possible.” She looked to Nick, “If Dad wants to wait directly outside the OR, if Lola is stable, we’ll bring her out for skin to skin cradling to you. But be prepared, Nick, she may need to be taken straight to the NICU.”

“Please, Nick. You need to hold her.” Sam bit down on his lip, “If I can’t do it, please.”

Nick looked overwhelmed, “I feel privileged and kind of guilty to be taking that from you,
Sweetheart.”

Sam lifted his hand and grabbed at Nick’s sleeve, “You’re not! Say hi to her from her Papa.”

A tear rolled down Nick’s cheek as he promised.

“Don’t cry, please. You’ll start me off.” Sam pursed his lips. Nick bent to kiss them.

An orderly appeared to take him down, just as Anna’s pager went off.

“See you on the other side, Sam.” Anna patted his arm.

Nick stuck like glue to the side of the gurney, holding Sam’s hand.

“Will you call, Dean?” Sam pleaded.

“Thought you said to wait, so he wouldn’t drive down tonight.”

“That was when I had vain hope for a false alarm,” Sam admitted. “He’ll need to be here, for his own… I dunno, future peace of mind… if I don’t make it.”

“Stop, Sam,” Nick cried, tears coming freely, “Don’t say it.”

“I have to.” Sam looked up at the moving ceiling, strip lights passing as he was rolled along, “I have to say it now. Lola Alighieri, Nick. She’s your daughter. Don’t shut Dean out of her life, but you’re her Dad.”

“I wouldn’t. I won’t need to. You’ll be fine. Lola will too.” Nick said with shaking breaths.

“Nick.” Sam lifted a hand. They’d come to a stop outside double doors. “I’m glad.”

“What?”

“Know this. Remember this.” Sam gulped hard. “This last year. I found Dean. Met Pawpaw. Carried Lola. Loved you, my love, my Nick.”

“Don’t you be telling me you are dying happy, Sam Winchester.” Nick demanded through his falling tears. “I love you more than life.”

Sam gave a weak laugh. Nick bent so that their lips caressed lightly.

The orderly coughed.

Hands shared a final squeeze.

“I’ll be right outside.” Nick called.

Then there were nurses and the anesthetist was attaching a line to the cannula in his hand. It was happening too fast but Sam understood speed was of the essence. The anesthesiologist gave him an oxygen mask and asked him to breathe deeply. His assistant stood to Sam’s right and held the mask tight to his mouth. Sam could feel his pulse racing but he tried to comply. He saw Anna, all suited and booted, entering the OR. They injected into his cannula and asked him to count back from a hundred. The assistant pressed three fingers to his neck as Sam tried to count. He didn’t make it beyond ninety four.
“Cough for me, Sam.”

Sam blinked. He tried to cough but his throat was dry and there was an oxygen mask over his face.

“Again.”

He felt like he had been hit by a truck, while he’d been sleeping. There was a thoroughly unpleasant sensation of waking up. He lifted his head from the pillow as the mask was removed.

“How,” Sam tried to speak. There was an aching pain deep inside.

“Hang on.” The voice said.

Sam opened his eyes to startling brightness. There was a junior doctor there and a nurse he knew, Veronica.

“Hey Daddy. Welcome back,” She grinned and held a paper cup of water to his lips.

“Not Daddy, I’m Papa.” Sam warbled. His mind began to catch up with events. He was in the recovery room, awake after his surgery. “Is she?”

“Your very pretty little daughter?” Veronica said in a playful gentle question. “She’s in the NICU, temporarily on oxygen. Her lungs need a little help but it is mostly precautionary. She’s small but your partner held her before she was taken down.”

“Nick?” Sam gasped looking around.

“I’ll get him for you now.” Veronica moved towards the door, “We’ll be moving you to your own room soon. How is your pain? Level?”

“I’m very woozy,” Sam admitted. “There’s pain. Not too bad. Is it the anesthetic?”

Veronica smiled, comprehending Sam’s question about his disorientation, “Partly but you have an IV of magnesium sulfate to prevent any eclampsic seizures. That can make your vision blur and you may have headaches.”

Sam huffed. He had no headache, except for the strange wobbly sensation, which he figured could be due to the good pain meds too, “I’m used to those.”

As Veronica ducked out, Sam nodded his thanks. He tried to move but was stiff and sore. He gave silent thanks for modern medicine and pharmaceuticals.

Nick ran through the door to his side. “Sam. Thank God you are OK. They said you came through it 100% okay. My darling, my love.”

Sam’s head was tucked into Nick’s chest, the older man’s hand cupping the back of his skull. Kisses were planted and then quickly exchanged.

“Is Lola OK?” Sam forced out.

“Yeah, Babe. She’s perfect. Tiny but so perfect. I held her.” Nick’s right hand cradled the invisible shape of their daughter high up on his chest.
“Perfect?” Sam checked.

Nick nodded, “She’s got hair and all her fingers and toes.”

Sam laughed quietly at the awe in Nick’s voice.

“Anna said she was born at 7.58pm.”

“Whoa, that was only minutes after they whipped me in.” Sam puffed.

“I didn’t get to hold her until twenty after eight. It was the longest and worst few minutes of my life… not knowing…” Nick grimaced, face tightening in recalled pain. “She… She had an AGPAR of 3. They said she was blue and not responsive, but she had a heartbeat. They had to use a bag with oxygen. Then,” Nick gulped a small sob as he relayed his story, “Then she gave a cry, and began to breathe, and a nurse told me she scrunched up her face at them all. She wasn’t blue when they let me rip open my shirt and hold her here.”

Sam noticed the missing buttons on Nick’s clothes, as his partner placed his palm over his heart.

“What was it like?” Sam gasped in awe.

“Amazing. I was so worried because they were still working on you, but it was like nothing else. Small and wrinkly but taking breaths and next to my heart. They had whip her away to take her to the NICU, but I can’t put it into words, Sam. She is beautiful and she has your nose.”

Sam grinned at the last comment. He’d hoped Lola would have lots of Nick’s features but he could cope with that genetic heritage. He imagined holding her. There was an ache in his arms, in his heart, as he sought to focus on the positives. She was okay. He’d hold her soon.

“And is she very tiny?”

“She’s 3 pounds 13oz. Bigger than they thought she’d be. They have her in the incubator but she’s a fighter, Sam. She’s breathing on her own but they’re giving her oxygen.”

“Can I see her?”

“I asked that.” Nick replied. “They want you stable first but I’ve been promised you can get a free trip to the NICU as soon as. They wanted to know if you are going to breastfeed.”

Sam nodded, confirming what Nick and he had discussed at home. “How do I do that when she’s not with me?”

“I think a nurse is going to come and help you express for her first feed, but they hope you’ll be able to go to the NICU and feed her, if she can suckle. I saw a Mom doing it on a nursing chair with her baby next to their incubator.” Nick reassured him. “She is really beautiful, Sam. Really amazing.”

Sam raised his hand for Nick to take. He wished he could do more, that he felt capable of jumping up, swinging around Nick and running to Lola, but it wasn’t possible.

“Do you want a middle name?” Nick asked. “They gave me the paperwork.”

“Huh?” Sam chuckled, “Lola Winchester Alighieri is not long enough?”

“It’s perfect.” Nick leaned in to rub their noses together. He left his hand pressed to Sam’s cheek.
Sam smiled into the touch. “Deanna.”

“Good.” Nick agreed. He stood upright and pulled out his cell phone. “You want to call him?”

“You haven’t?” It came out in a gasp, with just a touch of accusation.

“Sam. You know how hectic it was. You’ve have no idea how quickly everything happened.” Nick looked a little sheepish, “I couldn’t breathe, think, or see straight while you were in surgery. I wasn’t capable, I’m sorry. I’ve been sitting next to Lola while I waited for word that I could come to you.”

Sam forgave him. Those were pretty good excuses. He held the cell phone in his hand. Looking down on the keypad, he had the unwelcome thought pop up that if he’d had a regular birth, then Dean would be there already and he’d be holding his daughter now. He tried to shake it away.

“Sam?” Nick’s pitch rose with worry.

“Give me a minute.” Sam looked up, “I’m OK.”

Nick gave a rueful smile of understanding. “I’ll go check on when they think you can be moved.”

Emotions conflicted inside Sam. He couldn’t wait to tell Dean, but at the same time his arms were empty, not yet having held Lola, seen her. In invoked his logical and practical mind. There was no point to indulging in these impossible regrets. This was the way things had to be. He understood, yet that didn’t stop the paternal part of him aching for his baby to hold her, smell her, hear her cry.

The call took a minute to connect.

“Halloween Starship Enterprise, Ghoul of Captain Kirk Speaking.” Dean answered.

“Sorry, wrong number, I was looking for Uncle Dean.” Sam teased back.

“For…. Wait… for who? Sam! Sammy!” Dean yelped.

“Hey,” Sam chirped. “Small panic and a matter of emergency c-section, but your niece was born this evening.”


“I’m good. I’ve had a baby pulled out of me, but I’ll be fine. Lola’s in the NICU. I haven’t met her yet, but Nick says she’s perfect.”

“Sam… Hold a sec,” Dean yelled out, “Cas! Cas! Sam’s had the baby. I’m putting ya on speaker, Sammy.”

“I can’t stay on long. They need to get me to my room but I get an on-gurney detour to see Lola.”

“Congratulations,” Castiel’s deep voice joined in.

“Thanks, Cas. You can tell Balthazar that Lola Deanna Winchester Alighieri was born at 7.58pm on 31st October.” Sam smiled at the small gasp from Dean as he said her name. “I guess I’ve sealed her fate as the apple of her uncle’s eye now, hey?”

“Sam. I… I don’t know what to say,” Dean gave an emotional sigh.

“Come tomorrow and meet her, if they’ll let you into the NICU. I’m not sure about that,” Sam
chewed on his cheek.

“I’m coming, Sammy, to see you. We’ll come now if you want.” Dean offered.

“Naw, Man. You sleep. Once I’ve seen Lola, I need to sleep, which is weird coz I’ve been knocked out.” Sam laughed.

“You take care, Sammy. Can’t wait to see you and Lola.”

“Me too.” Sam said goodbye. Nick stepped up and folded him into his arms.

The detour to the NICU involved more corridors and a trip in the elevator. There was a welcoming commotion as he was wheeled next to a glass incubator. It wasn’t as scary as Sam had dreaded. Lola was tiny and wrinkly but she had dark hair and her mini hands were flexing. Her preemie diaper met the wires on her chest. She wasn’t intubated but a thin tube was taped along her cheek to under her nose delivering oxygen. Her little lips moved as she breathed. Butterflies of excited nerves flew circles in Sam’s solar plexus.

“Say hi, Papa.” A smiling nurse with her hair scraped back tight, lifted Lola out.

There were still wires attached to Lola’s skin. The nurse settled the baby carefully on Sam’s chest. He could barely comprehend the wonder, the warm settling awe of having this little person, his baby, his daughter. She was warm, alive and just there. It was a miracle. He reached his arm that was free of an IV. She was scarcely longer than his hand. Nick stroked the back of her head. The nurse hovered nearby.

“I’m a bit late, baby,” Sam cooed down at her. He ran the side of his pinkie finger on her soft cheek. “Hey Lola, my little girl. Hello baby, I’m your Papa and you’re my baby girl.”

Lola’s face turned to him. Her eyelids flickered. He was sure she was looking at him. It was magical. Sam’s breath caught in his throat. He was afraid to ask the medical professionals if he was imagining it but it seemed as if his beautiful perfect daughter could see him.

“Love you, will always love you,” Sam pressed her every so tenderly closer to his body. He had never held anything so precious and wondrous. Nick let out a shudder of emotional breath. Sam cooed down letting his own breath alight on Lola’s skin, “Our little girl.”

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Morning rain pelted and ran down the window of Sam’s room. He itched to get out of his bed, but hadn’t received the go from the doctors. On one hand they wanted him up and walking because of his c-section, on the other side he was to lie down with his IV to prevent any occurrence of post-partum eclampsia.

“The lactation consultant was here,” Sam said, when Nick came back from his frequent return trips to the NICU.

Sam sucked in his lips and tried to decipher the pattern in the weave of the plain hospital blanket that covered his sheet. He lifted his gaze to see his silent partner with a furrowed brow, waiting for Sam to continue.

“Once they take me off the IV, I can express some milk, some colostrum for Lola.” Sam choked back emotion. He blamed his hormones for being all over the place.
Nick placed his hand over Sam’s where it clutched at the blanket. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s all wrong.” Tears welled up. “She should be here, in a bassinet, beside me. I should be nursing her, holding her. Or I should be still carrying her.” He lifted his eyes to Nick’s concerned ones, “What if she takes a turn for the worse?”

“Oh, Sam,” Nick pulled his partner into his arms, only marginally careful of the IV line. “No, my love. She’s doing real good. They let me put my hands into the incubator and rub her little arm. She’s waiting to see her Papa.”

“I want to see her again. I want to hold her so bad.” Sam sobbed. “Nick, I need to see her.”

“God Sam, you’re breaking my heart here.” Nick gulped. “You’ve had major surgery and lost a lot of blood, and they have you on that stuff for your blood pressure.”

“I know.” Sam shuddered into the skin of Nick’s neck. Nick hadn’t shaved. He was still in the same clothes as the night before. The scruff of Nick’s morning beard tickled Sam’s skin. “Are you OK?”

“Am I?” Nick pulled back a touch. He pushed away the track of Sam’s tears with his thumb, “God Sam. What did I do to deserve you? We have our miracle daughter and I have my love safe and recovering. I couldn’t be better.”

“But did you eat?” Sam tried.

Nick just laughed. “Vending machine candy and the dishwater that passes for coffee. Don’t worry. Dean and Castiel will be here soon. I think that teacher would make an excellent pizza delivery man.”

“Only if I can have some too.” Sam grinned.

“Green olive frenzy?” Nick joked.

“You know,” Sam considered, “I don’t think I want any olives.”

“What’s the place your brother gets gooey eyed thinking of?”

“The Pizza Cave?”

“Yeah. We’ll do lunch takeout and maybe after that we’ll rail against the hospital hierarchy and get you down to the NICU? How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” Sam hummed. He rested his head against Nick’s chest, just for a moment longer.

Earlier than he hoped, Sam got the OK to go down to the NICU. It was to be a brief visit, but his BP was acceptable and he had painfully stood to take the few steps to the waiting wheelchair. The nurse on duty allowed Nick to take him down, but warned she’d be back later, when Sam would be expected to do some walking around his room. If all was good, then that evening they’d take him off his IV and he could spend longer with Lola.

In the NICU, friendly yet super efficient nurses sat him in the nursing chair and had him open the buttons of his pajama top.

“You ready?” The pretty nurse with long dark curls asked.

“So ready.” Sam grinned. He tried to pull his body up straighter. It hurt deep inside. “What about
when I will feed her with my stitches, or should I say staples?”

“Don’t worry about feeding now. She’s taken her bottle.” The nurse, Casey, explained. “Why
don’t we try a kangaroo cuddle?”

Sam almost felt disconnected from reality as the tiny sleepy bundle was placed on his chest. Casey helped him position the baby and his hands. The material of his top was wrapped over her body, so just her little head poked out. They had put her in a tiny white cotton beanie and mittens set. Her hands moved closer to her face as she snuggled into her Papa.

“Have you done this?” Sam asked Nick.

“I have.” Nick answered with a break to his voice. “You look gorgeous, my family.”

Sam gave an indulgent huff. He doubted Nick’s perceptive abilities. He hadn’t had a shower yet.

Casey took a photograph for them.

Lola slept.

Sam gazed adoringly at her, admiring her little nose and lips, and marveling at the feather light weight of his daughter.

“Later,” Casey promised when she came to lift Lola back into the incubator, “We’ll make sure you can be here for her feed and diaper change.”

Nick laughed at the diaper comment, “They threatened me with diaper time already.”

Casey didn’t look up from settling Lola as she said, “It’s very important that fathers are diaper experts.”

When she turned round, the nurse seemed startled by Sam’s high five, and Nick’s quick following kiss to Sam’s forehead.

“Drink plenty of water, Sam.” Casey gave as a final shot of advice. “Hydration is important.”

On the way back to his room, Nick used the vending machine to get two large sports bottles of water for beside his bed. Anna came and checked his staples and vitals. He took some Tylenol.

Sam closed his eyes for a minute that turned into an hour.

When he woke from his nap, Dean and Castiel were seated by his bed reading a pamphlet on natural childbirth.

“Turns out that brochure was irrelevant.” Sam muttered.

“Sammy,” Dean leaped up. “Congratulations.”

Castiel echoed him. He produced a fluffy long-eared rabbit from behind his back.

“Is that for me?” Sam quipped.

“If you wish,” Castiel said with a straight face. Dean elbowed him.

“I feel like a shit, an ungrateful asshat.” Sam muttered.

“It’s only a plushy rabbit.” Castiel gaped.
Sam shook his head.

Dean pulled the chair close enough to rest his arm next to Sam’s leg, “Cas, you wanna find Nick about his pizza idea?”

Dean paused until Castiel had squeezed his shoulder and departed. Then Dean turned his full attention on Sam. “Talk to me, little brother.”

“I didn’t hear her first cry. I didn’t hold her first. Change her first diaper, give her the first feed… It should have been me. And I love that she bonded with her Daddy, that she got to be held by one of us… and I should be thanking every Power that she’s alive and living, but I missed out on those… and they’ll never happen again.”

“Geez Sam. You get all the other times. You’ll be sorely sick of diaper changes, and spewed up feeds, and piercing teething cries… give it time.”

Sam chuckled, “When did you become a rock of sense?”

“I told ya, I rock, dude.” Dean gave his best shit faced grin. “Hit me, Sam. You wanna tell me about when you did hold her?”

Sam sniffled. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. There was a sideways jolt in his brain thinking of only the day before when his skin had come away stained in red. He huffed, “Dumb hormones.”

Dean waited.

“I felt… Geez Dee, I felt a wave of love break over me. It was like I wanted to shelter her, protect her, save her from every damned thing that could hurt her. And at the same time nurture her to be the amazing person I know she will be.”

“Whoa, that’s awesome.”

Sam ground his teeth with determination, “I’m going to give her the loving childhood…”

Dean interrupted, dropping his chin, “… that we didn’t get.”

“No, Dean,” Sam said firmly, “I’m going to give her the love you gave me. I’ve got an example to follow – You.”

“Geez Sammy,” Dean’s lips parted as Sam’s words sank in.

“I mean it.” Sam told his stunned brother.

“I hear ya,” Dean nodded his acknowledgement. He took a pause, then added quietly, “Tomorrow is Mom’s anniversary.”

“I know.” Sam said softly. For the younger Winchester, November 2nd was filled with memories of his father’s most drunken violent rages, but he knew for Dean, it conjured up the devastation of the fire.

“She would have been so proud of you, Sammy. So happy for ya.”

“You think?”

“I know.”
Sam lifted the corner of his lips, accepting Dean’s superior knowledge.

After juicy tomato rich pizzas with Dean and Castiel’s favorite combo topping, Sam walked the room in agonizing slow steps, first on Nick’s arm. He proclaimed to his brother that walking hurt like a bitch. His winces and slow determined progress did not go un-noticed because Nurse Laura appeared with some paracetamol. Sam took another turn of the room on Dean’s supporting elbow.

In her afternoon rounds, Anna pronounced Sam’s BP as acceptable and with no symptoms of post-partum eclampsia she approved the removal of his IV and catheter. Sam experienced the simple pleasure of being able to take a shower in the adjoining bathroom.

Dean had stopped in Moss Beach on the way and brought Nick’s essentials and a change of clothes. The older man had raised a silent disbelieving brow at Dean’s choices from the more casual end of his wardrobe. Castiel tugged the new father out of the hospital into the afternoon fresh post-rain air and to shower and change at Balthazar’s.

Nick was back before a whole episode of Dr Sexy had played for Dean’s amusement in the background of a half-dozing nap for Sam.

They arrived at the NICU at the perfect time in the schedule. It was busier with other parents there to feed their babies. Dean was permitted to join them. Castiel said he’d hang out back in Sam’s room.

Casey was still on shift. She made a beeline for Sam, who was delighted to see a familiar friendly face.

“Dr Baker came on her rounds. “ Casey imparted, “Lola is little fighter. I foresee a move to the Intermediate Care nursery in the coming days if all is well.”

“That’s awesome,” Dean exclaimed.

“My brother, the loud one.” Sam introduced, with an internal smile against all the years when Dean was the silent one.

Dean’s corresponding grin told that he appreciated the inverted reference.

Sam settled himself in the chair this time. It was easier without the IV drip and he wasn’t quite so stiff, having walked slowly down to the NICU. Casey and a short red-haired nurse remained aware of his gauze wrapped vertical incision. The new nurse, Dawn, handed him a pillow to place over his lower stomach. They settled an awake and lowly protesting Lola into his arms.

“There’s somebody’s hungry,” Nick smiled leaning close enough to bump Sam’s shoulder lightly.

Casey aided Sam to adjust his baby’s head. She encouraged him, while explaining that it often took a little more effort for baby to initially latch with carrier dads or moms with small breasts. As Lola nuzzled under his sensitive nipple, Sam suppressed a ticklish giggle. He didn’t want to blurt out his tell-tale tickle titters and provide Dean teasing ammunition. With a little guidance, held close to her Papa’s skin, Lola proved she wouldn’t let silly spatial problems deter her, and she latched on.

There was a pause, as if her newborn brain was figuring instinct out, then Sam experienced the wonder of his baby suckling.

Sam kept hold of the wonder in his heart, while Nick and then Dean got a chance for short spells cradling her. Then it was mini-preemie diaper change time. Sam’s huge hands seemed too big for the job but Dean placed his hand over Sam’s to assist him. Sam looked over.
“I changed yours, didn’t I?” Dean murmured for just their ears, “Potty trained your ass too.”

Sam bumped their shoulders together. “You’re right, Dee. You rock.”

“Awesome.” Dean smirked.

On day four, they took out Sam’s staples under local anesthetic. They redressed his wound and gave him instructions on how to care for as it healed. He had a brief spell alone in his room to rest. Nick was gone for fresh clean clothes and a few hours sabbatical to take care of some banking financial matters for the restaurant payroll.

There had been a conveyor belt of visitors, welcome to share in the new fathers’ happiness. Dean had come every day and was due again as soon as he drove down from his half-day working for Benny. The guys from The Gates had been spoiled by copies of photographs dropped in by Nick. Sam couldn’t be annoyed with his partner, even though he had included the one of unshowered blearily Sam holding Lola. Meg reassured him that they all only had eyes for the tiny little beauty.

Luxuriating in the silence of his room, Sam slipped into the heavy drowsiness of a happy exhaustion. Brady had been his first caller that day, sticking like a limpet to his fantasy ‘Godfatherhood’, which Sam told him wasn’t even a word. When Nick and he had parted after Lola’s midday feed, Sam returned to find a delegation of Sarah, Jess, and Jess’s little sister. They swore blind that they didn’t want to impose. Sam shushed their thoughtful protests and proudly retraced his steps to take his best female friends to the NICU to meet a sleeping but adorably cute Lola. Although they had to take turns to accompany him in, Sam relished each girls’ melting reaction to meeting Lola.

When Sam woke to the low sound of a Dr Sexy episode, his eyes sought out his brother. Dean was tossing M&Ms into his open mouth with ease, lounging back on two legs of the visitor’s chair, with the open buttons of his brown plaid shirt revealing a Bon Jovi ‘Bad Medicine’ tee. Honestly did Dean even look at his wardrobe coming to a hospital? And did he wear that to work? Sam decided he wouldn’t ask.

Once Sam had delivered his Lola update and the good news about his own progress, Dean suggested a call with their grandparents. When Lola had been less than twenty four hours old, there’d been brief phone calls of shared excitement and congratulations with both Bobby and his grandparents. Sam’s memory of the calls was almost indistinct among the concern, wooziness and anxieties of that time. Sam knew Dean had conversed long with Pawpaw on the 2nd, remembering their Mom, and sharing the bittersweet reality of becoming an uncle and a great-grand-daddy in a world that lost Mary too soon.

Sam twigged that the call was a Dean scheme, as soon as it was answered on the first ring and immediately put on speaker. The laughter embroidered conversation was an additional pleasure to add to Sam’s continued post-partum high. It wasn’t all bliss, as Sam confessed his momentary lows filled with fears and maybes. He told of the gripping panic of going down for his c-section. The gruff emotion of Grandpa Samuel combined with understanding pure happiness from Pawpaw made Sam well up so much, that Dean reached for a box of antiseptic wound wipes as the closest aid to catch the tears of love and family.
“I never thought I’d have this.” Sam choked out to his Pawpaw, his brother, and the world. “For so long I thought I was alone.”

“Oh Sam, my poor boy,” Pawpaw warbled around a sob.

“Sammy,” Dean gulped.

“We were all.” Samuel’s hoarse voice gained their attention, “We were islands, apart from each other.”

Pawpaw clicked his tongue, “Nearly eighty years old and suddenly he’s a poet.”

The gently mocking comment broke through the pall of long regrets for a past that could not be deleted.

Pawpaw took over then, extracting from Sam every fact about Lola’s progress in the NICU and imparting a few anecdotes about preemie babies he knew, who were now retired police officers, teaching in Lawrence, and remaking the world, if you believed his positive spin.

The following morning, Anna announced that she was pleased with all Sam’s test results. His BP had stabilized nicely, although it remained higher than the norm. She gave him scripts for mild laxatives and hypertension meds that wouldn’t harm Lola through his milk. With instructions not to lift anything heavier than Lola, and not to drive for six weeks, Sam could be discharged.

It was moving day for Lola too. Dr Baker had signed off on her transition to the Intermediate or special care nursery. Sam and Nick were welcome to visit as much and for as long as they wished. Anna warned Sam that he would be fatigued for some time and he was to take care of himself, eat regularly, sleep properly in his own bed, or else he wouldn’t be capable of taking care of his little one. She told him not to take a bath for four weeks, and not to worry if it took some time for residual bleeding to stop. After having major surgery, being horny was the last thing on Sam’s mind, but he enquired how soon he and Nick could make love. Anna told him they’d discuss it again at his four week check up with her, and warned him that he’d be extremely fertile and she’d advise him to wait until he made it through a whole cycle of Penandrocol, which she wouldn’t start him on until he was fully healed. Sam vowed to follow her advice and to focus on bonding with Lola. When Anna mentioned how due to the hypertension, abruption, and vertical c-section scarring, he’d be considered high risk for his next pregnancy, Sam’s jaw dropped. He swore he had no plans for another. To which the consultant chuckled knowingly, saying she’d heard that before.

After spending some quality time with Lola, Sam dressed and packed away his few possessions and toiletries. They had a stop at the pediatrician’s office before heading home for a few hours rest and a meal. There was something intrinsically wrong with leaving Lola behind. Sam had a running mantra in his head that his discharge brought them a step closer to Lola’s homecoming.

Dr Baker welcomed them as they took seats across from her desk. Nick pushed the two wooden armchairs closer together. He bent his head close enough for their hair to touch, “Are you sure she is old enough to be a pediatrician?”

Sam poked him with his elbow to behave. His partner’s softly spoken comment had been overheard but the doctor bore a well worn look, as if it was not the first time she’d experienced doubting parents.

“Mr. Alighieri, I am the Developmental Pediatrician assigned to the NICU. Presuming you continue your relationship with Lucile Packard, your daughter’s infancy check-ups will be at my clinic. I see many of our preemie babies until they reach their early developmental milestones,”
The long haired doctor explained with her hands loosely clasped on her desk.

Sam nodded.

His partner gave a concessionary head bob, “Call me Nick.”

The doctor quirked her lips, “In that case, please call me Lily. Thank you both for calling to my office. There are many distractions in the NICU and it is calmer here.”

“Is there a problem?” Sam rushed out. He sucked in his lips, “Lola was doing fine?”

“No, Sam,” Lily was quick to allay his fears, “I am very pleased with Lola’s progress. There is an incubator waiting for her in the Intermediate Care Nursery.”

“Thank God,” Nick puffed. Sam’s own chest deflated as he let go his held breath.

“All Lola’s vitals are good. I have the results of yesterday’s MRI. No sign of spotting or white areas on her cortex. I am very pleased that she has not had any seizures that can follow hypoxia. This doesn’t rule out brain damage due to being deprived oxygen at birth, but it is a positive and hopeful result. It is a matter of a waiting game, for Lola to hit her developmental markers.” Lily focused on Sam, who was hanging on her every word, “You must remember Papa, that Lola was born over six weeks early, so if you read a book that says she should, for instance, suck her fist at two months, that is referring to two months from full term.”

Nick gave a chuckle.

Sam glared at him.

“What Sam? You’d think she’d seen your legal pad full of baby notes.” Nick bounced his brows at his partner.

Lily cleared her throat, “I can tell you she’s already ahead of the preemie curve with her first milestones. She is regulating her own temperature, swallowing well, very little reflux, digestion is good, and she gained an ounce.”

“She did?” Sam beamed, turning to share his joy with Nick.

“She lost four ounces in her first 48 hours, as was to be expected, but she is back to 3lb 10oz today.”

“She sleeps a lot.” Sam commented on something that had niggled at him.

“Again, typical of preemies. Don’t be concerned.” The pediatrician paused. “To paint a picture, a child’s brain is an amazing organ, and very different at 18 months, two years… There is a possibility that as Lola grows you may see developmental delays, perhaps mild brain damage; speech, fine motor skills, or hearing issues. Or there may be no such problems. Be assured that our team will be here to help you deal with any issues that arise.”

“Thank you.” Sam said gravely. “Thank you for your honesty. We’ll love her just the same, no matter what.”

Nick gripped his lower arm and nodded his support of Sam’s words.

“The initials signs are very positive, have hope.” Lily stood. “I am sure you want to look in on her before you go home.”
They did. Gazing at their sleeping daughter, both fathers knew they’d turn the world upside down to do anything for her.

“Home?” Nick asked.

Sam agreed, trailing his finger with a barely there touch along his daughter’s leg which flexed gently in her sleep.

Coming home was strange. It was only for a few hours. Even though he wasn’t fully fit, there was a luxury in taking the stairs, showering and donning clean clothes.

When he opened the fridge and then the freezer, Sam found pies, casseroles and dishes all labeled in Dean or Castiel’s hand. They’d come from Jess, Ava, Dean, the restaurant… a pot revealed Benny’s Gumbo and a foil container was marked Alfie’s Famous Moussaka. Unable for a full meal, Sam prepared grilled cheese sandwiches while Nick took care of his own ablutions. He was laughing to himself about being able to cook, stand in his kitchen, and reach for the large serving plate on top of the dresser, when Nick joined him.

“I cooked. My bed rest is officially over,” Sam declared proudly as he set down the only spottily blackened sandwiches. “We can eat before we head back to Lola.”

Nick was very discrete when he scraped off the charcoal bits. The cheese was gooey and the added mustard hot enough for Sam to close his eyes and enjoy the snack.

Rising with his empty plate and balanced-on-top mug, Sam saw Nick synchronizing his motion. Sam turned for the sink, but Nick surprised him, taking the plate from him. Nick ran his hands round Sam’s hips, stilling him. Fingers caught Sam’s belt loops and pulled him closer. Sam’s affection for his partner flared warm and welcome in his chest. He raised his hand to cup Nick’s soft freshly shaved cheek, finger tipping his earlobe and finding the tingling touch of the short hairs that subtly curled behind. Nick lean wordlessly into Sam’s palm, detaching from one belt loop to press his fingers into the cheek of Sam’s butt and squeeze. Sam puffed a small noise of want. Nick’s eyes sparkled ice blue and searing with his own ardor. Their lips met, opening to receive each other. Tongues swept slowly and sweetly, taking and giving, exchanging without having to explain all the feeling behind such a simple act. Sam’s hand tangled in Nick’s hair. Nick’s palm flattened in the hollow of Sam’s spine.

Pulling back Sam’s intellectual emotional side wanted to quote Shakespeare’s parting is such sweet sorrow, but his twenty year old joshing self spewed out, “I’ll make sandwiches again.”

Nick threw his head back and laughed. “You make ‘em, I’ll toast ‘em.”

Sam sniffed in amusement, “Awh, Nick, if we do that compromise, you’ll never get that smoky charred bonus.”

“If I want a BBQ, I’ll fire up the grill,” Nick said pulsing the words out between his continued laughter.

“Ungrateful jerk.” Sam teased.

“Oh I’m grateful,” Nick said, all levity dropped. He caught Sam for a second briefer but no less passionate kiss, “You’ll never know how grateful, my love.”
Lola was two weeks and one day old when they brought her home. The previous ten days had been trying and tiring on both Sam and Nick. Their friends had rallied round. Between everyone covering Nick’s absence at The Gates, and the stream of visitors to accompany them to the hospital, there was never time or reason to be glum. Travelling to and fro brought its own trials, but it was worth it to see Lola thrive, and to be able to show off his dearest little girl to everyone. She gained weight to four and a half pounds. Sam was convinced she bubbled up a smile whenever he picked her up.

Dean and Sam worked together to put the final touches to Lola’s nursery, while Nick rolled his eyes and moved the bassinet into their bedroom. Once the nursery was ship-shape, the brothers made up the bed in Dean’s old room. Vacuuming was on Sam’s banned list, so Dean got to pump up the volume and push the Dyson along to Ozzy’s screeching.

Bobby Singer had been ready to steam south in his pick-up, as soon as he heard the news of Lola’s birth, but with Dean’s help, he’d been convinced to delay until Lola would be due home. Sam wouldn’t hear of his surrogate Uncle staying in a motel.

Collecting Lola was another bucket full of emotions. Casey came over from the NICU on her break to say her farewells. Drs Baker and Milton both also appeared briefly to wish their young charge well. Lola stayed awake for the whole departure, kicking and smiling at everyone as she was passed around the team. There were a final few reiterations on preemie baby care, and a repeated warning that they needed to be extremely careful regarding infections, screening their visitors with hospital level security.

Sam reveled in his little girl’s gurgles and throaty noises as he dressed her in a new pink sleep suit. He added the long ago purchased organic cotton mittens, lemon booties and the teddy bear ear beanie, which was far too big for her and had to be folded up at the end.

The house was filled with the smell of Castiel’s baking bread and Dean’s spicy meatballs, when the new parents arrived back bearing their precious bundle.

Any thoughts of a meal were delayed when Lola exercised her lungs.

“I think she’s hungry,” Sam rocked her in his arms, heading for the sofa. He picked the best spot. Amid all the extra cushions that had accumulated during his bed rest, Sam found a comfortable position to feed Lola. He was sure he’d be using that spot as much as the expert designed nursing chair in Lola’s bedroom.

“She is a marvel,” Castiel commented as he came in with a long glass of iced water for Sam.

“Isn’t she?” The proud Papa agreed. “Where are the other two?”

“Nick’s setting the table for our meal.” Castiel answered. He squinted his eyes a touch, “Dean got a call from Bobby Singer. There were a lot of swear words involved. Something about a department store collection and assembly.”

Sam chuckled. “We asked Bobby to pick up Lola’s stroller on his way. It was a special order at Every Baby.”

Bobby’s arrival was presaged by the sound of his truck pulling into the driveway, and Dean flinging himself bodily through the front door to be the first to greet his long lost surrogate uncle.

“Jeepers, Boy, you’ve grown.” Bobby’s voice drifted in from the hall, making Sam grin. His smile
widened when the mechanic added, “Not as much as your weed of a brother, mind you.”

There was the sound of introductions to Castiel and Nick. Then Bobby entered the family room with a grumble.

“Do you know what stares I got picking up this contraption for you idjits?” Bobby announced. “Rest of it is in my truck.”

Sam beamed. Bobby’s toothy grin was displayed under his beard and baseball cap. The man pushed forward a red Bugaboo Frog stroller with the pram attachment holding his duffel.

“Bobby, Welcome.” Sam bounced Lola up so Bobby could get a first glimpse of his daughter with her teddy-bear-ear beanie.

“And thank you for collecting that on your way,” Nick added.

“Look at her, little chickadee, and at you, Son,” Bobby clapped his hands onto Sam’s biceps and held on, “Never coulda imagined that from seeing you tearing outta my yard on New Year’s Day, I’d be here meeting your new family close on Thanksgiving.”

“Hey. You’re family, Uncle Bobby.” Dean piped up from behind them.

If Bobby’s eyes turned misty alongside a mumbled “Idjits”, Sam didn’t let on. Bobby removed his bag from the stroller and unzipped the duffel. He plunked his cap and a boxed bottle of Johnny Walker Blue onto the table. Nick’s eyes lit up at the vintage scotch.

“To toast your young’un.” Bobby announced.

“Let me get five glasses,” Nick moved towards his corner bar.

“Wait ‘til you see Bobby,” Dean beamed, “Nick’s got special glasses for every liquor.”

“Taste the same outta a cracked mug,” Bobby grumbled.

Sam glanced to make sure Nick wouldn’t take offence. He’d warned his partner about Bobby’s ornery humor. Nick shared an easy lazy smile of knowing with Sam as he lined up five dram glasses. He dipped his head towards their visitor, “If you would do the honors?”

Liquid amber flowed into each, as Bobby poured with his own expert hand.

“To family.” Dean ventured, as they all raised their glasses.

“To Lola,” Bobby said.

“And Sam.” Nick added.

Sam adjusted Lola into the crook of his elbow, and took the shot to his lips, consecrating the toast with a warming sip. He wasn’t risking giving Lola her first hangover via his milk. To his surprise Dean’s glass wasn’t knocked back. He watched Dean palm it off to Castiel, who finished it for him.

“Are you alright?” Sam tugged on Dean’s sleeve when he got the opportunity.

By the bar, Bobby was mounting an interrogation on how well Nick and Castiel were taking care of his boys.
“Me? I’m peachy,” Dean’s eyes slid away.

“Dean.” Sam threatened.

“I’m designated driver, Sam. Cas’s turn to have a few.”

Sam huffed. He looked over to where Bobby must have been satisfied enough to refill the trio’s glasses. “Suppose that’s responsible of you.”

Dean hummed. He bent low and kissed Lola between her fine brows, “Silly Papa, all worrywart.”

Sam elbowed him in the ribs, “Stop coaxing my daughter over to your side.”

Dean laughed, “She’s fifteen days old, Sam. Of course she’s on Uncle Dean’s side.” He sing-songed down to the dozing baby, “You’re Uncle Dean’s girl, aren’t you? Aren’t you, Lola Pet? Going grow up rocking to The Zep with Uncle Dean?”

“Oh God. Nick!” Sam called for reinforcements, “He’s turning our daughter into a metal-head.”

Lola’s big eyes opened and she bubbled up a smile, totally coincidental Sam told himself, as the others laughed instead backing him up, and Dean rocked an air guitar belted out version of Whole Lotta Love across the family room floor.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++

Chapter End Notes

Look! No cliffhanger this time. I’m not consistently evil.

***Edit made regarding IV/painkillers/lactation after very helpful feedback from Cirrat in the second comment below. I knew I’d make some medical booboo! Thanks Cirrat. ***
“What are you doing, Dean?”

Castiel’s voice was hesitant with concern.

Dean pulled his eyes away from his trembling hands. Their visible shake had locked him in a stare of fascination during which his partner’s arrival had gone unnoticed. Tracking his eyes up over his lined notepad and balled up discarded papers, seeing Castiel’s book bag with strap hanging over the opposite end of the table, Dean’s gaze found piercing blue eyes open and waiting for an answer.

It was 25th November. Dean had written the date on the top of each sheet of paper. He’d touched the red circled date on their calendar several times throughout the day while Cas had been at work. Today was the day he had decided that he would begin to believe. If he made it to today and through his appointment, if he made it to week 12, longer than Emma had existed, then he’d start to let his coiled and scrunched up emotions bloom. He’d use the word ‘baby’, rather than thinking ‘fetus’ or ‘embryo’. He would permit himself to imagine. He would allow Castiel to plan aloud. He’d tell. He’d hope. He’d join Cas in browsing that dumb website bouncingbabynames.com.

Today they would go to the clinic in Sebastopol for Dean’s first proper antenatal appointment. There’d been a crazy rushed last minute visit as the free Medi-Cal clinic was closing in October. That afternoon their family MD in Bodega had seen them both after they had finished work. When she heard Dean’s stuttered answer to the history of pregnancies question, she had picked up her phone and secured an urgent ultrasound to check that the embryo implantation was not ectopic. Stunned and speechless, Dean had seen a tiny kidney bean shape high on the right of his uterus, nowhere near a fallopian tube or anywhere else it shouldn’t have been. It had been enough to allow for some private celebrations between the expectant Dads, but it had been too soon for Dean to cry joy from the hilltops.

Lola’s birth at Halloween had overshadowed everything in the best possible way. Dean had been happy to concentrate on supporting Sammy, while dealing with adjusting to his new reality, Victor’s reaction, vomiting on Benny’s porch, having his social worker impose Tessa on them, and coming off his Buspar. He regretted that he couldn’t risk celebrating more with Cas, but they had communicated their cautious happiness quietly in whispered dreams under their duvet, ginger ale toasts, eyes locking when Lola was held by either of them, engaging with Tessa during her first couple of home visits, and speaking about childbirth options. Somehow Discovery seemed to be chosen more for its family and health shows than its shark attacks and particle physics documentaries. Dean flicked his eyes to the TV, letting a visualized little dark haired head appear over the back of the sofa and cartoons dance across the future screen.

He blinked as Castiel repeated his question.

“I.. huh…” Dean closed his eyes and swallowed. When he lifted his lids, Castiel was pulling out the chair beside him and taking Dean’s Fall-leaf-shaky hands in his own beautiful steady ones. Cas stroked downwards from the leather cuffs to the back of Dean’s fingers, then he curved their hands together, holding on and gifting Dean with a lodestone. The pressure of Castiel’s support allowed tension to lift from Dean’s chest.
“Better?”

Dean gulped. “Uh-huh, yeah. Y’know, nobody frigging told me it’d be this hard to go off my meds.”

Castiel’s head rotated into a disbelieving tilt.

“Well OK, maybe they all did,” Dean conceded.

“You know that Victor said if you need…”

“No,” Dean shouted an interruption. Castiel flinched. Dean winced apologetically. Something had gone wrong with his volume control. He hadn’t meant to shout at Cas. He ground his teeth and spoke at a more normal pitch, “‘S not so bad.”

Castiel accepted Dean’s word. He lifted his chin in acknowledgement before making a tactful verbal distraction, “I entrusted my freshman chem-sters into Inias’s capable hands.”

The corners of Dean’s lips perked up at the nerd-a-licious name Castiel had given to his ninth graders.

“Principal Harrington is taking the final class for me.” Castiel’s amused smile told of his pleasure at the support of his colleagues, but also of a mischievous imagining of his final period students’ stunned expressions, when they would enter the science lab to see their principal awaiting them.

“Tessa called.” Dean remembered. “She confirmed she’ll meet us in Sebastopol.”

“It is beyond the call of duty, you know?” Castiel commented as he went to the hall to retrieve Dean’s warm winter coat.

Dean felt a mix of gratitude, wonder and a side of independent stubbornness. A corner of his mind told him that his social worker hadn’t needed to set them up in a Nurse-Family Partnership. He huffed a rather put upon “Yeah, Cas.”

Castiel wisely refrained from pointing out that Dean quite liked the public health nurse with her practical manner and her obvious delight at having her first carrier family on her books.

Dean looked at his watch, “Crap, we’ve gotta hustle.”

They grabbed their things, donned their coats and headed out. Chill air hit Dean’s cheeks. He turned up his coat collar. Between their parked cars, he tugged on Cas’s sleeve, guiding him away from his fugly Ford ‘Kitten’ towards the shotgun door of ‘Baby’.

“I’m sorry,” Dean told the frame of the rear view mirror, as Castiel clicked on his seat belt.

“For what?” Cas squinted.

Dean chuckled. He filled up with love for his adorable partner. Leaning sideways he pulled Cas by the trench coat lapel and planted a smacker on his cheek.

“You do me good.” Dean grinned, “Better than any dumb Xanax or Buspar or Diazepam.”

“I should hope so.” Castiel quipped back with a toothy smile. “Are you OK now?”

The leather of the wheel was cool under Dean’s touch. He put on his fake smile, the one he knew Castiel was not duped by, “I’m a literal bundle of freaking nerves here.”
As he made the turn onto the highway, Dean sucked a breath and prepared to bare his worries. Victor and Dean had come to what the psychiatrist called a plan and Dean called a deal. No bottling up of anxieties, no letting them stew and fester inside, or else Dean could end up at the point where resuming his anxiety meds outweighed the benefits of being drug free.

He could start small with his littlest worry.

“Do you think Bobby’ll be offended that I didn’t head down today?”

Castiel’s lips parted in surprise. “I think Bobby Singer is the type of guy who would call you out, right in your face, if he thought you were doing wrong. I also think that Bobby and Sam understand that you couldn’t visit every day. You have commitments; the days working for Benny, your appointment with Victor…”

Dean hummed in agreement. He overtook a crawling VW with its two wheels over the white line. Bobby’s visit was awesome. Helping Sam with Lola was supremely awesome. He knew none of them expected him to drop everything and live at Moss Beach. However there was a part of Dean that felt he should, was meant to, do more for Sammy. Having Castiel state the obvious calmed him in a way Dean couldn’t put into words.

“Benny tomorrow,” Castiel reminded him, “and then we'll see everyone for Thanksgiving.”

“That’s what I was doing.” Dean finally answered Castiel’s question from twenty minutes earlier. “I took a leaf outta Sammy’s book and made a stab at list-making. I got everything down that we need for the pumpkin pies and sweet potato mash. You could do a grocery run after school tomorrow.”

“I’ll do it on my break,” Castiel interrupted, “I’m not battling crazed homemakers for the last pot of cream.”

“I’m thinking ice cream and maybe some cans of fruit, maybe pineapple?” Dean relaxed his shoulders as he talked out their Thanksgiving plans. He could see Castiel’s head tilted forward bird-like, perhaps about to urge fresh fruit. Dean pre-empted him, “Or you could look for some apples. I could stew ‘em in brown sugar and spices. And one of those freaking mutant watermelons, to serve seven hungry dudes? Hey, does Balthazar eat melon?”

Cas cleared his throat, “Yes, but Sam and Nick eat organic.”

“Organic Shamanic,” Dean grumbled, “A whole-fricking-foods melon then. We could scrape and clean the wedges of skin for me to bring to art class. Do you call it skin or peel or casing? Is Alfie definitely bringing the stuffing balls? Do you think we should buy some douchy wine for Balthazar? And six pack for Bobby?”

“Stop.”

It took all of Dean’s driving instinct not to slam on the brakes. He clammed his lips shut and turned a sheepish eye to Cas, “I was babbling, wasn’t I?”

An indulgent nod confirmed it.

“I’m gonna be sick.” Dean announced as his stomach churned.

“No, you are not.” Castiel affirmed, impressing his words with a fingertip grip to Dean’s knee.

“How do you know? Maybe I gotta pull over and decorate the highway.” Dean challenged.
“You don’t have that screwy cross-eyed look.” Castiel deadpanned.

“I have a pre-puke look?” Dean’s mouth opened and closed in imitation of a fish.

Cas tittered, the dork, and then snorted a confirmation.

“Sonvabitch.”

“Dean, why do you feel we aren’t prepared?”

That question could be taken to mean so much beyond Thanksgiving dinner plans.

“I’m ready.” Dean blustered, “I was born ready.”

Castiel’s huff of pure disbelief made Dean grin and tag on, “Suppose it’s simpler to freak out about hosting Thanksgiving.”

Castiel moved his hand to linger gently on Dean’s thigh. In a calm cool voice he intoned, “Nick and Sam are bringing the boned and rolled turkey, ready for the oven. Balthy’s promised a huge pot of his vegetable medley and a platter of sticky burfi sweets, heavy on the coconut and cardamom as you like.”

Dean let Castiel’s recitation flow over him as they approached the mile marker for Sebastopol.

“Nick is supplying the wine, Bobby the beers, and we have plenty of sodas. Since you decided to make it seven men and a baby, Benny is contributing a vat of chowder.”

Dean muttered a comment about Benny being all alone in his big house.

Castiel patted his leg with a fond, “I know.”

“And he’s bringing his own chair and a spare.” Dean added, a small part of him feeling he still had to justify including Benny in their family day.

“Pamela’s letting us borrow extra glasses and plates,” Castiel continued to remind him, “and Inny says they’ll be in plenty of time with the stuffing balls to swap for the pumpkin pie, because his sister, Gail, wants them at her place early.”

“Yeah,” Dean puffed, “It’s kinda sorted.”

There was a parking spot under the lime tree in the grounds of Sebastopol Medical Center. They sprinted for the warmth of indoors, Castiel beat Dean to the door and held it open for his laughing partner.

Once Dean announced his attendance and presented his Medi-Cal card, they took a seat in the busy waiting room. There weren’t as many children as the last day. Dean’s eye landed on two little tots with red cheeks who clung onto their mother’s long skirt. Cas offered him a dog eared magazine. Dean shook his head. He rested his elbows on his knees and tried to zone out the hard plastic chairs, the smell of the clinic, and the itch crawling up his spine.

“Dean?”

Tessa paced across from the nurses’ office.

Dean raised a hand in greeting.
“I apologize. I was checking in with my colleagues. How are you?” She asked brightly as she tucked a strand of her long bobbed dark hair behind her ear.

“Good. Nervous.” Dean admitted.

“But excited, yes?” She was practically bouncing.

Dean swallowed his answer and went with a smile. Tessa assured him of the great care given by the doctors at the clinic. She asked if his morning sickness had receded and tried once more to advocate weekly group meetings at the mental health clinic in Santa Rosa. Dean had tried to tell her that with his history he could host group sessions, but had listened with marginal interest to the one for new and expectant parents with mental health issues. He was fine for now, but he’d promised to keep it in mind.

Tessa excused herself a minute to speak with one of her regular patients, a nearby elderly Native American man who was coughing harshly.

A toddler clad in pajamas was working his way into a tantrum by the restroom door. They continued to wait. Cas brought him a cup of water.

A crack in the tiled floor extended outwards from the toe of Dean’s boot. In his mind, Dean made a resigned comparison to Sam’s private healthcare appointments where everything flowed smoothly and there was never more than a few minutes wait (usually because Sam had been obsessively early).

Dean’s knee hopped unconsciously. Cas’s knee bopping against it drew Dean’s attention and he stilled the repetitive movement. He quirked a grin in Cas’s direction. Castiel wasn’t looking at him. His head was bowed, shoulders hunched, hands resting loosely and open on his lap. Dean felt a surge of love and hope. He inhaled deeply, drinking in the close presence of his partner, his Cas who accepted Dean warts, scars and all, and was so ready to generously give of himself for whatever Dean required. Under Dean’s scrutiny, Castiel turned to face him, his expression earnest and enquiring. Dean raised his hand, fingers barely touching Castiel’s cheek.

“My Cas.”

“Dean.” Castiel’s skin moved under Dean’s touch as he said his name.

Dean’s name was called. Tessa wished him well. Castiel linked his elbow as they entered the office.

Dr Villas was a stout friendly middle aged man. He reminded Dean of Dr Huxtable from The Cosby Show, although Dr Villas was bald, short, Hispanic and looked nothing like Bill Cosby.

Dean knew the routine. He’d heard accounts enough times in ACIC. He’d gone with Sam to some of his checkups. Weighed, BP, pelvic, check-up, rinse and repeat, but it was different when he was the object of the doctor’s attention. He felt like the examination was something he’d be graded in. That he could fail. It was dumb crap, and he knew it would feed Victor enough ammo to fill a page of his file if he confessed such thoughts to his shrink.

He’d passed the test, but he was underweight. Dean bit back a snarky comment about how he was meant to gain, when he’d been spewing up on a regular basis until recently.

“Eat small regular amounts if a main meal is difficult on your digestion.” The doctor recommended as turned over a page.
Castiel looked at the doctor as if he had two heads, “Dean has a healthy appetite.”

Dean snorted.

Dr Villas looked up and blinked, not picking up on the couple’s humorous teasing. “We have a dietician who visits the clinic monthly if you wish to have a consultation.”

Dean did a headshake for the doctor and a wink to his partner, “More pie, Cas, Doctor’s orders.”

“God in heaven.” Castiel’s shoulders sagged in mock defeat.

Next was the ultrasound. Dean trembled. His voice deserted him. What if on the screen there was nothing? What if there was an unmoving kidney bean, not having grown since the last scan? What if he needed a D&C again? He dug his fingernails into Cas’s arm while the doctor readied the equipment.

“Are you OK, Dean love?” Castiel asked in a hushed worried voice.

A slight head shake, a shuddered breath and Dean closed his eyes. Cold gel was applied. He didn’t look until Cas made a throaty gasp.

“There’s baby. Doing exercises or just happy to be on camera.” Dr Villas moved the transducer along.

Dean could feel his eyelids widen. Castiel let out a hushed noise of wonder.

Something else happened as the doctor took measurements and examined different angles. The scan faded in and out, at one point Dr Villas got a view of the embryo’s skull with what looked like tiny fists suspended above. Rotating back to a sideways perspective Dean could see more clearly the form of his healthy baby. It looked like a baby now, small with loads of space to grow into but with a head, and a body and limbs. A laugh of pure pleasure escaped Dean’s lips. He knew without tearing his eyes off the screen that Castiel was exuding the same glee at his shoulder.

Seeing their child made Dean experience a sensation as if he was levitating a few inches off the exam table. That lightness of being didn’t dissipate. It lingered finding a home under Dean’s breast bone. It was like a fall of downy feathers, drifting, barely affected by gravity, coalescing into a blended nest lining of caramel gingers and inky ultraviolet blacks. With that image came a tranquility that bled love and hope, knitting together torn parts and gathering a buffer against tempests.

It was indescribable, inexpressible. All Dean could say was, “Cas?”

“Dean.” Castiel’s eyes brimmed full. He understood.

It was a dream, tantalizing to hold.

Too soon Dean was re-clothed and in possession of two square scan pictures of his baby.

At the desk, Dr Villas made a few more notes. He looked across at the stunned couple. “Just to confirm, you last cycled on September 3rd?”

“Yes, Sir.” Dean replied. He glanced at Cas. It was unspoken how Dean never cycled during their estrangement, how he was pregnant when he met Aaron, how they didn’t comprehend it until he was hunched over the toilet bowl weeks later.
“Tallied with your 7 week scan, I am happy to confirm June 10th as your estimated due date.”

“So when does that mean I conceived?”

Cas elbowed his bicep.

Dean shrugged. He’d like the doc to pin it down. Nick and Sam knew because of the spilt rubber. Sue him, if he’d like an idea of when he and Cas might have struck lucky.

The doctor looked amused as he scribbled on his pad, “Conception would have been 17th September give or take a day or two.”

Dean grinned smugly. All that very enjoyable sex around Cas’s birthday. Hell if the date was accurate, or maybe the 16th, then Castiel had been spotted on that night skinny dipping at the cove, there had been a baby, maybe only the first few cells, but their child had existed.

He glided through the reception, looking down from above and seeing Tessa hug him and Castiel, and hearing her coo over the scan print outs. He threw Baby’s keys to a startled Cas, who made an impressive late catch.

“Too buzzed to drive.” He admitted.

“How do you know I’m not?” Castiel smirked.

“Give ‘em back.” Dean chortled, reaching for the keys that Cas dangled above his head.

“Na-ha, no way, Dean. You handed them over, I get to drive the Impala.” Castiel jumped sideways.

“You’re a child.” Dean teased.

“I’m still driving.”

“OK, Cas,” Dean couldn’t help grinning, even if he threw himself in an ungainly fashion into the shotgun seat.

“Music?” Castiel asked, finding some pop station.

Dean’s hand moved to flick away from the douche pop music with soul diva extra.

Castiel touched him to stop with a smirk. “Leave it. It’s apt. And I do know the rules of the car.”

Dean rolled his eyes but let George Michael sing about how he knew some guy was waiting. The controversial pop singer’s Rolling Stone interview in the new millennium revealed his carrier status. The copy of the magazine had done the rounds in ACIC and had been the talk of the Rec room. Yannick had trumpeted that he’d known it all along, and Aiden said that he knew a guy who knew a guy who’d hooked up with the singer in a nightclub in Ibiza in the early 1990s back when the world thought George Michael was straight.

Castiel had said the song was apt. Dean listened to the lyrics.

_I don’t regret a single moment, no I don’t, looking back, when I think of all the disappointments I just laugh._

“I knew you were waiting for me.” Castiel sang, completely out of time and out of tune with the music.
Having put up with Castiel increasing the volume for Where is The Love by the Black Eyed Peas, closed his ears to some terrible boyband, and secretly mouthed along to Evanescence’s Bring me to Life, Dean was glad the journey home wasn’t any longer or he might have had to add a car owner codicil to who picks the music.

Dean changed into comfy lounge pants and his old brown Henley, while Cas reheated their leftover chicken pot pie and added long green beans (for the baby). They ate on the sofa using the lap trays that came from Balthazar’s place. Discovery was showing a documentary about a safari park but they were focused the lame animals, like llamas and aurochs. Dean muttered something about wanting the comical monkeys or the freaking lions, before tucking his head into Castiel’s neck.

When he woke, there was a cringingly embarrassing trail of drool on Castiel’s neck.

“Hey Sleepyhead,” Castiel reached to rub his hand down Dean’s Henley sleeve.

“Hey yourself,” Dean smacked his lips and tried to wipe away the evidence. He unbent his leg and rotated his ankle to shake pins and needles out. There were prairie dogs on the TV, so he mustn’t have slept for long. He looked at Castiel’s lap. The clearer scan picture sat on his knee. “How’d you get that without waking me?”

“I had it already.” Castiel confessed, “I don’t want to stop looking at it.”

“Me too.” Dean straightened enough to press their shoulders together. “Our baby, Cas.”

“Our baby.” Castiel rubbed a thumb through Dean’s light evening ginger fuzz before caressing his cheek gently with his lips.

Dean was accepting an air kiss from Alfie at their ground level entry door, when he saw Benny’s SUV pull in behind the florist’s store.

“You have a great day with your family, Dean.” Alfie chirped, his hands full with the pumpkin pie.

“You too, dude.” Dean raised a hand to wave at Inias and Poppy waiting in their car.

Benny in his long dark coat, scarf and hat, gestured for him to come over. “Hey, Dean, I need a hand with the extras.”

After a back clapping hug, Dean helped with the chairs and chowder. Castiel shook Benny’s hand and welcomed him to their home.

“Sweet place,” Benny said politely.

Dean curved up one side of his lips. You could fit their whole apartment into Benny’s entry hall. Still Benny did a circle of their living area, admiring their photos, books, coffeemaker and Spider.

Dean took Benny’s coat and led him to the sofa while Castiel took his seeded loaf from the breadmaker and finished setting the table.

“Soda?” He offered.
“You got anything stronger, brother?” Benny leaned into the chair, twanging his suspenders as he got comfortable.

“Cas?” Dean asked. There were a couple of the micro-brewery alcoholic ciders that Castiel liked in the fridge. Cas threw a can to them.

Benny raised his brows at the taste, but then saluted Cas with the can, “Good stuff.”

“I confirmed with Ms Epstein that you wanted the wider mounts on the gallery shots, and I mailed out the studio order on my way home.” Dean ticked the items off on his fingers, “and you’ll need to check your email tomorrow in case the magazine gets back to us about using your panorama shot from Yellowstone.”

“That’s great and all. Thank you, Dean. But no work today, agreed?”

“Sure, Boss.” Dean did a crisp impression of a salute.

Cas disappeared to change out of his ‘cooking’ shirt and into a dark navy wool sweater. Dean wondered would Balthazar or Nick notice the logo on his only-one-previous-owner new v-neck collared pullover. He’d snagged the black Hugo Boss, as lightning fast as a Black Friday bargain hunter, at the High School’s rummage sale fundraiser. Volunteering to help at Castiel’s table in the school hall had come with all sorts of benefits, including bagging a few more clothing treasures and selling a couple of his sketches of the harbor.

All their other guests arrived at once in a tornado of greetings. Sam scooted to change Lola’s diaper before Dean could even say hello. Balthazar marched over to untangle their bamboo wind chimes, muttering about bad Feng Shui. It had taken Dean an age to knot them up so they didn’t chime. Bobby supervised chilling the beer. Nick made quick work of getting the turkey into the oven. Then the new father unpacked for Lola, quipping that Sam had brought most of their daughter’s possessions.

Amid the family chaos, Dean smiled silently. The music of his friends’ mingled voices cheered his spirits. He was nervous of imparting his news, but in a tingling edge of excitement way.

Once everyone had a drink in their hand and the first course was ready. Dean sliced and buttered the seeded bread that was still warm in the center. He turned the heat off from under the chowder. Benny helped pour it into the delft soup tureen. Dean was amazed such weird table accoutrements existed outside of period dramas. Benny had supplied it and a long stemmed curved ladle to serve. Dean tried not to laugh out loud thinking how they would transfer the delicious fish rich chowder into his discount stackable soup bowls.

Lola was tucked into the carry-cot attachment of her Bugaboo, resting on the sofa after Sam had managed to get her back from Benny. In honor of her first visit to Uncle Dean and Castiel’s home, Sam had dressed Lola in her fleecy soft kitten newborn all in one sleeper. She looked a picture with her polar bear comforter and wiggling bootie covered toes. At four weeks old and over five pounds, Lola’s little body was fitting her cute newborn wardrobe. Her hair was still dark, but her eyes had lightened to a stormy sea blue, like her Daddy. Dean had bounced Lola on his shoulder, admiring her and trying to get her to gift him with a precious smile. Nick called over that Lola hadn’t liked the drive. While Dean explained the benefits of mullet rock as baby sleeping magic, and Sam bitch-faced the Dean-logic, Benny had taken the adorable, if grumpy, little bundle into his huge arms. There had been a surprisingly haunting rendition of a Creole lullaby by Dean’s boss, which had wowed Sam, left a lump in Dean’s throat and had settled Lola into slumber.

As they took their seats, Nick checked Sam was okay. Dean had done the same when they had
arrived, concerned with the dark circles under both men’s eyes, but Sam had explained that Lola was going through a vampire phase; sleep all day, wake up all night.

Friendly conversation surrounded Dean. Balthazar enquired about places Benny had seen in his travels. Bobby admitted the futon in the guest room was more decent than he’d imagined. Dean had given Bobby the brief guided tour and shown him where he would be sleeping on his last night in California before heading home to Sioux Falls.

Castiel tapped the side of his glass with his fork. Dean smirked at the polite and ineffectual attention grabbing attempt.

“Oy! Thanking time.” Dean yelled.

There was silence and a few lips parted in surprise.

“My family tradition,” Castiel projected his voice to the whole table.

Using his teacher voice, Dean thought.

“My family tradition back in Illinois was to offer a litany of prayer before each family member individually prayed their thanks for all to hear. Here, among my new family,” Castiel smiled, “Dean and I would like to institute our own tradition. If we all could simply say what we have been thankful for this year, that would be great. And it will mean the food won’t spoil.”

There was a flutter of laughter.

Castiel met Dean’s eyes, “I am thankful that I gained my teaching degree, and for all the support Balthazar offered to me. I am thankful that I found my job here in Bodega. I will never find enough time, words, or ability to express my gratitude for finding Dean.”

Dean raised his hand to his burning cheek. He nodded, silent, his eyes telling Castiel everything of how much that meant to him.

“Well, darlings,” Balthazar leaned back in his chair with his glass of zinfandel. “I am thankful that my business has been prosperous. That Cassie finally got his qualification and left my house, so I can indulge in pleasures of the flesh.”

With a snort of laughter, Castiel grumbled, “My being there never stopped you.”

“Quite right. It didn’t.” Balthazar guffawed.

“Well I sure didn’t think out this part of the day,” Benny admitted with a scrubbed hand over his jaw. He raised his glass, “I guess I can be thankful for new friends.”

“Hear, hear,” Balthazar clinked their glasses and everyone followed the toast.

Dean thought it was pretty clever of Cas to set the table with a pomegranate juice in his place. Sam had glared suspiciously. Dean knew it must have been on the tip of his little brother’s tongue to ask when Dean had become a wine drinker.

Bobby spoke next. “I’m damned thankful that John Winchester can’t show his mug today.”

Dean’s lips twitched at Bobby’s plain speaking.

“That the moose sized troublemaker found a decent guy, and managed to produce the cutest baby this side of the Rockies.” Bobby cocked his head towards Dean, “And I’m parade sized grateful
that this idjit to my left isn’t dead.”

A choked noise from Sam drew everyone’s attention. Nick’s eyes widened with worry. Sam sniffled. “I’m OK. I’m thankful, just every damn thing. This is my first real family Thanksgiving. It is Dean’s first in twenty years. Last year I went to Chicago. Brady’s family took me in, gave me a memorable day like the ones that you did Uncle Bobby. Last year I gave thanks for my friends and for living at Stanford and for my job at The Gates of Hell. Every year I gave thanks that for almost thirteen years I had the best brother in the world, while memories plagued me of that first Thanksgiving at Pastor Jim’s when our father screamed at me to shut up about going back for Dean, because Dean was dead….”

Dean hadn’t breathed during the beginnings of Sam’s speech. He watched as his little brother pinched his nose to steady himself. Nick wrapped an arm around Sam’s waist. Dean almost rose too, to swamp his brother in a hug, but Sam broke out a dimpled smile and continued, “This year I am so full of thanks I’m surprised it’s not leaking out my pores. I give thanks for Bobby’s unbelievable support.”

“Shucks, Boy.” Bobby mumbled but Dean could tell he was pleased.

“I will never ever forget this year, I found my brother.” Sam gulped. He was so choked up, he couldn’t continue.

“Sammy?” Dean blurted, biting at his own lip as his heart clenched.

“I’m good, Dean.” Sam huffed lengthily, “That Dean and Cas got over their rough patch…For Pawpaw in our lives…. Nick and I… Nick and I.. Lola.”

Nick pushed back his chair and covered Sam in his arms so that the younger man could hide his face in his chest.

“I think we know, Sam sweetheart.” Nick stroked Sam’s hair.

“We do.” Dean added.

“Dear God knows that every day I wake up thankful for Sam, and that we have been blessed with Lola.” Nick said with a nod that rested his chin on Sam’s head.

“Well this turned more click flick than I thought it would,” Dean commented drily. He waited until Sam had composed himself and Nick had retaken his seat.

“Your turn, Dean.” Sam pointed out, “You don’t get to skip out.”

“I’m thankful that Sam interrupted my efforts to fix Chuck’s radio.”

Sam sniggered before raising his glass of Sprite to Dean.

“I’m thankful that Sam has Nick and Lola. And that Benny puts up with my lame ass efforts at being a PA.”

“None of that talk,” Benny interjected.

Dean winked at him. “Thankful that Bobby’s joining us today. And that Balthazar lives opposite Sam’s old student house so I could perv on Castiel riding his bicycle.”

“That’s the spirit, luvvie,” Balthazar exclaimed.
“I’m thankful for second chances. My second chance at life, at love, at family. For my Cas.” Dean got up. He knew the others’ eyes tracked him, as he went to Cas’s desk for his hidden scan pictures, keeping them down by his side. Cas stood as he came back to the table. He slung his arm around Dean’s shoulder. Dean lifted his head for a kiss. “My everything. He understands me. He sees me. He puts up with me.” Dean huffed as Cas tightened his hold. “All of me, of us. I’m thankful that…”

Dean took a deep swallow. A whirlpool whipped in his chest, one of excited anticipation, not the grip of a panic attack.

Sam scrunched up his face. The others looked curious for Dean to continue.

“Thankful that we’re pregnant.”

“What the hell?” Sam squawked.

“I’m pregnant.” Dean stated into the stillness that followed Sam’s expletive. He placed the clearer scan photo into Sam’s hand.

“Boy… you boys,” Bobby blinked at them.

“Dee.” Sam said tilting the picture back and forth, examining it with a ‘whoa-shaped’ open mouth.

“Well, if you’re happy, then I’m damned happy for you both,” Bobby announced, standing up, “I ain’t exactly the hug-it-out type, but I guess I can make an exception. Come ‘ere y’idgit.”

Dean took the couple of paces to the rock that was his Uncle Bobby. He was squeezed rib-squish tight and a scratchy kiss planted on his cheek.

“Thanks, Bobby,” Dean uttered into his shoulder.

A single clap on the back announced the hug was done. As Dean returned to Sam’s side, he was patted on the arm by Nick, who offered, “Congratulations to Dean and Castiel.” He grinned at each, “How far along?”

“12 weeks.”

“12 weeks?” Sam echoed. “And you told no-one. Wait, was it a shock? When did you find out?”

Dean could feel the flush rising up his neck and cheeks. He wanted Sam to understand. “A month ago, but Sammy, I couldn’t say, couldn’t risk… I was… I.. It was… I lost Emma at eleven weeks.”

“Shit.” Sam hissed. He was up pulling his brother into a hug before Dean could continue or protest if it was Hug-a-Dean-Day. “It’s OK, Dee. I know.”

“Cas knew.” Dean supplied.

Sam’s chest shuddered with laughter.

“Bitch.” Dean muttered into his brother’s continued hug. “I thought you mighta got suspicious that I was cleaning your toilets every time I visited.”

Nick chuckled, “They stank of air freshener when you did.”

“Yeah, well, y’know I was a puke-fest for while there.” Dean flushed as he admitted, “Benny called me out when I wasn’t able to hold my breakfast down for two weeks running.”
“Damn idjit, whatcha go into work for?” Bobby asked.

“That’s what I said wasn’t it, Sugar?” Benny added.

“They’re ganging up on me, Sammy.” Dean whined playfully. Then he adopted a more serious tone, “I didn’t hide it from ya, cos I didn’t want you to know. I couldn’t talk about it until I was sure everything was alright. They did a quick urgent scan straight off the bat, to make sure it wasn’t ectopic again, but I needed to be through, or almost through my first trimester. I couldn’t tell and then lose…” He paused as his chest tightened even thinking of another miscarriage. “I mean we found out just before Lola was born, and it didn’t feel right to say then. But this week we had a real scan, as you can see, and our baby looks real good.”

“If blurry.” Castiel added.

“Shuddup, Cas.” Dean shot with fondness.

“And everything is OK?” Sam checked, “No blood pressure crap, or problems?”

“Naw, Sammy. Ship shape.” Dean grinned, “Right on target for a June baby.”

The scan pictures were passed around. More congratulations were given. When Dean and Castiel admitted the baby was planned but conceived within days of their intention, Balthazar contributed some fairly lewd comments on Castiel’s virility. Castiel’s threat of no dinner and no more wine improved his cousin’s behavior. The chowder was reheated before they began their meal. Sam wanted a rundown of every symptom, twinge and craving Dean had experienced. Dean admitted developing a sweeter tooth, with candies and canned pineapple in syrup topping his list.

“They say cravings are your body telling you what you need for the baby’s development. You’d think with you Dean, it might be broccoli or zucchinis.” Sam huffed.

“Says Mr. Green Olive,” Dean retorted. “What did that give Lola?”

“It gave us Lola.” Nick chortled.

“Listen to me,” Dean pointed his soup spoon at Nick, “I don’t want to hear nothing more about Martinis and night long sex. I’m scarred by Sam’s attempts at sharing already, Man.”

“Some people are trying to eat here,” Bobby put his foot down.

“Sorry, Bobby,” Dean and Sam ducked their heads and replied in unison.

“Listen, none of that nonsense matters. You boys have got something pretty sweet here, and I guess I’ll be planning another vacation away from the salvage yard in the summer.” Bobby looked to the ceiling, “Jodi Mills is gonna be looking for kenneling fees at this stage.”

“She won’t, Bobby.” Sam protested.

“No, she won’t. And she’ll be damn glad to hear Dean’s news too.”

“You know,” Sam said privately to Dean as he helped plate up the simple desserts, “I guess we’ve reclaimed this holiday, remade it anew.”

“Anew?” Dean snorted at the Sam’s vocabulary, “Sammy, you’ve been mainlining Oprah again.”

“No, Dude,” Sam gestured with the ice-cream scoop, “That was the holiday wisdom of Dr Phil.”
“Sap.” Dean nudged with his elbow for emphasis.

Another whisper, “Are you sure you’re OK, Dee?”

Leaning in, Dean went for honesty, “I had a few cramps early, but they checked out fine. I’ve been told to eat more, wouldya believe it? I’m off all my anxiety meds, which bums sometimes, but Cas has been great, and my social worker insisted we get a nurse appointed to us, Tessa… she’s been solid too.”

“So you’re happy?”

Dean beamed, “Hell yeah! Now are you churning that ice cream or serving it?”

“Jerk.” Sam stuck his tongue out.

When dinner was over, and everyone had helped clean up, Benny took Bobby, Balthazar and Nick over to the marina to see the pleasure craft he kept moored in Bodega Bay. A call was placed to Kansas that made Pawpaw so emotional he had to pass the phone to Samuel to say their farewells. Five minutes later Dean Campbell rang back full of joy and celebration, with so many good wishes for Deanie that the grandson in question nearly had to sit down under the comfortable weight of them.

Lola was fed. Dean tried to give her a baby high five, when she spat up on Sam’s grey zip-up jumper as soon as he’d closed it and taken away his muslin spit-up cloth. The bitchface was epic. Dean compensated for laughing by returning Sam’s Cardinals’ hoodie, which the older Winchester had sneakily taken to Bodega when moving from Moss Beach. Sam was sleepy enough to nod off, while they waited for the others to return. Dean gave a brotherly glance over at Sam, but he was out for the count, snuggled in his old hoodie with his head on the arm of the sofa and Lola napping in her carry-cot by his side.

Dean and Castiel stood in front of the fireplace in their home, languid and indulgent, wrapped together, foreheads meeting, a new and tender life cradled between their spines, as they swayed to a music all of their own. Held there, Dean welled up with a wave of love, of hope, of feeling. It was made up of how much he loved Cas, how much he wanted their family, how much he wanted to give Cas a family too. They were both hurt and burnt in the past, rejected by parents, lost and going it alone. They were scarred but survivors. Each others’ bastion and inspiration. Dean and the baby could give Castiel the family he craved. To Dean, his beloved Castiel was the hub, the axis of his new and cherished life.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies if I offended anyone with the fictional liberties taken with George Michael’s biology.

Nurse Family Partnerships really do exist for low income, first time and vulnerable parents with social risk factors. The public health nurses in the scheme do home visits, and they help with accessing welfare, antenatal classes, education and mental health
services. They are appointed after a referral by a concerned health practitioner or a social worker. Typically they attend the family from first or second trimester until the child is two years old.

In my original plotting this was the final chapter. However as I wrote I found that this point no longer feels like the right place to end Tread Softly. Plus there is more story to be told. I’m not calling them timestamps but time will move on between each of the additional postings. There should be about six more chapters, with the next one set in 2004.
Chapter Notes

Thank you again to everyone who has left kudos, bookmarked, subscribed, or commented on Tread Softly. You have no idea how awesome it is to get your feedback... now on with the story....

Dean woke.

He didn’t open his eyes.

Mentally trying to chase after the vestigial edges of a pleasant dream, he marveled that his body had managed to fall into a decent slumber. No matter how many pillows he hoarded, how he placed extra cushions or arranged Castiel’s limbs, these nights having a solid four hours was a blessing.

“Dean.”

His name was softly murmured into his neck. Dean drank it in as light caresses dotted his shoulder.

“Too early, Cas.” Dean grumbled hoarsely, planting his face into soft cotton pillow. It strained his neck and was distinctly uncomfortable. His jumbo sized baby bump made sleeping on his stomach a thing of light years ago.

“I wouldn’t consider eleven early.” Castiel said in that perturbed tone of his.

“Ex-squeeze-me. Eleven?” Dean might have popped his eyes open and swiveled his head Exorcist style but he was certain he didn’t squeak.

Castiel was already dressed in his running shorts and tee. A tee that had a suspicious vee of perspiration.

“You’ve been out!” Dean accused as pulled his body to sit upright. He winced. Deep pain spanned his lower back. His ribs were assaulted from the inside. Someone else wasn’t happy about being woken.

“You tossed all night, but were snoring pleasantly when I left. We don’t have to be anywhere until Two. Also I got fresh Danishes and box of natural OJ popsicles.” Castiel explained as he ripped off his top and went searching for a clean tee.

“One, I will not be distracted by your sexy body,” Dean ignored the huff of laughter from behind the closet door, “Two, I don’t snore. Three, I need to be ready for the opening, and Four, when we win the lottery we are buying a memory foam mattress.”

“You want a bed that remembers you?” Cas crowed, running a hand through his mussed hair.

“Damn right I do. Because this one hates me.” Dean held out his arms for assistance.
“Illogical.” Castiel muttered under his breath. He took Dean’s hands and helped him to stand up.

A kiss that bordered on a hickey was sucked into Castiel’s skin in thanks.

“I need to shower.” Cas reluctantly interrupted Dean’s efforts.

“You’re all salty.” Dean agreed with a laugh as they parted.

“Would you like me to make you one of my teas before I do?” Castiel reached for their robes from the hook on the back of the bedroom door.

“Naw, Babe.” Dean pushed his arms through the sleeves of the robe. It was only for decoration. There was no chance of it meeting in the middle. Anyway, Dean reasoned it was too hot for layers.

“How many pastries you get?”

“They had four for the price of three.”

“So I can have three?”

“Sam…” Castiel began.

“Don’t tell me we have to feed him? He’ll eat everything.” Dean peeved in jest, “I thought Sam was gonna get here once the party started.”

A flutter in his chest, that was not due to his baby’s movements, warned Dean that although he’d deny it, he was nervous about the Grand Opening of the Bodega Bay Art Group Show. Alfie and the old hands in the group had tried to calm the nerves of their talented newbie. It was a low key day at the community hall. Dean was reassured the small expected crowd would be artists’ families, locals, and tourists. Shoreline Radio was covering it, but Dean was exempted from interviews, as he requested. The attendees weren’t going to resemble the Press and Glitterati that had gathered for the show in Sarah Blake’s workplace the previous month, including Sam and Nick in matching Tom Ford suits. Dean was still getting mileage out of teasing his brother for appearing in the ‘society’ page of the San Francisco Chronicle.

“Sam,” Castiel tried to begin again. “Your brother called earlier.”

“Sonvabitch. He’s after bailing. He’s not coming.” Dean spat out words of disappointment without a brain filter, automatically assuming that something had cropped up to keep Sam away.

“No, Darling. With his day manger on vacation, Nick’s needed for Saturday service at the restaurant, but Sam’s coming. Sam said he’ll be here early.”

“You what?”

Cas sighed. Dean chewed on his lip, biting back an apology for being an awkward mopey person. He honestly didn’t know how Cas was putting up with his mood swings.

“Sam will be here at lunchtime and he asked if we would wait for him. He wanted to talk to you before we go to The Hall.” Castiel imparted before kicking off his trainers. “You want the bathroom first?”

Dean nodded. The pressure on his bladder grew once Castiel had mentioned it. He gritted his teeth from the pain that spread across his spine, but it receded when he’d taken care of business.

With Castiel singing some sort of off key sonata in the bathroom, Dean set about opening every
window of their small apartment. He was sure that it was unseasonably hot for June. Tessa had agreed with his weather forecasting on her visit earlier in the week, but had also pointed out that Dean’s body was possibly running hot as he approached his due date. With his Danish in his hand, Dean went to the long mirror in the centre of the closet. He turned one way and then the other. He didn’t think his bump had dropped much since Tessa had assessed that he was presenting at three fifths engaged. With a puff of frustration Dean tried to mentally will his little boy into the world. His trusted nurse had soothed Dean with tales of first babies who only fully engaged once labor commenced but to Dean it was another sign that he was headed for the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest carrier pregnancy in recorded history.

He pulled on his elasticized soft fake jeans and a black tee. The top was one that Sam had bought for his later weeks carrying Lola but had never got a chance to wear. Freaking weirdo floppy sandals that could be expanded with Velcro were the only things that fitted on his swollen feet. Dean hated the ploppy noise they made when he walked. It was them or slippers, which gave Dean an itch about his years in the hospital. Men should wear boots. It was one of the few things Dean could agree with his father about. With a longing look at his favorite lace up leather boots, Dean fixed his wrist cuffs. He took a few breaths with a steadying hand placed in the small of his back. Chewing on his second Danish, Dean gave up trying to find a painless posture on the hard kitchen chair. He took his mug of black tea and his breakfast treat to the sofa.

Why would Sam call to ask them to wait for him? What did he want to talk about? Why didn’t he call Dean? If he had news why couldn’t it be told at the art show?

By the time Cas appeared with towel dried hair, Dean had gone from questioning his little brother’s motives, to worried, to frustrated with Sam’s presumption that they’d follow his wishes with limited information.

“This is freaking ridiculous.” Dean eased his frigging elephant ankles up onto the coffee table.

Castiel made a beeline for the coffee machine.

Dean screwed up his face. Sam was being ridiculous and Castiel was ignoring him. Dean wondered if his partner had finally developed selective deafness of his moans. “I said, this is motherfucking ridiculous. I’m 41 weeks pregnant.”

“You are two days overdue.” Castiel said in a neutral voice.

“That’s what I said, 41st week.” Dean growled. “Are you trying to mess with me?”

He rubbed his bump through the tee’s stretched cotton. Every time he traced his hand over his newly popped out ‘innie’ belly button, it felt weird and strange. Castiel however was fascinated by the new ‘outie’ and liked massaging oil in ever expanding and decreasing circles around it.

“No, Babe. Just sit back and relax.” Castiel’s voice pulled Dean back to the present. “Would you like more tea?”

“No. Thanks. He’s pushing my diaphragm one way and my bladder the other.” Dean twisted his weight onto one buttock and attempted some shallow breaths. He knew part of his grouchy temperament stemmed from how desperate he was to give birth. He was impatient to see their son, but also to not be so fatigued and bloated and pregnant any longer.

On due day and the evening before Dean had consumed spicy curries. Chili and ginger did nothing to sway their baby from taking up permanent residence inside his Daddy.
Yesterday when Castiel came home, full of news about the following week’s graduations, before he could change out of his suit, he had been roped into running a steaming hot bath for his partner. The old wives’ tale of a hot soak to bring on labor had led to an incident which, Castiel promised faithfully, would never be spoken of again. Dean had gotten stuck in their hip-bath. Castiel had been so weak with laughter he couldn’t gather enough strength to help Dean out and had ended up collapsed on the linoleum floor being soaked with splashed water. The hysterical teacher was re-soaked with cold water dumped out of their plastic toothbrush beaker when Dean managed to extract himself, thank you very much.

Dean had seriously contemplated seducing Cas to see if his magic dick could dislodge their child. Maybe if they could find an angle where Cas could pound into him hard enough to make Dean scream. He’d heard at his antenatal classes that nipple play helped too. He imagined biting and pinching, teeth scraping over his sensitive flesh. Maybe if he could get Cas in the mood, they could spend hours sexing their baby into the world.

“Do you think it’d help if we named him?” Dean mused aloud, before his twitching dick got 100% on board with his private fantasies, “Like started laying down the law.” He put on a stern voice. “Get out of your Daddy, Sport.”

Castiel’s shoulders were quivering with silent laughter again. He’d taken a spot leaning one elbow on the over-mantle. A splash of coffee tipped over the edge of his mug.

Dean glared at the coffee mark on the floor. Cas spilled it, he could mop it up. He tried to seize Castiel’s attention. “I mean, Sport or Baby don’t have as much firepower as ‘Dean Michael Winchester, take care of your brother’, does it Cas?”

“He’ll come when he is ready.” Cas said sympathetically.

“He’d better. I’m not having Dr Villas sticking anything up me to get my labor going.”

“Dean,” Cas rolled his eyes, “You don’t have to think of being induced yet. Try not to worry I’m sure Buddy won’t wait that long.”

Dean bit his lip. Cas could be sure all he liked, but he wasn’t the one who looked and felt like a balloon ready to pop. He craved having their baby with them. Both of them couldn’t wait to meet him, to see him and hold him close.

“Can we not use Buddy? And no sneakily calling him Remiel. I heard you whispering it in bed last night.”

“Yes, Dean. I will stick to our pact and wait until we meet him.” Castiel said with a firmness that transmitted his sincerity.

That was fine with Dean, who had already decided to veto any douchy angel names. He had a few names of his own in mind, convinced he could persuade Castiel that their ‘sport’ had the look of a James Tiberius or a Kirk. He’d teasingly ventured Ulrich, Bonham and Zeppelin, only to have Cas outdo him by calling their son Amadeus over the whole Easter period. There were rumors of a new Indiana Jones movie. Dean wondered if Harrison Winchester sounded apt.

“What about Harrison?” Dean said immediately breaking their agreement.

While Castiel just chuckled at Dean, their baby registered his own reaction. A powerful kick that Dean could see through his tee, as well as being battered inside, left him pondering whether that meant Harrison was awesome or lame.
“Sam asking us to wait here, when Alfie might want our help, is ridiculous.” Dean handed his empty mug up for Castiel to take.

“Sam asked. He didn’t demand. And Dean, you said yesterday that everything was hung and ready at The Hall. The Triple Threat are handling today’s prep.” Castiel said patiently.

Dean smirked at the name he had given the three senior retirees in the art class. Wonderful friendly ladies, who had wanted to bake a storm for the opening, until Alfie put his foot down about serving food not being a tradition he wanted to start. Instead the trio had volunteered to do the final checks, hand out the class’s self printed catalogue, and offer attendees a soda or a sparkling water when they entered the exhibition.

“What do you think he wants?” Dean asked.

Castiel shrugged. “He didn’t say. You could call him.”

“Meh.” Dean knew his brother. Sam wouldn’t tell unless he wanted to.

He hoped there was nothing wrong. He didn’t think anything could be wrong. Lola was the bounciest brightest little button. She was meant to have her own schedule of milestones being a preemie birth but she kept exceeding the expectations of Dr Baker, her pediatrician. Her latest trick was waving with fingers opening and closing down over her palm. She waved at everyone and everything, including their neighbor’s dog and her favorite toy Bunny, the one that Uncle Cas had given her as a new baby gift. Sam said it was Nick’s fault, because he kept getting her to wave with him for hello and goodbye when either of her Daddies came home or had to go to work/college.

Sam had been flying high when Dean had spoken to him the day before. According to Sam, it was almost spooky how well he’d predicted the questions and topics in his summer exams. George Wyatt, his advisor, was delighted with Sam’s coursework. All in all, despite some heart tugging days getting used to leaving Lola at home with Nick, Sam’s first semester back in academia on half-time had ended with him confident that he would hit the grades he wanted when the results were posted.

In all likelihood Sam wanted to talk. Dean tried to roll his eyes back into his brain. He’d probably gotten another ADL report on John’s upcoming trial and wanted to include Dean in his miniscule analysis. Going over and over crap made Sam alternately miserable or stressed, and made Dean wish Sam would leave it alone and wait for news of the verdict. There was bile in his throat when he swallowed. Maybe it was significant news. Perhaps John had plea bargained. It was a worry of both sons that John might escape jail time in Minnesota and they’d be faced with the harrowing prospect of a trial in California for the assault on Sam.

Dean asked “Do you think it’s about John?”

“I don’t know, but it is probable.” Castiel pursed his lips, “Sam wanted to tell you in person. But Dean, whatever happens in Minnesota, remember it’s not over. He’ll be extradited.”

“Yeah, right.” Dean gave a head shake, “Just… I was hoping we’d catch a break here.”

Breakfast was cleared away. Castiel redressed their bed and took their linens to the launderette. Dean was thankful that Castiel refrained from pointing out that the night time heat and his freaky metabolism was drenching their sheets in perspiration. He took the few minutes alone to carefully indulge in a close wet shave. His facial hair grew slower and finer with all his pregnancy hormones meaning he could skip a day without much scruff. Although he had no plans to grace the front page of the town newsletter, he had some pride in looking well for the exhibition opening.
With a quick double slap to his cheek Dean spoke to the mirror, “Game face on.”

Sam’s arrival followed quick on the heels of Castiel’s return. Cas, being the more mobile one, ran down the stairs to greet him. Voices chatted as they ascended to meet Dean in the living room. Dean couldn’t stop his broad smile when he spotted Lola in her white cotton sunhat perched high on Sam’s hip. She was babbling in her own language with a fist in the end of her Papa’s hair. Uncle Cas got a kiss and a smile before she turned her face into Sam’s shoulder.

Dean puffed as he rose. He made his way around the table with a slow rolling piratical gait (not a waddle). He could see Sam scrunching his face up in concern.

“I’m good, Sammy,” Dean puffed.

Sam hummed with raised brows. He lifted Lola up for Dean’s kiss of greeting.

“Ba.” Lola said with a bubble of smiling spit. Sam whipped a tissue from his pocket in a well practiced move.

“You’re bigger.” Sam squinted at him, “And he's dropped some.”

“Way to go with the obvious, College Boy. Of course I’m freaking bigger. You haven’t seen me since your finals started.”

Sam hovered over Dean while he took a seat pulled out sideways parallel to the table. A raised pointer finger communicated the need to back off, that he was fine, that Sam was crowding him.

“OK.” Sam responded to the body language and took a step back. “No danger of childbirth in a crowded art show, then?”

Dean snorted.

“Would you like something to drink, Sam?” Castiel asked with his hand on the refrigerator door.

“A juice would be great.” Sam replied as Lola squirmed with a low whine.

“I’ll have a cold one with a whiskey chaser.” Dean joked, holding his arms up for Lola to be transferred to him.

Sam obliged. Lola smiled in excitement with the change, putting up with being adjusted and readjusted in Dean’s hold as he made sure she was secure.

“Be lala nono.” She squealed in delight.

“Who’s the cutest? Who is?” Dean bounced the darling seven month old on his knee. “Any words yet Sammy?”

“Nick is convinced she’s calling him Dada, but I’m not so sure. She likes repeating sounds. She linked together ‘Hi Baba’ the other day, so maybe her first words were a hello to herself.” Sam grinned. “Connie Marks, at Dr Baker’s clinic, says her daughter’s got her first words, and she’s only six months, but Lily keeps reminding us that Lola’s due date was December 17th. She’s way ahead of the graph using that date.”

“Hey, every baby is different. Talking isn’t the be all and end all, y’know.”

With a bittersweet slight smile, Sam surprised Dean by leaning over to pat his shoulder. “I know Dee.”
“When are you back in classes?” Castiel asked as he brought over three long glasses of apple juice.

“22nd.” Sam raised his glass in thanks, “It’s a short break. Campus will be quieter during the summer quarter. Lots of the anthropology department will be out on field research or archaeology digs.”

“But there are units on offer relevant to your major?” Castiel enquired.

Dean listened in on their talk about Stanford, but he was fixated on Lola’s little movements and the way her eyes kept tracking towards her Papa. When Sam raised his glass to his lips, Lola imitated him, smashing her fist into her mouth and sucking. Sam produced her binky and her Bunny. The grabby hands for her favorite toy made Dean chuckle, remembering a ragged teddy that Sam had carted across the country for years.

“So.” Sam said, leaning back in his chair.

“Uh-ho, time to spill the crap?” Dean stabbed his brother with his eyes, “You know I had a minor freak out here, Man?”

“I’m sorry,” Sam muttered, pushing his hand through his hair.

“Talk to me.” Dean barked out.

Castiel subtly took Lola without a word. He retreated to the sofa to give the Winchesters some space for whatever discussion was about to take place.

Dean wound his fingers around his wrist cuff. Whatever this was, it was significant. Sam’s face beheld his constipated look.

“I got a call from the Chaplin at Cottonwood County lock up.”

“I fucking knew it’d be Dad.” Dean hissed. “Don’t tell me he’s found God and wants back into our lives, because d’y’know what that is? It’s pure unadulterated BS. A ploy for the trial. Next you’ll be saying that he wants us as character witnesses for the motherfucking defense.”

“No, Dean.” Sam’s dry laugh didn’t hold a speck of humor. “Quite the opposite.”

Dean glared, waiting.

“Did you know John registered me as his official Next of Kin?” Sam plowed on, ignoring Dean’s open mouth, “He got jumped in the yard. Days ago. KO’d him. Kicked the crap outta him. He was taken out of jail to hospital. Chaplin says he’s awake and on the mend. He’ll get his own cell now, locked down for his own safety, on the block with the rapists and pedophiles.”

Sam blew a huff through flared nostrils and glanced up at the ceiling. Dean hummed. He knew how a kicking to the ribs felt. He knew the crunch from his father’s boot. There was a twisted karma to John’s current fate.

“The padre said he riled up the other inmates. That he’d been in the hole before now for throwing a punch or two. They were lying in wait for him. That they don’t take kindly to wife and child beaters.”

“How’d they know about us?” Dean gasped.

“They didn’t.” Sam licked his bottom lip, “Get this. The guy asks me if I want him to let my
brother know about our father’s injuries.”

“Huh?”

“I know. I said that I’d tell my brother myself. So he says, do you have his new number, that Kate changed all their contacts when she filed for divorce and moved to a new rental nearer the hospital.”

“What?” Dean wrinkled his nose. What Sam was saying didn’t add up.

“He keeps talking, while I can hear papers rustling, saying Adam, who is only thirteen, seemingly came through his second surgery with flying colors. That they say the boy will regain full movement from the injury when John wrenched his shoulder from his socket. Then he’s apologizing about presuming John’s innocence and how he wasn’t charged for the assault on Adam. It happened before the cops broke into the house.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ.” Dean’s eyes sought out Castiel, who was staring rapt at both brothers.

“I know. I played dumb, made Ahem noises, so he’d presume I was up to date on all the family news. He gave me their new number, listed under Kate Milligan.”

“1990 or 1991?” Dean asked.

“I dunno, Dee.”

“Could Nick find out?”

“I suppose. Does it really matter?”

“Once we left Maryland, we kept moving all through 1990, do you remember?”

Sam blew a slow raspberry, “I must have done first and second grade through ten schools.”

“He’d disappear for weeks.” Dean tried to shake the fog of being eleven and so hungry he thought his stomach was glued flat to his spine. “He said he was getting casual jobs, but there was less cash. He was off playing happy families, getting married… while we were in fucking squalor…” He kicked the leg of the empty chair beside him.

Lola began to cry.

Sam rose to take his daughter.

“No wonder he dumped my ass… he already had a wife and one extra child to feed… Motherfucking Bastard.”

The chair fell behind him. Gagging over the sink, gripping the metal edge, bent over, his inside clenched vice-like. Angry bitter tears fell. He didn’t know why he was crying over this. He’d shed enough over John Winchester. He’d vowed nothing the man could do would hit him this hard again. Yet here he was, hunched over, sucker punched.

He could hear Sam trying to calm the other crying person in the room. A warm hand spanned his shoulder blade.

“It’s alright, Dean.” Cas soothed into his ear.

“But it’s not.” Dean protested straightening up and wrapping an arm under Castiel’s shoulder. He
addressed Sam, “Why’d you tell me? Why now? Why today?”

“I want to contact him.” Sam stated.

“John? You want to listen to his soft soaping apologies?”

“I never want to speak or see him again.” Sam fumed back. “I mean Adam. I want to contact Adam.”

“And you’re looking for my permission? My approval? For what? You’ll do it if you want to, but don’t expect me to play happy families. Excuse me but we don’t know this Adam from Adam.” The smile at his own pun was closer to a sneer, “What if he is a John Winchester Mini-Me?”

“He lives half a continent away. Looks like he didn’t have a Dad Of The Year either, but if he is an asshat then…” Sam shrugged. “We don’t have to become bosom buddies, but Dean, he is family.”

“How? How is he our family?” Dean’s fists clenched. “He’s our blood, but when did some random teenager gain admittance to our family?”

“Dean.” Sam pleaded.

Castiel cleared his throat, “Why don’t I take Lola to the deli and get a few subs for our lunch?”

Dean nodded. He appreciated Cas giving him and Sam some space to work things out.

“Here.” Sam passed over the keys to his Prius. “Her stroller is in the car. I’ll have a salad.”

“Cheese pastrami melt.” Dean added, “And one of those single serving apple pies.”

“I trust you won’t have killed each other before I get back.” Castiel raised his brows.

“No, Cas.” Dean promised.

Sam gave a silent tight lipped head bob.

“I’m not looking for your blessing.” Sam said when Cas and Lola had gone. “I’m giving you the heads up that I’m gonna make contact with our brother. Don’t get me wrong, Dean. I’d like if you were onboard, but I respect your opinion, and if you don’t want to meet him or speak to him that’s fine. This is all presuming he’d want to have contact with me, with us, y’know. God only knows what, if anything, John told him about us. He might think we’re feral monsters or Dad might have inculcated his opinions about ‘sissy carrier queers’ in Adam. But I’ve got to try because he is family and he’s also a boy whose Dad is in jail awaiting trial for almost killing his Mom.”

“I hear ya.” Dean sighed, the fight dropping away from him. He was antsy and ready to fly back at Sam if he challenged him, but he was also weary. “I’m not interested. OK?”

“Alright, Dean, but you could think of giving him a chance. He’s only thirteen.”

“How would I know that? And I’m not going introducing myself like ‘Well howdy, I’m your brother Sam, and are you a male carrier?’”

“I know that, you numbskull.” Dean said with less aggravation and more affection. He was entitled to be frustrated. Sam had pounced this on him. Fair enough some jailhouse priest had dropped it on Sam. He tried to be conciliatory. “Look Sammy. I guess you’re curious, yeah? You want to know
who this kid is? But I don’t need this. He is a stranger. You want to call him up, make nice, fly out there and see him, you go ahead, but leave me out of it. And don’t you look at me like that, Sam. Don’t you make me the villain.”

“What? No. I’m not.” Sam protested. “I guess I expected you to… I don’t know…be worried about how we’d make Adam feel one of us, that you’d put yourself in his shoes.”

“I can do that.” Dean steamed. “Whoo look at my family of a gazillion cousins and a Mom, and the same school friends since kindergarten. So hey, let’s meet a Winchester who had the perfect childhood.”

“You’re jealous.”

“I am not.” Dean rested his hand on his belly. Maybe there was a touch of envy for a son raised in a stable home with a mother and a life of his own.

“I doubt there was much perfect. Adam was cursed with John as his Dad too. I mean, Dad musta been missing a lot from his life. Left Kate and Adam when he was with us. And he injured him pretty badly if he needed surgeries.”

“So what? We bond over John’s epic failure and sit around a campfire singing Kumbaya? Cos I’m not doing that, Sam.”

“What is your problem, Dean?”

“Did you hear me?”

“Look. In my opinion, Adam is family. Can we leave it at that?”

“Yeah, good talk.” Dean pouted.

“I didn’t want to ruin your day.” Sam hung his head.

“Bang up job there.”

The guilty look on Sam’s puppy eyed face, made Dean twist inside. He took a beat, thinking of what had said, how his brother seemed to view discovering another sibling as a positive win. Maybe Sam had thought he was coming to share good news. He grudgingly permitted, “You can fill me in.”

“How?”

“’bout Adam. You can tell me how it goes, y’know, and if he’s not a complete douchebag… then.” He shrugged.

Sam barreled into him, swamping Dean in a hug.

“You’re the best, Dean.”

“I know. I’m awesome.” Dean snorted over his brother’s hunched shoulder. “John’s not going to ruin this day.”

He was squeezed tight. Sam affirmed, “Damn right.”

“Glad to see World War 3 hasn’t broken out.” Castiel drolly intoned when he, Lola and a paper bag of super subs appeared.
Lola’s grabby motions for Sam’s salad bowl, made Dean shake with amusement, “Like Papa like daughter, hey?”

“I have something for her.” Sam produced a small food tub. “We had suckle-time this morning before we left home. I made this up, it’s banana rice with a touch of breast milk.”

“Sheez, I was gonna ask for a taste until you said that.” Dean joked.

After lunch Castiel helped Dean into a pale gray-blue and green plaid shirt. Dean left the lightweight summer shirt unbuttoned. He figured he looked less like a slob with it open like a jacket, and anyhow no one could see the stretched thin elastic panel of his pants under the tight covering of his tee. Once Lola was freshly diapered and amusing herself by singing a string of almost rhyming syllables, Sam pronounced they were ready to leave.

There was no hurry and The Hall was near, a block behind the main drag on the side street to the High School. The stroll in the sunshine was pleasant. The sky was such a dazzling azure, that Dean strained to visualize what palette he would need to experiment with to recreate it on canvas. Perhaps ultra blue with dabs of iridescent white and pthalo green. Carmen was wiping down the outdoor tables at the Bluebell Café. She waved when she spotted their party.

“Hey, Dean, Castiel. I’m going to check out the show later!” She called in their direction. “Mom is there.”

Dean waved back, feeling rather weird about being the object of attention. Castiel linked his elbow as if he knew a tremor of sickly anticipation had hold of his partner. At the turn off the main drag, Lola flung her sun hat onto the sidewalk with a trill of laughter. Sam rolled his eyes, huffed lightly and re-fixed the bonnet onto the little minx’s soft golden hair.

“Good girl, Lola. You leave your pretty hat on for Papa, OK?” Sam said while squatted down beside the stroller.

“Sam?” Dean asked with his hand on the handle of the Bugaboo to halt the resumption of their progress.

Sam raised a brow but followed Dean’s lead to press his back against the side wall of the pharmacy, and stay out of the way of others making their way to the temporary gallery.

“I meant it, Sam.” Dean bit down on his lip.

“What?” Sam asked.

Castiel looked at him with puzzlement.

“You kinda blindsided me and I knee jerk reacted, but,” Dean dropped his eyes and laid a hand on his bump. With a sigh he continued, “You’ll let me know? How things go with Adam? If the kid is doing OK and all?”

When he looked up Sam was all smiles, dimples out with force. “You’re the best, Dee.”

“Yeah, right, whatever. Now move your freakishly long ass, we’ve a show to get to.” Dean blustered.

“My ass is not long.” Sam shot back, gripping the stroller and getting it moving, “My dick on the other hand…..”
Dean stuck his fingers in his ears and Lalala’ed until Castiel glared at him with a chuckled admonishment to watch where he was walking.

Dean was pleasantly surprised and only marginally apprehensive to see plenty of cars parked and people on foot heading for their destination. Inside the venue, the place was bustling with people viewing the art pieces as they waited for Brick Holmes, hometown boy made NFL player to open the exhibition. Brick’s youngest sister was the pride and joy of Alfie’s crop of this year’s graduates, heading to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in the fall.

Alfie skipped across the room, dressed in a flamboyant sky blue suit with sleeves rolled up. Dean eyed his bubbly enthusiasm warily, and bit back a comment on the return of Miami Vice fashion.

“Hey guys. Look at the turn out. Can you believe it? We’ve had to put red sold dots on two paintings and one of Thomasine’s embroidery hangings already. We’ll have to print more leaflets by Monday, no way they’ll last. And Dean, people love your stuff.”

“Sure,” Dean looked sideways, not completely convinced.

“Any movement?” Alfie whispered privately into Dean’s ear with a hand on his arm, as Inias came over with Poppy.

“Not a budge.” Dean smiled.

“Papa. Baby.” Poppy chirruped as she bent into the stroller to kiss Lola.

The two year old’s dark curls fell over her face as she leaned on the frame of seat. Lola pealed laughter and caught hold of Poppy’s cardigan.

“That’s Lola.” Castiel explained. “Remember Lola, from the picnic at the cove?”

“She likes me.” Poppy giggled. “Where your baby, Deehan?”

Dean grinned at the bright eyed elfin face looking up at him. Inias and Alfie had explained to Poppy that Dean was having a baby. Every time the families met up, Poppy asked the same question.

“She’s as impatient as we are to meet him.” Dean beamed at Alfie. He addressed the little lady, “Not here yet, Miss Poppy, but soon.”

Poppy turned out her lip. “He’s a brat.”

Dean burst out laughing.

“Poppy!” Alfie gasped, “Where did you hear that word?”

“’Toons.” Poppy peeped, “Lola like ‘toons?”

“She’s too little for TV yet,” Sam said through his own huffs of laughter.

Dean was distracted by Pamela’s arrival. She kissed both his cheeks and patted his belly. “I’d say very soon, maybe tomorrow.”

“What you’re the baby whisperer now?” Dean quipped.

“I told ya before, Dean. I’m psychic.”
“You wanna bet.”

“Sure. Five bucks, Big Man.”

“We are not betting on the birth of our son.” Castiel’s voice dropped to pure gravel.

Dean shook on the wager when Cas wasn’t looking.

They stayed to the side for the opening speech and cutting of the ribbon. Brick Holmes was no public speaker but he drew a crowd. Dean did an obligatory circle of the room, as Castiel chatted with some of his students' parents. Sam was in conversation with Inias by the sales desk. Luckily Dean had little more to do than nod or smile. He knew a lot of the locals and muttered his thanks to those who liked his paintings. Standing was making his back and pelvis ache. He spied out the line of chairs pushed against the back wall.

“Sugar, you sure are talented.” Benny said from behind Dean’s back.

“Boss.” Dean turned round with a warm smile. He hadn’t seen Benny since he’d taken leave three weeks earlier. “You came.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it.” Benny grinned wide. “Kind of the others to provide a foil for your brilliance.”

Dean raised a brow at his smirking boss and friend.

“I mean, your pieces stand out. I’m not surprised three out of your six have already sold. I’m proud of you, brother. I know what it’s like to expose your work to the world.”

Dean was speechless. He blinked at Benny. On the other side of the hall, Inias and Sam were reaching up to remove Dean’s painting of birds flying over the rocks at Moss Beach. Turned out the older lady, with the designer handbag and Hermes scarf, was a visitor to the town. The Hitchcock fan on a pilgrimage paid a premium to remove the painting immediately, rather than comply with the request in the catalogue to allow the pieces to remain on show for the two weeks duration. Castiel coaxed him over with sweeping gestures and a powerful stink eye. Benny chuckled as Dean dragged his feet. Castiel planted a huge wet lipped smacker on his face.

“I knew you could do it. I knew they’d love your art.” He wrapped his arms around Dean as if he could transmit how proud he was by osmosis.

Dean buoyed by his partner’s happiness for him, conceded to meet Mrs. Sandover. Luckily the well heeled lady was eloquent in her praise of Bodega and Dean’s art. He didn’t need to try to string more than two words together as Mrs. Sandover complemented his style and had him sign his name again on the back of the canvas. A part of him was sorry to see that painting go. He knew the point was to sell his art. He’d been chuffed about the sea in that piece, fist pumping in art class when he’d taken a pace back to see that he had captured dappled sunlight on the water.

Finally planted on a plastic chair with his own glass of sparkling water, Dean sighed and let go of tension that he hadn’t comprehended had built up. Castiel slumped into the seat next to him.

“Will you be fine if I head to the office supply store with Inias and run off some copies of the catalogue?”

“I thought we’d go home.” Dean whined without admitting how hot and achy he was, “But sure, we can duck out when you get back.”
Castiel patted his knee before promising not to be long. Benny was gesturing to Ms Epstein from the framing company in Petaluma. Dean hadn’t known the businesswoman would be interested in attending their small show. Sam found a new calling, helping the Triple Threat ladies organize sales, take names and numbers for collection, and give receipts. The disadvantage to sitting down was being pinned by three of the mothers of Castiel’s students who gazed at his bump with dewy broody eyes and filled him in on how their kids adored Mr. Fletcher. Released, Dean cast an eye over his fellow art group members' pieces. There was a plentiful scattering of red dots, more than Alfie had expected for the first day. Embroidered samplers, vibrant batiks, and some fantasy fan art produced by sci-fi loving Jerry, all had sold marks. Having had enough downtime, Dean made his way towards Benny, who was near the open doors. The room had quieted down a lot with only twenty or thirty people in a relaxed wander through the exhibit. The idea of a breeze was tempting in the sticky heat. Dean squinted as he noticed Benny was slipping his wallet into his ass pocket.

“You buy?” Dean asked.

Benny hummed. “Thought your larger view of Bodega Harbor would look mighty fine in the blue guestroom.”

“But I wanted to, Sugar.” Benny winked at him. “Your beanpole brother is reaching up now to put my exclusive red dot on the corner.”

Dean watched as Sam did just that, then turned round and gave Dean a big thumbs up. Sam re-raised his hand, all five fingers displayed and mouthed the word ‘five’. Dean’s jaw dropped. That meant one of his two still life works had gone too. Was it possible that five out of his six pieces had sold in the first couple of hours? He was dismayed that people forked out their hard earned cash for his hobby.

He excused himself to join Sam at the sales desk. Only a few steps from Benny, out of the blue, Dean was gripped by a vicious cramp that made his knees give way. Sam and Benny noticed at the same moment and dashed to his side.

“Dean!” Sam dropped to his own knees and skidded on the polished wood floor.

“Way with the Swayze move, Sammy.”

“What happened? Are you OK?”

Dean opened his mouth to offer some platitude. He felt the freakiest sensation down low, almost like a pop, and then something warm and wet was trickling down his thighs. Dean gave a deep throated laugh.

“My waters broke.”

“Dean, is it?” Alfie sprinted to join them.

“Don’t think it’s Braxton Hicks this time,” Dean joked as Sam helped him up.

“How long between contractions?” Sam asked all business-like.

“I dunno. I didn’t know they were contractions.” Dean searched his memories for the few cramps and the spikes in his back ache. “It was a while ago.”

“OK. Stay calm. Stay calm.” Sam puffed. “The cars are back at your place. Where’s Lola?”
Dean eyed his opposite-of-calm brother. “Pamela.”

Their barkeep friend had been amusing Lola and Poppy beside the sales desk before Dean’s collapse. She was still there.

“Oh right.” Sam threw a grateful smile in that direction.

“Is Cas back?” Dean asked, leaning more weight on Sam as they headed to the chairs.

“Not yet.” Alfie supplied, “I’ll text Inny.”

“We’ll wait for Cas.” Dean said calmly. Benny took his other arm. Dean sort of wanted to shake him and his brother off and say he was fine, but on the other hand he wasn’t sure what would happen next. What did happen was the trickle of water became a gush down his legs. “Shit, Shit, Shit. Right. Hospital.”

“I’ll take you.” Benny volunteered. “I’ll bring the SUV right up to the door.”

“I should take you.” Sam moved closer.

Dean looked from one determined face to the other.

“Chill,” He barked. With sudden mental clarity he ordered, “Listen, this is how it is going to go down. Alfie, get hold of Cas. Tell him to follow us to Santa Rosa Community Hospital. Sam, can you get my hospital bag? Call Santa Rosa, tell ‘em I’m on my way and I’m Dr Villas of Sebastopol’s patient. And will you give Pawpaw and Bobby the heads up. Benny, you got towels or rags for your shotgun seat? Yeah? Well take me now. I’m not having my baby here with a freaking audience.”

Benny broke every speed restriction and highway code, while driving with one hand on the wheel and the other on Dean’s leg. He parked across reserved medical personnel spaces outside the Birth Center’s doors.

“You’ll get clamped or towed.” Dean warned.

“You think I care?” Benny responded coming round to help Dean out of the SUV.

After rushed explanations that Benny wasn’t the baby’s father, they admitted Dean to the antenatal ward. The reassurance of a short efficient graying brunette midwife, called Peggy, helped Dean steady his nerves. Benny was allowed back in once Dean had been helped into a hospital gown and had an initial exam. He was almost 3cm dilated and his birth canal ready. Peggy chortled about the magnificent biology of male carriers. Dean didn’t feel so magnificent as he breathed through waves of a full contraction. Benny offered encouraging words, but Dean was almost ready to cry, beg or sell his soul for Castiel to turn up.

When the wave receded, Dean lay back into the pillows and tried to relax. Benny found a chair to be by his side.

The doors burst open, startling Dean, and wild eyed Castiel flew to his side full of apologies and kisses.

“I can’t believe it. Oh Lord, I’m so sorry Dean. The store in Bodega was closed. We had to call to Principal Harrington and beg the keys to the staff room for the photocopier. I can’t believe I wasn’t there for you, because of some leaflets.”
“’S fine, Cas. You’re here now.” Dean soothed.

Castiel turned and thanked Benny, who wished them both well and said he’d take his leave. Dean pulled him down and gave him a one armed back clap.

“You’re a true friend, Benny.”

The older man turned his head away, “Best of luck, or whatever you’re meant to say in these circumstances. You’ll call me?”

“You’ll be one of the first.” Dean promised.

He only had time to update Cas on the dramatic events, and have a quick cuddle, when Sam arrived. Lola couldn’t come in, but the clerk at reception watched her for a few minutes, while Sam brought Dean’s bag and took the chance to get pretty chick flick emotional about his nephew and Dean’s birthing experience. Dean finally had to tell him fondly to can it.

Sam couldn’t stay. He had to take Lola home, but he vowed he and Nick would be there in the morning. Castiel promised to keep him abreast of developments. Dean was sniggering so much at the word ‘abreast’ that he could hardly say goodbye to his brother.

Timed contractions proved to be close on 30 minutes apart. Peggy warned them they were in for a long road yet. Before dinner was served, of which Dean got zilch, the on-call obstetrician imparted the news that they had reached four centimeters.

Munching on his ice chips and listening to Ramble On with one ear bud, Dean said farewell to Peggy at 8pm as she finished her 12 hour shift. Peggy’s replacements, a duo called Greg and Millie, had him walk the room. He was encouraged to switch positions and to rest between his pains. The time between pains was shortening but not by much. He breathed through the waves of cramps. Cas didn’t move from his side, even when Dean dozed in fits of a few minutes. Dean joked that he’d catch five minutes shut eye in any situation if he could sleep during labor. At midnight he had barely progressed. There was a debate about an IV to help him along. Dean and Castiel had explained their birth plan for a natural childbirth, with gas and air to help the worst. The IV wasn’t for pain relief, it was to encourage his cervix to widen. With a fatigued nod, Dean agreed.

In what felt like the dead of night, Castiel nodded off with his head on his arm. Dean poked him in the ear when the next cramp came, because if he had to be awake with contractions every 10 to 15 minutes then Cas should be too.

It all blended together. There was a strange rhythm to the night. Time dragged yet seemed pulled out like soft taffy.

“What time is it?” Dean yelled at one point.

It was almost four.

“Twelve motherfucking hours.” Dean growled. “He doesn’t want to be born.”

Greg was the one with his head between Dean’s legs, “Good news, you’ve moved to 6 cm, nearly at the final stage. I’ll get doctor to look at you again soon.”

“I want a long cool pineapple slushy and a pie. Cas, go get me pie.” He dug his nails into Castiel arm and hissed, “Pie!” through the next contraction.
“I’ll get you pie. I bake you pie. I’ll buy you the greatest pie.” Castiel promised.

“But not now, Cas.” Dean sagged back, drained and not ready for there to be another round of gripping pain. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t.”

“You did.” Dean peeved.

“To the restroom.” Castiel admitted, “But I’m not going anywhere.”

“OK. You won’t though, will you? You won’t leave me?” Dean gulped. He was getting freaking teary eyed. He blinked back emotion.

“Never,” Castiel made his own gulp, “You’re stuck with me.”

It ratcheted up soon after that. Greg and Millie hovered in and out of the room. The contractions got longer and stronger. Dean walked again. Castiel tried to help by massaging his back.

“Cas?” Dean asked after a sonvabitch contraction, that ended with him on his side, tearing his fingernails into the sheet.

“Yes, Dean.” Castiel crouched to his eye level, profound concern in his blue gaze.

“It will be a cold day in Hell before your dick gets into my ass.”

“Yes, Dean.” Castiel nodded.

“The only action is going to be mine in your ass. Do you hear me?” Dean ground out.

“Yes, Dean.”

“Is that all you can say?”

“No, Dean.”

“I need to get out of the bed.” Dean announced.

“Whoa there. Where are you going?” A female voice asked.

Dean looked up to see Peggy. He spluttered, “You’re back.”

She quirked a smirk at him and raised his leg to check on how far he was dilated.

“Yep, new day, new babies. And you’re in transition.” She rounded the bed. “Castiel, help me get Dean up.”

Assisted to the birthing mat, Dean felt a rightness, a meant-to-be sensation, as he squatted.

“Best position for carrier births.” Peggy said with approval.

Dean puffed his chest proudly at his own body’s instinctual action, before another quick ripping pain had him gripping Cas and panting hard.

They came quick and fast then. Dean barely had a chance to recover before he was in the middle of the next contraction. The shift change brought a new female doctor to work beside Peggy. Dean didn’t care so long as they helped him.
“Baby’s crowning. Don’t push, Dean. Don’t push.”

He looked at Cas. Tears were pouring down Castiel’s cheeks. Dean’s hand seemed to float of its accord to wipe them away.

The pressure to push soared. “I need. Fuck! I need to push, Goddammit.”

“Now, Dean. Push.”

With a feral roar, Dean pushed with all his might. He strained and bore down with everything he had.

“Take a breath.”

It hadn’t worked. One push was never going to do it, but Dean felt he’d given everything. Another contraction built.

“Now, Again.”

“I can’t.” Dean bellowed as he did. Pouring every bit of energy into the effort.

It burned. He was on fire, burning stretching. The only other thing Dean could feel was the cool cloth Castiel held to the back of his neck.

“Again.” The doctor demanded.

“You Bitch.” Dean yelled at her. She grinned, inured to hundreds of childbirths.

This time was different. Dean gripped Castiel’s fingers, grinding bones together he used so much force. As Cas yelped, Dean clenched his jaw. He forgot about panting, he ignored every word coming from the midwife and doctor. He pushed. He pushed as if nothing else mattered in the world. He gave every frigging kilojoule of energy in his being. And the burning stretching changed to movement. It worked. His son’s head came into the world. Instructed to give another ferocious push for the shoulders, Dean complied before he sagged back into Castiel’s arms. There was a flurry of joyous words and praise, followed by the first warbling cry of a newborn. Then his wrinky baby boy, covered in fine hair, cord still attached, bigger than Dean imagined, was placed on his chest.

“Hey, hey little one.” Dean whispered, hushed in wonder and amazement.

Castiel rubbed the little boy’s cheek with his finger.

“He’s gorgeous, Dean. And a big boy. He’s nearly as big as Lola,” Cas exaggerated.

“Gave me a ride, didn’t you, Baby Boy?” Dean asked. He was in awe. This tiny person was his son. His heartbeat was next to Dean’s. His little face near enough for Dean to kiss his forehead. His eyes were wide open, and it seemed like he was seeking Dean’s.

Too soon, Castiel was sobbing like a man possessed while he cut the cord. Peggy took their son for his newborn checks and Dean had to very tiresomely put up with some slight contractions and freaking pushing some more to deliver the afterbirth.

Baby Winchester was covered with a warm blanket when he was returned to his new daddies. Dean was cleaned up and back on the bed. Only adrenaline and joy was keeping him awake. There was a tremble under his skin and a lump in his throat, but it was all good. If a little saline water
leaked out of his eye then he was only trying to catch up with Castiel who had wept shamelessly.

Peggy helped Dean settle the baby next to his skin and guide him to find a nipple. It was harder than Sam had described, maybe because his son was only minutes old, or perhaps because Dean’s chest hadn’t swelled much. With a little persuasion his mouth found the nub. Dean tried not to laugh as his nipple was licked and pushed before finally his boy got with the program and began to suckle.

“What do you think, Dean?” Cas asked. They were alone. Castiel shuffled onto the bed, stretching out along the edge to be as close as possible to his family.

Dean raised his gaze. He was willing to bet that Castiel’s shambled look was a mirror for his own wrecked appearance.

“I don’t think he is a Remiel.” Castiel said in a voice full of love and affection.


Castiel nodded. “And James. My one non-angelic name you didn’t veto.”

Dean chuckled, pulling Robert James closer to him as his body rocked with laughter.

“Robert James Winchester.” Castiel kissed Dean’s temple. “Born 9.20am, 13th June 2004, 9lb 10oz, in possession of ten toes, ten fingers, and two fathers who love him passionately.”

“Right on.” Dean agreed.
Note: Tense and uncomfortable air here but if you’ll ride it out I hope you’ll enjoy the end of the chapter.

Also, there is a brief scene of mild consensual d/s with mention of bondage. If that’s not your thing and you want to skim, all you miss is my attempt at a steamy interlude.

BTW this is the longest chapter. I hope it will keep you guys’ attention and isn’t too wordy or boring!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We have commenced our descent into Baltimore Washington International. All passengers please observe the fasten seat belts signs, ensure your tray tables are securely stowed, and your seats are in the upright position.”

With a huff, Sam reluctantly slid his much scribbled table plan into its plastic sleeve. Nick’s shoulders hitched in silent amusement.

“What?” Sam challenged, as he handed the air stewardess his laptop bag to place above their heads with their carry-ons. So what if he was a grumpy moose? They had been awake since the godforsaken hours of the morning. He stretched his legs and rotated his ankles. At least almighty Mike Alighieri had forked out for business class in his summons for the prodigal son and his fiancé. Sam thought the only reason Nick had decided to travel was that two separate personalized invitations had been delivered for each of them to attend the Alighieri Perpetual Family Trust Fund meeting.

“You’re adorable.” Nick chuckled.

Sam threw a seriously skeptical look to his right.

Nick’s lips twitched. “Our guests will be happy no matter where they sit.”

“That is where you are wrong, Mr. Smarty Pants. I disagree. Imagine Ava increasing volume next to half-deaf Grandpa Samuel? Or do you think I’d inflict your snooty dry accountant on Uncle Bobby?”

Imagine if everyone had accepted their invites?” Nick’s grin didn’t quite light up his eyes. He had told Sam that he was fine, shrugging his shoulders, about receiving more apologies than his partner. All had good excuses. Joshua wasn’t keen on a long flight at his age. Raphael’s arthritis precluded same. Nick’s old Wilmington business partner was overseas. Also while, Sparrow, Lola’s sitter, was a joint invitation, she had long made plans too. On Sam’s side only Andy, who was on his annual Mexican summer pilgrimage, and the Bass family sent their excuses.

Sam squeezed Nick’s arm, hoping to lessen any lingering sting that their wedding would be slightly weighted with Sam’s friends and family.
“I’m good.” Nick offered a downturned smile. “Once we’ve waded through whatever stunt Mike’s pulling, I’ll be able to truly enjoy the build up to Friday.”

“Did you call Venetia about the kitchen?” Sam blurted. They were taking over a beautiful vineyard that offered their guesthouse for weddings. The owners could provide catering but Nick was beating off chefs trying to gift their services or dishes as wedding presents. Gianni’s sous chef was doing canapés and wedding favors, and Tom Masters volunteered to join Max Miller as Baldur’s slave labor.

“Baldur has it handled. They know to expect Max on Thursday evening for prep work.” Nick added his own spur of the moment question, “Did you persuade Dean to wear a boutonnière?”

Sam broke out a short bark of laughter, “You mean a *douchey pansy pink flower* in his buttonhole? Yeah I did. Told him he’d be odd man out. Small amount of emotional blackmail too, that Lola’d wonder why her Uncle Dee didn’t have a rose to match the ones on her dress.”

“You’re sly.” Nick planted a proud peck on Sam’s cheek.

“I hope she’ll sleep for Dean and Cas tonight.” Sam chewed on his bottom lip.

“No chance!” Nick gave a fulsome guffaw. “Robbie and Lola double teaming them? I wish we had installed spy cameras to witness it.”

“I miss her,” Sam gulped as the plane began its final descent. “I know it’s dumb. I mean on my long day during spring quarter I was away from 8 ‘til 8. But y’know, she’s in Cali and we’ll be on the East coast until tomorrow.”

That prompted Nick to apply supportive pressure to Sam’s arm.

As they were only visiting Ilchester overnight, there was no hold baggage to collect. Sam shot out his arm to halt Nick’s march through arrivals.

“I need to call Dean.”

He whipped out his phone and waited impatiently for it to pick up a signal. He had promised to let his brother know that they had landed safely, due to Dean’s unhelpful insistence that ‘Planes crash, Sam.’

“Y’allo,” Dean’s chipper greeting calmed Sam’s parental heart tugging, “Plane didn’t crash then?”


“She is helping to unpack some of the boxes we’d placed to the side.”

The previous month, Dean, Cas and Robbie had finally moved out of the tiny apartment above the florist, after living there for a second year. Their new rental was a compact but well fitted out three bed with a decent yard on the same drive as their friends, Inias and Alfie.

Sam hummed, “How’s that working out for ya?”

“Well, your toddler keeps squealing with infectious giggles and needs to be tickled. My 15 month old got his head stuck in a cardboard box and took off in dizzy circles until I caught him.”

“Everything is great.” Sam relayed to Nick. “The kids are helping Dean.”

“You wanna say hi to Lolls?” Dean asked.
Sam eye rolled the nickname. It was pointless trying to fight Dean on it.

“Just for a moment.” Sam didn’t want to upset her by reminding Lola that her parents were missing but he couldn’t resist. Lola got a ‘sleepy night night’ call from her Daddy when he was at the restaurant but at almost two years old, she sometimes did funny things like cover the handset in kisses or walk away when distracted.

“Hey Lola Baby.” Sam cooed when he heard lips being smacked.

“Dadddeee!!” Lola squealed with excitement.

“No Baby, it’s Papa.”

“Dadddeeeeee!!”

Sam huffed a defeated breathy laugh. Happy to hear his little girl was doing fine, he handed the cell to Nick. “She wants her Daddy.”

“Hello Poppet.” Nick leaned his head into Sam and held the phone so that they could both hear.

“Dadddeee! Unca Dee got wobblies. Papa like wobblies?”

“Did he? That’s great. You be a good girl for Uncle Dean and Castiel. Play nice with Robbie, baby girl. Remember he is small.”

There was a peal of laughter and more kissing noises.

Sam said his farewells to Dean, who added an instruction to stick it to the ADL dickbags if they stepped out of line.

“She had strawberries.” Nick translated. “I hope when she said ‘for Papa’ that she hasn’t hoarded squished berries in her pull-up.”

Sam puffed in sympathy for Dean, recalling the day Lola hid a peanut butter cup, paper and all, in her diaper.

Emerging into the arrivals foyer, Sam spotted a real life stately chauffeur, complete with cap and gilt buttons, holding up a laminated sign for Mr. Alighieri. Behind the older grey haired man, was a broad shouldered guy in a dark suit with an ear piece, wearing his shades indoors.

Nick took a deep cleansing nasal inhale, “Mike thinks I need security. ‘Cause I might run? Or attack him?”

The dour chauffeur underwent a sea change when he saw Nick. His dark eyes widened and Sam could damn near swear that they twinkled. In the most welcoming tone he boomed, “Nee-Coal-Ah.”

Sam found his partner pulled away from him and being enveloped in the uniformed man’s arms.

“Tomaso. It’s good to see you.”

“Welcome home, Nicola.”

“Please, Tomaso. It’s Nick now.” He turned slightly, “And this is Sam.”

Sam’s extended hand was grasped tight by both of Tomaso’s. “Welcome Mr. Winchester.”
“Thank you.” Sam smiled subtly, surprised by the effusiveness of their welcome.

“Come, come.” The chauffeur encouraged.

With a sense of the unreal, Sam climbed into a hummer limo. The silent bodyguard took the front passenger seat. Nick rubbed the back of Sam’s hand before guiding it towards him and resting his own on top.

“Tomaso has been with the family as long as I remember. His father was house chef. I was his junior taste tester.”

“They say the kitchen is the heart of the home.” Sam grinned, imagining a small blond Nick standing on a stool to help stir a pot.

Nick tapped on the glass divide. It lowered electronically.

“Will Mike be at the house?”

“No. Mr. Alighieri is at HQ. The library has been set up for the meeting at seven and he intends to host dinner.”

Nick thanked their driver. He hummed towards Sam who raised a querying brow.

“I thought he’d hold the trustee meeting at ADL tomorrow morning,” He muttered for Sam’s ears. “Each time I came to plead my case it was at HQ.”

“Maybe it’s a positive sign that it’s less formal? More familial?”

Nick clicked his tongue, “Your interpretation of family, my dearest love, does not align with the Alighieri experience.”

Once they left the highway the landscape was greener with expanses of trees. Sam watched as they drove by the ruins of an old convent. The next turn brought them down a two lane road. They turned through tall arched ornate iron gates displaying the words ‘Ex Pertinacia Victoria’.

“From determination, victory?” Sam cocked his eye.

Nick smiled wryly, “Alighieri family motto. The company slogan is We Make It Happen, derived from the same spirit.”

The graveled drive wound through lawns with regimented floral beds. The limo glided to a halt at pillars that flanked the tall double doors of a colonial style manor house. The first two stories were painted in gleaming white with green shutters ornamenting the windows. The top level’s nine high pitched dormer windows stood out from the gambrel style roof.

Inside Sam’s eyes widened at the vast space, all dark wood and paneling. The mansion smelled of furniture polish and old money. Tall windows threw shadows and afternoon light, but didn’t dispel an oppressive atmosphere. At the bottom of a wide mahogany stairway, they were greeted formally by the staff. A distinguished woman in a tailored suit, introduced herself as the household manager and beckoned them to follow her up the steps.

“You are in the Blue Room,” She said with a note of apology.

“I presume that hasn’t moved location?” Nick asked as he linked Sam’s arm on the turn round to ascend a second story. Sam glanced across the central hall. A huge painting of battling angels in
flight graced the main wall. It gave Sam the shivers.

From the front the manor looked as if it was a simple rectangular house. Inside it was revealed to have two wings extending rearwards.

“Mr. Alighieri, if you will permit, we all thought it was a shame what happened when the elder Mr. Alighieri renovated.”

“I will permit.” Nick responded.

The house manager launched into a short speech for Nick’s benefit, on the redecoration of the ballroom and formal sitting room. Sam straightened his back and followed Nick’s lead. He was determined to do Nick proud, even if he found the opulence of his childhood home intimidating.

Adding to the feeling of formality was how everything was almost paranormally clean. Sam hadn’t spied a cobweb or a dust bunny anywhere.

The Blue Room was humongous with shining parquet flooring and an honest to god four poster bed. Sam kept silent on a budding theory that the reason Nick fell in love with their home by the Pacific was partly due to the vastness of its rooms.

Their carry-on bags were already unpacked, suits hung and in-flight sized toiletries spread out on the vanity in the attached double-sinked bathroom. Sam bit back a comment about a team of elves having done it all in the few minutes while they were received below.

Left to unwind, with the hanging expectation of the meeting in the library, Sam sat back on the blue soft bedspread, propping his body up with his elbows. He craned his neck to watch Nick removing his jacket and shirt around the carved wood pillar of the bed.

“The room is Queen Anne with Dutch accents.” Nick talked to Sam through the dressing table mirror, dropping his cufflinks into a tray that Sam suspected was created solely for that purpose. “I’m going to shower. I suspect there is a TV hidden behind one of the closet doors. If you want anything, Darling, a coffee or such, dial one and a member of the household will answer.”

“Nick?”

“Huh?” Nick toed off his socks.

“What did she mean? It was a shame about the renovations?”

Nick turned, “After Pops died, Mike redeveloped the East Wing.” He gestured nonchalantly with his hand, “Included the steam room by the pool. On the next story, he lost the eleventh bedroom for a home office opposite the dining room. Up here he took down the walls of our childhood bedrooms and the pokey room of our nanny, and created a huge corner master bedroom with a couple of queen guestrooms.”

“So he tore the house apart?” Sam sought clarification.

“And consigned every boyhood possession of mine to a dumpster.” Nick’s tone was level and constrained.

“Oh Nick!”

“It’s fine, Sam. They were only material things. But I would have appreciated a heads up to come collect a few mementos and keepsakes.”
“That’s mean.”

“Cold.” Nick agreed.

“But…” Sam mused in an attempt to put a smile back on his fiancé’s face, “…if this isn’t your childhood bedroom, then it wouldn’t be at all weird if I joined you in the shower.”

“I like the way your mind works.”

Sam stripped off his travel clothes in record time and launched himself into the bathroom. Walls of veined marble with sparkling quartz: Italian, Nick told him. There was nothing antique about powerful shower jets that massaged their back and shoulders. Nick glided the concertina door across behind them, sealing them in a shower that could fit a volleyball team with ease.

“Turn round.” Nick commanded, low and sultry. “Hands on the wall.”

Warm breath ghosted over the nape of Sam’s neck as he obeyed. Teeth scraped along his shoulder blade. He scented coconut. A hand spanning his forehead pushed into his hair and guided his head to tilt back. Nick took his time massaging shampoo into his scalp.

“When you said turn round, I wasn’t expecting to role-play a trip to the barber.” Sam softly sniggered, keeping his eyes shut and relaxing into the feel of Nick’s fingers.

“No words,” Nick warned, aligning their bodies and pressing wet skin on skin.

His partner was already half hard, intention thrust against Sam’s crack. As much as he could with a hand on his head, Sam nodded his assent. If Nick needed to play then Sam was more than on board. Their restraints were locked away at home, but they knew each other’s tells and sensitivities so intimately that physical bondage wasn’t necessary. Soft velvet lined cuffs, satin double lined blindfolds and lengths of silk rope were luxuries.

“You can safeword.” Nick murmured into his earlobe, nipping and tugging with his teeth.

Sam gave a small headshake to the offered out, leaning back to encourage Nick.

He heard the hose extend from the wall and a warm stream of water rinsed away the shampoo.

It was about trust. Trust, devotion, praise, and slotting together into one whole, completing each other.

Sam needed. He wanted to remove his palms from the tiles, to curve his fingers and jerk his own need, hard and powerful, or to reach back and explore Nick’s body, but he didn’t move. He trusted.

Creamier coconut conditioner ran through the ends of Sam’s hair. Nick’s hands tugged on his hips. Sam responded bracing his body with his palms on the tiles, stepping back and widening his stance. More conditioner was squeezed. Sam hung his head, relaxing his muscles, breathing in the steamy air.

“So good for me.” Nick praised as a finger feather-touched, gentle and almost tickling, gliding round his entrance. He took his time, slow, one finger to the knuckle first, the improvised lube slick and cool. Sam circled his hips asking for more.

Nick prodded into Sam’s perineum with a circling knuckle. Biting down on his lip, a hiss escaped Sam’s teeth. From only one finger to this was almost too much, the agonizing stimulation on this sensitive area that drove him wild, arching his hips and beginning to weep pre-come. Sometimes
Nick tortured him with pleasure, pressing a bullet vibe against the skin behind his sack until Sam broke over the edge and cried for more, for relief.

Sam’s toes curled in the thin film of water, as two fingers pressed. A long pulsing sucked hickey graced his back while Nick scissored him open.

“Love you, my Sam.”

Attention was paid to the individual bones of Sam’s spine, Nick kissing each making his way down. Sam shook with an irrepressible chuckle, thinking Nick would get a mouthful of soap if he wanted to suck and lave at Sam’s rim. Conditioner was not edible lube.

The light sting of a smack to his butt brought him back to delicious reality.

Finally Nick’s hand snaked into Sam’s vision and he wrapped his fist around Sam’s leaking bobbing cock. Simultaneously Sam’s chest heaved with deep shuddering breaths as Nick’s erection slid along his crack. Nick pressed them closer, muttering sweet puffs of desire. Sam issued his own non-verbal craving moan when Nick thumbed his head. He almost came on the catch of Nick’s cock against his rim, and again when he felt Nick pressing home. He pushed back to take him, hissing his want through the slight burn. Guttural noises left his throat as Nick cried his name.

“Sam. Oh Sam.” Nick gripped Sam’s hips for purchase, moving together. His forehead hit Sam’s back. “So good.”

Balls deep full, Sam wriggled under the hold. Nick began to move again. It wasn’t wild nor frenzied. It was strength and rhythm. Sam chased the peak. He bucked backwards to take more, then forward into Nick’s open fist as his balls drew up and arousal coiled inside him.

“Hands!” Sam pleaded, sparks bursting behind his eyelids, electricity coursing through his veins.

“God. Yes.” Nick allowed.

Sam bypassed his own almost there orgasm, palming back, reaching Nick’s bare skin, taking, feeding on their contact.

Nick growled a feral noise as he came. He crowned it with Sam’s name which became a near inaudible declaration of love. With quickened strokes adding to jerking hits on his prostate, Sam’s toes curled, feet arched with every other part of his body. His release shot pearl and cream hitting the wall and coating Nick’s hand. Sam watched shower spray rinse it away, mesmerized and sated, sagging back into Nick’s equally limp body.

Turning round, Sam claimed his delayed kisses. He ran his fingers through Nick’s hair, holding his head steady as he swept his tongue along Nick’s teeth, tangling them in a dance where neither had dominance. Leaning back with a satisfied grin, Sam took a moment to see his handsome partner’s wrecked appearance before lowering his head to Nick’s shoulder and letting his lover wrap him in his arms.

“Love you,” Sam said into the skin where Nick’s shoulder met his neck.

Another long deep caress came to an end before they used the shower as it was intended, amid shoulder nudges and quick pecked kisses.

Stepping out into the tropical bathroom Sam flushed, a rising blush painted his face puce and scarlet. He knew this because he saw his burnished face in the space Nick swiped clean on the mirror.
There were heated fluffy towels and robes waiting for both of them.

Nick thought Sam’s embarrassment was cute, laughing from deep in his belly and telling Sam that the staff had probably seen a lot worse.

“It’s freaky,” Sam grumbled. “Norman Bates Freaky. We were in the shower.”

“And we needed towels.” Nick said practically.

“It’s like that show where they are all in a house and there are cameras everywhere.” Sam continued to peeve, while making use of a luxurious thick towel.

“You think Mike installed cameras?” Nick squinted at the recessed light fittings.

“No, you fool,” Sam flicked him on the glutes with the smaller towel.

“Ouch.”

“You smacked me first.” Sam grinned, full powered dimples.

“You’re gorgeous.” Nick breathed.

“Oh Hell. You mean Freshly Fucked. Don’t’ya?” Sam’s jaw dropped in horror, wondering if any of the bigwigs would be able to tell.

“No, my sweetheart, I mean gorgeous. If any of my family have a thought it will be to ponder on how I managed to be so lucky as to find you.”

“Vice Versa, Nick, vice versa.” Sam ducked his head to lean their foreheads together. He ran his hands up and down Nick’s shoulder blades in what he hoped was a calming and supportive action to store away against the stress of the meeting to come.

They had lingered long in their enjoyable pursuit, and had to hustle to dress in time for the meeting. Nick called down for some homemade sweet lemonade to quench their thirst and rehydrate. It was a delicious treat as they got ready. Sam put on his trusted Tom Ford charcoal grey suit, pale grey button down, and a black tie with a thin double pale grey stripe. Nick was in Armani black with raven dark shirt and deep grape tie.

“I’d hire us,” Nick quipped as they stood before the mirror.

“Shame it’s not a job interview, then.”

A tug on his sleeve moved him under the vaulted arch of the long dormer window. Nick pushed the sheer drapes back to their full extent. Below was an interior patio square, between the wings of the house. Outdoor seating was scattered around a central fountain. A walled garden, segmented in three, and a huge glasshouse lay beyond the west wing. Exquisitely kept lawns led the eye onwards where the property dipped to woodland.

“There is a vegetable garden, one that produces cut flowers for the house, and a rose nursery,” Nick leaned against Sam and pointed to the old stone walls. “In the trees there are packed earth trails which wind down to a wooden dock where you can dangle your toes in the water of the Patapsco River.”

“Did you spend much time in the gardens?”

“So much so that they knew to check amongst the roses or near the jetty.” Nick seemed to have
taken some strength from pleasant memories. “Come on, Darling, let’s face the music.”

People dotted the foyer, some with drinks in their hands. Sam was introduced to names he had only heard mention of, or had spoken to on the telephone.

Joshua was older and shorter than he’d imagined. Retired from ADL, yet still a trustee, the senior wore a sweater and golfing trousers. Cain was taller and more intimidating than expected, while his wife Collette was softer and prettier than Sam had pictured. Nick asked the couple about their farm. Sam wondered how many pies these businesspeople kept their fingers stuck in. His attention wandered to the others present. Raphael’s replacement was power suit with a killer smile and a $500 hair cut. Nick said she was a distant relative of his old trustee. A tall man with a buzz cut in a black hoodie under a leather jacket slouched against the far wall. He nodded in greeting to Nick who returned the gesture. Sam’s eye lingered on the stranger, who didn’t fit with the security team nor with the trust fund representatives. He was about to ask when the Library doors opened.

“Mike,” Nick said so low that Sam wasn’t sure if he realized he had spoken.

Sam had seen publicity and news report pictures of Nick’s older brother. He’d watched him testify to the House Defense Committee, but seeing Michael in the actual flesh was different. He was refined and handsome, Sam had to admit. Yet he wasn’t as tall as his younger brother. Mike’s brows were dark. His brown hair was styled longer than Nick’s, with no sign of stray silver threads. Sam figured it was Grecian Formula or whatever guys who were rich as Croesus used instead. Sam tried schooling his face to neutral when he noticed both brothers had chosen Armani for their reunion, although Mike had preferred a pale silver tie.

“Shall we begin?” Mike projected his deep voice. “Nicola?”

“As you wish, Michele.” Nick bobbed his head, nails pressing into his palms, until Sam pulled them open to take his hand.

The long slender highly polished table that ran the length of the burgundy carpeted library looked like a permanent fixture. Sam gaped at floor to ceiling weighted shelves. Part of him wished they were on a social visit where he could examine the hundreds of book spines and take choices down to spread out on the table under the natural light of long windows. Embellished metal card holders held name plates to tell them where to sit. Sam let out a relieved sigh to find his place between Nick and Cain’s assistant.

Michael pointedly shuffled his papers before clearing his throat.

“Full attendance. No apologies.” Mike met Nick’s glare with a shark grin. “Joshua, you have the floor.”

Sam sat through the senior’s litany of figures, yields and adjustments. He kept in mind that the stream of data was relevant. It was Nick’s trust fund too. However the soft slow patter of Joshua’s speech in a warm room, their pre-dawn start, and post-shower-pleasure energy dip, combined in a soporific effect. He caught his head drop with the practice of many student years. Shifting his gaze round, he was mightily relieved that his slip had escaped notice, save for a tiny curl of Nick’s lip, which told him his partner was not unawares.

“Thank you, Joshua.” Michael’s tone evoked attention. Sam could see his power as a charismatic successful CEO. “On October 31st next…”

Ice slid down Sam’s spine. That was Lola’s birthday. Nick shot up straight in his seat, rigid with sudden tension.
“… Lola Alighieri’s first annuity…”

“Hold up.” Nick interrupted. “I never asked for this. I never asked anything more than my due under Father’s will.”

Michael spoke as if talking to a small child. “The trust fund is perpetual, for generation after generation, primogeniture with regard for extended family. The terms specifically prohibit parental interference from disadvantaging, or worse attempting to exclude, the newest Alighieri. A spendthrift clause prevents louches from gambling away the family assets. The multiple trustee clause means a miserly parent cannot prevent access. Thus Pops could limit but not disinherit your ungrateful ass.”

Nick bristled. Sam could feel his fiancé’s whole body vibrating with rage when he placed a soothing hand on his arm. He was fighting down his own outrage as he tried to process what Michael had said. How dare he suggest Nick was ungrateful, when all his wonderful partner had wanted to do with his life was forge his own path.

Michael continued. “We are here to select my niece’s trustees. I have nominated myself. Our cousin Cain has requested to be appointed. The terms specify Sam Winchester’s seat at the table.”

A blurted, “Excuse me?” issued from Sam’s lips.

Joshua answered. “Enlightened farseeing legal terms for their era provided a separate account for each Alighieri. During their minority it is administrated by four trustees, one who will be child’s mother, or carrier parent, or their appointed representative.”

Nick reasoned, “Sam will represent Lola as our Mother did for us.”

“Until she died,” Mike snarled with spleen. His mask dropped, face contorted with decades of bitterness.

Nick rolled his shoulders with a smirk. Sam tensed with certainty that Nick was about to stir things up.

“You never know, Mike. There could be a love child out there somewhere with one of those vacuous bimbos who hang off your arm and your every word?”

“Are you saying I fathered a bastard? Like you?”

Sam’s fists curled under the table.

Nick growled, “How dare you?”

Mike’s curled his nose, “Stating facts, little brother. Not that it matters. Lola is the heiress.”

Sam’s mouth opened but no words came out.

Nick was half out of his seat, leaning on the table. “My daughter will not be a poor little rich girl, a Christina Onassis, a princess in a glass tower. I was out. My family was out. You cannot hold this over my head.”

Sam closed his eyes seeing himself crouched down having to put a band-aid on Bunny’s paw to match the booboo on Lola’s finger. He coughed, “What does this mean? Can someone explain?”

Cain replied, “ADL is owned by the trust fund. As first born, Michael is the current CEO and main
beneficiary. Nick is the next greatest beneficiary with historic smaller annuities payable to other
cousins.” Cain paused meeting Sam’s eyes as if checking he was paying attention. “Each Alighieri
child is entitled to a trust fund intended to cover their education, upbringing and enough to give
them a start in life. Joshua knows the finer details of the trust’s origin, perhaps it was high infant
mortality rates, but the first annuity is payable on the new family member’s second birthday. We
are obligated to have the minor’s trustees appointed by that date.”

Sam raised a pointer finger to ask about the ‘heiress’ comment.

“As it stands,” Cain said with an inclined head to show he had noted Sam but hadn’t finished,
“Should Mike die without issue, and Nick continue in his blank refusal to engage with ADL, then
the company, the assets portfolio, everything would be run for the benefit of the legatee, Lola
Alighieri.”

Sam’s breath caught. This was huge. His little darling toddler’s life was being discussed, planned,
directed… by old guys in suits who had never met her. He shook his head. He’d known about
Nick’s silver spoon. It was always in the background. Hell, they’d paid for the wedding on 2005’s
annuity. But Nick had walked away from all this. He had refused their overtures, preferring to live
thousands of miles from his home place. For Sam, Nick had re-engaged with some of ADL to offer
protection against John. Now their family was destined to be wrapped up in ADL and the running
of the fund. It was all Nick had escaped from. Yet Sam knew, and the self-satisfied smirk on
Mike’s face concurred, that the Alighieri family had them over a barrel. For Lola, for her future,
for giving their daughter the very best, for letting adult-Lola make her own choices, for not
denying her anything that would make her life easier… Nick and Sam would die for her… they
would do anything for her.

“Here.” Mike slid across a manila folder.

“What is this?” Nick asked.

“A pre-nuptial agreement,” Mike sneered, “Not that your boy toy will ever get his grimy mitts on
the principal, but in the event of divorce he relinquishes his seat. If you pop your clogs, Nick, then
he agrees not to fight for control of Lola’s inheritance.”

Sam gulped so hard it hurt his throat. “I never. Never asked or sought any of this. I’d love Nick if
he was collecting garbage. But I will not sign my name to anything that excludes me where my
daughter is concerned.”

Nick took the pre-nup and ripped it into pieces. “No. Sam is not signing that.”

“Fine but I want your refusal recorded in the minutes.” Mike shrugged.

“Oooh,” Nick mocked, “Record my rebellion in your precious minutes. It won’t be the first time.
You have your trustees. I’ll take the fourth seat. Are we done here? Because Sam and I are leaving.
We’ll get the red eye to San Francisco.”

Before they could push back their chairs, Mike’s raised his voice, “There is the matter of security.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed at the self assured dickass.

Mike clasped his hands loosely on the table, “You may wish to play at being an anonymous
restaurateur. But wakey wakey Nico, reality bites.”

“What in the Hell does that mean?” Nick snapped.
Mike stretched his hand back. The looming presence in the hoodie handed him a paper. “These are the latest round of crazies, kooks, and not-so-wacko threats on my life and liberty. Item 12 occurred after our announcement to supply the French Ministry of Defense with our secure biometric mobile technology. It is to wipe every Alighieri off the face of the planet.”

“Old news,” Nick huffed.

“Upon investigation it was deemed a legitimate threat. We acted on intelligence and eliminated it.”

“You struck first, in other words, using unofficial channels.” Nick shook his head with disgust.

Sam felt nauseous, exposed to the dark underbelly of this world.

“They had the security codes for the house in Nantucket.” Mike leaned back in his chair. “They knew which nights you close your restaurant alone. And here’s the kicker… 234 Indigo Drive, Pacifica, home to one Sparrow Jennings who was in sole custody of my niece during Sam’s late evening class last semester.”

Sam gasped, kicked in the chest. He couldn’t stay in the room. His head was pounding. He had to call Dean. He had to check Lola was okay. It was irrational. They might think he was a crazy person. He pushed back his chair and was racing for the door, cell in hand, while Nick called a Time Out and followed him into the foyer.

With ragged breaths, Sam grabbed Nick’s bicep. He could feel his blood racing, pulsing hard in his ears.

“Take a slow deep breath,” Nick advised.

Sam did his best to comply before Nick would dial 911 to report a hypertensive emergency.

“Was that real? Have we been living in the clouds?”

Nick pulled him close, kissing his neck tenderly between his words, “No. Babe. Mike is trying to scare us. Scare you. He’s trying to intimidate us into agreeing to whatever he wants.”

“So he’s lying?” Sam took a step back, texting Dean as he asked his question. He was too stressed out to call. Dean would be able to hear how het up he was. Then it would all go south. Sam might just follow through on Nick’s earlier threat and race to the airport for the next flight home.

“I doubt it’s fiction.” Nick said despondently. “We grew up in a bubble of protection. Orchestrated like puppets and hidden at private boarding schools. Looking back, Pops must have gotten threats, but Sam, I was never kidnapped, shot, or attacked by packs of rabid pacifists.”

Sam quirked a half smile to the attempt to cheer him.

Nick took a heaving breath, “Lola is our child. The same as when we left her in Bodega this morning. We decide what is best for her.”

Sam sighed. His phone pinged with a text. Lola had discovered the joy of playing with pie crust trimmings. Sam resisted replying with a warning not to let her eat raw pastry. He knew Dean would have it handled. “They’re baking pie.”

Nick’s face lit up. The dark strain of the meeting was broken.

“What will we do?” Sam sucked in his lip.
Nick took a minute. He paced towards the stairs and back to Sam.

“We may consider utilizing ADL’s security department? Getting updates from them? We can use Lola’s trust fund to research the best closest to home schools? But all on our terms.”

Sam nodded. “We go back in? Do we hear Mike out?”

“Let him talk,” Nick grasped Sam’s hand, “The more he says, then the more we’ll know.”

“What about down the road?”

“You mean if Lola wants to find out about my side of the family?”

“More, what if she wants to take the reins of a defense logistics empire?” Sam blew an exhale when he heard the worry in his own voice.

Nick stalled. He held Sam’s right shoulder, using the fingers of his other hand to tip up Sam’s chin until their eyes met.

“I promise you that we will guide and educate Lola. We will support her choices, whether she wants to try a career at ADL or use her talents to open a donkey sanctuary in Venezuela.”

Sam nudged him, “You’d prefer the latter.”

Nudging back, Nick teased, “So would you.”

“We do this for Lola,” Sam affirmed, “Because otherwise I’d smash my fist into your brother’s conceited mug.”

A hush of quieted whispers greeted their re-entry.

“Ready to resume?” Mike checked. The mystery element came to stand behind Mike’s shoulder. “Sam, let me introduce our cousin, Gadreel, Lola’s personal security officer.”

Nick placed two palms flat on the table and said in a viciously low tone, “I thought Special-Ops-Zeke was out in the field.”

“He was compromised.” Mike said flatly. The tall man behind winced.

“You cannot impose a bodyguard on us. I will not allow Gad, or anyone else, into my house.” Nick spat.

“So Bullheaded,” Mike said with scorn. “Gadreel monitors intelligence. He deals with threats. He is relocating to the San Francisco sub-office. Why not use him as a resource? He can scope out schools, do background checks, accompany you abroad, etc. In a few years time when John Winchester is up for parole, you might be glad to have a security presence.” Mike jabbed his barb at Sam. “You’ll accept him in your day to day lives or you won’t. But Gadreel’s role is non-negotiable. You know it, Nick. I had Virgil and you had Azazel shadowing you as we grew up. This is happening. Do you understand?”

“Do you know him?” Sam asked before Nick retorted.

Nick looked at his cousin, “Many years ago, before you left for Saudi?”

“’93.” Gadreel nodded. “My first assignment. I returned from Zimbabwe 18 months ago. Requested a position in the States and was appointed to the family security team. I received your
daughter’s file in April 2004 and have worked on her behalf. I’ve ensured the activation of the Tennessee and Maine extradition warrants against John Winchester. I personally explained the consequences of not declaring that his uncle was a convicted pedophile to one Gary Frankel.”

Sam was dumbfounded. This guy was casual and everyday as he explained his deliberate interference in their lives. However he could barely swallow around the realization that if the student, who he’d chosen before Sparrow, hadn’t pulled out of his job acceptance, then Lola would have been placed in Frankel’s care. With his new insight, Gary’s panicked fear-tinged phone call to withdraw from being Lola’s sitter made terrible sense.

“You weren’t standing behind Gary’s back with a gun to his head?” Sam checked.

Gadreel laughed, “Much subtler than that. However Sam Winchester, I would shoot and not hesitate to take a bullet for my charge.”

Sam exhaled, “I suppose if we decline round the clock security, you’ll remain a presence?”

“I report to Caesar Vineyard at 8 Hundred Hours, Friday, as part of the catering team for that day’s nuptials.”

Nick chuckled. Sam watched as his partner bellowed out loud guffaws. “I guess....” Nick wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, “I guess I have another cousin at my wedding.”

“So you’re OK with this?” Sam swiveled in his seat.

Nick calmed and gave his undivided attention to Sam, “Gadreel will be discreet. His life has depended on it. We will negotiate his involvement in any situation.” He turned to Michael, “This is the limit of interference I will tolerate. My family will continue with the freedom and free will to live our lives as we see fit. However I concede, there are necessary evils.”

With that the meeting concluded. Gadreel slipped away, but paused to take Sam’s question on whether they really needed security at the wedding. Gadreel met his eyes with an unnerving stare and told Sam that his presence was purely precautionary. Sam was impressed and somewhat mollified by Gadreel’s confidence, and by Nick’s comment that his cousin had been pretty unobtrusive in his hidden role so far.

Dinner was strained and muted. Mike’s discombobulation as his normal small talk fell flat had Nick preening. Joshua and Nick spoke about what a great investment The Gates of Hell proved to be. Cain whispered to Sam that with his voice added to theirs, they could ensure that future annual meetings took place in San Francisco. Collette drew out stories of Lola from Sam, which helped to ease his internal tension down a notch.

When the guests took their leave, Michael indicated he was heading to his office to make some international calls.

“Well, it was an experience.” Nick offered as a sort of goodnight.

“I never understood you, Nick.” Michael shook his head.

“You never tried. Don’t stretch your grapefruit trying now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Michael retorted. “A pleasure to meet you, Sam.”

Sam nodded, moving closer to Nick.
In the Blue Room, they slept like commas, curled facing each other, Sam’s hand never breaking contact with Nick’s body.

++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++

Tapping on his door, startled Sam. He paused from fiddling with his cufflinks, in front of a full length oval cheval mirror. He smoothed down his pure white jacket and trousers.

“Come in.”

Expecting his brother, who was alternating between high pitched Best Man nerves and a sort of excited hysteria at the occasion, Sam beamed when Dean Campbell stepped into the suite, gently closing the door behind him.

“I brought you a tie pin.” Pawpaw held a slender silver pin bearing a single pearl, “It was my Poppa’s. You may borrow it for today.”

“Thank you,” Sam gushed in wonder, “Will you fix it for me?”

Pawpaw’s tender smile, as he approached, stilled any jangling nerves.

“You know the traditional rhyme?”

Sam shook his head, watching old yet sure hands as they opened his cream silk tie with decades of practiced ease. He imagined morning after morning where Pawpaw perhaps checked Grandpa’s appearance before his husband opened their dry cleaning business.

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.” Pawpaw recited. “My pin covers old and borrowed. These fine elegant white and cream threads are certainly new.”

“I’ve nothing blue,” Sam blurted.

“Here.” Pawpaw pulled his silk periwinkle blue handkerchief from the breast pocket of his sandy brown three piece suit. He folded it until it was small enough to be hidden from view in Sam’s jacket pocket. “Where is your ivory cumberband?”

Sam was about to explain that he and Nick had reached a last minute decision to forego the too restrictive decoration, when another knock sounded.

“Come in.” Sam repeated, as Pawpaw squinted appreciatively at his grandson’s appearance and tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear.

“Huh, Sam?” A young voice asked. Then a dark blond head with a thin and freckled face popped around the door. “Oh, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Come on in, Adam. This is my Pawpaw. He won’t bite.” Sam encouraged the pale gangly teen.

“My dear boy, please join us.” Pawpaw added.

Adam entered hesitantly. It pained Sam to see him so unsure, bearing resemblance to Dean’s worst shy days. The sense of humor and bright intelligence Sam had gotten to know over the past year or more, was dampened in this foreign setting. Adam sucked in his lips, hands in pockets, he lifted his head with a meek smile.

“I wanted to say something.” Adam shuffled his feet. “Mom said it was OK to come now because after the ceremony everyone will want to congratulate you and Nick.”
“I could do with another pair of eyes to ensure that I don’t walk down the aisle with my fly undone.”

“Where’s Dean?” Adam looked round.

“Ah!” Sam met Pawpaw’s eye, “He has the honor of Lola’s company. He was a bit overwhelmed and made his escape. No click flick moments, and he had dust in his eye.”

Pawpaw chuckled, “I’ll check on him later.”

Sam appreciated the promise. He confided into the elder’s ear, “He might have taken a Xanax to stop his hands shaking.”

Pawpaw nodded, “No problem. Castiel will take care of him. Now young Adam, do you want a private word with our Groom-In-Waiting?”

“No, sir. I interrupted.” Adam wet his lips, “I just wanted to thank you, Sam. For inviting us, paying for everything…”

“You’ve thanked us already. And we paid for everyone. I’m grateful that you and Kate accepted.”

“But more, I mean.” Adam hitched his shoulder, the one Sam knew didn’t have full range of movement. Physio was ongoing but with each month Adam’s dream of being a surgeon faded. “I can’t say how epic and awesome it is to meet you. Even Dean hugged me when he picked us up at the airport in Dad’s old car. I met my niece and nephew. I guess I’m saying that I might be only nearly fifteen but I’m pretty sure that all of you here in California, but specially you Sam, you rock something mega.”

Sam bit down on his cheek to quell a spurt of laughter. He didn’t want Adam to feel as though he was being mocked.

“I hope you and Nick will have a long happy marriage.”

“Bravo, Young Sir. Well said.” Pawpaw clapped.

With wide eyes Adam slowly broke out a sweet smile.

“Thank you, Bro.” Sam tagged on, “Would you do me a favor?”

“Anything.” Adam responded quickly.

“Will you find Nick, and remind him to pass my ring to Fergus? I’ve given his to Dean already.”

“No problem. Thanks, Sam.”

“That is one lovely well mannered boy.” Pawpaw said as he brushed non-existent dandruff from Sam’s shoulder. “Is he like us?”

“If you mean family, then yes,” Sam grinned, “but no. Adam isn’t a carrier. No chance of getting your awesome genes. Guess Kate and Castiel have sort of carrier prevention chromosomes.”

Pawpaw hummed. Sam knew his grandfather wasn’t exactly disappointed that Robbie wasn’t a carrier, but he suspected the Dean senior was hoping there’d be more great-grandchildren in the future.

The door pushed back to its full extent. Grandpa Samuel entered, in a dark chocolate suit with a
grey and yellow stripe tie. Sam took in the width of said tie and pegged it as early 80s, perhaps as old as he was.

“Look at you, Son.” Samuel said leaning back, “Getting married, with the sweetest flower girl to lead you up the aisle.”

“That’s what I was saying,” Pawpaw smiled.

“Are you ready?” Samuel asked.

“Uh-huh.” A sudden bout of jitters tapped on Sam’s sternum. He had no doubts. There was nothing to be fearul of.

“We are so proud of you, Son.” Samuel clapped a hand on his shoulder, “Dean and I, we could never of imagined that fate would arc round to bring our grandsons back into our lives. To have this at the end of our long roads…”

“Stop, you old coot,” Dean Campbell whacked his husband’s arm, “You have me blubbering up. Sammy knows what he means to us. No need to make the poor boy meet his husband-to-be with puffy eyes.”

Samuel gripped his namesake’s wrist with more force than Sam would have believed he possessed. “Our great-grandchildren, such wonderful men in Nick and Castiel, and Mary’s boys. Who would have guessed we’d be in possession of such family?”

“Thank you, Grandpa.” Sam swallowed hard, “Nick and I are real happy that you were both well enough to travel.”

“Ho!” Pawpaw tilted his head back and reached over to playfully rub Samuel’s bald scalp, “Nothing would have stopped us. My thick skulled hubby would have moved Heaven and Earth, wouldn’t you Samuel?”

“As usual you are right, my dear.”

Sam marveled at their teasing affectionate manner after more than a half-century of marriage. He offered a quick beseeching prayer to whoever was listening that he and Nick might have that enduring shared love.

“Now.” Samuel declared, linking Sam’s elbow to get him moving. “Only thing that would improve today is if you were both becoming Mr. and Mr. Campbell.”

Sam grinned as he held out his arm for Pawpaw, checking he had his walking cane. “Alighieri is plenty good for me.”

With a sense that he was floating, almost dreamlike, Sam made his way down the single flight of stairs to the bright reception area, already decorated in cream with blush rose accents. Gadreel was standing by the door of a large closet being used as a cloakroom for those not staying overnight. He nodded. Sam mimicked the motion.

Outside, four rows of white metal chairs were full of friends and family. A rose arch marked the start of the central aisle. Another was beyond the guests where Father Gregory waited for the happy couple. The sun shone, aroma of roses filled the air, and the view of the vineyard made the location perfect.

Dean and Lola stood waiting. Sam blinked in appreciation of how stunning Dean was, scrubbed up
and wearing the bespoke dark navy suit that Benny had provided when Dean accompanied his boss to a photography awards show. Fergus cocked Sam a wink from the other side as he waited for Nick.

“Papa! Papa!”

He had been spotted. Lola threw herself forward with such energy that for an instant Sam thought there would be a delay to deal with scraped knees and copious tears. In a blur of blond curls and pink ribbons, with her skirt flaring out showing the pretty roses on white satin, Lola wrapped her arm around his leg. She bent her head back to gaze up. Sam lowered his hand to fix a slipping bobby pin.

“Unca Cas got Robbie on a stwing.” Wide eyes told him.

“Cas has resorted to the binky and baby reins.” Dean explained. “I swear my son was a racehorse in a previous life.”

“Says the schools’ sprint and relay team veteran.” Sam reminded his brother.

Dean hummed, pleased. “Huh, yeah, I was, wasn’t I?”

Pawpaw and Samuel kissed Sam’s cheeks and Lola’s forehead before taking their front row seats next to Cas.

Nick appeared, looking amazing, from the side of the main house. Sam’s mouth watered at the sight of his partner quickening his step. Nick swept Lola into his arms and leaned in to plant a sweet kiss on Sam’s beauty spot. A loud lip smacking noise told that Lola had participated in the kissing too.

“Oy! Boss! Kissing’s the finale.” Fergus quipped.

“You ready?” Sam breathed in the light citrus scent of Nick’s new aftershave as he nosed into the soft skin of his neck.

“I was ready for this when I saw you enter our restaurant for the first time, three years ago.” Nick gulped, “The best three years of my life…”

Sam squeezed his arm, unable to produce a verbal response.

Dean walked behind Sam and Fergus behind Nick. Their flower girl took a few steps in front of her Daddies before diverting to say ‘Hi’ to Brady, who redirected his God-daughter into Sam’s crouched hold.

“Lolly hair!” Lola cried with a beam as she reached towards Nick’s side in an effort to grab Lilith’s towering white-blonde beehive.

Balthazar, who’d secured his place as Lilith’s plus one, cheered the mischievous toddler on.

“That’s the girl, Lola.”

Next, Bobby, with hair gelled down and beard trimmed, offered Sam a head bob of pride. In the same row, Jess shone with a cheek splitting smile. On the other side, Ruby whispered that she was so happy for them both. Walking together through their gathered guests was a special experience to share. Sam considered that in this way carriers had the edge on traditional straight weddings. Passing Lola to Dean, Sam got a stinging back clap from his distinctly misty eyed brother. Dean took his seat on the edge next to Cas and Robbie, while Fergus took opposite, next to his new
girlfriend Delta, and Cain and Collette who completed the row.

“Dearly beloved, dear friends, you have come together so that the Lord may seal and strengthen your love in the presence of this minister and community.”

Turning to face each other toe to toe, eyes locked, the pastor’s words that Sam had worked to memorize faded away. He drowned in Nick’s eyes, melted in the touch of their loosely linked hands. He answered the questions of the rite, eyes never wavering.

“Sam, do you take Nick for your lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?”

“I do, forever.” Sam wanted to take Nick into his arms and add a kiss to his words of consent.

When the pastor asked Nick the reply was “I do, beyond Death, eternally.”

Father Gregory declared that God had joined them in marriage. There was the shuffle of feet as Dean and Fergus produced the rings.

The pastor spoke, “May the Lord bless these rings which you give to each other as the sign of your love and fidelity.”

Sam took the exquisite platinum band, encrusted with a row of ethically sourced crushed diamond shards, and engraved with their initials and the date on the inside. He slipped it onto Nick’s finger as he felt a stray tear slip down his cheek. “Nick, take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity.”

His own hand was taken lightly and the matching ring sat at home on his finger, as Nick echoed the words. The ring shone like starlight.

“You may exchange a kiss.”

They did, more gentle and sweeter knowing it was their first as husbands.

Showered with rice and surrounded by cheers and clapping, they walked down the aisle with clasped hands and twin grins of joy.

Hours later, after the embarrassing speeches, tables were pushed back in preparation for the first dance. Sam had a moment to himself to reflect.

Bobby’s unplanned toast had been touching as he called Sam and Dean the sons he wished he had had. Dean’s speech however contained the extremely embarrassing story of 8-year-old Sammy’s attempt to marry a rescued kitten to Bobby’s basset hound. At least everyone else was taken with the story. The meal had been a triumph with Baldur, Tom and Max appearing to take a round of applause. When cutting into their croquembouche tower wedding cake, the resulting avalanche of profiteroles would make a favorite memory for years to come.

Lola and Robbie had lasted until dessert was served up. Castiel disappeared with Robbie, while Dean took Lola from Pawpaw to bring her up to the top table. She was sleepy in his arms, not stirring much for Nick’s goodnight kiss.

Sam took her on his hip. She curled her head into his chest on the way to Dean and Castiel’s room.

“Papa?”

“Yes, Baby?”
“We’s married now?”

Sam beamed as Dean swallowed a snort of laughter.

“We are Lola, pet, all of us.” Sam kissed into the soft silkiness of her hair.

Robbie was already settled in the first cot, when Sam tucked Lola in. He only got through the first verse of Lola’s nightly favorite book, The Owl and The Pussycat. Pawpaw appeared as self-appointed sitter with a finger to his lips not to wake the little ones. Sam mouthed his thanks as he followed Dean back down.

Coffees with freshly baked amoretti cookies were taken as Sam leaned his head on Nick’s shoulder watching their guests enjoy the evening. He was pulled out of his reflections by a shout from Dean.

“Sammy! Help. Cas wants to keep bees in the backyard!”

Sam snorted with an eye roll as he came over to the side table where his brother and Cas were chatting to Cain and Collette.

“Bees, Sam! With a curious newly ambling child in the house.”

Castiel’s earnest face patiently out-waited his partner’s half freak-out half hilarity. “Our yard runs back to scrubland, which is banked with wildflowers, perfect for bees.”

“Do you hear that, Sam?” Dean continued.

Sam wondered if Cas was pranking him.

Cain cleared his throat. “I have kept bees for many years on the farm. I find them soothing and fascinating creatures. A lot less trouble than humans, I say. Don’t I, Collette?”

Cas and Cain were suddenly bonding over the wonder of bees.

Dean threw his hands up in exasperation.

“You’ll be next, Dean,” Sam teased as his brother sneaked a look at the ring on Sam’s finger.

Dean huffed with one eyebrow raised, but Sam noticed that Castiel had overheard and was lasered in on Dean with an eager eye.

“If it does happen Cas will be a Winchester.” Dean poked Sam in the side.

Sam twisted round and gave Cas a thumbs up and a wink. Unfortunately Dean noticed. He caught Sam by surprise getting him into a neck hold and rubbing his knuckles into Sam’s hair.

“I’m still your big brother, Sammy.”

Sam cried uncle before they descended into full body wrestling on the reception floor.

“Ha! Gotya good.” Dean rolled his shoulders before straightening his tie.

Sam was saved from coming up with a clever snap back by the sound of a microphone being tapped.

“Hello? Testing?”
Ruby was standing on a chair with the microphone.

Nick came from behind and took Sam’s hand.

Their dark haired petite friend spoke, “I wish I could say I had a hand in joining this couple of lovebirds, but Nick and Sam found each other despite my exertions to find the new Mr. Alighieri a fine match.”

The guys from The Gates of Hell tittered. Sam squinted at Brady and company.

“It is my pleasure to call on the new husbands to begin the first dance.” Ruby bowed from the waist. She remained on the chair, better to kiss both Nick and Sam.

The lights dimmed. Sam wrapped his arms around Nick’s waist, waiting for the reveal of Nick’s secret choice of song. He felt the pleasant weight of Nick’s arms on his shoulders. Swaying in pre-dance readiness, Sam recognized the first tinkling rising to swing music and Frank Sinatra’s velvet voice. It was Witchcraft.

Sam closed his eyes, conjuring up a spring evening, as Nick’s sure hands and dulcet tones instructed him how to make a perfect martini. He opened his lids to see Nick mouthing to the words. Sam joined him whispering along with Old Blue Eyes.

*My heart says yes indeed in me*

“Magic.” Sam breathed into Nick’s lips and sealed their union with endless tender kisses.

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Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed!

Just a note. I know most bishops don’t grant permission for Catholics to marry outside of a church, but there are rare cases, more common when it is a mixed marriage. I am presuming Nick was very persuasive and Father Gregory amenable to plead his case.

Next chapter will return to Dean’s POV.
Chapter Notes

Long again! Sorry, not sorry, because I really enjoyed writing this chapter.

Chapter Warning for Minor Character Death.

This is set at the end of 2007. There wasn't a 2006 chapter, so don't worry, you haven't missed a chapter.

Finally we are near the end of Tread Softly and I want to express again my thanks for all your kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++

“Come here,” Dean huffed with laughter, unable to sound tough. “Come here, you rascal.”

Robbie took off. Small legs working as fast as they could carry him. “No Daddy. No. Can’t catch me. I is flying.”

“Robert Winchester!” Dean brought out his stern voice as the three year old skidded round the end of the shelves, disappearing from sight. While Dean was 90% sure his budding Usain Bolt was headed for the in store bakery at the supermarket back wall, Robbie knew he was meant to stay in Dean’s line of vision.

A sheepish face full of big green eyes peeped around a stand of discount pasta sauces. “Sorry, Daddy.”

Robbie dragged his feet, Velcro trainers scuffing the tiles. Dean sighed. The rolled up end of one denim leg had fallen down, and the green coat over his Lightning McQueen tee was coming off Robbie’s shoulder.

“What do Pops and I always say?”

“No running away.” Robbie pouted. “’Cause you need to see me.”

The simplified version of multiple reasons given by his three year old was good enough. Dean ruffled his son’s dark hair before dropping his wire basket of meatloaf ingredients to kneel down and fix Robbie’s clothing. “Can you be good? Or will we go outside and get one of the shopping carts with baby seats?”

“Be good,” Robbie answered double quick.

Dean nodded sagely, knowing being a ‘big boy’ was the best incentive for good behavior. “What will we get to have with dinner?”

“Cookies? Apple pies?”
“A boy after my own heart,” Dean laughed, “I think Pops might like some greens.”

Robbie made a face. Dean bit hard on his lip. He took Robbie’s hand. Picking one of the vegetables Robbie found least objectionable, he asked “How about I do some long beans, nice fresh ones with butter? And you pick the treat?”

“OK, Daddy.” Robbie beamed.

On the way to the Impala, with Robbie continuing his good behavior by carrying the quart of milk, Dean wondered how he was going to break it to Cas that dessert was canned chocolate pudding, peanut M&Ms and a semi-headless iced snowman-gingerbread man that cost a quarter due to his missing brain.

His phone started up just as he was securing Robbie, and his Cookie Monster toy, into his car seat. Between sticking groceries into the foot well behind the driver’s seat, avoiding Robbie’s grabby hands and his cries be allowed to answer the cell, and fumbling with dumb pixie-finger sized buttons, Dean was almost tempted to let it ring out. Why Sam thought he’d want the latest camera phone with internet access and freaking Bluetooth as a gift was beyond Dean’s ken. He’d been perfectly happy with his 2003 Nokia. The number was a Kansas area code, but not one he recognized. With a furrowed brow, Dean depressed the answer call button.

He cautiously ventured, “Hello?”

“Dean Winchester?” A female voice asked.

“This is he.” Dean winced. Who said crap like that? He was off balance. He hated talking to strangers on the phone. After all this time it was the one thing he dreaded in his job with Benny, although at least then he was usually calling with purpose or answering a query. He computed there’d been a significant pause from the other end of the call. With a head tilt to make sure Robbie was amused, he asked, “Hello? Are you still there?”

“My name is Gwen.” Her voice caught.

“Yeah?” Dean encouraged. Wasn’t there a cousin called Gwen who was a Campbell? His eyes widened and breath shortened. “Wait? Cousin Gwen? Sonvabitch. Are Pawpaw and Grandpa OK?”

“Uncle Samuel.” There was a definite sob.

Dean dug his fingernails, sharp and hard, into his left hand. He tried a sort of corrupted Lamaze breathing to keep it together.

“Samuel passed away this morning.”

An icy shiv sliced into his chest. “No, no, no,” came out. He felt dizzy.

“Dean?”

“Pawpaw. Is Pawpaw? Oh God.” Dean clutched at his shirt buttons. He planted his back against the cold metal of the Impala, “What happened? How is Pawpaw?”

“God, I’m so sorry to have to call you with this.” Gwen sighed deeply, “Uncle Samuel, they think he died in the early hours. Uncle Dean found him and called 911. There was nothing the EMTs could do, but…”

“Geez, poor Pawpaw.” Dean couldn’t imagine the nightmare of waking up to find your husband
dead beside you.

“I’m at Lawrence Memorial Hospital. They brought Uncle Dean here with chest pains.”

“Motherfucking…. We’re on our way. I mean, we’ll get there as soon as we can.” Dean gulped. His mind raced with finding flights, telling Sam, and should they bring Robbie and Lola. He needed Cas. Oh God, he needed Cas now.

“They have him under observation.” Gwen rushed to say, “Don’t know yet if he had a mild heart attack, or angina, or what. He’s in the cardiac evaluation center. He’s a bit out of it. He was asking for you and your brother.”

“Can you give me your number? Oh wait I have nothing to write with.” Dean wrenched the car open and started rooting in the glove box for a pen.

“I’ll text you my cell and Arlene’s going to take shifts with me. I’ll send her number too.”

“Arlene?” Dean asked. Robbie was making vroom vroom noises, impatient to go.

“My sister in law. Christian’s tour was extended.”

Dean blinked, trying to dredge knowledge out of his muddled mind. Christian and another cousin were in Iraq. “Uh-huh. I’ll call when we know, but we’ll be there. Is there anything we can do, like I don’t know, anything?”

“No, Dean. I’ll pass on that you are coming.” Gwen’s voice dropped. “I am real sorry for your loss.”

“Hey, you too. I mean, you must be feeling it too.” Dean bit down on his cheek. He knew from Pawpaw and Grandpa that Gwen was the one who visited with them weekly, often bringing a casserole or a cake.

“He was a good man.” Gwen swallowed audibly, “Gruff, and I was kinda scared of him when I was little, but he had heart of gold.”

Dean nodded although he knew she couldn’t see.

“If y’all need a pick up from the airport, you let me know. Between us Campbells we’ll arrange something.”

“Sure,” Dean agreed. “I’d better go.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll talk to you later.” Gwen finished, her tone full of sympathy.

Dean bent over, hanging his head over his knees. He took a few long breaths.

His Grandpa was dead.

Puffing he tried to reach into his mind to comprehend it. He didn’t know if it was because they lived several states away, but it didn’t seem real, as if Grandpa Samuel was doing whatever he did at this time on a Friday. A cousin he had never spoken to before told him that the octogenarian had died. It didn’t sink in. Yet something else did and was causing waves of clenching anxiety. Pawpaw was in hospital, maybe had a heart attack or having one, and he must be devastated with grief. He had to get to Pawpaw.

First he had to call Sam.
There was no answer. Sonvabitch. Sam was in class. No way was Dean leaving a voicemail.

He tried Moss Beach. Nick, or maybe Sparrow, would know when Sam was out of class.

“Alighieri residence.”

“Gadreel? Is Nick there?” Dean’s breath sped up again. If Gadreel was in the house, maybe with Sparrow and Lola, then Nick probably wasn’t there. Over the last two years, Gadreel had proved his bona fides. He was on a short list of trusted family and friends.

Robbie was whining now. Dean threw him a pleading look which probably only served to confuse.

“Dean? Is there a situation?” Gadreel sounded hyperaware.

“Yeah, um, I need Sam.” As he said it, Dean knew he did. He couldn’t do this alone. He needed back up. He had to get this call done and go find Cas.

“Daddy? Daddy? You OK Daddy?”

A single line of wetness traveled down his cheek. Dean sniffed in damp cool air and shuddered it back out. He sat behind the wheel and twisted round. “I’m OK, Robbie. Good boy.”

“Dean.” Gadreel’s commanding tone drew him back to the call. “Do you need assistance?”

“When… what time is Sam out of class? His cell is off.”

“There is a free period between the class Sam TA’s for Dr Wyatt, and his Ethics class. If he does not go to the library, then he may turn on his cell to call here.” Gadreel explained.

“I need to talk to him.” Dean’s throat was beginning to ache. Purely psychosomatic, he told himself. He focused on taking another deep breath. No way was he going to lose his words. “Is Nick there?”

“No, Dean. I’m sorry. Nick is interviewing for a new day manager this afternoon.”

That was right. Sam was having a minor secret celebration that Alastair had left to open his own bar in Saratoga.

“We need to go to Kansas.” Dean blurted, as if his brain filter had sprung leaks.

“Your grandfathers?” Gadreel asked perceptively.

“Grandpa.” Dean choked out. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t freak out in the Costco car lot, with his son in the backseat. There were small blessings, because Robbie had taken to whispering to Cookie Monster, although Dean could feel he was being monitored by his three year old.

“I’ll handle it.”

“Handle what?” Dean double blinked. He hadn’t told Nick’s cousin anything.

“Do you need me to call someone for you? Castiel?”

Castiel was in class too. Dean, or Gadreel, could call the school, but Dean wanted to get see Cas and have him hold him.

“No no. I’m good. I mean I’m shocked but the high school is my next stop.”
“I will leave Sam a voicemail to call you.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Man. I shoulda but I didn’t know what to say.” Dean admitted.

“I am taking Lola with me. We will go to Palo Alto and find Sam. In the meantime, is travel to Kansas a priority?”

“Huh?”

“Are you travelling to pay condolences? Tomorrow? Or is it an imperative that you depart ASAP?”

“Ahem, ASAP?” Dean sounded unsure in response to questions fired with military speed. However he wished that teleportation existed because all he could see when his eyes closed was Pawpaw in distress.

“I can organize transport. Do you wish me to tell Nick?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, so he can be there for Sam. What transport?”

“Don’t worry.” Gadreel gave a snort. “If it comes to it, Dwayne has a pilot’s license.”

A shiver went through him at the thought of getting on a toy plane, probably hired in his niece’s name, and piloted by some ADL lackey. He couldn’t think of that now.

“Right. Good.” Dean attempted to steady his nerves. “You’ll handle it.”

“Go find your man, Dean. And you have my number on your cell?”

“Yeah.” It was there but Dean had never had occasion to call it.

“Call me if you need anything. I should rendezvous with Sam in under an hour, if he hasn’t checked in with me or his husband by then.”

“OK. Thanks.” Dean pocketed his cell.

“Daddy. You sad?” Robbie called.

Dean scrubbed at his cheeks with the back of his hand. “I’m OK, Little Man. How about we go see Pops?”

“Yay!” Robbie kicked his legs in glee.

It took two goes to put the key in the ignition. He had no Xanax at home. He hadn’t renewed his script when he’d dumped the last Penandrocol pack. After the mere thought of having a baby seeming to be enough to conceive Robbie, Dean had gone through three cycles with no luck. Doc Smith, their family physician, advised patience.

With almost preordained timing, a Buick pulled out of a parking space next to Doctor Smith’s office. Dean swerved the Impala into the vacancy without indicating. Robbie’s scarf and mittens were on the bench seat, but it was in the mid-fifties and they were only going a few paces. He dashed into reception with Robbie in his arms.

“Can I see Doc Smith?” He panted.

“Hey Dean, is Robbie-boo sick?” Cindy attributed Dean’s wild state to parental panic.
“I’m not Robbie Boo. I’m a big boy.” Robbie protested, squirming to be let down. “I is not sick. Daddy get an owie.”

If Cas was there he’d correct Robbie’s grammar, tell him ‘I am not sick’, ‘Daddy has an owie.’ Just thinking of Cas allowed Dean’s heart to race at a slightly less frantic speed.

Cindy was examining him with narrowed eyes and a slow head bob. She picked up the internal phone. “Larry, I have Dean Winchester out here. I’m going to send him in next.”

Dean sighed and gave a hushed thanks.

“Perhaps stay here a moment, rather than taking a seat in the waiting room. The Doctor is almost finished.” Cindy suggested, adding with a smile, “You’d be surprised how quickly patients can become riled at suspected queue jumping. Why don’t you bring Robbie round here, while you go in? He can help me at my job and I think I have a coloring book.”

“Can I? Can I Daddy?” Robbie pleaded.

“Sure thing.” Dean let his son down and watched Cindy opened the hip height counter door for him. Robbie scooted round as if Santa Claus himself was hidden behind. Dean closed his eyes. They were meant to join Sam and Nick in San Francisco the next day, to take Robbie and Lola to Macy’s to see Santa Claus. Dean sent a silent prayer of thanks that he and Cas had decided to keep the special day a surprise, and hoped Sam had done the same. At four, Lola was pretty clued in to the whole holiday season and had been adorably teaching herself snatches of Christmas songs from the CD she insisted be on continuous replay.

“Dean, you can go in.”

He flinched as reality rushed back in. With a self-admonishment to keep it together, Dean entered his MD’s office.

“I…” He stopped. He didn’t know whether to sit or talk.

“How can I help?” Dr Smith asked simply, gesturing to the chair.

Dean dropped gratefully into it.

“I gotta get to Kansas, like tonight, and I’m gonna havta fly, and I can’t, I mean I never. Planes crash, Doc. Metal tubes full of people in the sky, all kinds of wrong, but I gotta, cos my grandfather passed, and my Pawpaw’s been taken ill, and I can’t drive, because I would if I could, but I need you to give me something. Some of the good stuff, you know, something to knock me out, or like I used to get in the home to make my brain take a vacation.” Dean paused before he turned blue, sucking in air.

“Relaxation techniques…”

“No, Doc. You don’t get it.” Dean dug his nails into his thighs. “I can’t lose it midair, and I could, you get me? I’m talking panic attack at 30,000 feet. Haven’t you got some of that stuff Murdock used to give BA Baracus?”

“Slow down.” The doctor moved round his desk.

“My Grandpa. My Grandpa died and we have to fly there and I can’t. I can’t get on a plane.” Dean slid his palms down to his knee. His chest heaved. “I need…”
A glass of water appeared in his vision. “Take small sips.”

Dean followed the simple instruction, pushing back the tsunami in his mind.

“Would you like me to consult with Dr Henricksen?”

Dean raised his palm to indicate he needed to moment. He visited Victor every two months now, rather than every two weeks. His appointments were almost social occasions, although they had discussed Dean’s choice to have another child at the last visit.

“I’m sure you can help.” Dean made an attempt to sound reasoned, “Isn’t there anything you can give me? Please. Going by car would take days and my Pawpaw might have had a heart attack.”

Dean’s chest clenched with vicious pain at the thought.

His physician nodded. “You’ll need to pee in a cup for me, Dean. I won’t prescribe these if you’re pregnant.”

Dean agreed. He knew he wasn’t pregnant but it was best to be careful. He paced the room back and forth in the short time it took for the test.

“Negative.”

Dean nodded. That was fine. It confirmed his own instincts.

The doctor put a Xanax into his hand. Dean had dry swallowed before the glass of water was replenished. He got a few more and two low dose Temazepam, one out to Kansas and one for the return. They would sedate him, but probably not enough to knock him out. The doctor asked if he was driving.

“Only to collect Castiel.”

“You can take another Xanax when you get home, if you need. Castiel is designated driver, yes?”

“Yes. Sure, Doc.” Dean promised. “You’re a life saver.”

The Xanax, or the placebo of taking a Xanax, was already doing its mojo when Dean collected Robbie and a purple-yellow giraffe coloring.

A turn off the main drag and within moments they were in Bodega High’s grounds. Robbie was hungry so Dean left off his mittens and gave him the injured ginger-snow-man to nibble on.

“Joos?” Robbie asked as he walked beside his Daddy to the secretary’s office.

“No juice.” Dean ruffled his hair. “We’ll get Cas. Then you can have some juice or some chocolate milk when we get home.”

“Wanna now.” Robbie whimpered and then there were tears.

Dean plunked his son on one of the three waiting chairs and knelt in front of him. The poor boy was worn out. He should have gone for a nap after the grocery store, not have been dragged around Bodega watching his father come knife edge close to a panic attack. He hugged the crying child close, making soothing cooing noises while intermittently trying to tell Muriel, the school secretary, that he needed his husband. She gave him a few Kleenex for Robbie’s face. The crying eased. Muriel laid a hand on Dean’s shoulder and told him she’d sent someone to get Castiel at the science lab.
Gingerbread crumbs covered their clothes. Dean took a seat. He put Robbie on his lap, face to face. Humming some Metallica he bounced Robbie on his knee while they waited. He watched the clock hands move, 15 seconds, 45, two minutes… how motherfucking long did it take to get a teacher out of class?

The door opened. Robbie clapped his hands. Castiel looked like he had run the length of the school building. Dean eased Robbie off his knee. He threw himself into a very taken aback Castiel’s arms.

A sob broke out of Dean’s throat. He squeezed Castiel’s ribs, holding on as if he’d drown or sink without trace if he let go.

“Let it all out, my love. Tell me what’s wrong.” Castiel lifted his hand to cradle Dean’s head. Muriel put more tissues into his other hand.

Dean nosed into the clean white edge of Cas’s shirt collar. He breathed in everything that was his beloved; scent of his skin and the laundry softener, the warmth of his body, the strength of his arms. Other smaller arms squeezed tight around his leg.

“Daddy got an owie.” Robbie said with a gravity built on trying to be like his Pops. “We got pudding and candy at the store. Daddy talked on his cell. Is a bad cell, make Daddy very sad and all wrong.”

Slowly rubbed circles on Dean’s back mixed with Robbie’s worry for him, made Dean gulp and begin to tell Cas in stuttered words.

“It’s alright Dean. It’s OK. I’m here, Babe. It’s alright.” Cas held on and let Dean keep the hug going for as long as he needed.

When he looked up, Castiel fluttered the half crumpled tissues in his face. Dean huffed. He wiped his face while Castiel picked Robbie up. The office was empty. Muriel must have made herself diplomatically scarce.

“I’m so sorry about your Grandpa.” Castiel frowned, his eyes full of concern.

“Yeah, me too, Cas,” Dean said in a half-whisper. “I’m tied up in knots thinking of poor Pawpaw.”

Dean’s cell phone interrupted telling Cas about the drugs he’d gotten for the flights. Castiel pulled it out of Dean’s pocket and flipped it open.

“It’s Sam.”

Dean squared his shoulders and put his hand out for the device.

“Sam,” Dean faltered. He tried again, “Sammy. Grandpa’s gone.”

“Nick’s here. He told me. Christ, Dean.”

“He tell you Pawpaw’s in hospital?” Dean couldn’t remember exactly what he’d told Gadreel earlier. “Shock maybe, I hope. He’s in a cardiac unit in Lawrence.”

“Lawrence Memorial,” Sam agreed, up to date somehow, probably Gadreel. He made an audible gulp, “I can’t imagine it. We have to get there. You good to fly, Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“Gadreel’s here. He says he’s booked us out of Oakland at 8.15 tonight.”
“By us you mean?” Dean sought clarity.

“Everyone. I’m taking Lola. I know the, oh God, the funeral might be too much for her, but I want her to see Pawpaw.”

“Right.” Dean blinked. He’d talk to Cas about Robbie. He knew Alfie’d take Robbie without a quibble and the school crèche would take him, like it did on days Cas and Dean both worked. However Sam was right about taking the kids to Pawpaw. Dean didn’t want to even ponder that they could lose both grandfathers.

“Poor Pawpaw.” Sam sighed.

“We’ll get there soon.”

“I gotta go see George about my classes and get one of the other TAs to cover my tutorials and office hour. We have to pack too.” Sam paused a second, “Nick is leaving instructions for Crowley and Vepar. He’s got his Blackberry out. He says it’s 32 degrees in Lawrence. So pack sweaters.”

“Cas and I are about to do that now. Oh crap,” Dean hissed, “I need to call Benny. And I’ll call Gwen. I’ll let you know if there is news.”

“Thanks, Dean. See you at the airport.”

Cas vanished for a few minutes to talk to the school principal. Dean called Benny, who was cool. Dean knew he would be. Benny wanted to know if there was any way he could help, but Dean couldn’t think. Benny told him to take as much time as he needed. He couldn’t get Gwen but got Arlene Campbell who told him there was no change in Pawpaw’s condition.

At Castiel’s insistence Dean left the Impala at the school and Baby’s keys with Inias. Alfie would drive the Faiths’ car home and Inias would take the Impala, vowing to park her safely behind Dean and Cas’s home and cover her with their tarp. Inias and Alfie would water their plants and take in their mail too.

Entering their home through the half-glass rear door, Dean experienced a disconnect. He had gone out for groceries. Now toeing off his boots and shepherding Robbie into the kitchen-diner he was readying to leave for his Grandpa’s funeral.

Castiel put the kettle on the hot plate. He switched on the TV in the corner for Robbie, settling him on his beanbag with a carton of chocolate milk.

“Sit.” Castiel ordered, placing a steaming cup of suspiciously herbal tea on the breakfast bar.

When had Cas taken off his coat and jacket?

Dean pulled out one of the bar stools at the counter.

“You are amazing.” Castiel slung an arm around Dean’s shoulder.

“I’m amazing?” Dean raised a brow.

“You held it together. Got meds sorted for facing your phobia. Took care of Robbie. Got the ball rolling with Gadreel. And made it to tell me. You know plenty of people, so called normal people, would have collapsed.”

“I was close.” Dean took a sip of grassy tasting liquid.
“You want some honey in it?”

Dean nodded.

Cas chuckled as he indulged his partner. “You stay here. Keep an eye on Lightning McQueen over there. I’ll pack.”

“Don’t forget sweaters. It gets cold in the mid-west.”

“Illinois farm boy, remember.” Castiel called as he headed down the hall to the bedrooms.

The flight was a nightmare. Dean didn’t sleep, but there was a blended fuzz that blunted the edges. There was turbulence, during which Dean didn’t scream like a banshee. Robbie puked for an hour solid. Lola cried for her Bunny which had been forgotten. If it wasn’t for the sedative and Castiel’s hand on his arm, Dean might have tried to bolt off the flight during the three and a half hours. He was sleepier by mid-flight and his head dropped to Castiel’s shoulder on the shuttle ride to the AVIS pick up. He wondered if it was possible to buy a junker and convince Cas to drive back to California.

There was a seven-seater SUV waiting for them, complete with an infant seat for Robbie and a child one for Lola. When Dean removed his face from Sam’s jacket in the parking garage of their hotel, there was a trail of drool. He tried for an apologetic grin.

“Hey it’s 2AM in Kansas,” He challenged the others, “People should sleep. And I roofied myself.”

“He challenged the others, “People should sleep. And I roofied myself.”

“Dean!” Sam rolled his eyes, “Just get out, so we can check in.”

He wobbled when he set his feet on the concrete. Sam took dozing Robbie, while Nick had Lola. Dean didn’t remember how he got to their bedroom. Castiel put him to bed, with a kiss on his forehead.

“Love you.” Dean slurred finally dropping off for proper sleep.

They breakfasted early in their room on coffee and sweet rolls. Gwen met them at the steps of the hospital, spotting their party with ease from all the photographs in Pawpaw’s apartment. She was dark haired wearing a black leather biker jacket and a bright red wool scarf. Dean got good vibes from her as he leaned in for a welcoming hug.

After introductions, she imparted the news that Pawpaw had a comfortable night. He was being kept in for observation.

Sam and Dean went into the ward alone first. Dean gave a brief clench to Sam’s arm. Pawpaw looked so small in the hospital bed.

“Deanie, Sam!” Pawpaw called, “I am so pleased to see you. You needn’t have come. I’m a tough old boot.”

Dean clicked his tongue at Pawpaw’s words, “Of course we came.”

Sam went to the other side of the bed and took Pawpaw’s hand. “How are you holding up?”

Pawpaw gulped with his eyes shining. “A mess. At our age… but I never imagined… Samuel was always larger than life, you know? He’s my rock.”
Dean chewed his lip. He didn’t know what to say. In the end, he sat on the edge of the bed and took Pawpaw’s other hand, rubbing circles tenderly on the senior’s paper dry skin.

“Are the children here?” Pawpaw asked after a time.

“Yeah. Both terrors.” Sam joked.

“Speak for your own offspring,” Dean grinned, “My Robbie is an angel.”

Their comments brought a watery smile to Pawpaw’s face. “I’d love to see them. Do you think they would be allowed in?”

“I’ll check, Pawpaw.” Sam stood to go. “You’re not on some super strict ICU ward, I’m sure we can persuade the nurses to allow at least a few minutes.”

“I was so freakin’ worried when Gwen called,” Dean confessed.

Pawpaw tapped his hand. Dean flushed and ducked his head. How inappropriate was that? Caught rotten.

When he looked up, Pawpaw’s face was crinkled in a smile.

“This is an awesome hospital,” Dean jerked his head towards the next patient where Doc Not-Joely was continuing her rounds.

“It is.” Pawpaw agreed. “They’ve taken good care of me. I wish. I only wish I’d woken during the night then maybe, if I’d called 911 in time….”

Dean rushed in, “Don’t Pawpaw. Don’t do the ‘what if X and what if Y’. It will only torture you. I know. What if, and if only, and if I had, they twist you up inside and do no good.”

Pawpaw sniffled, breaking Dean’s heart.

“I woke, and I turned to him, and he was cool to touch and so still. Deanie, he was cold.”

“There was nothing you could do.” Dean tried to comfort.

Pawpaw got a faraway look in his eye, “He took me into Kansas City in 1951 to see the Christmas Lights.”
“We were courting then,” Pawpaw looked to the middle distance, as if he was seeing things that Dean could not, “We took Mary with us in 1961. It was the week after her seventh birthday. He piled us into the car, wouldn’t say where we were going. It was ten years to the day, and he remembered that sweet date.”

“That was thoughtful.”

“Samuel’s like that. He never was a flowers and chocolates type of guy. He dragged me to Vegas in ’84. I hadn’t left the house in weeks. I cried at the craps table. I saw a blond boy, your age, with his mother and a baby, in an ice-cream parlor. I broke down on the street, but Samuel did the right thing. It was either live or curl under a rock. We had our photograph taken at Caesar’s Palace. I look awful, like a gaunt shadow of myself, but it’s framed on the bookshelves, because when we collected the print, I fell in love all over again seeing the devotion in my Samuel’s eyes.”

“God, Pawpaw.” Dean spoke over the golf ball lodged in his throat.

“It’s alright, Deanie. We had fifty six wonderful years together. I met him when I was twenty two. He was twenty nine and so handsome.”

Sam returned with Lola. Dean beamed seeing Castiel carrying Robbie in their wake. Passing Robbie to Dean, Castiel kissed Pawpaw’s cheek and offered his condolences. Then it was all about the great-grandchildren. Pawpaw visibly brightened as he cooed over them, complementing them on their sweaters and listening to both as they talked over and across each other. Dean couldn’t help letting out a few huffing laughs as Lola twirled a finger in her curls while she circuitously explained that her Bunny had taken Gadreel’s place as their home’s guardian. Meanwhile Robbie tried to make his arms wide enough to demonstrate the hugeness of the cool SUV that they came in.

When the visitors had to clear out so the midday meal could be served, they promised to be back once they had lunch. Nick came in with Lola’s jacket and to express his own sympathies.

Pawpaw crooked his finger for Nick to bend down. Dean wasn’t eavesdropping but he was close enough to overhear as Pawpaw whispered how special it had been that Samuel had been able to attend their wedding, and how he had often mentioned what a wonderful couple of days they had spent at the vineyard. Although he and Cas couldn’t be happier, Dean felt a bead of regret that Samuel had never had an opportunity to celebrate with them. Neither he nor Cas needed a piece of paper to say they were committed to each other forever. It wasn’t that marriage was off the cards, it was just weddings were frigging expensive, and there wasn’t any urgency in their minds.

The kids had spotted a brightly colored diner on the way to the hospital. Dean was jerked out of his musing when Lola asked if they could go back to the rainbow place for their lunch. At the kiddie-friendly Melody’s Diner, Dean thought both Sam and Castiel might stage a food traceability protest as he ignored their salad based suggestions and ordered buckets of chicken nuggets for both the children and his own lunch. The nuggets came with boxes of crayons to decorate their placements. Dean couldn’t imagine anything cooler for a three and a four year old. The food police could cram it with nuts as far as he was concerned.

Castiel wisely didn’t comment on his partner ordering the same as the kids, moving along smoothly to request the steak sandwich with sides. Nick confused their server by creating his own pizza topping while Sam finally, with terrible predictability, choose a Caesar salad.

“Does he eat?” Dean jerked his thumb towards the window to where Gadreel was leaning against
the SUV with his cell pressed to his ear.

“Gad likes Twinkies.” Lola chirruped.

“How did you get Twinkies?” Sam paused with lettuce hanging off his fork.

“Ooops.” Lola trilled with giggles.

“Twinkies are awesome,” Dean hummed.

“Like pie?” Robbie asked. “Can I have a Twinkie?”

“Eat your nuggets,” Castiel rolled his eyes and muttered, “They’ll want candy or shots next.”

“Balthy’s store’s got fruity shots.” Robbie proved there was nothing wrong with his hearing.

Sam snorted, “You’re caught now, Cas. At least Balthazar is peddling organic smoothie pouches.”

“We can go all hippy dippy whole food tomorrow,” Dean shrugged and popped another golden crisp mix of protein and cholesterol into his mouth. “Nothing wrong with some comfort food.”

By Monday, Pawpaw wanted out. He threatened to discharge himself against medical advice. Dean and Sam were his morning visitors. Cas and Nick had taken the kids to the mall to see a local Santa Claus, recommended by Johnny Campbell’s family.

Pawpaw was fretting about the funeral, despite everybody offering to do what they could. Hearing that Don from Eudora Funeral Home was on his way to see him, along with the heads up that he was likely to be allowed to leave after the cardiologist signed him off, persuaded Pawpaw not to do a mid-morning flit. Samuel’s body had been released to the funeral home by the county coroner on Sunday evening, with the pending cause of death being a stroke, as they had suspected.

Don Cambridge was a huge man. If Sam weighed 320lbs then he might have been a match for the grey haired mortician, whose enormous beer paunch stretched the threads of his pink pinstripe shirt. Once hands had been shaken, Don got down to business.

“Melanie and I, we want to say how sorry we are that this day has come.” Don looked towards the younger family members, “We’ve known Samuel and Dean since they moved to Eudora. They started their plan with us back in ’92.”

“Plan?” Sam asked.

“Our spouses’ prefinanced funeral agreement.”

Dean nodded, unsurprised at how sensible his grandfathers had been. Sam, however, was gaping at the disclosure, as if planning for the end was alien to him.

“Close your mouth, Sammy, you’ll catch flies.” Pawpaw smiled. “We are seniors. We arranged every fine detail with Don years ago. Samuel was a hard-nose when it came to finances and business. Don gave us the seniors’ package with the married couple advantage.”

“Sure did.” Don bobbed his head. “This is courtesy call to confirm that everything remains as chosen. I understand your pastor called yesterday evening. If it suits, we can facilitate the funeral at the home on Wednesday with removal to your family plot in Lawrence.”
“Samuel preferred the gilt handled coffin.” Pawpaw said in a hushed tone.

“I have it all arranged. Do you wish to host a visitation on Tuesday evening?”

“I don’t think so.” Pawpaw sighed.

“I’m sure the funeral will be plenty chance for people to pay their respects.” Dean assured his grandfather.

“Yes. Deanie is right.” Pawpaw said more firmly. “We will have people back to Gwen’s home afterwards. The dear girl has offered, and our, I mean, my apartment isn’t much suited to multiple callers.”

“We talked about it,” Sam added, referring to the time spent at Gwen’s home the previous evening. “Nick and I would like to provide catering, if you’ll permit Pawpaw. We can find a good local outside caterer.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Sam. We are a decent community at Pinelands. There may be a pile of dishes already building up outside our apartment door,” Pawpaw exaggerated with a fond smile, “However, if you and Nick want to put your heads together with Gwen, then I will leave you youngsters to your plans.”

“Wait until I tell Nick he is a youngster.” Sam joked.

“A mere whippersnapper.” Pawpaw replied.

The funeral director stood to go. “You take care, Dean.”

Pawpaw nodded, while Dean narrowly avoided humiliatingly answering to his name by mistake.

“If you want to come in for a private family viewing before the ceremony, you let Melanie know, OK?”

“Thank you, Don.” Pawpaw shook his hand, before the giant gave farewell handshakes to both Sam and Dean.

At lunch, Nick and Castiel joined them at the hospital coffee stop. The kids were over the moon with their gifts from Santa Claus, of coloring markers and a tub of building blocks. The photo of them both, each on one of Santa’s knees, was very cute. Dean asked Sam if he would take Robbie while he and Castiel ran an errand. Castiel squinted in puzzlement but didn’t say a word.

Outside the hospital, Dean dragged Castiel to the taxi rank. The wind was biting. Dean did up the top collar buttons of his parka. Castiel defied climatology leaving his trench coat open, even if he had wrapped a thick scarf over his sweater and shirt layers.

“Should I be worried that you are kidnapping me?” Castiel nudged Dean’s shoulder.

“You got your license on you?” Dean checked.

“We hi-jacking a taxi?” Castiel screwed his face up at Dean’s lack of information.

“No, you doofus,” Dean elbowed. “I brought my passport for the flight.”

“Is that some sort of code? Or are you telling me you were so stressed out about flying that you are carrying thirty one flavors of identification.”
“You have your license. We can go straight there.” Dean made to open the door of the waiting cab.

“Dean!” Castiel barked suddenly, “We are not buying a car to drive back to California.”

“I hear you.” Dean chuckled.

“I’m deadly serious,” Castiel said as Dean shunted across the bench seat to make room for his partner.

“Where to?” The driver asked.

“Douglas County District Court.”

Dean leaned over and put his finger on Castiel’s lips.

They were at their destination in five minutes.

“We could have walked here,” Castiel grumbled as Dean paid their fare.

Inside, Dean examined the board with the list of offices. He took Castiel’s hand and led him to the elevator. When the door closed, Cas caught Dean’s shoulder and turned them face to face.

“Are we going to the basement to see the Clerk of The Court?”

Dean smirked with a nod.

“For a marriage license?” Castiel tilted his head like an astonished bird.

Dean lifted his hand to Castiel’s cheek.

“Dean, is this your way of silently proposing to me?”

The elevator car stopped. Doors opened. Two women swapped places with them. Dean tightened his hold on Castiel’s hand. He hadn’t planned to go silent. He was brimming with excitement at his paradoxically both spontaneous and long awaited seizing of the initiative. There were a shit ton of words involved in explaining how much he wanted this, how Samuel’s death brought home how short life is and how years slip away, how he wanted Pawpaw at his wedding, how he wanted Castiel to be his next-of-kin no matter where they were in the world, how he’d continue to adore Cas exactly the same if he refused to be onboard, how a simple affirmation of their love following on Samuel’s funeral wasn’t meant to be disrespectful, how he hoped Castiel could see all this…

“I get it.” Castiel said. “The answer is yes.”

“Awesome,” Dean said hoarsely, pointing at a poster on the wall, “Cos I only got $50 in cash, you’re gonna have to fork out the rest for the license.”

Castiel bent double in mirth, which made Dean lean into him for support as he joined in. Luckily there were a few people in front of them waiting to be called to the desk, so they didn’t have to appear breathless and red-faced as they applied for their license.

“I… I know it’s not the most romantic proposal,” Dean conceded, “You deserve more, better…”

It was Castiel’s turn to put a finger to Dean’s lips, “Stealing me away in a cab, and twinkling your eyes with your secret? Plenty romantic.”

“Shucks, Cas. Nothing chick flick.”
“No danger,” Castiel chuckled. “Hey, did you plan this when we left home? You have your passport.”

Dean shook his head. His carrier status was on his Medi-Cal card too, but he wasn’t sure that Kansas would accept that Californian ID as official or proof enough, when the state didn’t have non-carrier gay marriage.

“I brought the passport ‘cause in movies they hand them over when they get their boarding passes in airports.”

Castiel looked skywards, “If you’re working off pop culture knowledge, it’s a good thing Lost isn’t back on air yet. You’d have brought a polar bear.”

“The bear wasn’t on the plane, Cas.” Dean argued. “It was on the island.”

“No way. How did it get on the island? I maintain it was in the hold, and broke out of its cage, when they crashed, until proven otherwise.”

Dean clicked his tongue at their well worn opposite hypotheses.

“And by the way,” Castiel whispered in his ear as they were called up to the desk, “We are not calling the new baby Sawyer.”

Pawpaw was allowed home late on Monday afternoon. Sam stayed over with him the first night. Dean and Castiel slept in Eudora on the Tuesday, giving Robbie a sleepover with Lola back at the hotel.

In the evening, Pawpaw went to make his signature hot chocolate. Castiel was wrestling with the pull out sofa. Dean tried to offer assistance but Castiel refused to be bested by a piece of furniture.

Wandering a circle around the family room of his grandfathers’ home, Dean scanned the multitude of framed photographs. The walls were a mural of past times, with spaces on shelves, side tables and the top of the TV cabinet bearing many memories too. There were sepia toned wedding and occasion portraits, a black and white 1920s postcard style of two fine men in white aprons against a store front, and ones of his Mom at all ages. The color era brought vacation pictures, Mary’s graduation, and several of Dean as a small child. There were the originals of the selection that Pawpaw had copied for his grandsons. On the TV cabinet, the photograph collection entered the new millennium. Pictures of Samuel and Dean Campbell with their grandsons and great-grandkids combined with photos of Robbie and Lola that had been mailed to Kansas. Dean picked up the group family portrait taken at Sam’s wedding, eyeing along the line from Adam’s awkward posture on the left to where he could see Castiel’s fingers tight on his own waist at the far right.

It was time to broach news with his grandfather. He was going to test the waters. If Pawpaw seemed outraged at the wedding so soon after the funeral, then there was no harm no foul. All that was lost was the cost of the license.

“Pawpaw?” Dean said as he entered the small galley kitchenette.

“Yes, Deanie?”

“Cas and I.” Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Castiel following him, “We have something to tell you.”
“Oh!” Pawpaw gasped, “You’re pregnant.”

“No,” Dean laughed nervously, “Although you’re dead on. We are trying for another baby.”

“That is such swell news.” Pawpaw sighed, “Samuel would have been over the moon.”

“That’s it.” Dean expressed, “Grandpa was so happy to come to California for Sam and Nick’s wedding. And that got me thinking. Castiel and I, we said we’d like to get married some day. What would our day be without my Pawpaw?”

“Oh Deanie.” Pawpaw put his hand on his chest.

“If you don’t approve…” Dean gulped, “…nothing happens. But on Monday Cas and I applied for a license, and we have an appointment at the district court on Thursday at four.”

“Oh my,” Pawpaw blinked.

“Mr. Campbell. I’d very much like to marry your grandson on Thursday,” Castiel interrupted, “We would very much like you to be our witness.”

“And Sam too, if he doesn’t end me for doing this behind his back.” Dean added.

“And if he doesn’t then Balthazar and our friends back home will,” Castiel teased.

Dean waited. He blew a slow exhale. Pawpaw was welling up. He prayed he hadn’t judged this whole thing wrong.

“I’d be honored.” Pawpaw said. “Samuel would have loved this.”

Dean breathed a long sigh of relief. Pawpaw tenderly kissed his cheek, raising a hand to rub his thumb along Dean’s old white lunar shaped scar.

“You deserve nice things, Deanie. Are you sure you don’t want to have a big day surrounded by your friends?”

Dean chewed his bottom lip and swung his head. His chest tightened under the kindness of his grieving Pawpaw.

“Sir,” Castiel intoned, “With your attendance, the day will be more than special.”

“What Cas said.” Dean forced out.

Dean drew his brows together as the senior caught the bottle of liquid soap at the kitchen sink and smeared it over his left hand, then worked at his fingers under the running faucet. Turning round, Pawpaw slid his wedding ring off his finger and placed it reverently into Dean’s palm. The metal was warm, soft, curved yellow gold. Pawpaw curled both their fists over the simple band.

“I want you to have it.” Pawpaw ignored both Dean’s and Castiel’s dropped jaws, grabbing his cane and heading for the bedroom.

Dean kept his fingers folded over the weight. He stared at Castiel’s widened blue eyes, mirroring how astounded he felt. The teacher mouthed ‘I know’.

Pawpaw was back with a matching larger sized band dangling on a gold link chain. He handed Castiel the chain and asked him to undo the fiddly clasp. It was a twist one, stiff from being kept closed, but Castiel worked on it with his pink tongue poking out the corner of his mouth while
Pawpaw spoke.

“Samuel’s hands aged less gracefully than mine,” Pawpaw smiled tenderly, “Some years back we found he couldn’t wear his wedding ring anymore. We bought this long chain that he lifted over his head every morning. He’d say I should copy him – wear my ring close to my heart. It will be far too large a size for your piano-player-fingers, Castiel, but perhaps you can get it re-sized when you get home?”

“We can’t take these from you, Pawpaw,” Dean said in a hushed tone.

Pawpaw’s hand found Dean’s again, holding tight over the ring, “You can, and you will. I will keep and continue to wear my promise ring. It was always my favorite with its sparkling solitaire.”

He blinked back his emotions, “And one day, many years from now, perhaps you will pass on these rings to Robbie or his children, or your future little one?”

“Thank you, Pawpaw,” Dean kissed his cheek and rubbed his upper arm, “I love them. To have something so special… I can’t express…”

“We both love them.” Castiel gulped, joining in on being misty eyed.

“Good. I am glad,” Pawpaw said with a firmness that told it was the end of discussion.

The blame for giving an old man new ideas was parked at Nick Alighieri’s door, as Pawpaw produced a bottle of Baileys. Spiked hot chocolates raised in toast, Pawpaw gave his blessing to Dean’s impulsive wedding plan.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPSNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++

Sleety rain hit into their faces, stinging their cheeks and the foreheads of those who ducked their heads against it. Wednesday’s forecast was for the day to clear to showers later.

Pawpaw wore a black suit, pale shirt and a slim black tie. He looked dignified and regal as they were greeted by Don Cambridge. It was a thin veneer. A broken sob alerted Dean to his Pawpaw laying his hand on the closed lower half of the coffin. Dean stepped aside, wrapping his arm around his grandfather’s waist, while Pawpaw dried his tears. The funeral home had done a professional job in making Samuel Campbell’s body look peaceful, although Dean found it odd to see pan-stick make up on his grandpa’s skin. He’d thought he would have some private silent words or a mental farewell to give when he got to the coffin but looking down, it was like Samuel was a mannequin or some powered down android version of the real man. Whatever made Samuel Campbell a person was gone; his soul, his personality, his joie de vivre?

“Daddy?”

Robbie’s solemn little face looked up at him. Dean bent down and lifted his son up. “It’s just Great-grandpa’s body. He is up with the angels now.”

“In the clouds?” Robbie checked as he imitated his Pops’ trademark head tilt and puzzled face.

“In heaven,” Castiel explained, “with the other good people who have died.”

“And will Pawpaw go to heaven?” Robbie drew his brows together.

“Not yet.” Pawpaw leaned over and rubbed Robbie’s hair.

“Did Bitsy go to heaven?” Robbie asked.
“She went to worm-heaven,” Castiel answered seriously.

Dean whispered to his Pawpaw as they took their seats that Robbie had tried to create a worm-city in a burned down Yankee Candle jar.

“And is the other baby in heaven?” Robbie asked.

Dean’s heart stopped. Months ago, on the anniversary of the miscarriage, Dean had spent the day in bed. He’d told an adorably concerned Robbie the story that a long time ago his Daddy had a small little baby who had gone back to heaven. It hadn’t been mentioned since. It was amazing what small brains remembered and thought about.

“I am sure she is,” Pawpaw answered for the dumbstruck parents, “I bet Samuel’s bouncing her on his knee.”

“Good, ‘cause I don’t want ‘em to be lonely bears.” Robbie began a ramble about the three bears, who never got visitors till the goldie haired girl got lost. Castiel hushed him with a gentle reminder that it was a sad day and lots of people were coming to say goodbye to Grandpa Samuel.

Lola and Robbie were extremely well behaved during the short service at the funeral home’s chapel. Dean felt his eyes mist up a few times but there were smiles too. The padre’s eulogy was peppered with stories of Samuel and Dean Campbell’s kindness as well loved parishioners, and with the joy they shared when they found their long lost grandsons. At that point Lola asked her Papa if he had gotten lost.

During the final prayers Robbie made a steeple of his fingers and closed his eyes. Dean made to nudge Castiel so he would see their adorable boy.

“Daddy, ‘M prays.” Robbie admonished and went back to looking holy.

There was nothing Dean could say to that. He was pleased to see that Pawpaw had been distracted by the little scene.

After a short journey the convoy pulled in to Oak Hill cemetery. There was a walk through the final flurries of icy rain. Looking round, Dean thought the mourners moved through the bare winter trees like a snaking river under a sea of umbrellas. He shuddered to a stop at the chairs beside the open grave.

It was his Mom’s grave.

No one had said. He hadn’t worked it out. The mound of earth sat on a green spread tarpaulin which was spread in front Mary Winchester’s headstone. It was a family plot with space at the head of Samuel’s resting place for a new memorial stone to be erected.

While the graveside prayers were said, Dean sat between Sam and Castiel, holding Robbie who was tired and leaned into his chest.

Each family member had a flower to throw in on the lowered coffin. When it was Dean’s turn, he didn’t return to his seat. He was drawn like a magnet to place his palm on the top of his Mom’s stone. With his back to the remaining mourners, Dean closed his eyes. He readied to offer a prayer for her, but instead mentally he began to talk to Mary.

‘Hey, Mom. Behind me there is my son Robbie and the gorgeous guy holding him is my Castiel. We’re getting married tomorrow. I wish… I hope you can see how happy Cas makes me. You show Grandpa the ropes up there, hey Mom?’
He shivered in the cold after-rain air. Most people were gone. Pawpaw was on Nick’s arm talking with an ancient gentleman. Sam came to stand beside Dean. His face was blotchy. Dean twanged with guilt that he was perversely glad that he had missed Sam’s graveside breakdown. His brother was an ugly crier.

After the interment, neighbors and friends came back to Gwen's to pay their respects. It was obviously wearying for Pawpaw, who took the corner of the sofa to receive his callers. After an hour the more perceptive and considerate made their excuses. Dean subtly communicated to hangers-on by wrapping the party sausages in foil and taking them to the refrigerator. Then he took Lola and Robbie down to the bird table with the torn remains of the mini-sandwich triangles. Eventually, Castiel kicked out the final few, who were a couple of old customers of Campbell’s dry cleaners and a distant cousin descended from the weirdly named Moshie Campbell.

Sam stretched out his shoulders, reaching to tip the ceiling of the family room.

“Show off.” Nick teased.

“I can’t wait to get out of this suit and take a bath.” Sam sighed, “Oh, sorry, Pawpaw. I don’t mean that we are in rush to leave.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Pawpaw did his own more genteel stretch as he rose from the sofa. “When I get home, I think I will retire early. We have another big day tomorrow.”

Sam contorted his face in bewilderment.

Dean cleared his throat, “Ahem, yeah. I think we should use the overnight laundry service back at the hotel for our suits.”

To say that Sam had a conniption, when Dean explained the suits would be needed for his wedding the following afternoon, would be a vast understatement. He was purple faced as he repeatedly shouted ‘What?’ and ‘What Dean?’

Nick attempted to calm his husband with a hand on his shoulder while Castiel carefully removed Robbie and Lola from the potentially volcanic brotherly spat.

With not a word spoken, Pawpaw sidled in between his two grandsons. He reached up and stroked Sam’s clenched jaw.

“So like your granddaddy.”

Sam’s reaction, or over-reaction as Dean was calling it, did explain how Dean, Castiel and Robbie spent most of the build up to the lowest key wedding in history, being feted by the personal shopper service of Lawrence’s finest department store.

There was to be no wedding reception or large scale fuss. However it turned out that Gwen Campbell was a demon with a video camera, so the occasion was recorded for posterity. Dean claimed he was happy with the leftovers from the funeral as their post wedding meal, but not even Pawpaw would go for that suggestion. Dean Campbell called in a favor, which resulted a reservation for a large table at the best steakhouse in Lawrence.

There was pre-ceremony late lunch at a diner close to the courthouse. Castiel admitted he was experiencing a sense of excitement. Dean’s raucous laughter at the handsome groom’s understatement broke through any awkwardness at their idiosyncratic wedding day.

When their plates were cleared away and they waited for coffees and sundaes for the littler guests,
Sam gave Dean his wedding gift in a long white envelope from the hotel stationery.

“What the hell is this, Sam?” Dean gaped at a check for an obscene amount of money.

“Look, Nick and I, we wanted,” Sam ran a hand through his hair, “We decided that when you and Cas made the announcement, we would pay for the wedding and honeymoon, but you guys kind of screwed up that long laid plan.”

Castiel laughed sheepishly. Dean’s glare dimmed.

“Do what you want with it.” Sam continued. “Go all out on a slam-dunk honeymoon. Put a down payment on your own home. Put it aside for Robbie’s schooling, but I do hear that the public schooling is pretty fine in Bodega.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Dean handed the check over to Castiel, who caught Dean’s eye. With almost psychic levels of connectedness, Dean knew Castiel was checking if it was permissible to begin thanking Sam and Nick. Dean Winchester was not an ungrateful ass. “It’s too much…”

Sam caught his hand. “It is not, Dean. Nothing could be. Family, y’know parents, if they can afford it, they do crap like pay for weddings, and college, and down payments on first homes. You are my family, Dean. Pawpaw too, and Nick and Lola, and Cas and Robbie, and Adam, but you, Dean, you raised me. You and me against the world, remember?” Sam pleaded, “Let me do this. Hell with Cas getting tenure, that paltry class action settlement you’ve squirreled away as a nest egg, and this gift, you’ll probably buy one of those super-condos.”

“Won’t,” Dean muttered while he did a quick calculation of their finances, including his just shy of $20G share of the ACIC patient abuse case settlement.

“Dean?” Castiel’s smile was hesitant, as if getting such a generous gift would have made Dean fragile.

“Peachy.” Dean responded to the unasked question on his mental state. “Thanks, Sam. Thank you, Nick. I maintain it’s too much, but yeah, you’re not too shabby a brother.”

“Jerk,” Sam beamed.

“Jerk.” Lola echoed.

Castiel put his hand over Dean’s mouth before the ingrained reply could be given in front of the younger generation.

“You know,” Castiel said with feigned casualness as he stirred his coffee. “Alice McGoldrick over in Occidental had Carla from Bodega Realty give her a valuation.”

“Freaking Nora,” Dean barked with laughter, “Is your staff room plugged into the Bodega Bay Gossip Newsfeed?”

“No,” Castiel squeezed in close, “Dwight, Pamela’s bartender, is Alice’s nephew.”

Dean hummed. He figured they could commence Sam-standard research into the idea of owning their own home when they had plenty of time back in Bodega.

He linked back into the flow of the conversation. Sam was talking about the mild winters in California.
“Dean?” Nick addressed the elder Dean.

Sam leaned towards his husband encouragingly.

“Sam and I would like it very much if you would consider making your home with us. We have plenty of room and you would be sincerely welcome.”

Sam jumped in, “And if you didn’t want to live in the same house, Nick and I would find you a real comfortable condo nearby.”

“It would be awesome to have you in Cali, Pawpaw,” Dean chimed in, completely onboard with Nick and Sam’s suggestion. He imagined being able to visit Pawpaw regularly, with the surety that Pawpaw wouldn’t be alone or so far away.

“Well now boys, that is a mighty fine idea,” Pawpaw began. “But my life, my friends and my memories are here in Kansas. I like my regular grocery store and coffee shop. Pinelands is a good place to live. And I have Gwen and Arlene to keep an eye on me.”

“Are you sure, Dean?” Nick checked.

“I am, Son.” Pawpaw answered thoughtfully. “This is my home place.”

“I can’t bear to think of you spending the holidays here.” Sam blurted. “I insist you come to ours. I’ll fly back and forth with you if you want a travelling companion, or bring a friend, or maybe Arlene with Christian being in Iraq? But you must come for Christmas. Please say you will?”

And there were the puppy dog eyes. Dean almost snorted and shattered the moment.

Pawpaw tittered. He slapped the back of Sam’s hand. “I am immune to the Mary Campbell patent pleading puppy peepers. But I accept. Spending Christmas with you all sounds just swell.”

With his plan accepted, Sam was positively bouncing. He had Lola worked up to such a high pitch that both Papa and daughter went for a chase around the cars in the District Court parking lot to burn off some energy.

In front of the Judge, dressed in a paler shade of grey than Castiel’s charcoal suit, Dean had his Pawpaw as his witness, while Sam stood with Castiel.

Dean couldn’t believe how calm he was. Without going near a Xanax, he was almost fricking serene. Standing in a courthouse should have seen him liquefied into goo. Instead he was standing tall, with a pillar of strength at his core. He drew his shoulders back, matching Castiel’s proud upright carriage. Blue eyes found his, drawing him in. When Castiel smiled, white teeth and tiny crow’s feet revealed, Dean was steadied further.

The judge cleared his throat beginning the simple brief civil ceremony by welcoming them all to the celebrate Dean and Castiel’s union.

When they were asked if they had come freely and without reservation, Dean was sure that the eye twitch Castiel gave was due to the accusation of kidnapping a few days earlier. They shared a secret smile as they responded that they had come of their own free will.

“Dean Michael Winchester, do you take Castiel Isaac Fletcher to be your spouse?”

“I do,” Dean said with gusto. Sam tittered behind them, the jerk.
“Will you love and comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Dean affirmed, with a definite nod.

Castiel looked demure and serious as he made his vows. Dean longed for when they would get the chance to flip that appearance. He panted lightly a single time, thinking of Cas with his neat hair wrecked, ripping off Dean’s silky panties with his teeth, a growl in his throat, and a gleam of possessive adoration in their dilated pupils.

“I understand you have brought rings as tokens of your sincerity.”

The judge’s words rooted Dean back in the now.

Sam hugged Cas and then Dean when he gave Pawpaw’s ring. When Castiel placed it reverently on his hand it felt warm and at home.

Castiel offered his elegant hand, all slender fingers and soft skin. Dean rubbed the callus of his thumb over the bumps of Cas’s knuckles. Samuel’s ring swam on Castiel’s digit but for the ceremony Dean placed it on his hand. When they turned round to face their family as a married couple, Dean squeezed Castiel’s left hand with his right, the ring pressing into his flesh, affirming their joining.

The judge intoned the final words of the ceremony, “By the authority vested in me by the State of Kansas, I now pronounce you joined in matrimony. Congratulations. May I present to you for the first time, The Misters Winchester.”

“Mr. Castiel Winchester,” Dean chortled with a very satisfied shit faced grin. He poked a fleeting dimple into his own cheek, “Kiss your husband.”

“You were mine already,” Castiel tried to have the last word as their lips met.

Dean closed his eyes and let Castiel explore the seam of his lips, the soft skin inside and the way they melted into one another.

Pawpaw started a round of applause, which Robbie continued long after it had ceased from the others.

“Welcome to the family as a legal and official member,” Pawpaw clapped Castiel on the arm.

“Thank you, Dean. I’m very pleased to belong.” Castiel replied. He bent down to pick Robbie up, seating the boy on his hip and showing him his shiny new ring.

“And you, my darling grandson,” Pawpaw gulped, “My dearest Deanie. It has been an honor to be your witness. May you both be blessed with many years of martial happiness. There will be good times, and there will be darker days, but remember in it all, the love that bonds you together.”

Dean caught Sam about to blubber, and threw him a wink. Sam pursed his lips and drew Nick in for a hug. Dean copied his little brother, extending one arm to Pawpaw while tugging Castiel’s sleeve to join in. The four way hug that Dean, Castiel, Robbie and Pawpaw shared, ranked up there with the most special moments of Dean’s life.
Chapter End Notes

LOL I finished two chapters in a succession with a wedding!

Next chapter will be from Castiel’s POV.
Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay. I wrote 7,000 words and then scrapped the chapter because it didn’t sit right (read: I hated it). Hopefully the rewrite is a success.

Warning: For mental distress and emotional turmoil.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

++++++++++++++++++++++++SPNSPNSPN+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Castiel sat on the side of his bed. He ran the pad of his thumb along the smooth warm surface of his wedding ring. Lifting his hands to his face, he dropped the weight of his forehead onto his fingers. He was bone weary, yet restless, feeling that he shouldn’t be here, sitting useless and idle, when he could be in Santa Rosa. The fact that he had been ordered home didn’t lessen the urge to pack up Robbie, drop him over to Inias and Alfie, and hit the road.

The sun had set. Dusk light cast the room in grays. Two empty cots awaiting occupants sat across from his toes. The cots and a brand new changing table had swapped places from the guest room, aka intended nursery, replacing the laundry basket and a funky shoe tree that had appeared during Benny’s woodcarving phase.

Cots, diapers, musical mobiles, soft fleecy blankets that had gone though a wash cycle, matching plushy teddy bears… roving his eyes over every waiting item cracked a thin line in the grip Castiel was striving to keep on his fraying equilibrium.

“What can I do?” Castiel gulped hard, desperation pressing on his sternum. He blinked back tears, chest shuddering. He’d wept long and hard in the deep dark hours, once he was sure Robbie was at rest, and he could indulge in letting go with bitter sobs so hard that his throat ached and pain spread across his brow.

“What do I do?” Cas looked to the ceiling for inspiration. He could remember crying after Robbie’s birth. He’d sobbed so much Dean had teased him mercilessly. He remembered Robbie’s tears too. He’d been a good baby, only crying for his feed. Later when he was teething, wailing and red blotchy cheeks had come. Passing Robbie to Dean always worked. Although Dean maintained the reverse, that when Robbie wouldn’t quiet for him, putting their boy into Castiel’s arms did the trick. They’d nudge each other and tease ‘Take your son.’

Dean sang lullabies to Robbie, snatches of Beatles and Led Zeppelin songs. Castiel tried humming under his breath, but he could only conjure a dirge. The wisps of Dean crooning Hey Jude back in their old apartment lingered in the air.

Castiel had promised he’d reach out if it all got too much, but how could he burden those around him? How was he going to cope with two babies?

It was too silent, too still, too empty in the bedroom.

Castiel could call Sam, but he wouldn’t. This evening Nick had vowed that he was dragging Sam
out on a date-night in an effort to take care of his husband. He could picture his brother-in-law driving north like a man possessed. Distance was a good reason not to call Dean’s Pawpaw too. Also that it was two hours later in Kansas. How could he ask Dean Campbell to help him solve the mystery of how to be the best father to two newborns?

With Sam and Pawpaw discounted, he could call Tessa. She had given Castiel her new cell number, placing the post-it in his hand, when he had staggered dead on his feet from the coffee vending machine back to the NICU.

A barking single laugh broke from his throat. He rose slowly, stretching his muscles. Rather than reaching for the light switch, he eased his way hesitantly into the hallway. He didn’t want Robbie to notice his red raw eyes.

Splashing his face with cool water, Castiel briefly considered calling his mother. That was pure dredging the bottom of the barrel. Over ten years of no contact with the hard-as-nails God-fearing woman who’d spat on him as he father tried to beat the gay out of him. What would he even say to her now?

His cell was on the low table in the hall, next to the bowl where they dropped their keys. Castiel’s eyes glazed over as he ran his thumb down the Batmobile key ring on the Impala’s set. He had sneakily bought it on a trip to Palo Alto to see Balthazar, hiding it in his socks, and wrapping it for Robbie to give to his Daddy as his 30th birthday gift.

He almost decided on Tessa but their friend and nurse deserved her downtime undisturbed by her client families. Maybe he should just Google ‘coping on your own with twins and a four year old’. He clicked on his contacts list. Disturbing eight-months-pregnant Alfie wasn’t a prize-winning idea either, but his name was first alphabetically.

“Hey, Cas. Are you OK?” Alfie asked with gentle concern.

“I am sorry. They are coming home tomorrow, and I don’t know how…”

“Do you need me to come over? Inias can walk with me.”

Castiel shook his head, not wanting to drag Alfie out of his home. There was solace in knowing their friends were only a few doors away. Their home loan approval had come through early in Dean’s pregnancy, but they’d jointly decided to postpone their house hunt until after the birth. A decision Castiel was glad of now, reliant on the comfort of close friends and familiar surroundings.

He clicked his tongue, “Just some advice, Alfie. You’d think I’d never… but Dean… with Robbie, Dean and I were a team….”

Alfie was a great teacher. He put on his instructing cap and commenced with a rundown of every new baby issue he could conjure. He checked Castiel’s answer on topics from trapped wind to umbilical cord infection.

“Congratulations Mr. Winchester, you have passed Twin Care 101 with flying colors.”

“I wish it was going to be so easy,” Castiel gulped.

“Maybe it will, Castiel. Maybe it will.” Alfie sighed, “We are only a couple of doors away. You have plenty of friends to call on. Every single teacher at Bodega High would love to help out. You know that.”

“They’ve been so good already, covering classes during my leave.”
“See,” Alfie insisted, “Don’t be afraid to call for back-up.”

“Thanks. You’ve helped, really.” Castiel tried to keep weariness from his voice, “How are you doing?”

Alfie tittered, “As big as an aircraft carrier. They’re going need one of those hoists they use for the morbidly obese to get me out of the house to the delivery ward. There’d be no teasing about my neat bump if Dean saw me now.” He sucked in a breath, “Sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

“No. I’m sorry. I put my foot in it.”

Castiel assured his friend once more that it was fine, before wishing him a comfortable night’s rest. He padded with deliberate steps, his socks muffling any sound.

Robbie was in the corner of his room. He had a line of advancing army men, approaching the pile of picture books where tatty old Cookie Monster reigned.

A lump lodged in Castiel’s throat. He could see his dark haired son’s side face as he whispered instructions to his toys. He knew that Robbie was being as good as gold, trying to stay quiet. He looked from the door, struck in the chest by similarities to his beloved husband. Everyone said Robbie was the image of Castiel, but there was plenty of Dean in him from his bright green eyes to his thoughtful kind nature. Robbie was keen to remind people that he was coming up on four and three quarters, especially since his cousin Lola, very unfairly, turned five before him. When Dean was Robbie’s age, he’d lost his mother, his home, his voice, his Pawpaw and his Grandpa. That little boy had become responsible for the care of his baby brother. Castiel repeated his vow to be a million times better a father than either Dean’s waste of space Dad or his own distant rigid disciplinarian.

“Pops!” Robbie beamed up at him.


Taking Robbie’s hand, Castiel guided him to the bathroom. He made sure Robbie’s step was in front of the high sink. “You are such a good boy. Are you excited about your little brother and sister coming home tomorrow?”

“Sure, Pops,” Robbie said solemnly.

“Would you wash up and brush your teeth while I check we are all locked up for the night?”

Robbie nodded. He leaned in pressing his head against Castiel’s stomach. “Love you, Pops.”

“And I love you, Robert.” Cas squatted to share a tight hug. Holding tears back he let his little boy go. He would not weep in Robbie’s presence. He composed himself as he did the rounds of the windows and doors, checking locks and closing curtains. Castiel returned to the bathroom. Robbie had gone. He took a few moments to brush his teeth. He’d need to shave in the morning.

Pushing Robbie’s bedroom door back, he could see his son had donned his PJs and was kneeling at his bed saying his prayers. His hands were joined adorably with his elbows planted on his blue striped bed covers. Castiel opened his mouth to ask if Robbie wanted a bedtime story, but he stalled when he overheard the prayer.

“…’cause Uncle Adam is far away. And please bless Lola ‘cause she’s my cousin. And God bless
Pops and make him not sad. And God? I’m a good boy, I swears, and I eat my greens and I can sing all of Daddy’s songs with him. Please help make Daddy better. I miss my Daddy and I want him back.”

Castiel’s knees almost gave way. He stumbled to pick his son up, sitting him on his lap on the bed. Robbie curled into him, not so much crying, but repeating that he wanted his Daddy.

“I know. I do too, my boy. But Daddy is getting better,” Castiel hoped he was being truthful. “The doctors are working very hard to make sure Daddy can come home.”

“But when? When can Daddy come home?” Robbie gazed up with huge green eyes.

“I promise that as soon as he's better he’ll come home.” Castiel pulled Robbie closer as his son stuck his thumb in his mouth. It wasn’t the time to deny that comfort, although he and Dean had been attempting to break the habit of infancy. “You know how much Dean loves you. You know he’ll be home as soon as he can.”

“And you Pops.”

“Huh?”

“Daddy loves you mostest. You and me. More than pie, he said.”

“That’s right.” Cas confirmed. He lifted the covers and lay his son down. “You want a story, Robbie?”

“Can I have The Beanstalk?”

Castiel picked the picture book off the top of the pile. Neither he nor Dean needed the script but Robbie liked to see the illustrations. Emotionally tired out, Robbie was asleep before the beans had sprouted.

Castiel slept too, in fits and starts, plagued by nightmares that skittered away when he opened his eyes.

In the morning, the last day of February showed signs of spring. The sun shone oblivious to the troubles of the people below. The watery brightness had dispelled days of rolling sea fogs, gifting a particle of hopeful promise that the day might offer a better outcome than the ones conjured by Castiel’s tortured mind.

Breakfasting and readying for the day ahead seemed a huge undertaking as Castiel towel dried his hair. Relying on the sage advice of his favorite high school math teacher, Castiel broke each task down to its constituent parts. The small practicalities of morning routine helped ground him in the here and now. He’d put flour, yeast, water, butter and a spoon of honey into their breadmaker and set the timer the evening before. Soft crust fresh bread spread with peanut butter brought a grin to Robbie’s sleepy eyed face. Castiel ruffled his hair and let him lean into his side as he took his coffee and their plates to the sofa.

“Can I see Daddy?” Robbie asked while Castiel laced up the boots that Robbie loved best. They were the imitation mini-Doc Martins that Dean had found at a craft fair, when he’d done a wander from selling his own paintings and sketches.

“But today.” Castiel forced out hoarsely, sorry to have to deny his son. “The hospital has rules about…”
Robbie stamped the boot Castiel had just tied. “It’s dumb. Stupid dumb hospital. We saw the babies. Lola and me, went and we saw them all small through the window and then we saw them in the same room and even Lola gotta touch my sister, and she’s not a big brother. I want to see Daddy. I want my Daddy.”

Robbie shook and cried. Castiel tried to sooth him. He tried to console with touch and crooning in his throat, but he couldn’t promise the impossible.

Gulping back his hitching final sobs, Robbie looked Castiel right in the eye, “Pops, how come they don’t have names?”

Castiel blinked and licked his lips. Flashing through his mind were all the late night conversations of boys’ and girls’ names. Fingers curled together under bedcovers, or his hand resting on Dean’s bump waiting with anticipation for any kick or movement, also Dean’s trepidation at settling on a favorite. At the anatomical scan, there had been a moment of shared wonder. Hesitant smiles shared between them when baby boy showed to have the pelvic placement of a carrier. Nothing would be certain until their second son was born and could have an MRI, but they’d locked eyes and nodded when Dr Villas had shared his suspicion. Then the Obgyn had laughed. The contrast jarred in Castiel’s memories. The doctor’s joyful chuckle before he told them the second twin was definitely Miss Winchester, grated against the way Dean’s face fell. Dean’s reaction dimmed Castiel’s bright flare of awe. He watched as the nerve jumped in Dean’s cheek, as his husband grasped his right cuff with his left hand, as rising anxiety shook Dean into silence. Dean pulled himself together in the clinic, but as the third trimester progressed, Dean’s grip on his fears slipped. His conviction grew that there was something wrong with one of the babies, that he’d lose one or both. Dean came home pale faced after his discussion with Victor that taking buspirone was the lesser evil than Dean having panic attacks or falling into a spiral of negative thinking.

Yet, physically Dean’s pregnancy was textbook. Alfie was having a girl too. He was only a couple weeks behind Dean and they went shopping together, had a shared baby shower, and took Benny’s pick up down to Moss Beach. Castiel let a smile break his lips remembering Dean and Alfie raiding the hoard of Lola’s baby things. Then when they had come home, Dean had directed operations while Castiel set up Robbie’s baby cot next to Lola’s donated one.

But behind all the joy and the expectation was the growing fear that Dean tried to suppress, letting Castiel only glimpse how terrified he was that he would miscarry or deliver stillborn twins.

“Pops?” Robbie rubbed his hand. “Is it because they’re going back to the store?”

“What?”

“The babies? Do we have to give ‘em back? Is that why they ain’t got no name and Daddy’s so sad it’s made him sick?”

“No, my babe, not at all. I wanted to wait until... We,” He corrected, “wanted to name our little ones together after we had seen them. Like we did you, you know your story…”

“How Daddy had cool names like Zep and Chevy, and you wanted to call me Angel-Boy?”

Castiel let a huffing laugh. “That’s Daddy’s make believe version. We knew when we’d meet you, that we’d find the perfect name. And we did.”

“Cos I’m Robbie Winchester.”

“That’s right.”
Robbie looked up from under his long eyelashes, “Can we name one of ‘em? Like for Daddy, so he could see their names?”

Castiel rubbed at his own forehead, just above his brow. Robbie may not have had the vocabulary to express it, but his little boy had a point. The nurses in Santa Rosa had wanted to register their births with names, but considering his circumstances they were reluctantly willing to release Babies Winchester with a rake of forms for Castiel to file later. Tessa had been asking if there were any names yet. Even Sam had gently suggested that the babies needed names. How long could he wait? Until Dean was ready to talk about this, to choose? How long would that be? Maybe he would be wrong to name them alone? Would Dean be angry? What did it matter if it was two weeks or two months before they had names? Yet, when Cas thought of his little son and daughter in their incubators, so innocent and small, without even a name, it hurt.

“I think a boy could be Elmo.” Robbie declared.

At that Castiel did grin. “Not sure we could do that to your brother. A little girl would be called Elma.”

Robbie brightened. However as soon as Castiel spoke the name aloud he sucked a breath. He realized it was far too similar to Emma.

“Do you remember the story about Daddy’s first baby?”

Robbie nodded solemnly, “The one that didn’t get borned and makes Daddy all sad?”

Castiel nodded. “Do you remember her name?”

“Emma?”

“That’s right. I think Elma sounds too alike.”

“You’re clever, Pops.” Robbie scooted off his sofa cushion and onto Castiel’s lap. “Whatdaya wanna call ‘em?”

“Something strong and pretty for her, and a special name for your new brother too.”


Castiel had a preferred name. It was celestial in origin. Beautiful Ambriel, angel of communication and protection. No shrinking violet in his mind, a proud angel, strong and magnificent. Robbie was mouthing something to himself, perhaps the name of every story book and cartoon princess he could remember.

“Ambriel?” Castiel asked his little boy.

“Pops?”

“Ambriel for your sister.” Castiel held his breath on the judgment of his son.

“And Tink?”

Castiel choked a laugh. Peter Pan had a lot to answer for. “How about Wendy?”

“Naw, Wendy’s lame.” Robbie pouted. “Fee-oona?”

“Princess Fiona?”
“She kicks ass.”

“Robbie!”

“Sorry Pops, but she does. Daddy said she’s badass.”

“Ambriel Fiona.” Castiel sounded. He winced thinking of Dean’s half-playful half-serious objections to angelic names. He’d shot down Castiel’s campaign to call their son Emmanuel with a fearsome glare. “Robbie? What about Fiona Ambriel? Or maybe Fiona Grace?”

“Cool.” Robbie gave a high pitched laugh, “Real cool. Cos I gotta name my sister, and that’s way better than Poppy, cos Alfie said when he was minding me that they got a name for their baby when they go get her from the hospital and it’s Abigail, like Poppy’s Auntie Gail, and Poppy is all mad cos she wanted the baby to be Hannah Montana, and I gotta Princess Fiona. And she’s a princess like Uncle Sam.”

“What?” Castiel blurted a laugh.

“I heard Daddy calling Uncle Sam a princess.” Robbie insisted.

Castiel cleared his throat, “Ahem, Robbie, when Daddy says Princess Samantha, he's only joking.”

Robbie huffed, “No way. Well, we got a Princess Fiona, and she’s the best princess, and we’ve got Shrek.”

This time Castiel couldn’t help laughing, “Shrek?”

“Yep, uh-uh, Fiona and Shrek.”

“I don’t think so, Robbie. And don’t say Donkey either.”

Robbie’s shoulders slumped, “Donkey’s awesome.”

“I’m going to have to run our choices by Daddy, and I don’t think he’ll go for Donkey either,” Castiel smirked, “Any other ideas for your little brother?”

“Like one of Daddy’s songs,” Robbie tilted his head to the side and pursed his lips in a thinking pose.

“Jude.” Castiel said out loud, an image of Dean singing lullabies popping into his head.

“Like the sleepy time song?” Robbie checked.

“Yes. Jude. Jude Campbell Winchester.” The name settled into the air, perfect. He hoped Dean would agree. “Hey Robbie, how about you wash up now? Uncle Sam will be here soon.”

Robbie hopped down and obediently headed for the bathroom. As he tidied their breakfast, Castiel’s mind wandered.

The twins had been three weeks early. Dean’s due date wasn’t until mid-March. There was no panic. Tessa had reassured them that twins liked to enter the world a little sooner. Dean had recognized the early signs; the lower back ache, the mucus plug going, how low his bump had dropped. Castiel had joked that they were old hands at it now, as he massaged Dean in their bed. In the morning, phone calls had been made to the extended family. Castiel had called Principal Harrington to say he wouldn’t be attending work. It was Monday February 23rd. At lunchtime Castiel took Robbie to the school crèche. Alfie promised to bring the little guy home with them
until Nick and Sam could arrive from Moss Beach. Dean was a mix of ethereal calmness about the early contractions and the trip to Santa Rosa, while being increasingly nervous about finally seeing their new son and daughter.

In the delivery suite, they met Millie, one of the midwives who had helped Robbie into the world. Labor progressed quickly. Castiel did his best to support Dean, who was a champion. The attending obstetrician, Dr Brockman, was happy that everything was well for a natural birth, but added the comforting information that if there was any problem, Dean would be taken for a caesarian. Three hours flew by. Castiel was filled with awe and amazement anew for his wonderful husband. Flocks of birds flapped their wings in his chest as the time grew near. Castiel could barely breathe with rising anticipation. He offered his hand for Dean to squeeze, not caring a whit that he might end up with splinted fingers this time too. Then the doctor told Dean to stop pushing. Dean left a cry that chilled Castiel to the marrow.

Millie and a nurse had Dean’s legs flexed back and held, before the doctor explained that baby number one was stuck, the shoulders were at an angle preventing final entry into the world. Castiel couldn’t think. He couldn’t process it as Dr Brockman attempted to rotate the infant for delivery. Dean’s head fell back and he stared at the ceiling, tears pouring down his cheeks. Castiel grabbed his arm, telling him it would be OK, but his warbling voice belied his lack of confidence. Castiel blinked back his own tears, biting down on his lip. He saw a scalpel and the pain on Dean’s face as contractions and the perineotomy combined. The doctor called out that he was ready and Dean was to push. Castiel leaned forward seeing the doctor manually rotating his daughter into the world. She came with a rush of amniotic fluid, falling into the doctor’s hold. Castiel let out a gasp of relief. He looked at Dean whose neck remained strained and tense.

They held her up for her Daddies to see, but her skin had a grayish bluish tinge and she was floppy in the midwife’s arms. Dean gulped and reached, but this time there was no laying on his chest. Castiel didn’t get to cut her cord. She needed oxygen after her traumatic final phase.

“She’s dead.”

“No. No Dean, she isn’t, my love. They will bring her back soon.” Castiel tried to comfort, while trembles of shock ran through him.

“Cold.” Dean said. Castiel didn’t know if he meant the baby or himself.

Dean’s contractions began again. Castiel tried to mentally catch up with all that was happening. They were working on his daughter while Dean delivered the second twin. Dean clenched his jaw. His brow was furrowed and damp. Silent and trembling Dean delivered their son. He was perfect to Castiel’s eye, but the team were concerned that he had been stressed during delivery, so he too was whipped away from them after the briefest of moments. Castiel welled up. Millie touched his arm, telling him the twins looked good, that they needed a measure of special care but not to worry. Castiel turned to share this with Dean, but his husband was staring at the ceiling. The afterbirth came. Dean was sutured. He was pliable and cooperative as the nurses cleaned him up and settled him.

Millie returned with their twins. Their daughter’s skin had pinked up but Millie warned that they could hold them only briefly as they wanted to give them both oxygen in the NICU as a precautionary measure. They would assess their baby girl for any shoulder injury and she promised once stabilized they’d let them know if their youngest was a carrier.

Dean didn’t hold them. Panic gripped Castiel. He placed their little baby girl on Dean’s lap, encouraged his husband to rock her, cradle her to his chest, try to get her to suckle like he had Robbie. Dean shook his head. He looked down on the little six pound baby as if he wasn’t seeing
her or he could see something different.

Instead of Sam and Nick bringing Robbie in to see Dean, there was a psych consult and a sedative. Later Castiel had lessons in newborn formula feeding and the family met their newest members at their incubators. Every waking minute was divided between his silent unmoving husband and his tiny new children. Dean was withdrawn and mute, yet overcome with emotion. Castiel felt like he was shattering inside.

When Castiel returned to the hospital the following morning, Dean was sitting up and he leaned in for a kiss when Castiel approached. He cleared his throat and told Castiel that he had asked for help. There was a measure of pride in Castiel’s chest mixed with dread and worry. It had taken a lot for Dean to ask for psychiatric assistance. Few words were said. Dean was mostly silent. Castiel told him how brave he was. He attempted a light hearted ask of what was going on in Dean’s grapefruit, but his husband turned his head away and there was one single tear that nearly broke Castiel’s heart.

Castiel split his time between Dean and the twins. Each time he re-entered the post-natal ward, he was hit by the way Dean had the curtains pulled around his bed, or his body turned to the wall. He supposed it was to avoid the five happy female mothers with their new infants. Castiel attempted to cheer Dean with the news that their little girl hadn’t suffered any serious damage to her shoulder. He came back later and coaxed a watery smile from Dean with the news that their son was a carrier like his Daddy. In the evening he simply sat with Dean holding his hand.

On day three, they moved Dean to the ‘Wellness Ward’, which was a fancy name for Santa Rosa’s short term psychiatric ward. Benny weighed in with Dean’s occupational insurance policy and Nick with the arrangements for a private ambulance if it was needed to bring Dean to Stanford Medical Center. On day four, Balthazar threatened to knock Cassie out, if he didn’t sleep. Babies Winchester were pronounced well enough to come home. Castiel had no memory of how he tried to explain it all to Robbie, but he remembered Tessa sitting the boy on her knee while Sam knelt in front of them.

“Uncle Sam’s car!” Robbie squealed running in from his bedroom, which overlooked the front of the house.

“What?” Castiel blinked. He made his way to the door.

Sam extracted his long body from his family Prius, straightening his hoodie before opening the back door for Lola.

“Cas and my favorite boy Robbie!” Sam smiled but his dark circled eyes told the strain he was experiencing.

“Hello Sam.” Castiel greeted, managing to produce his own smile as he caught sight of Lola peeping around her Papa’s waist, her golden hair done in two long braids. Robbie strained against his hand, moving already to join his cousin.

More doors opened. Nick came from the passenger side, phone pressed to his ear. Gadreel emerged from the opposite rear door.

“Calvary’s arrived,” Nick bellowed.

Robbie mewed in excitement as Sam picked him up and swung him round. Then Sam threw his arms around Castiel, as if he hadn’t seen him the day before. Swamped in his brother-in-law’s hug, Castiel squeezed back, sharing their worries and concerns. As they parted, Castiel saw Robbie
leading Lola by the hand, no doubt escaping for his bedroom so they could talk together without adults listening in.

“Come on in to the warmth.”

While their home was a sight larger than their tiny first rental above the florist, the kitchen diner seemed full. Castiel was grateful that Sam headed for the coffee maker. Gadreel leaned against the fireplace, hyperaware as always. His presence was not exactly soothing, but being surrounded by such support from family and friends was amazing. Glancing around, Castiel could almost hear Dean’s ribbing, of how Cas was the midget in the family, in the presence of Nick, Sam and Gadreel. His lips opened almost of their own volition with his well worn point of contention on the tip of his tongue that he was exactly the same height as Balthazar and considered tall by normal people.

There was the sound of a throat being cleared followed by a young voice.

“Are the babies really coming home without Uncle Dean?” Lola asked, standing on one leg like a flamingo.

Sam muttered something about keeping the den door closed when Lola could be sitting on the stairs.

Castiel twitched. “Ahem, yes. Dean… Dean isn’t…”

Nick narrowed his eyes at Lola, “Weren’t you going to tell Robbie about your new bike?”

Swiveling on her heel, Lola retraced her steps back to Robbie.

Sam moved closer to Castiel, “How are you holding up, Cas?”

With a gulp, Castiel drew a shuddering breath, “I’ve got to be strong.”

“True,” Nick agreed as he lined up coffee mugs, “But you got us to take some of the weight.”

“It’s good to see you all,” Castiel realized he meant the words as he uttered them. “I wish Fiona and Jude were coming home under better circumstances.”

“Hold up!” Sam shot. “Fiona? Jude?”

“Ahem, yeah,” Cas rubbed his jaw, “Thought Dean would like Jude. Robbie picked Fiona.”

“Shrek,” Nick nodded sagely with a downturned lip.

“Not bad,” Sam gave a smile of approval. “Fiona Winchester.”

The sound of running feet presaged the entrance of Lola and Robbie. Castiel’s shoulders hitched in amusement. Obviously talk of bikes, and whatever Robbie had wanted to show his cousin, was not enough to deter the young kids from being in the middle of everything. Skeeting to a halt, Robbie looked around at everyone.

“Hey Lola, come here.” Sam dropped to his knees, produced a Kleenex, and wiped his daughter’s nose. Then he caught the tip in his fingers and chirped, “Boop!”

Lola giggled.

Robbie’s eyes filled. He threw himself against Sam’s shoulder, “You’re like Daddy.”
“Thank you, little man,” Sam said softly, twisting to pull his nephew in for a hug.

“My Daddy’s sick.” Robbie whispered.

Castiel swallowed around a gigantic lump in his throat.

“I know, pet, but he is getting better,” Sam said gravely, “And today your Pops and I are going to bring your new sister and brother home. Isn’t that good?”

“They’re babies.” Robbie told him, as Sam took the armchair and lifted Robbie onto his lap.

The obvious statement broke the tension. Gadreel chuffed a laugh. Nick grinned. Sam huffed in amusement, and finally Castiel and Robbie both smiled too.

“They’re very small babies, who don’t do nothing ‘cept let you hold ‘em,” Lola added, standing with one hand on her hip. “Robbie and me are much more fun.”

“Your new cousins will be fun too, Lola petal.” Nick explained.

“Too small, Daddy.” Lola announced. “You should make ‘em grow, Uncle Cas.”

“I will.” Castiel faithfully promised.

Nick made pointed looks at Robbie and Lola, before suggesting that they might come with him to check that the car seats were ready for the new babies.

When the kids had gone with Gadreel trailing behind, Castiel cleared his throat. “Dean’s doctor wants to speak with us when we go in. I doubt she is going to tell us he is ready to come home.”

“I talked with Pawpaw this morning.” Sam sighed. “I wish I had better news to tell him. Every time I call, his voice rises with hope that ‘Deanie has come round’, and I have to, y’know, dash my Pawpaw’s hope and cause his voice to sink back down.”

“He will come round, Sam.” Castiel filled his words with confidence. “He held Jude yesterday when I was permitted to bring him in. I know he didn’t say anything but he rocked Jude in his arms. I mean, that’s good, I think.”

“He will pull through,” Sam affirmed. “He’s been through the mill before and made it out the other side. It’s plain cruel, that his mind would play tricks on him like that. I can’t imagine it. I can’t imagine seeing Lola for the first time and thinking she was dead.”

“Maybe,” Castiel paused, “maybe he didn’t. Maybe he saw his mental picture of Emma. I don’t know. I hope we’ll get some answers today.”

It was time to go. Nick and Gadreel remained behind with the kids. Thankfully Robbie wasn’t upset when Castiel departed. He had been successfully distracted by Gadreel, who proved he had the patience of a saint by agreeing to sit through another viewing of the first Shrek movie with Robbie and Lola. Castiel wished he could have spied on them, imagining Robbie pointing out Princess Fiona every time she’d appear on screen.

The journey was short to Santa Rosa. The breeze was chilly as they marched to the hospital. Tension coiled in the pit of Castiel’s stomach the closer they got. He desperately wanted to see Dean, to be with him, but he dreaded hearing negative news.

“I’m freezing my balls off here.” Balthazar yelled from the entrance steps, gesturing wildly with
the ends of his long silver grey scarf.

“Balthy?” Castiel double blinked.

“Good morning to you too, Cassie. You didn’t think I was letting you bring those darling babies home alone, did you?” Balthazar twisted his lip, “I see I was beaten to it by the Winchester Giant.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder with a wry grin.

“I know you have business inside. Do you have anything you need to pick up on the way home? I could go shop while you are busy?” Balthazar suggested once he had planted a fleeting kiss to Castiel’s cheek and tapped his cousin’s shoulder in a move of support.

Castiel huffed fondly, grateful to Balthazar for coming and for offering his help, “I have a list of fresh produce here somewhere.”

While Castiel dug in his pocket, Balthazar got an update on the twins from Sam. Then he was off, promising to be back in plenty of time to accompany them to Bodega Bay.

Inside it seemed like every staff member in the small hospital greeted them, or offered a welcoming sympathetic smile. Notoriety due to their situation wasn’t the way Castiel would have chosen to become a local celebrity. Carrier births were rare. Alfie was fêted too when he came for his appointments. Twins and Dean’s breakdown made them the talk of the hospital.

When Sam and Castiel signed in, they were asked to go to Dr Cartwright’s office near the psych ward.

“Can I see the twins first? Before we begin?” Castiel asked.

“Of course, Mr. Winchester.” The clerk responded, “I’ll let Dr Cartwright know you’ll be along shortly.”

Sam paced ahead, first through the doors of the special care nursery. The team had Fiona and Jude just about ready to go. Castiel had brought clean baby clothes, but they weren’t necessary. He thanked both nurses who were on duty, and explained how he had an appointment with Dean’s psychiatrist before he could take them home.

Dolores, whose professional mask tended to slip when she cradled the newborns in her charge, enforced her will, ordering Castiel to one chair and Sam to another. Fiona’s bottle was handed to Sam, while Castiel received Jude.

“Feed the babies. Then you go to your appointment.” Dolores informed them in a tone that brooked no argument.

Jude blinked up at his Pops. Fiona whimpered in Sam’s arms until he succeeded in getting her to latch on to the bottle.

“They’re beautiful.” Sam whispered. “So small. They remind me of Lola when she was newborn.”

“I know.” Castiel agreed. Jude was a warm weight against his chest. Castiel crooned at him, simple phrases of what a good baby he was.

“I remember being so nervous that I’d be clumsy with my big hands, but it doesn’t work like that.” Sam chewed his lip, “I am holding her right? Aren’t I? With her shoulder?”
“Her shoulder is fine, Sam. She was lucky, I suppose, to come through with only brief oxygen depletion and a few contusions.”

“They are fading,” Sam popped the top buttons of her sleepsuit to assess the yellowing bruises.

Castiel adjusted Jude again. He cupped the back of his head, marveling how it fitted into his hand and how soft his hair felt. Jude suckled happily, eyes almost closed, content. His hair was soft and dark like Robbie’s had been. Fiona’s was pale and thinner. He wondered if she was going to take after Dean in coloring and complexion. Perhaps cute freckles would appear as she grew up. Jude’s eyes closed and his sucking motions slackened. He was asleep, innocent in his father’s arms.

“Sam?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Would you go again?” Castiel wondered.

Sam huffed, “I don’t think my doctorate program would survive another extended pregnancy leave.” He lifted Fiona up in a fluid motion to begin rubbing her back for trapped wind, “But seriously, Cas. I don’t think it would be safe. It would be an at risk pregnancy. With Lola, everything was new and totally terrifying, but this time I’d know going in that I might be spending five, maybe six, months on the flat of my back.”

“I understand.”

“Yeah. I mean, it would be cool for Lola to have brothers and sisters, but she has three awesome cousins, hey?”

“Truly awesome.” Castiel readily answered.

“Castiel?” Dolores interrupted. “I hope you don’t mind, but I overheard you calling Baby Boy Winchester a name. It is not too late for us to register their birth names.”

“I need to talk to Dean.” Castiel said with gravity. “If I’m unsure that he approves, we’ll wait.”

“I see.” She sounded slightly disappointed, as if the nurses had been hoping to learn their names.

“Fiona Grace and Jude Campbell.” Castiel revealed. “In case you want to be ready to complete the paperwork.”

“Thank you.” She nodded, her lips twitching in a slight smile as she took Jude.

“Grace and Campbell,” Sam mused over the second names, “Good choices, specially as I stole Deanna for Lola’s middle name already.”

“I don’t know if Dean would want to use his own name.” Castiel admitted. “I think he’ll like Campbell. I was sorely tempted by Ambriel for Fiona.”

Sam guffawed, “Thank God you didn’t. Dean would kill you.”

“It’s a very fine name.” Castiel smirked as he protested.

It was time to move on. Castiel planted gentle kisses on his twins’ foreheads before heading across the hospital.

Dr Cartwright shook their hands when they entered her office. The efficient brunette with sharp all
seeing eyes impressed Castiel. In the absence of Victor, he couldn’t hope for anyone better to be in charge of Dean’s care. She gestured at the straight-backed chairs in front of her desk. Looking up she met both men’s gazes.

“Initially Dean presented with symptoms of acute anxiety. Having consulted with Dr Henricksen on Dean’s previous hospitalizations, we recognized his catalepsy and mutism as typical of his condition. I was concerned that he would regress into a catatonic state and we administered benzodiazepine, to which there was a favorable response.” She paused, “On Dean’s last admission in 2003, he responded to his surroundings within 24 hours. Although Dean did not exhibit full withdrawal or mitgehen…”

“Pardon?” Sam interrupted.

“Apologies,” The doctor inclined her head, “Mitgehen is also termed waxy flexibility. It is when our patients are extremely compliant in their stupor allowing the nursing staff to move them, feed them etc. Dean was compliant but he also showed partial awareness. For example, he assisted the nurses placing cold compresses for his drying lactation.”

“That all well and good and we know that,” Sam huffed, “But Dean was terribly distressed.” Castiel chewed his bottom lip, looking between his brother-in-law and the psychiatrist.

“Remember with his hormonal adjustment heightened emotions are to be expected. I believe Dean experienced a disconnect, a delusion if you wish, laying his teenage miscarriage over the traumatic birth of his daughter. You have said, Castiel, that Dean refers to the lost child as a girl.”

“That’s correct.” Castiel nodded, “He thought she was dead, like Emma. She didn’t look alive, I mean, I was shocked and dumbstruck. It all happened so fast. When they brought her back to us, she was obviously alive, but Dean couldn’t. He just couldn’t. Maybe he was afraid to see her.”

“Post partum psychosis is rare but it does happen.”

“Are you saying Dean is psychotic?” Sam challenged, half-rising out of his seat.

“Psychiatric diagnosis can be difficult. Very few patients fit neatly into a box. Many exhibit depression with anxiety, or bipolar traits with schizo-typical personality, for instance.” She tapped the edge of her desk, “Dean had an acute stress reaction, with mutism and immobile dissociation. With his PTSD and long years of past abuse, he is a complex case. He has seen his children and has responded to medication. I have adjusted Dean’s buspirone script and reintroduced intermittent Xanax. The commencement of a SSRI will benefit him as he recovers. I would hope that Dean will be speaking and interacting more before he is discharged. However I want to reassure you that his mutism will not prolong his stay, as Dr Henricksen informed me that he left the care home in Arkansas while still uncommunicative. Mr. Winchester?”

“Yes?” Castiel blinked.

“These new medications, and the time Dean will need to recover, mean you should not be thinking of more children in the near future.”

“What? No, of course.” Castiel bristled. Dean had always been extremely careful with his medication during both pregnancies and when breastfeeding Robbie.

“I must say how Dean’s drive to find his way back to wellness is admirable.” Dr Cartwright said with a single head bob, “However I am not signing him off for discharge. I’d like to be confident that his new regime of antidepressants and anxiolytic scripts are working for him and that we are
on top of any potential side effects.”

“How long?” Sam asked the question on the tip of Castiel’s tongue.

“A few days only, Mr. Alighieri, conditional on Dean’s continued improvement. Santa Rosa’s Wellness Ward is short term only, for brief admissions. We assess before discharge as out-patients or transfer to longer term facilities.” Dr Cartwright explained, “Those in need of specialist care typically transfer to Marin or St Helena’s long stay behavioral units.”

Sam pointed out, “We have already arranged that Stanford Medical Center will take Dean if needed.”

Castiel closed his eyes. He didn’t even want to consider Dean being in Palo Alto.

“I am hopeful that will be unnecessary.” She responded.

Castiel expelled his held breath, “Thank God.”

“Going home will be a stage in Dean’s treatment. Dr Henricksen would like to see Dean weekly. I would like to enroll him in our outpatient Post Partum Wellness group. Other birth parents with post partum depression and psychosis have benefited greatly from the program.”

“I’m sure Dean will agree.” Castiel nodded.

“Also I am pleased that Tessa has agreed to regular home visits. You both are going to need lots of support. Twins are…” Dr Cartwright smiled, “… often called double trouble.”

“They’ll have it.” Sam affirmed.

“My cousin is here too, and our friends.” Castiel added.

She leaned forward, “This has been a setback for your husband, Castiel. It will take time and patience. I would not recommend that Dean return to work for some months.”

“That won’t be a problem. Benny would only shoo him away.” Castiel chuckled. He wondered if she was worried about their financial situation. They’d cope and Tessa had already registered them for subsidized infant formula. “And we’ll be OK.”

“Good.” Dr Cartwright paused, before handing over an appointment card. “I have written the time of the local NAMI family support group. There is a toll-free number also.”

“Thanks.” Castiel took the offered card with a sense of numbness and disbelief that he might need a support group too. He wondered if Sam would like the number or if a group meeting was something Sam wouldn’t even consider for himself. He remembered Dean saying how Sam had a need to appear strong and stoic, but he would break for Nick and allow his husband to heal his wounds.

“Can we see him?” Castiel asked, thinking how close Dean was, only a wall or two away.

A male nurse, called Scott, came to take Castiel and Sam into the locked ward. Scott was chatty and upbeat, telling them that Dean showered unassisted that morning. Castiel passed over a bag of clean clothes. It was important to Dean to have his own threads. Scott let them know that a resident from the post natal ward came to check on Dean and that his perineotomy stitches were healing nicely. At the door, Sam said he’d give them a few minutes alone. He’d call Nick and check all was fine back at base.
The communal area was small in Santa Rosa, compared to Stanford. Castiel wasn’t surprised that Dean preferred to remain in his room, rather than sit at one of the cramped tables under a high mounted TV.

Dean was seated at the window. He was in a black tee and grey sweat pants. An abandoned blank sketch pad and pencils sat on the over bed table. Dean had tilted his face to the early spring sun, his left hand holding his right wrist cuff. He looked perfect, Castiel’s beloved husband, sun highlighting his hair’s ginger tips. Mental illness was a bitch like that. Someone could look like a movie star but be filled with suffering. Castiel matched the picture of Dean now to ones of his love seated at their kitchen table, on the decking at Sam and Nick’s, head thrown back laughing at Robbie’s antics, stood tall and proud at Sam’s graduation, mischievously dragging Castiel to obtain their wedding license, diving into the waters of The Cove, shaking way back at the beginning when he confessed to Castiel about his lost years locked away… and back to the present, Castiel’s heart swelled with love and a bitter happiness.

This was what Dean Campbell called a ‘dark time’, but there were no regrets. Not a wisp of remorse. If Castiel could live his life over with the knowledge of his experiences, the only thing he’d change was that on September 18th 1995, his eighteenth birthday, he’d drive his battered car from Heaven’s Gorge Farm down I-74 and steal Dean Winchester away from Aaron Bass.

Dean twisted round, maybe sensing he was being observed. His beautiful green eyes widened and his lips parted in a slight hushed sigh. Castiel closed the distance between them, kissing the top of Dean’s head.

Dean reached his hands for Castiel to take. With a quick move, Castiel pulled the second chair close. He sat and placed both his hands over Dean’s. He dropped his head, staring, wishing that his darling husband was speaking, so they could put into words all the love and devotion they both felt. The smooth yellow gold of Castiel’s wedding ring contrasted with the lily white line on Dean’s ring finger. For safe keeping Castiel was wearing both rings. Dean’s hung on a leather cord under Castiel’s shirt.

Both of Dean’s hands held in his, Castiel beseeched silently, *Come back to me.*

“Cas.” Dean whispered.

Castiel blinked back tears. He smiled. “Hey, my darling. You’re looking good. Scott said you’re a little better today.”

Dean gulped. He nodded. His mouth moved as if he was struggling to find his words.

Castiel waited.

“Is it Saturday?”

Castiel gave a single hissing laugh. He hadn’t expected that question. He tried for jocular. “Yeah. The babies get to blow this joint today.”

The corners of Dean’s lips twitched. “They’re not sick?”

“No, my love.” Castiel repeated his reassurances that they had two adorable babies who were doing fine. He told Dean how he and Sam had just given them their midday feed.

“I’m sure they have grown overnight.” Castiel searched Dean’s face for a smile. There wasn’t a grin but Dean was listening. It was important to keep telling Dean how healthy they were.
“So,” Castiel let the word trail away. He inhaled deeply. “So, my love, Robbie and I, we got talking and we gave the little ones names.”

Castiel bit down on his lip. Dean widened his eyes with curiosity and interest.

“If you don’t like them, I mean, if you think they are douche-ass names… We can change… Well we can’t really, because I’m taking them home today, home to their cots and their toys and their big brother.” Cas licked his lips. He felt the strength of Dean’s attention. “Fiona, Fiona Grace, that’s your daughter, your beautiful perfect little girl. Robbie’s watched Shrek one too many times.”

Dean looked up. Was it the fluorescent lighting or a twinkle of amusement in Dean’s eyes? Castiel met his gaze, holding them there, drinking in the simple reaction.

“And Jude Campbell, for your Mom, your Pawpaw and Grandpa.” Castiel leaned forward, “Our kids, our family.”

Dean tongue wet his bottom lip.

“Cas?” Dean took a shaky breath, “I like their names. They suit ‘em.”

It was a hoarse and a broken hallelujah.

Rivers of hope and love flowed down Castiel’s cheeks. Those simple words meant Dean knew the twins weren’t ill or in danger. He tightened his grip on Dean’s hands. Warm pressure squeezed both ways. There was so much to be said, so much more to communicate. Castiel knew the most important thing needed to come first.

“I love you, my Dean, always. A few days, my love,” He vowed, “A few days and we'll all be home together.”

Chapter End Notes

The penultimate chapter will be from Dean’s POV and the final chapter from Sam’s POV. I faithfully promise to try and post the next chapter in a more timely manner. Thanks to everyone who has stuck with the story since New Year’s Eve, and to those who have begun to read later. Once more, your kudos, comments and reviews are all greatly appreciated.
“Do you feel you have adjusted to your father’s death?” Victor tapped his pen on the side of his pad.

Dean shrugged one shoulder. Unconsciously he grabbed and seated a cushion on his lap. Years ago, after their disastrous reunion and confrontation in Sam’s kitchen, Dean had worked hard with Victor to mentally leave John behind. The news, when it came from Minnesota a month ago, had been a shock. There’d been parts of Dean that mourned his few rose-tinted memories of Lawrence with both his parents, parts that wondered if his father had lived into old age whether a reconciliation of sorts might have been possible. However the greater feeling was relief at the dispelling of a distant threat.

“Do you regret not travelling to Windom?” Victor tried again.

Dean’s nostrils flared. They had gone through this whole rigmarole last week and the week before. Dean had answered these questions already. They’d talked of doors closing and twists of life’s journey, but his psychiatrist was like a dog with a bone. What did Victor want? Sobbing? Dean had shed enough tears back in Arkansas to float a boat.

Sam went to Cottonwood County Jail, obliged as next of kin, after John had dropped from a massive heart attack. Head first into a plate of spaghetti prison chow, which Dean was sure he’d eventually see the funny side of. Sam wouldn’t permit Nick and Lola to go with him. Kate offered him a bed in her home. Adam attended the internment, insisting it was to support Sam. The only other mourners were the Chaplin and Brady, who drove seven hours overnight from Chicago to be there for his friend.

“So no regrets?” Victor probed.

Dean looked up. Sighing, he dug deep inside for some sort of answer. He licked his lips.

“Plenty of freaking regrets... you know ’em all… lined up in all those years of notes you’ve got on me.” Dean inhaled and exhaled. It wasn’t Victor’s fault that John Winchester had been an A-grade asshole. “You want this year’s sorrow? It isn’t not commemorating the life of a man who should have cherished his little boy. Jesus, Victor I was Robbie’s age.”

Dean shook his head to dismiss John and to refocus. “I’ll tell you what’s worthy of regret. It’s missing the first month of your babies’ lives. All those moments and I’ll never ever get them back.”

Dean inhaled and held his breath, pushing back tears that threatened to fall, not for his deceased father, but for Fiona and Jude, for all the pain that Castiel had gone through, all the weight that had fallen on his husband’s shoulders.

“You know, Dean, that a few weeks is not a long time…”

“I know,” Dean interrupted to recite back some of the points they had previously discussed, “if I was a Dad in the service, worked away from home, had freaking been physically ill then I coulda
missed early weeks of their lives. And I know too, that I spent weeks raising Sammy while Dad disappeared, not that I’d take John as a role model if it came with a state lottery win.”

“There is no difference between physically ill and mentally unwell.” Victor said patiently.

“Tell that to our neighbors and the busybodies in the grocery store with their sympathetic smiles and their enquiries about my family’s health.” Dean groused.

“People’s concerns reflect well on you and your husband’s status in the town.”

“Nosey parkers.” Dean moaned but he recognized the truth in Victor’s argument. There might have been a few gossip seekers but most enquiries had been genuine, coming from people they knew through the high school, art group, daycare, frequenting Jesse’s Forever, The Bluebell Café, and the local open secret beach spot at The Cove.

“How are you coping in public? Did you schedule your grocery shop at a busier time as per my request?” Victor raised his brows.

Back in March when Dean had come home, his words had been sparse and few for Cas and Robbie, tiny whispers to his twin babies, but a wall prevented speech in public or with those outside his inner circle. It was like he was a child or a teenager again and it frustrated Dean so much that after their sessions Victor had let him use a punching bag in Stanford Medical Center’s gym. It hadn’t just been speech. Trembling slithering nerves snaked down his arms and through his body in public. Dean knew his neighbors were being sympathetic when they asked after his health or his family, but the sadness in their eyes felt like judgment, and he fought against the part of him that wanted a quiet room or a blanket fort. The intensive four week out-patient program, in which Dr Cartwright had enrolled him, had helped, especially speaking with those at the Post Partum Wellness group.

“Uh-huh. Went through the manned checkout and made nice with the dippy chick operating it. But I’m sorry Victor, taking two babies to Costco is a military operation, not improved by having to queue for the baby changing restroom.”

Victor gave a chuffing laugh. “I apologize, Dean. Perhaps this week if weather permits, you might take your dear little ones to the park and engage in conversation there.”

Dean wrinkled his nose, “We don’t really have a park in Bodega. The twins are three months on Saturday. We are going to Sam’s for a BBQ tomorrow. Does socializing there count?”

“So long as you keep up with your regular walks during the week. The summer is here. It’s not good to be cooped up in the house.”

Dean looked down at his cuffs, “That was at the beginning, when I came home, and I couldn’t then,” He gulped, moistening his lips, he thought of something more positive to tell his shrink, “I did a bit of organizing for Benny this week.”

Victor beamed, “In Jenner?”

“Naw, Benny called to see us. I think he was avoiding his office,” Dean chuckled at the recollection of Benny explaining that he thought he had managed somehow to delete his air-miles, until Dean logged in on Castiel’s laptop and found them. “I volunteered to bring his diary back from the brink of chaos. I’m gonna do a couple of hours a week from home.”

“What about the art show?”
Dean folded his arms and threw back, “What about it?”

“Are you going to help out there?”

“Listen. I don’t like the fricking meat market opening ceremony when I’m participating. Not having to parade myself this year is actually one of the upsides of the whole FUBAR.” Dean raised a hand, “Wait, before you make it one of your ‘weekly suggestions’. Alfie’s not manning the hall so much himself this year because of Abigail. So I told him if he needs an extra body on his roster, I’ll take a couple of hours later in the week.”

“Our time is almost up. Do you have anything you’d like to add Dean?”

Dean scratched his inner arm, just where pale tendrils of old scar tissue peeked out above his cuffs. “I’m glad Jude’ll never have to meet Dad.”

Victor waited during Dean’s pause.

“I’m gonna do my damnedest to make sure my son will grow up proud to be a carrier, not thinking it’s freakish, never being abused for it like I was, or living in fear and secret like Sammy.”

“I believe you.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m deadly.” Dean affirmed.

There was no nicer way to wake up than with Castiel’s lips grazing Dean’s skin, the back of his fingers stroking his cheekbone. “Good morning, Dean.”

Making a comfort noise at the back of his throat and stretching out his neck, Dean opened his eyes to see Castiel beside their bed, already wearing his dark suit.

“Mmm, did I oversleep?” Dean muttered, blinking awake to a sunny morning.

“No such thing when you got up for their night feed.” Castiel said, turning away to pick his watch off the dresser and put it on. “They woke at 6.30 like clockwork. Robbie came in and rocked Fee back to sleep after her feed, while I gave Jude his bottle.”

“So the whole family was up before me?” Dean grinned, pulling himself up and out of bed. He checked his phone. It was almost time for Castiel to leave. “…and breakfasted?”

Castiel chuffed a laugh, “There’s bacon and scrambled eggs in the skillet for you. Robbie supervised that too.”

“He’s gonna be a chef, I tell ya,” Dean thought of how interested Robbie was in everything that went on at the stove.

“Good idea,” Castiel commented, “He could keep you in pie into your dotage.”

“Come ’ere,” Dean ordered.

Castiel stepped closer, standing still as Dean reached to do up the top button of his white shirt. Dean smiled widely as he tightened and straightened his husband’s dark blue tie, “I know you’ll rip it loose without a thought later, but setting off for work you look mighty fine, Mr. Teacher.”
Castiel leaned from the waist to kiss Dean’s jaw, “As so you, my love.”

Dean harrumphed, casting a hand down his sleep tee and shorts, and his unwashed body. He raised a brow.

“You do.” Castiel insisted. “Robbie’s in the kitchen diner. He’s got some sort of Lego-spaceman-dragon that he says will kill Peppa Pig when she comes on screen.”

“Good God.” Dean huffed, “Save us from imaginative interaction with preschool TV. Although Robbie is right. That Peppa is horrible to her little brother.”

“Do you want me to pick up a pie from the café on my way back?”

It was Memorial Day weekend. Bodega High was on a minimum day. Castiel would be back by lunchtime and Robbie was staying at home. Dean was planning to have everything ready so they wouldn’t be too late getting to Sam’s for the BBQ.

“Nah, Cas. I’d like to take my morning walk all the same. I think it’s good for Jude and Fee to have a routine.” Dean didn’t mention that he liked routine too. Once morning chores were done, weather permitting, Dean took the twins and Robbie, if he wasn’t at daycare, for a long stroll along the waterfront, either out along the peninsula or into the town.

Robbie would be delighted to come on their walk. Dean recognized that Robbie was clingier since he had gotten out of hospital. He hoped it was partially due to normal older sibling adjustment to having a younger brother and sister in his life, but he suspected that Robbie had been scared by his Daddy’s prolonged hospital stay. Over the last couple of months as Dean clawed his way back from his setback, he’d been mindful of his darling boy and hoped that when Robbie looked back at this time his memories would be more filled with quiet joy and love, than with the trauma he must have gone through. Castiel was great with him. Dean knew he was blessed to have Castiel, but life hadn’t been simple for him either. Although Dean liked to grouse and tease about hippy hand holding when Cas disappeared every Tuesday evening for two hours, he knew his husband was benefiting from his own support group in Santa Rosa.

Simple things became special things in the weeks after Dean’s return home; Castiel’s thick sliced sandwiches, reading bedtime stories to Robbie, Pawpaw’s notes of support, Sam’s refusal to trim his floppy hair, napping on the sofa with two tiny children.

The morning flew by. Dean ducked in for a quick shower after his husband left for work. He enjoyed his reheated breakfast with a strong java brew, while Robbie sat on the bean bag in between his two younger siblings, who were awake in their bouncy chairs. Dean choked back laughter several times as Robbie provided a running commentary on Sesame Street to his infant audience. Once Robbie was dressed, in his current favorite blue and white striped tee and pull up jeans, Dean topped up his cross body baby bag with a few essentials, got out the double stroller, and the Winchester crew were ready for their morning walk.

Dean waved at Celestine from the sidewalk. Their previous landlady was adjusting her store’s display of hanging baskets. She responded with a huge wave and blown kisses to Robbie, who ducked his head behind Dean’s leg to peep at their family friend. At the pedestrian lights opposite Pamela’s bar, Dean’s phone pinged for a text. With a warning to Robbie, not to move, even if the light turned green, Dean pulled his cell out of his pocket. Expecting a reminder to buy dessert from Cas, he was surprised to see it was a message from Benny, asking if he was at home. A flurry of texts later it was arranged that Dean was meeting his boss in five minutes at the Bluebell Café.

Dean and the kids beat Benny to their rendezvous. It was warm enough to snag one of the outdoor
tables. Carmen came out and assisted the sneaking of the canvas barrier a couple of feet in front of
the next door property so that Dean could have the stroller and Robbie’s chair tucked into a corner.

“Hey Dean,” Benny called as he approached, “Looking good. How are my favorite small people?”

“Benny!” Robbie hopped up and ran to wrap his arms around the older man’s thigh.

Dean joked, “Someone’s happy to see ya.”

“More than one person, I hope, Sugar.” Benny said. He took Robbie’s hand to guide him back to
his seat, stopping to clap Dean on the shoulder, and to look in on the little ones. Plunking down on
the free seat opposite, Benny removed his cap and asked, “What are we having this morning?”

“Smoothies,” Robbie cheered.

Almost simultaneously Dean explained that they had just arrived. “You had breakfast?”

Benny nodded, “Early. Took a trip over to Salmon Creek. Wanna talk to you about that, but first
let’s order.”

Robbie got the Sunrise, strawberry and banana, but not the supersized version that he claimed he
could drink. Dean ordered a double shot latte with a single slice of pecan pie. Benny gave an
indulgent headshake, knowing Dean’s inability to refuse a slice of heaven, before ordering Huevos
rancheros with sour dough toast.

That signalled Dean’s turn to eye roll. “Thought you had eaten.”

“Hey, I’m a growing boy.” Benny chortled, patting his belly.

“You’re as bad as Sammy.” Dean joshed. “Bottomless pits for stomachs.”

“Says the guy who ordered pie.”

“Hey, I’ve three under five. I burn it off.” Dean rejoined.

When Carmen came with their order, Dean asked what freshly baked treats they had available for
takeout that day. He was tempted by an apple and cinnamon or a cherry pie, but Lola didn’t like
cinnamon and there was Kirsch in the cherry pie. Carmen brought an alternative out for Dean to
view. The white chocolate and raspberry cheesecake looked amazing with curls of the chocolate
across the top and swirl pattern of the raspberry. If there wasn’t a slice of pecan pie in front of him,
Dean might have been tempted to taste the dessert before she boxed it up.

“There was no appointment in Salmon Creek in your mess of a diary.” Dean commented with a
wave of his fork.

The sound of Robbie slurping through his straw broke the few moments silence before Benny
answered.

“I bought the old boathouse as you come off the highway.” Benny said casually.

“You what now?” Dean squinted. “You moving your boat from Bodega?”

“Nope.” With twinkling eyes, Benny leaned forward, “Gonna turn it into a gallery, thought I’d
display my interpretive pieces, maybe a few of my wood carvings, already got some of the other
artists who use Goldie Epstein’s framing service lining up for gallery space. Clamoring won’t do
them any good ‘cos I got a section reserved for you, brother.”
Dean opened and closed his mouth like a beached fish.

Benny smirked, “You know it.”

“I…” Words failed Dean, but not from any dire reason. He was astounded.

“Thought when you are ready to come back to work, you might like to be involved in the running of the venture,” Benny raised his hand, “No pressure. Not asking you to rush back, but I’d like it if you’d help me choose the first artists to join us in exhibiting. And I won’t listen to any downplaying of your talent, or talk of your stuff not being good enough. You can shut your pie hole back up if that’s all you’re gonna say.”

With a splurt of laughter, Dean slapped his knee, “Benny, you sonuva….sailor,” He stopped himself with a quick glance at Robbie who was taking in every word. Still chuckling he continued, “I don’t think anyone else would tell me to shut up. You're priceless.”

“Yeah?” Benny scratched his stubble, “Well, I don’t wanna hear any trash talk.”

“No, sir.” Dean gave a relaxed salute with his pointer finger from his eyebrow.

“And I want at least eight paintings, a rake of sketches, and a selection we can print as postcards.”

Dean snorted, “You don’t ask much, do ya?”

“I have faith in you, Dean.” Benny toasted him with his cup of Joe.

“OK.” Dean expelled a breath.

“OK? You’ll do it?”

“Hell yeah,” Dean shook his head, “We’ll make it the best damn independent gallery in Sonoma County.”

“That’s the spirit, Sugar. They’ll be lining up to visit. I’ll have Andrea on the phone looking to open a Light Up Your Beans on the premises.”

Dean cleared his throat, “Ah, Boss, you know it’s a boathouse in Salmon Creek you’ve purchased, not a warehouse on the pier in San Fran?”

Benny threw his head back and laughed. Once he’d recovered he asked, “What about you and Cas? You thinking of rebooting your property hunt?”

Dean nodded with his mouth full of pie.

“We’s buying our own house, so Pops can have bees and puppies and kittens and chicks and pigs and all.” Robbie informed Benny with a deadly serious face.

Benny raised his brows at Dean. “Sounds like a farm to me.”

“Shoreline’s outta our budget,” Dean explained. Property prices were exorbitant within shouting distance of the ocean, “even with Sam and Nick’s outrageous wedding gift, our loan approval, and having an awesome boss who ensured all my medical bills were covered.”

Benny ducked his head at Dean’s gratitude.

Hitching breaths in preparation of crying came from the closer side of the stroller. Dean paused to
take a clean binky out of his bag. Jude had thrown his onto the pavement. Robbie took it from his Daddy’s hand. He jumped off his seat to bend down and offer it to his brother.

“Good boy, Robbie. You are a great help.” Dean smiled. He turned back to Benny, “We want something within spitting distance of Bodega, y’know, Cas and I don’t want to be long distance commuters. I’m happy to go for a rural home. Castiel’s convinced me that our own honey and eggs would be awesome, but I’m putting my foot down about a pig. No way are we raising a porky-pet only to traumatize the kids Clarice Starling and her lamb style.”

“Don’t think your husband’s gonna make a farmer out of you.”

“He’ll be lucky to get his bees, and he knows it.” Dean pursed his lips with the firm pronouncement.

Benny nodded, “I hear ya.”

Then while Dean’s back was turned, checking on the twins, Benny paid their check. Dean attempted to shove twenty dollars for the cheesecake into Benny’s jacket pocket but Benny dodged his move. As they bade each other farewell, Benny suggested they should try inland from Jenner for their new house, saying that the Russian River area was a great place to live, but not as exclusive as the coastline.

Sweeping through the gates at Moss Beach, Dean was blessedly able to answer Robbie’s “Are we there yet?” with confirmation. It had been a couple of weeks since they’d headed south as a family and Robbie was vibrating with excitement to see Lola.

As they exited the Impala, the loud beat of “I’ve Gotta Feeling” accompanied by Lola screaming the chorus could be heard coming from the terrace.

“Guess we might have beaten Sam and Nick home.” Castiel smirked.

Despite the evidence of Nick’s new Mercedes under the carport, Dean nodded his agreement. Gadreel appeared round the side of the house. On his shoulders waving her arms in time with her current favorite song was Lola, still in her St Bede’s School uniform. Gadreel’s words of greeting were lost under the loud music and Lola’s call to them.

“Uncle Dean!” She squealed at supersonic levels, “Did you bring the babies?”

“Hi Gadreel. Hey Lolls.” Dean grinned as he opened the back door for Robbie. “We all came.”

“Good ‘cos we made family pictures in school today. I drew everyone.” Lola announced, proud of her kindergarten art pieces which decorated every surface of their double door fridge. Dean couldn’t fault his brother for displaying Lola’s colorful drawings. Castiel had covered their own kitchen with an eclectic arrangement of art by Robbie and Dean.

Gadreel carefully lowered his charge to ground level. With wave at Castiel, she beckoned Robbie to follow her indoors.

“Can I, Daddy?” Robbie said pulling on the hem of his blue striped tee. “D’ya want help with Fee and Jude?”

“Go ahead. Pops and I’ve got it covered.” While Dean admired his older son’s innate sense of responsibility and family, he was determined that Robbie should have plenty of chances to play
and enjoy his childhood.

“Sam has left Stanford. He’s picking Nick up at the restaurant. They should be here soon.” Gadreel informed them. “Sam was delayed. He hoped they’d make it back before you arrived.”

The parasol was out on the decking in consideration of tiny babies. Castiel made quick work of erecting the twins’ baby beach tent too. They sucked on their binkies contentedly while Dean settled their seats under the shade, adjusting their sleep suits and cotton sun hats to make sure they were comfortable.

“Here!” Lola came flying back out through the French windows waving her picture. Robbie followed, head down playing Lola’s DS.

“Robert.” Castiel called.

The young boy’s head shot up with the use of his full name.

“We have come for a BBQ at the beach.” Castiel reminded, “Not to play video games. You too Lola, no disappearing indoors to use the Wii.”

“Unless we play Guitar Hero: Legends of Rock later.” Dean added ruining Castiel’s admonishment and earning a fond glare from his husband.

“Oh God, Metallica on repeat,” Gadreel sighed dramatically, “Until Sam shoves him off and we get Muse on repeat instead.”

“Hey!” Dean objected, “Didn’t we have to forcibly remove you from Sabotage so Castiel could give a try at Paint It Black?”

Gadreel looked down his nose with a poker face and denied everything, “Must have been Lola’s other bodyguard.”

“I don’t have another bodyguard.” Lola squinted. “Adults are weird, Robbie.”

“Uh-huh.” Robbie nodded concentrating on the DS.

“Show us your picture.” Dean asked.

His five year old niece happily displayed the multicolored figures. There was a yellow Lola with her two braids between her Daddies holding their hands. Surrounding them in a circle of love and family everyone important was represented from Adam, Pawpaw, Bobby and Brady in the top corner because they were ‘far away’, round to Gadreel, Sparrow, Allie who was her best friend in Kindergarten, and her teacher Sister Maria Goretti. Next to a huge smiling Sam was Dean’s family complete with a blue and a pink splodge for each twin.

“It’s marvelous.” Castiel proclaimed.

Lola preened.

“I like your style. You might be a famous artist when you grow up.” Dean praised.

Any response was lost in the joyful reception Lola gave her returning Daddies. The picture was waved again. Both Sam and Nick smothered their daughter in kisses and complements before they both made a beeline for the baby tent to look in on Fiona and Jude. Sam caught Dean in a sideways welcome hug, while Nick took Lola to find the perfect spot for her art and to change out of her
“School uniform.”

“Looking good, Dean” Sam swept a hand gesturing over Dean’s new light summer denims and plain black short sleeved button down.

“Wish I could say the same.” Dean ribbed. He raised one eyebrow at Sam’s sweater vest.

“Hey I was teaching today. I’ve got an image to uphold.” Sam glared.

“Image? If you want to call it that.” Dean huffed a laugh at Sam’s indignant bitchface.

Sam nudged his brother’s shoulder and gave a short laugh before simply saying “Good.”

Dean smiled gently. He understood. A couple of months ago, Sam must have been wishing that Dean was well enough to insult him.

“Hungry?” Nick called from the windows.

“Hurray!” Robbie jumped up.

“Jeepers,” Castiel eye rolled, “You would think we never feed him.”

“He’s a growing boy.” Gadreel grinned, ruffling the top of Robbie’s hair.

“I’m going to change,” Sam commented. “A lot of the food is precooked. Nick prepped the sides this morning. Won’t be long serving up.”

“You want me to fire up the Barbi?” Dean tried for an Australian accent.

Sam’s put-upon headshake told him his impression was a blow out, but Dean ignored him and went to check if the state of the art grill was ready to go.

Just as Nick and Lola came out with the first table settings, Jude woke with a piercing hungry cry.

“I’ve got it.” Castiel called, heading to the kitchen to warm the formula.

“Takes two.” Dean preempted his daughter, who was bound to follow Jude’s lead.

While the adults made everything ready for a delicious feast, Lola and Robbie ran down to the edge of the waves for a quick paddle in the shallows. They stayed in Gadreel’s line of sight. When they came galloping back up the sands, Dean narrowed his eyes at the salt water splash pattern on their clothes but didn’t spoil the kids’ mood by commenting on their clandestine fun and games.

Sam had a towel ready to brush away the sand and salt. While Sam tided the two gigglers up, Dean and Castiel took their twelve week old twins to the bench under the balcony and let them feed to their hearts’ content.

“Hey Fee, who’s a good girl for Daddy? Drinking like a champ.” Dean cooed, cradling his precious girl.

“I think Jude is beating her.” Castiel commented dryly.

“Nope. Fee is winning.” Dean beamed.

“If she drinks too fast she’ll spit up and be disqualified.” Castiel said drolly.

Dean tilted the bottle for the last couple of ounces. Fiona mouthed around the nipple. She
squirmed. Dean pulled it back and brought his little blonde bombshell up to his shoulder to rub her back. Nosing into her hair, Dean inhaled the wondrous sweet scent of his baby girl.

“Jude wins.” Castiel crowed.

“How exactly?” Dean chuckled at Castiel’s smiling face.

“He took more.”

“Not fair, Cas. It was a speed contest, then a not spitting up contest and now it’s a volume competition. Fiona is lodging an appeal with the International Court of Arbitration for Sport. If you want us, we’ll be in Switzerland.” Dean tossed his head and stood up.

“Switzerland?” Castiel laughed.

“Yes. Commonly known as the baby tent.”

“Daddy, you won’t fit in the tent.” Robbie pointed out.

“At least one member of the Winchester family has some sense.” Sam chortled.

“Hey, you’re a Winchester.” Dean retorted.

“Nope. Papa is an Alighieri like me and Daddy.” Lola corrected.

“They are ganging up on me, Cas!” Dean pleaded in a jovial tone.

“I’m sorry we cannot assist. Jude and I have a trophy to collect.” Castiel brought Jude, whose dark haired head was dozing on his shoulder. He eased his little son into his carry seat, taking care to move him gently into the shaded tent next to his sister. “Fee’s going to drop off any minute too.”

Dean hummed. He caught Castiel’s arm as they rose, pulling him close enough to kiss with a loud smacking noise.

“Medium rare?” Nick interrupted for steak cooking directions.

With confirmation given, they took their seats at the long picnic table. Dean made sure Robbie had a napkin tucked into the neck of his tee. There were meat patties and sticky skewers of chicken along with the flash cooked thin steaks. Nick’s potato salad, bowls of salsa, hummus, and slaw decorated the table too. An ice bucket of beers and another of sodas sat in the center. Dean didn’t give a damn if he was setting a bad example for small watching eyes. He chewed open mouthed, made orgasmic noises and smacked his lips around juicy beef. His only worry was if there would be enough room for a chunk of the Bluebell Café’s cheesecake.

Conversation was light. Castiel mentioned how if the weather held they were going to The Cove with Inias and Alfie on Monday. Nick and Sam offered Dean and Castiel their copies of The Girl Who Played with Fire, leading to Dean comment that only they would have bought two copies so they could do a synchronized read. Gadreel had been given a budget to purchase a new SUV and asked Dean’s opinions on his few preferred models. They were comparing Toyota’s Land Cruiser to the latest HUMMER when Sam began to clear away their plates.

“Do you know I’m gonna be a time traveler like The Doctor?” Lola chirped.

Nick cleared his throat. “Petal, you know Papa explained that we are travelling by airplane, not by TARDIS.”

“But Daddiiieee,” Lola whined, “I’m gonna jump a day. You said so too.”

“For real?” Robbie’s literal jaw drop had Dean simultaneously grinning and beseeching Sam with his eyes for a Robbie-suitable explanation.

“When you travel around the world,” Sam pulled Robbie closer to him on the bench. “It is different time as you go. So when it’s daytime here, it’s nighttime in India. Way out in the ocean,” Sam pointed towards the Pacific, “The day changes to tomorrow. So if you fly really fast in an airplane, say today Friday, you jump into Saturday.”

“That’s mega weird.” Robbie said breathlessly, “Cos they’ve no Fridays there?”

Nick laughed. “I think the problem of longitude may not be on the Kindergarten age syllabus.”

“I don’t see why God didn’t make it so it is the same time everywhere.” Lola pouted. “I don’t think it’s fair that Australia people get to wake up before we do.”

“They have to go to bed before you too.” Nick pointed out.

“I’m going to ask Father Gregory, and he can ask God, or the Pope. I’m sure he knows.”

Sam hummed and nodded with his lips sucked in. He leaned over Robbie’s head to whisper to Dean, “Nick’s department. He gets to handle all the awkward religious dilemmas.”

Dean huffed a laugh. Castiel had a pen out and was drawing time-zones on his napkin. With a head tilt to alert Sam to look at the scribbles, Dean eye rolled, knowing that tomorrow at home Robbie was going to be privileged to a fun child-friendly explanation, probably with diagrams and a power point presentation, and maybe a model of the solar system.

Lola widened her arms to their full extent, her open palms in front of Nick and Cas. “Cos we’re going all the way around the world, I got a passport too, like for Lola Deanna Alighieri, with my picture on it. Can I show Robbie, Papa?”

“Not now, baby. It’s in the safe.” Sam diverted Lola, “Do you remember where we are going?”

“Yep,” Lola straighten her spine to recite their itinerary like a nursery rhyme, “After school finishes we are going to Hawaii, New Zealand, India, Africa, and Europe. And then I gotta visit Uncle Michael, ‘cos he wants to meet me even though he's mean to Daddy.”

“What?” Nick gasped.

“He’s your brother, but he’s not like Uncle Dee. He’s a mean old guy who makes you get an angry sad face when you talk on the phone and Gad’s lip gets all twisty like he ate the sour candies when he says about Uncle Michael.”

Gadreel spluttered up his sup of beer, “Does it? I am sorry, Nick, I had strove for a neutral expression.”

“It can be difficult to remain expressionless when you have a douche for a boss.” Dean commented. “Remember Zachariah-Bag-Of-Dicks at Greengoods?”

“Well, technically Michael isn’t my employer.” Gadreel smirked.
Dean let out a breathy “Ha.”

Lola’s trust fund employed her security.

“Let’s not give small minds big ideas.” Nick glared.

“Can I ask about the inclusion of New Zealand on your much extended Summer field research?” Castiel deftly changed the subject.

“Wonderful ecology,” Nick said fondly.

Dean coughed, “Hobbits.”

Sam hissed, “Jerk” at Dean, before answering. “Nick travelled extensively back in the day but never made it to New Zealand.”

“I suppose it’s a bucket list item.” Nick chuckled. “Once we agreed that round the world tickets would be the best way to plan all the research interviews for Sam’s dissertation, there was an option of a stop between Hawaii and India.”

“Tolkien.” Dean coughed again.

“Seriously, Man.” Sam bitch-faced. “I have arranged to meet with the Houstruckers who travel the length of the islands.”

“How long will you be in New Zealand?” Dean asked, to check his memory. He shifted slightly on the bench seat to allow Robbie to tuck into his side.

“Ten days.” Sam answered. “And don’t, Dean. We are going to sightsee. We have only three days in Hawaii. I can’t believe I got approval to talk with our navy guys stationed there.” He nodded towards Lola, “Once we cross the international date line we head for some research-lite time in New Zealand. Uttar Pradesh is going to be all business too. We are staying with Camille Pompidou from the Sorbonne, who has been among the Dharkan people since 2007.”

“Did your professor connect you with her?” Castiel asked.

Sam looked sheepish and shook his head. “Ahem, Facebook.”

“What?” Castiel smiled wide.

“Anthropology groups on Facebook. I’ve been chatting with her since we debated peripatetic versus pastoral nomadic peoples last year.” Sam got that glazed look in his eyes heralding an enthusiastic talk about his doctoral research. “She’s has such a depth of knowledge on nomadic Indian tribes. We’ve been messaging each other for months. I can’t believe we are actually going to Lucknow to meet her and the Dharkan families she works with.”

Dean grinned. It made something warm bloom in his chest to see Sam so excited about his explorations to add layers of research to his doctorate dissertation on peripatetic families. His brother had taken a few short trips away the previous summer, meeting Inuit families in Alaska, some transient Roma in Oregon, and carneys during their high season. There had been a clown incident somewhere in the Midwest but Sam wasn’t talking about it.

The dissertation was tentatively titled Raised on The Road, which gave Dean a smart of heartache every time he heard it. Sam had never known a permanent home until he moved in with Nick. Pushing back any sad thoughts Dean returned to the conversation.
“After India we fly to Gaborone through South Africa.” Nick was saying.

“This time George Wyatt did get me my in to visit the San People. Stanford has an exchange program with the University of Botswana.” Sam beamed, “We have a few days in a five star game reserve before we fly to Frankfurt.”

Nick added, “Sam’s going to record the stories of some Gastarbeiter families before following Lola and me to the Alighieri ancestral home in Livorno.”

“That’s in Italy.” Lola clarified for her Uncles Dean and Cas.

“We’ll have a weekend in London.” Sam continued. “A few days in Ireland, where I am going to interview travelling families, and show Lola the Cliffs of Insanity.”

“Inconceivable.” Dean muttered.

Sam sniggered, “Buttercup.”

“Hey, you are you calling Buttercup, Buttercup?” Dean poked his finger into Sam’s firm bicep. “More André The Giant these days.”

“Guys, stop with The Princess Bride.” Castiel pleaded.

“Just ‘cos you were culturally deprived as a child, Cas.” Dean teased.

“Between Cars, Shrek, Kung Fu Panda and that movie, I believe I have ‘caught up’” Castiel said with added finger quotes.

“Po rocks.” Robbie twisted to high five his Daddy, who was firmly of the opinion that the panda was badass.

Dean met Robbie’s hand and then scooped him onto his knee. “Back home then, Sam? It’s going to be long two months without y’all.”

“Yeah, Dean, via DC. Michael will meet us at the Four Seasons.” Sam sighed dramatically, “Breaks the journey from Shannon to San Francisco, I suppose.”

Nick got up and came over to their side of the table. He squeezed onto the edge of the bench and threw an arm around Sam’s shoulders, “Don’t let Michele put a damper on the summer. Remember it’s only a couple of days and then we’ll be home, and you get to spend the next two years writing up your findings.”

“Way to make a guy feel better.” Sam chuckled, pushing back into Nick’s arms.

“I do my best, sweetheart.” Nick grinned. “And remember I’ll be lucky if anyone recognizes me when I get back to the restaurant. I know Fergus will take the reins but I’ve never been away for so long.”

“Think of all the inspiration you’ll get from cuisine of the world.” Dean remarked, “Bet they have way out pie fillings in some of those countries.”

“It all leads back to pie.” Sam chortled.

“And to think, he brought cheesecake today.” Castiel quipped in.

“I am a man of many mysteries.” Dean snorted.
A few minutes later Dean followed Sam inside to help bring out more drinks. Catching him by the arm beside the antique writing bureau, Dean hissed, “You’ll stay safe, won’t you Sammy?”

Sam gave him a fond stink eye, “You mean don’t get kidnapped by Bushmen?”

“No doofus,” Dean growled at the back of his throat, “You know.”

He meant everything from crashing planes, to getting lost, to being mugged, getting weird ass illnesses, and being kidnapped by gypsies.

“We’ll be fine, Dean.” Sam promised. “We might freak out driving on the wrong side of the road, get tummy bugs, or get caught in a rainstorm, but it’s all good. And we aren’t leaving until the end of June.” Sam surprised Dean, pulling him in for a tight hug. “You’ll always be my big brother, won’t ya?”

Dean flushed with emotion. “Always. Don’t you forget it.”

As they entered the kitchen, Sam said in a low voice, “Sydney called.”

“Uh-huh.” Dean nodded.

“Said to tell you they all send their condolences on John’s death.”

Dean gave Sam a ‘seriously’ look.

“Yeah,” Sam huffed, “I feel that way too. But I promised I pass ‘em along.”

“Any news of Aaron?” Dean asked, curious as to how his old flame was doing.

“He’s good. Sydney said he’s got a commission from some hotel under renovation in Cyprus for a large scale piece in their plaza.”

“Awesome,” Dean was wowed. Aaron was really making it as a sculptor. “Reminds me… Benny’s opening a gallery in Salmon Creek, wants me, sorry, has demanded that I give him art.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder. “Way out, Dean. That’s amazing. You’ll be famous yet.”

“Dunno about that, Sammy.” Dean said with skepticism but he was pleased with his brother’s reaction.

Soon, the day began to cool into early evening. Gadreel headed home taking a slice of cheesecake with him. The rest moved indoors to the family room. The twins needed out of their carry seats. Castiel spread a blanket on the floor for them to roll around and kick their legs. Lola asked Robbie if he wanted to play a game and took him upstairs so they could choose.

Dean whipped out his phone and took a quick snap of Castiel lying on his side as Fiona stretched her arm out towards Jude. Just then Jude began a huge yawn, which Dean caught dead on. He held the phone up for Cas to see.

“Magic.” Castiel beamed, “If you tried to get a shot mid-yawn you couldn’t do it. That is a brilliant photo. Look Fee’s got a cheeky little smile going on too.”

“We have to print this one off.” Dean agreed, kneeling down to play with Jude’s toes.

“Good enough to send to Eudora and Sioux Falls, I’d say.” Castiel suggested.
Dean nodded. Bobby and Pawpaw would enjoy that one. He hadn’t sent a picture of Fiona and Jude to ACIC yet. This one might do the job. He imagined it gracing their wall of photos, maybe pinned next to the one of Robbie’s first birthday where both Dean’s and the birthday boy’s faces had been smeared with cake. Dean thought he might get several prints.

“Good enough to add to the family collage frame.” Dean added.

“What is?” Sam asked.

Dean showed him the picture and watched his overgrown little brother melt. “Get in here, Nick and look at the photo Dean’s taken.”

Then there were two grown men cooing over the photo and the cute twins. Reality bit back with a particularly stinky diaper attack. Dean smiled at the others as he lifted poor whimpering Fiona and took her to the bathroom to clean her up. When he got back, Castiel handed over Jude, who had a wet diaper, and Dean retraced his steps, affectionately moaning to Jude about double the workload for double the love.

“Your turn on diaper duty next.” Dean winked at Castiel as he reunited Jude and Fiona on the blanket. “I’m going to see if Sammy and Nick need a hand tidying up.”

“No problem, Darling.”

Castiel was offering Jude his finger to pull on when Dean glanced back from the doorway.

Clean up was nearly done. The dishwasher was on the go. Sam had suds up to his elbows at the sink with the rest of the ware. Dean dried and put away. Nick finished wrapping leftovers and parceling some for them to take back to Bodega. Once a pot of drip coffee was brewing Dean returned to the den. Castiel was asleep with his feet kicked out on the La-Z-Boy with Jude snoozing on his chest.

Fiona was awake, happily and loudly sucking her binky, next to Robbie and Lola who were on the floor rolling dice for Chutes and Ladders. Robbie put his finger to his lips and made a hushing noise, while Lola pointed gleefully at Castiel.

Dean mimicked Robbie’s shushing pose. He carefully eased onto the seat cushion next to Cas, intent on gingerly removing Jude without waking his husband. He gave a closed mouth sympathetic smile. Tiredness had caught up with Castiel. A full time job and three young kids would do that to a person. Dean admired how perfect Castiel’s features were in slumber; his skin smooth with a barely shaded evening shadow, his eyelids looked soft enough for Dean to run the pad of his thumb over them, and his hair was mussed from a day of running his hand through his short locks. A wellspring of gooey cookie dough feels threatened to burst out of his chest.

Dean was happy.

He double blinked, surprised at the revelation.

Happiness was his gorgeous kind loyal understanding husband who stuck with him through thick and thin. It was his pretty fair daughter, his adorable little Jude, and his wonderful mini-Cas Robbie. It was having the luxury to visit his brother and darling niece. It was knowing friends and family were only the touch of his phone away. It was being here a decade on from his worst times, living more awesome a life than he ever could have dreamt. It was being loved so fiercely that a fire burned inside him rising up to return Castiel’s affection and adoration in equal measure.

Life was a rollercoaster but today…
Today, it was peachy.

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter… *sniffle sniffle*…will jump forward in time again.
As this story started from Sam’s POV so will it end.
Sam sprinted from his car to the steps. Fumbling with his keys elicited a soft cuss. He pushed the door open with his hip, slipping inside and shutting it against the unseasonably chill evening. Once the alarm code was in, he tipped up the thermostat a couple of degrees.

Empty and still, there was a certain luxury to beating Nick home. Sam huffed a laugh, considering donning sweatpants and taking control of the TV. He imagined Nick arriving to find him vegetating on their sofa watching mindless shows. Nick wouldn’t say a derogatory word, but no doubt there would be softly phrased questions about stress and blood pressure and his well being.

There would be plenty of time for mutual relaxation later. Lola was in Los Altos, having a sleepover at Audrey’s, with their mutual best friend and classmate, Allie. There had been a clandestine background check on Audrey’s family and home. Sam reflected on the contrast to when he was a child. He pushed away a needle of bitter incomprehension of how John could have left his little boys all alone in skivvy motels and rat-infested apartments. While it was reassuring to know the Powers family weren’t mafia plants conspiring to kidnap his daughter, sometimes Sam thought Gadreel went beyond the call of duty. However since someone had taken a pot shot at Michael, Lola’s bodyguard had upped his vigilance. Sam wondered if Nick’s cousin really headed away for his weekend off duty or if he was cruising through Los Altos like some paranoid helicopter parent. Sam was more worried about Audrey’s Mom’s phone call the evening before. Amid discussion of how late the girls would be allowed to stay up and what time Sam would collect his daughter, Lynn Powers had let Sam know that Audrey was excited to show her friends the training bra they had shopped for together.

Lola was eight, almost nine, still very much a little girl in Sam’s mind. That Audrey, a half year older, was seeing early pre-puberty changes, meant Lola wouldn’t be far behind. There was something precious about childhood, especially to Sam, whose fraught past made it all more important that his daughter get to have the best experience possible. Lola was a sweet and happy, if occasionally mischievous, child. Sam was dreading anything that would change that. It wasn’t that he thought Lola would turn into a demon-teenager. His concerns were more to do with the cruelty of other kids, cliques and mean girls, teasing and peer pressure, boys breaking hearts and not being asked to dance by her crushes. Already Lola’s bedroom walls had transformed into a shrine to One Direction, and Nick had repeatedly told of his astonishment at being put in the position of refusing to buy his baby a scanty glittery bikini for summer pool parties.

Pushing back tumultuous thoughts of Lola as a teenager, Sam dumped his book bag at his office area under the stairs. His library lined floor to ceiling under the wide stairwell, except where his desk sat against the wall that was shared by the kitchen. A few years back, Sam decided to set up this nook as his study area. It ensured the den was exclusively a family room. When Sam had been conferred with his doctorate, Nick bought a beautiful modern desk from the studio of a young designer who created curved masterpieces from reclaimed ash and olive woods. When Sam was announced as the new Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology, there had also been a new MacBook Pro, a weekend in Carmel, and a painting of Moss Beach by Dean to hang in his cubby office at Stanford.

Sam put away his papers and set his Mac on the ergonomically slanted smooth desk surface. He had to review his plans for Monday morning’s meeting with his two teaching assistants about the
first essay assignment for the brand new sparkling freshmen. But that could be done later. He moved to the kitchen and filled the drip filter. Letting the coffee brew he headed upstairs. A quick shower, soft worn denims, his red v-neck tee, and a navy warm hoodie allowed Sam to leave his work behind. He gave the bathroom a spruce up, braved Niall Horan’s multiple eyes to make Lola’s bed and vacuum around her piles of tennis rackets and little ponies’ stable, before coming down to the den. There was a twinkle in his eye and seduction on Sam’s mind as he rooted into the back of the dresser for a box of pillar candles and a half used coconut Yankee jar. Once they were arranged to his satisfaction Sam gave a pleased nod and made the decision to relax.

With a tall cup of Arabica and his feet on the arm of their new black leather recliner sofa, Sam allowed his shoulder muscles to unbunch and his chest to fall with expelled breath. Through the long windows the sea was a murky grey that matched the sky. Wind whipped white horses onto the Pacific, making rolling waves race to shore. He pondered if in the morning, there would be a line of seaweed tucked up against the rocky wall below their decking. There’d probably be legions of surfers over at Half Moon Bay too. Their outdoor furniture was secure, the hot tub tarpaulin tied down and the windows shut tight. If a storm did break over them, everything was ship shape. He’d miss having Lola with him if there was thunder and lightning. From the first time when toddler Lola had been frightened, Sam had made a game of electrical storms, counting the gaps between forked strikes into the ocean and the fearsome rumbles that followed. He grinned remembering a spectacular light show that had broken over Eudora when they’d visited Pawpaw. Lola had danced and trilled with glee, making Dean Campbell shake his head with soft chuckles at the amazing reaction of his great-granddaughter to a tempest that shook the roof.

The sound of Nick’s key turning in the lock, made Sam’s heart do a quickstep. He quirked his lips at his body’s unconscious reaction to his husband’s arrival. Twisting round, Sam called over the back of the sofa.

“Hey Sweetheart.”

Nick appeared, slate gray suit jacket splattered with the first large raindrops. He bore a cool bag. A bottle of wine was tucked under his arm.

“Whatya got?” Sam enquired, tilting his head to receive a soft pressed chaste kiss.

“Rib eye steaks and a bottle of Silver Oak Cab Sav.”

Sam reached up as Nick began to straighten, pulling on both sides of his undone necktie so that their lips could meet for a second caress.

“You’re spoiling me,” Sam said with a light tease, as he released his hold on the silk blend and patted the lapel of Nick’s jacket.

“How about you light the first fire of fall?” Nick suggested with a satisfied smirk. “I’ll feed you melt in the mouth beef with sauce Béarnaise and crispy sautéed potatoes?”

“Alchemy,” Sam grinned. Whenever Nick indulged in a lovingly cooked meal, flexing his restaurateur-in-the-kitchen muscles, the results were magic.

“I’ll handle the alchemy,” Nick huffed, moving to the corner bar. He put down the bottle of wine, “Will you decant?”

Sam nodded. “You want any help in the kitchen?”
“Naw. You take it easy. Any news of our daughter from her overnight vacation?”

“No. Having too much fun, I guess.” Sam carded his hand through his hair. “I got a text from Gadreel, saying he’d dropped her off.”

“She knows she can come home if she’s not enjoying it.”

Sam nodded his agreement, as he stood to make his way over to the log box. It wasn’t winter, just an unseasonable low. Sam knew how to make a little pyre with sparse fuel in the centre of a grate, enough to throw out a romantic glow and add subtle warmth to the room.

Nick watched him selecting kindling and slim logs. “It’s a treat to have a date night so close to our anniversary.”

“Mmm,” Sam raised his brows, “Is that what this is now?”

Nick’s eyes twinkled. He crept up and snaked an arm around Sam’s waist, pulling their bodies flush together. “You, me, alone, food and wine, roaring fire, heated lovemaking. Thoughts?”

Sam shook his head fondly before leaning it against Nick’s shoulder, “Thoughts? They mirror yours. I’ll snag the rug from our bedroom.”

“Oh good,” Nick shook with humor, “My old bones might crack on bare wood.”

Sam elbowed him, “Less of the old.”

“I’ll be 47 in November.” Nick gave an exaggerated downturned lip.

That deserved another elbowing, “Stop, you noodle,” Sam sniggered, “You’re as bad as Lola: “I’ll be nine, Papa, I’ll be nine.””

Nick smiled broadly, “That’s my girl.”

“Impossible.” Sam snorted, “Go! Cook!”

Nick chuckled all the way out of the room.

Their meal was as delicious as Nick promised. Nick eschewed his suit for a causal v-neck sweater and bare feet under his jeans. He leaned across the table to feed morsels of heaven to his husband, as he had promised. Leaving the clean up for morning, they adjourned to the den. Candle flickers and low licking flames in the hearth lit their indulgence. Jewel ruby tones danced in their goblet wine glasses. Berry notes with long satiny rich tones warmed Sam’s mouth and made him crave to taste the vintage from Nick’s lips. There was no musical background. The soundtrack was the crackling of logs, the patter of rain, and their shared breathing.

They whispered hushed compliments and concerns. Nick wanted to chase the university administration to get their finger out and grant Sam his parking space. Sam wanted to go online to leave a scathing comment on a mediocre review that a disgruntled patron had left on Trip Advisor for The Gates of Hell. Nick dissuaded him with a rueful grin about the breaks of an online world.

Nick sneaked away to supposedly hit the head. Sam crept on tip toe to his desk, then skittered back into the living room, socks sliding on the floor, just in time to plant his secret under his butt on the rug.

Nick’s chest was bare, shoes gone, boxers peeking over his open zipper. His wink would have won
awards for lewdness. Sam salivated at the promise. In one hand Nick dangled a gift bag from the jewelers in Menlo Park, and in the other a padded leather blindfold.

Sam wet his dry lips. He gasped, “Nick.”

“For you.” Nick said simply with a half-smile as he sank to his knees beside his beloved.

Sam raised his hand, palm stroking Nick’s chest, pushing into his warm skin. He leaned in testing Nick’s nipple with his tongue. The older man gave a delicious moan. Sam strained forward, desire coiling, half-hard already in anticipation of what was to come. He traced downwards with his fingertips, over Nick’s soft belly, closing his eyes, imagining nuzzling into the yielding flesh later.

“Open your peepers.” Nick commanded with amusement. “Don’t you want to know what’s in the bag before we move to the blindfold?”

Sam hummed, raising his lids to see Nick’s grin. “Tease.”

Nick pulled the glossy bag closer, hooking the cord handle with his curved pinkie finger. “Only the best for the best.”

“You are so cheesy.” Sam laughed. He pulled a decent sized box from the bag.

“The best ten years of my life.” Nick whispered into his ear, as Sam tried to concentrate on unwrapping the gift.

“Nick!” Sam gasped. “I love it.”

It was a watch, but not any watch, a Xetum Stinson with a gorgeous large round face and eco-friendly production. Sam also knew it was the bones of a $1000, because he’d been eyeing them longingly. He added points for observation onto Nick’s scorecard.

“But you do know Sunday’s anniversary is our seventh?” Sam yanked Nick’s chain.

Nick knew he was being ribbed. “What? You got a seven-year-itch.”

“Oh I have an itch alright.” Sam threw his head back and guffawed. He wasn’t sure that itch quite described the yearning need building in his groin.

Lips met the hollow of his throat, the rise of his Adam’s apple. Nick murmured how much he loved the long expanse of Sam’s neck, all tanned skin crying out to be worshipped. A hickey was sucked hard and deep. Sam’s breath skipped as pain and pleasure grew. He tugged a hand into Nick’s hair, holding his husband there, communicating that he should keep going. Sam stretched his arms up. Nick removed Sam’s hoodie and tee, all the time tiny fleeting pecks and tips of tongue were exchanged. Sam slipped out of his jeans while Nick leaned back to accomplish the same urgent feat.

Nick’s hand searched for the eye mask but found the long white manila envelope as he swept across the pile of the rug.

“What’s this?” Nick’s brow rose.

“Dunno,” Sam shrugged with an impish smile. “Maybe your husband got you a gift too.”

“My husband?” Nick’s brow rose impossibly higher. He ran his hand up Sam’s thigh. Sam opened for him, allowing Nick to reach tantalizingly close to Sam’s heavy balls and straining cock. “Did
he? How kind of him.”

Nick ignored the envelope to bend double. Sam raised his hips, pushing forward between Nick’s parted lips. The warm wet heat had him panting. He almost came undone when Nick rolled out all his tricks, flicking his tongue, sucking his cheeks, opening his throat to take Sam to the hilt. One hand held Sam at the hip, another tapped with caressing promise on his perineum, worked delicious pressure under his balls, then along his rim. Sam palmed Nick’s neck, stroked his hair, didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“I’m gonna,” was the only warning Sam could give. He shuddered. Nick’s nails dug into Sam’s skin as he tilted his neck a notch, and Sam was coming, blindingly with repetition of his adoration and love. “Love you, my Nick, my lover, my Lucifer, my hubby, my forever.”

Blinking in the flickering light, Sam saw his love bracing himself with one hand, curled on the rug, his lips swollen, chin glistening. He reached a hand to wipe the trail of come from the corner of Nick’s lips. He sucked his finger clean, seeing Nick’s pupils dilated, knowing he’d caused it. It gave him a thrill of power and possessiveness. He caught the hand that lay loose on Nick’s thigh, taking it to press against his lips, hard and fierce. Breathing through his nose, Sam scented Nick’s skin, expelling a deep throated moan into Nick’s metacarpals. Satisfied, he sank back into the soft rug, blissed out as Nick cleaned him up and took the side closer to the fire, propped on one elbow, slitting open the envelope.

Sam held his breath, eyes wide. This time his inner tremble was nervousness, fluttering inside, hoping Nick would approve of his choice.

“Oh Sam. Really? You organized all this?” Nick’s parted lips told of his joyous surprise.

“Oh-uh, got to spend my hard earned bucks somehow. President’s weekend, a late Valentine. There’s a print out of the flights to Vancouver attached. Dean and Cas will have Lola.” Sam ducked his head and added sheepishly, “I kind of promised Fergus he could go to Scotland for Christmas, if he covered our romantic weekend on the Snow Train to Jasper.”

Nick play-punched his shoulder. “Does that mean you’re volunteering to work shifts at the restaurant over the holidays?”

“Ahem. No. But I could ask Brady to stay for Christmas and he might work…”

“Don’t even finish that nightmarish thought!” Nick pressed a single finger to Sam’s lips. “Lola’s godfather is welcome to come, but the only reason he’ll be stepping foot inside the Gates is when we all boogie down for the launch of 2013.”

“Boogie? Seriously.” Sam snorted through the held finger.

“Nothing wrong with a boogie woogie.”

“Oh Lord, I’m gonna have to forbid use of that word.” Sam’s shoulders shook.

“I bet you Castiel knows what a boogie woogie is.” Nick persisted.

“Have you seen Cas dance? And I don’t mean when he’s surgically attached to Dean.” Sam gaped.

“I have and…”

They chuckled in unison, “It’s hilarious.”
“We should dance.” Nick’s voice deepened.

Sam opened his mouth to protest a lack of music, but found his shoulders hitting the rug, his husband hovering over him, and his legs lifting to rest on Nick’s shoulders.

“Love you like this.” Nick approved.

“Spread out for you.” Sam agreed.

“You want the mask?” Nick asked.

“Want to see you.” Sam shook his head.

Nick hummed happily, leaning forward to plant a hand next to one shoulder and use the other to card Sam’s hair back from his forehead. It was warm under the glow of the sinking fire, beads of sweat dotted. Sam devoted attention to tasting them. He nibbled on Nick’s top lip, sucking on it and scraping his teeth on his deep Cupid’s bow.

They built a rhythm, sweet for its rolling languid pace. Nick worked him open slow with warming lube and a stretch that went straight to Sam’s dick. Muscles strained as Sam met Nick’s lips again. His hands touched Nick’s arms, his side. Multiple unhurried moist kisses travelled up along the tender skin of Sam’s inner thighs. The light evening stubble on Nick’s chin tingled and dappled Sam’s nerve endings, driving him crazy with need.

When finally Nick drove in balls deep and hissing Sam’s name through gritted teeth, he stroked Sam’s cock with perfection and Sam came for the second time. Painted in Sam’s come, Nick’s body rode Sam, pulling out and thrusting forward as small moans escaped. They moved together, united. The muscles of Nick’s back flexed as he pushed in and gasped his desire. Sam bit down on his lip, holding back groans of pleasure. Building heat drove his hips to arch up, taking Nick deeper, angling to have his husband find his sweet spot.

“There!” Sam puffed air. “Yes, Nick, more.”

Sam’s head seemed too heavy to hold up. He dropped it back, closing his eyes, making his own blindfold of fluttering lids, sensing powerfully Nick’s building pulsing orgasm. When Nick came, he fell forward, brushing Sam’s prostate once more, pulling another gasp of tingling want out of his spent lover.

“So good.”

“My love.”

Sam wasn’t sure who said what. They shared intent and thought.

Somehow during the night, the rug wrapped itself around them with along the soft fleecy throw from the armchair where Lola liked to curl up in with her books. Sam woke stiff and achy, melting to the first sight of his husband. Sam nuzzled into Nick’s tussled hair, breathing in his scent, reveling in the rightness of belonging. Braving morning breath, Sam wakened Nick with the best way to start a day.

At breakfast Nina Simone’s sublime voice was drowned under Nick’s stove-side serenade that he had put a spell on Sam, who shut him up with pressed closed mouth kisses and an exchange of good morning text messages with Lola. Then there were pancakes drizzled with Winchester Honey from Castiel’s bees, tall mugs of strong smooth coffee, a shared shower, and another quicker shared shower after their run along the storm tossed sands.
Nick pressed two kisses to Sam’s wrist, above and below his new timepiece, before sadly couple time ended with Nick heading to open the restaurant and Sam to collect their daughter.

Lola was full of beans and tales of her night with her friends. All the way around Whole Foods and the farmers’ market Sam heard about the mischief of eating chips by torchlight and illicit experimentation with Audrey’s Mom’s lipstick. They pit stopped at the craft store in Menlo Park for Lola to pick out a little something to give Uncle Castiel.

At home, Sam juiced organic oranges, peaches and carrots with a lemon and a touch of ginger. He brought two tall glasses into the family room. They watched Tangled again. Sam persuaded Lola she couldn’t wear her Punzel dress to Dean’s house the next day. There was a pout and a downturned lip that made Lola look so like Nick that Sam couldn’t be even mildly annoyed with his little princess.

While Lola carefully wrapped her gift for Castiel, Sam made po’boys adulterated with salad leaves and salsa. Lola brought her raggedy Bunny to the kitchen table, tucking him under her arm and then on her lap as she ate. The old comfort toy alerted Sam that Lola might have gotten very little quality sleep the night before. Once they had cleared up together, he ran her a bath and tucked her into bed early with a goodnight kiss.

It was after midnight when Nick got home. He slipped in between the sheets, pressing kisses between Sam’s shoulders, waking him with icy feet and cold fingers, until Sam dozily snuggled into being the little spoon and drifted back to dreamland.

“Dean!” Sam rolled his eyes. “Dean!”

“Hold your freaking horses, Sammy! I’m not gonna disappear on ya!” Dean called from the kitchen.

“What are you fussing over? Get in here! He’s nearly at the door.” Sam roared, “Nick has the candles lighting.”

“Daddy! Come on.” Robbie joined in, as he jumped on the spot unable to stay still with his excitement. He had kicked off his sandals and was skipping in place with his bare toes peeking from under his jeans.

Jude zoomed by Sam’s leg on the scooter he was not permitted to ride indoors, heading for the foyer. Luckily Nick got a sweeping one-armed grip of the three year old, while stalling the toy by its handle. He plunked Jude, too surprised to protest, onto his lap. Just then Dean ducked back into the family room from the connecting door to the massive farmhouse kitchen of their Occidental home, muttering about golden crisp mashed potato toppings, casseroles and oven timers.

“They’re coming.” Robbie vibrated in his lookout spot, half hidden by the long drapes.

Sam peered over his eldest nephew’s head to see Castiel looking moderately perplexed as Lola tugged him away from the tree line along the meandering gravel path, her unconcealed excitement infecting Smaug, adolescent Husky guard dog cum drooling slob. Hearing Castiel gruffly order Smaug to behave made Sam snicker. He ruffled Robbie’s hair in silent appreciation for the boy’s excellent naming choices.

Sam glanced back, checking everyone was in place. Castiel’s birthday had been and gone, but the
kids had been up for surprising their Pops. Lola’s large-eyed coy request to help Uncle Cas take Smaug for a walk, had been expertly done. Dean hissed in Sam’s ear that Lola was gonna be dangerous.

Robbie darted from the window to the open door, ready to grab Cas as soon as he and Lola were out of the boot room. Dean had leant against the side of the sofa. Fiona perched on its arm, wrapped around her Daddy, her blond head leaning on his shoulder. She had her ever-present baby-doll, Dolly, hanging out of her other hand. Dolly had a pink hat to match Fiona’s sparkling tee, but wore nothing else. Jude, whose bright green tee declared he was a Little Dude, escaped Nick’s hold and ran back and forth so much that Sam suspected he’d be planted on his pull up at any moment.

The family room wasn’t as spacious as the huge kitchen, more snug and homey, large TV mounted on the wall above a mountain of toys and games. There was a long sofa, three mismatched armchairs and a few beanbags stolen from the kids’ rooms for the day. Above the wide stone fireplace hung one of Dean’s largest works. Sam considered it his brother’s masterpiece. When he had showed it at Salmon Creek Gallery, there had been a multitude of offers to buy, even though it had been marked ‘not for sale’. It was a view looking down from the cliff at the Cove, the tide was out, sands clean and inviting. Three little figures built sandcastles while two adult shapes swam closer to the cliff where the water was deep. Sam had noted that Castiel and Dean’s fingers would tangle, or their eyes met softly, when one noticed the other’s gaze lingering on the painting.

The Winchesters had been lucky to find their rural home on Joy Road. It was a doer-upper foreclosure that fell just inside their stretch-to-make-it-possible budget limit. On almost an acre of land, the 1950s built single storey house had four bedrooms and a larger back lot with neglected vegetable patches and out houses already laid out for Castiel’s sustainability plans. It was surrounded by redwoods giving it the feel of a private retreat, yet it was barely two miles into the community of Occidental and only ten to Bodega Bay and Salmon Creek beyond.

The side door to the house opened and havoc reigned. Fee and Jude couldn’t contain themselves and started to sing a jumbled up version of Happy Birthday. Nick picked up the extra large pie dish as he stood from the sofa. The draft of breeze from opening and closing doors blew out a few of the candles. Robbie flew by everyone and leaped into a stunned Castiel’s arms, wrapping his legs around his father’s hips and singing that it was another birthday.

“What is all this?” Castiel double blinked while jiggling his eight year old in his arms.

Dean stood more slowly, crossed the space between them and kissed Castiel’s cheek.

“Happy Birthday again Darlin’,” He ducked his head slightly and explained, “The kids wanted a family celebration.”

“And I said that all the parties for the guys in school are at the weekend, so Pops’ party should be too.” Robbie added his own logic as he slipped down to stand on his own two feet.

“And I was a secret agent.” Lola bopped up and down on her toes, “I was really good wasn’t I, Daddy? Papa?”

Nick and Sam nodded, but Lola wasn’t finished.

“And I asked Gadreel, and he said you must be really calm, like Sister Julienne who never gets shouty, and you should make up a story for you, like you are in Mogadiso… Mogidisu… that place where Gad was spying for Uncle Michael but was pretending he wanted to build a factory.”
Sam looked at Nick, who was stony-faced. He opened his mouth to advise Lola against taking up spying and secret agenting as a favored activity. The trouble she could cause and experience was on the tip of his tongue but instead he asked, “And what did you pretend to be?”

Lola stood tall, drawing up to her full four and a half feet, “I was a girl, who had an Uncle, who had a dog, who needed a walk in the woods, and didn’t know there was going to be a party, and she was very nice and liked purple and small monkeys and her name was Deanna.”

Castiel hummed with the corners of his lips turned up, “This explains why we discussed all that can be purple on the way to the winery boundary fence and spider moneys all the way back.”

“So long as it wasn’t flying howler monkeys.” Dean gave an exaggerated shudder before turning his troublemaker grin on Sam, “or clowns, hey Sam? Imagine if her secret identity loved clowns?”

“No thank you, Dean.” Sam pursed his lips, which only made Dean, and other nameless family members, howl with laughter.

“You gonna blow out these candles before there is a lake of wax on your pie?” Nick shouted when they recovered.

“Oh God, Cas!” Dean yelped, “Save the pie!”

“My pleasure,” Castiel smirked in Dean’s direction before coming over and bending down to blow out the remaining candles.

Sam clapped along with the cheering kids. It was their Pawpaw’s Castiel Welcome Pie, the peach wonder that Dean Campbell had baked with Dean way back when Sam had been on enforced bed rest, and now Dean baked it with mini-chef Robbie as a new family tradition.

Castiel shared out slices of the decadent treat. Dean warned the kids that if they filled their bellies now, then they wouldn’t be able to eat later yummy foods. Sam shook his head when Dean surreptitiously took a second slice of pie when the kids weren’t looking. For the sake of fraternal peace and harmony he bit back a snarky comment of practicing what you preach.

Dean stood patting his full belly and winked at Sam, knowing his brother had spotted the double serving. While Dean was by no means overweight, he had lost both the terrible teenage gauntness and the worn anxious look of nine years earlier. His body was softer, not so lean anymore. Of course, Dean would rib Sam and say he had no right to make remarks as he hadn’t pushed three children into the world. In fact, he’d point out Sam hadn’t pushed out any.

Lost in his thoughts, Sam looked up when Dean and Robbie moved to take the empty pie plates to the kitchen. He leaned into Nick’s side, feeling his husband’s arm slide around his shoulders.

“You good?” Nick checked.

Sam shuffled closer and down into the squishy cushions so he could place his head on Nick’s shoulder, “Uh-uh, yeah. Better than good. Golden.”

Nick’s hand rubbed up and down. His voice held caressing humor, “You’re so cute like this.”

Sam gave a mild stink eye but didn’t protest.

“You are. My adorable Sam.”

“Daddy and Papa are getting all snuggly.” Lola announced at volume.
Nick snaked his free hand out, pulling his daughter by the ends of her flared denim skirt. “Can’t have you missing out.”

Sam pushed his back into the corner of the seat to make room for Lola to be a snuggle bug in the middle. The moment was sweet and precious, not even Lola’s boney elbow in his ribs spoiled it. It didn’t last. Robbie came barreling back in from the kitchen, offering to take Lola to see the chickens, and she was gone.

Dean cocked his eye towards Jude who was curled into a ball on the larger old corduroy beanbag. Smaug was laid out on her side behind him.

“I think it’s nap time.” Castiel announced, rising to help Dean take the twins down to their bedroom.

“You want help?” Sam offered, hoping his reluctance to move wasn’t too evident.

“Naw, Sammy. We got this.” Dean said, planting a squirming protesting Fiona on his hip, while Castiel carefully scooped their dozing youngest into his arms.

Dean and Castiel came back via the kitchen, bringing a pot of coffee for the adults and homemade sweet lemonade for Robbie and Lola, who followed in their wake.

“Can I give Uncle Cas his gift now?” Lola asked.

“Of course,” Sam agreed, nodding at Nick, who eased out of the comfortable seat to retrieve their presents from the car.

“There was no need to give me a gift,” Castiel huffed, “Wasn’t a special birthday.”

“I dunno, Cas,” Dean rejoined, “35 is pretty special, and y’know gifts are all good.”

Castiel quirked his lips, both men sharing a conspiratorial look that had Sam almost nervous.

Nick closed the front door carefully so not to wake the napping twins. As the older man reappeared, Dean produced a square beaten copper frame from the cabinet under the mounted TV.

“Robbie was reading a story where the Granny got a string of pearls because it was her thirtieth wedding anniversary.” Castiel began.

“So he asked Cas how many years we’d be married before Christmas, and Cas said five.” Dean continued.

“And then Robbie wanted to know was there a special thing to give…”

Dean’s shoulders began to heave. Sam furrowed his brow at him. Dean blurted, half unintelligible with laughter, “Cas googled it, and he says all serious like… Wait for it… *It says here Dean, that I need to give you wood….* as you can imagine, I took him up on his offer.”

Sam stretched to the armchair and whacked Dean’s arm. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I think you’ll find you mean adorable,” Dean responded snap quick before moving on, “When we had recovered, Cas continued his nerdish exploration of traditional gifting. He found out that for seven years of wedded bliss we should be getting you guys copper or wool.”

“We found the frame in Celestine’s.” Castiel told them, breaking out a toothy grin at Dean’s storytelling, “and the photo is an old one, from your album.”
Sam received the frame from Dean’s hand. It was an attractive crafted piece with a black felt covered standing leg extending from the back. The photo was one of his favorites, occupying pride of place in the early sheets of their very first family album.

“How did you get this?” He asked in awe, tilting it for Nick to see. Sam’s floppy nineteen year old hair spilled onto his forehead not quite covering his eye, as he craned his neck to be in the shot with Nick who gazed blissfully towards his new boyfriend. The top buttons of Sam's black work-shirt were open, Nick’s silk tie slack at the collar of his matching dark shirt. It had been taken in The Gates of Hell by Tom, Meg’s brother, when he’d dined with friends that Easter Monday. Sam loved it for the pleasure evident on both their faces so early in their relationship.

“It was a covert operation.” Lola giggled. “Do you like it, Papa?”

“We had inside help.” Dean confirmed.

“I love it.” Sam beamed.

“We love it.” Nick confirmed. He whispered into Sam’s ear, “Do you think we should buy her a James Bond boxset and arrange a day trip to ADL’s San Francisco operations, or tell Gadreel he’ll be banned from the house if he tells any more Somalia stories?”

“Both,” Sam muttered with a wry twist to his lips. Before he could get maudlin imagining adult-Lola heading up the undercover division of her empire, the imp in question produced her Hello Kitty paper wrapped gift for Castiel.

“I bought it for you outta my allowance.” Lola made sure to tell her uncle.

“That is very kind of you, Lola.” Castiel bent from the waist to give her a one armed hug.

“Open it.” Robbie and Lola echoed each other.

To the sound of ripping paper, Sam watched his daughter’s bitten lip and twisted fingers as she waited for the verdict on her choice.

“Oh Lola. That’s perfect.” Castiel said warmly, holding up the Honey Bee sun catcher to the light from the window.

“You couldn’t have gotten Cas anything better,” Dean said seriously, reaching over to run his thumb down on the smooth stained glass between the wire framing.

“You like?” Lola double checked with Castiel.

“I love.” Castiel nodded, grabbing her for a tighter hug.

Lola danced over to Sam and Nick, filled with delight. Nick patted the free side of the sofa for her to sit next to him.

“We got you something too.” Sam handed over the not at all suspiciously laptop bag shaped parcel.

“Hmm, I wonder what this is?” Castiel deepened his voice, winking at Robbie.

The verdict was positive on the cross body leather trimmed laptop and messenger bag. Once more thanks were exchanged on all sides, Robbie helped his Pops try it out, confirming it would accommodate his computer with plenty of space for notebooks and essentials.

Over coffee, Dean pulled Sam aside.
“So,” Dean glanced away, acting unconcerned, but that didn’t fool Sam. “How’s being a professor working out for ya?”

Sam snorted, “Associate professor, Mr. Gallery Director.”

“Yeah, well, I only do a couple of hours while the kids are in daycare or school. What I mean is, those guys with tenure and shit, they’re not giving the department newbie any crap, are they Sammy?”

Sam couldn’t stop his lips rising in a fond smile, picturing all the times his silent big brother had braved school yard bullies to stop them picking on his nerdy little bro. He clapped Dean on the shoulder.

“You are the director, Dean. It’s on that brass plate Benny screwed into the office door. And,” He huffed, “there’s been no crap at Stanford. They’ve welcomed me onboard, and have been real complimentary about my paper being published. And yeah, I mean, I might have been allocated the late lecture on Fridays, the smallest office, and the teaching assistant who smells of wet dog, but it’s all good.”

“Good.” Dean nodded firmly. He swung his thumb towards window, “Any news from up north?”

“You mean from Adam and his girl in Seattle? Nothing new. Too busy settling in as biology pre-med seniors, I guess, but he promised in his last facebook message that they’d try to make it down for Lola’s birthday next month.” Sam explained.

Dean hummed. “Will be good to see the other college boy in the family. But I meant Bobby and the puppies.”

“Shush! Dee!” Sam hissed, “No mention of the impending birth in Sioux Falls. Lola wants one.”

“Ah!” Dean sucked in his lips. “Is she going to get one?”

“Dean,” Sam eye rolled. He kept his voice low, but Lola was entertaining her Daddy and Robbie. “Bobby’s breeding mastiffs. But yeah, I think a pet would be great for her, just something smaller and less like the dog in Hellraiser.”

“Ah Sammy, you’re not getting her a kitten? Are you? You know I’m allergic.” Dean scrubbed at his nose.

Sam wrinkled his brow and cocked his head towards the yard, “What do you call Bert and Ernie out there?”

“Farm cats.” Dean pronounced, “They sleep in the outhouse.”

Sam just shook his head. Dean’s mild allergy meant that their two black cats were excluded from the bedrooms but there was a suspicious soft bed in the boot room and kitty toys under the kitchen table.

“Hey, Cas,” Nick was saying as the brothers rejoined the conversation, “did you do anything special for the birthday itself?”

Castiel plunked a hip on the edge of the chair Dean had taken. He ran his fingers, almost unconsciously, into the short strands at the back of Dean’s neck. “Tuesday evening, Inias and Alfie kindly took our children with their daughters for burgers and a DVD showing back at their place.”
“And I took Cas down to Novato to see the IMAX release of Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Dean added enthusiastically.

Nick laughed loudly. He asked with a put on air of fond disbelief, “You took your husband on his birthday to indulge your Harrison Ford fantasies?”

“Ah, Nick babe,” Sam huffed softly, “I guess they didn’t see that much of Indy. Wrapped together in the back row like a couple of moon-eyed teens?”

“Hey,” Dean protested with hitched chuckling speech, “We were three rows from the back.”

Sam raised his brows.

Dean sniggered, “And my gift blew.”

Nick and Sam exchanged a knowing look about Dean’s sense of humor.

Robbie piped up, “Bet it didn’t, Daddy. Pops said your gift was awesome.”

Castiel’s was pink-tinged from his collar up. His Adam’s apple bobbed. Dean squeezed his thigh, while Cas nodded slowly at his eldest, who looked proud as punch that he had spoken up.

When a natural lull fell in their conversations, Dean rose to check on their meal. Sam tapped Nick’s arm and looked towards the door. The pitter patter of small feet along hardwood flooring presaged the arrival of the twins, in their PJs and slipper socks, trying to sneak in unnoticed. It was adorable, especially when they were outraged that they were caught and welcomed in.

Jude let out a squeal of, “But we’re small.”

Sam swept him up to carry his little nephew on his shoulders. “And now you’re tall.”

Jude pealed with giggles. “I can touch the roof!”

“Ceiling, Juju.” Robbie corrected.

“I can touch the ceiling,” Jude repeated. Mindful of his precious cargo, Sam crouched through the doorway as he followed Dean into the kitchen. “Is very high. Do you get dizzy, Unca Sam?”

“Bet he does,” Dean encouraged, before Sam respond, “Sasquatches are very dizzy creatures.”

“Thank you, Jerk.” Sam sighed, putting Jude down. The little scamp ran straight back into the family room.

“You’re welcome, Princess.” Dean chortled.

They busied themselves with getting the casserole and roasted vegetables ready to serve. Dean pulled oven heated plates out and handed Sam mitts to bring them to the table. Castiel appeared to take the basket of round bread rolls and a carafe of water. The others followed in, chatting and laughing together as they made their way to their places at the long farmhouse dining table. Robbie and Lola helped Fee and Jude onto their booster cushions. Robbie put a cup of juice into Fiona’s grabby hands.

Everything was set to go for a meal that was making Sam’s mouth water from the aromas of Dean’s cooking. He half-turned to check that they were ready to move. Dean was standing arms loose, next to his giant casserole dish with the serving spoon wedged into the potato topping like a leaning flag-pole. Sam wrinkled his brow at him.
“I don’t…” Dean cleared his throat and then scrubbed his hand over his mouth and jaw, “say it much, but Sammy, you’ve grown, overgrown, into a fine human being. I’m real proud of you.”

“Right back atcha, Dean,” Sam felt his chest swell with pride and affection. Hearing Dean break through his wall of emotional repression meant so much to him. He knew his brother would protest any talking about their feelings, so he clapped his hand all the way around Dean’s bicep and quirked a dimpled grin, “We made it, big brother.”

Dean’s gaze spanned across their assembled family, taking in the fridge magnet photo collage of those not present that day. Sam tracked his eyes and followed suit.

“We did, Sam. We made it.” Dean gulped, then he cleared his throat again, ducked his glistening eyes a moment, before he added, “Well come on, let’s eat, you big moose, before you get all chick flick.”

Sam wisely refrained from pointing out that Dean was the glassy eyed one. He looked over Dean’s shoulder, catching Nick mid-admiring peek in his direction. Nick pursed his lips in a quick private psychic kiss. Castiel had settled the kids and was patting Dean’s empty chair in encouragement for his husband to take his place at his side.

Sam carried the warmed plates, trailing behind his brother, just like when he was small.

Back then his bowed head would have looked from under long bangs and shy lids at the sway of his marvelous silent brother’s walk, and at old scuffed trainers that kicked up dust, or snow, or sand, or garbage, as they ventured onwards down a long winding path that had led them here and now, to this warm glowing home and their family on Joy Road.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. Thank you for your patience with delays, specifically for this last chapter. But as Chuck said, endings are hard.

Thank you again for every kudos, favorite, comment, review, follow, bookmark and subscription on AO3 and Fanfiction.net. They encouraged and buoyed me to continue (and to improve) this story. Special mention to my cheerleaders (you’ll know who you are, I hope. <3 you.)

This story has taken almost nine months to write (kind of an appropriate amount of time) and it has mostly been a pleasure, a wonder and a revelation to me. I will be bereft without this version of Dean, Castiel, Sam and Lucifer.

Fin.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!