### Give Me Hope in the Darkness

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1142364).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M, F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Supernatural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Destiel, Castiel/Dean Winchester, Castiel &amp; Dean Winchester, Jessica Moore/Sam Winchester, Ellen/Bobby - Relationship, Bartholomew/Castiel (Supernatural), Dorothy Baum/Charlie Bradbury, (mentioned) - Relationship, Dean/Lisa, Ambiguous or Implied Relationship(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Castiel, Dean Winchester, Sam Winchester, Missouri Moseley, Bobby Singer, Jo Harvelle, Ellen Harvelle, Emma Winchester, Ben, Lisa Braeden, Original Male Character, Anna Milton, Benny Lafitte, Jessica Moore, Other canon characters, Charlie Bradbury, Dorothy Baum, Bartholomew (Supernatural), Original Jessica Moore/Sam Winchester Child(ren), Claire Novak, Gabriel (mentioned), Original Female Character, Jimmy Novak, (sorta) - Character, Uriel (Supernatural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alternate Universe, Safe Haven, Hurt/Comfort, All Human, abuse tw, Slow Build Castiel/Dean Winchester, Violence, almost, Angst, Fluff, Romance, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Flashbacks, Past Abuse, Time Skips, Non-Linear Narrative, Past Sexual Abuse, Emotional Manipulation, Consent Issues, Sexual Violence, Supernatural Elements, dean is bi, Dean is out, Minor Character Death, Dom/sub Undertones, POV Multiple, Graphic Description of Corpses, Top Castiel/Bottom Dean Winchester, Bottom Castiel/Top Dean Winchester, Bottom Castiel, Castiel-centric, Unreliable Narrator, POV Third Person, POV shifts, Adultery, no abuse between deancas, Top Dean Winchester, Cockwarming, Explicit Sexual Content, Dubious Consent, Top Castiel, Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies- Almost!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Summary

Jimmy Novak took the name Castiel the night he escaped his life on a southbound Greyhound bus. He found himself a thousand miles away in North Carolina, with little money, no job, nowhere to stay, and no one he knew. He was alone. Then he met charismatic widower Dean Winchester and his two children, Ben and Emma. Suddenly, for the first time in years, Castiel felt safe.
This fic was inspired by and based upon the book and movie Safe Haven by Nicholas Sparks. The title is from “Ghosts That We Knew” by Mumford and Sons.

I would like to thank Her-Roses-Never-Fall for her help on this fic. I couldn't have done it without you, Cayla.

Please heed the tags. Major trigger warnings for domestic abuse, including scenes of non-consensual sex, coerced consent, and graphic physical abuse. There are also instances of emotional and psychological abuse. Castiel is in a bad place. And bad things happen to him.

*If you or someone you know is being abused, please seek help. If you feel you are unable to seek help on your own, message me here or on Tumblr and I will do all I can to help you.*
Chapter One: Holland Road

Chapter Track: Holland Road, by Mumford and Sons

March 31, 2014

90 Holland Road

Brookline, Massachusetts

I ran away in floods of shame
I’ll never tell how close I came
As I crossed the Holland Road
Well you went left and I went right
As the moon hung proud and bright
You would have loved it here tonight

Jimmy Novak sprinted down the quiet street, his heart hammering against his chest.

Evening was just settling in, giving the sky a surreal blue-green hue that he’d always loved until this moment. Jimmy ran from his life—he ran for his life—away from that cold Tudor house on Holland Road. His breath was quick and fast, broken only by sobs he could no longer hold back.

Jimmy clutched a pillowcase tightly between bloodstained fingers. It was filled with everything he’d had time to grab in the few moments before he ran: a photograph of Claire, faded and bent, his mother’s bible, a wad of cash he’d slowly been stealing from Bart since Thanksgiving, a few changes of clothes and his trench coat. And that was it. That was all he took with him from the life
he’d endured for ten long years.

Mosquitos swarmed around him; the unusual humidity for this time of year brought them out much earlier than expected, even as small pockets of dirty snow still lingered in the street gutters.

Jimmy ran on, through Newberry’s campus and up three streets to Chestnut Hill.

The fabric of his dress shirt clung to his back. A stinging pain in his left heel reminded him that he was barefoot but he ignored it and ran faster. He was good at ignoring pain, at pushing through it. Hell, he’d been doing it for so long, it was second nature.

Up ahead, he could see Missouri’s quaint blue house; the street lamp cast an eerie red glow against the slightly worn paint. Her door was right there and he knocked loudly, banging his fists against the stained glass window, smearing blood on the pane. Jimmy found himself sobbing before she even opened up.

Missouri Moseley saw the blood on his hands and immediately embraced him. “Jim, honey, what’s wrong? Where are you bleeding?” she asked, ushering him in. She took in his bloodshot eyes, the deepening bruises around his throat, his heavy limp.

“I-it’s not mine, Mo, it-it’s—” he broke off, choking on his words.

He told her what happened, his voice breaking every few words, as she helped him up the stairs into her bedroom. Missouri’s training took over. She assessed the way he limped across her hardwood floors, how shallow his breathes were. His hands were trembling. She tended to the cuts on his wrists quickly. One was deep, but she didn't think they were bad enough to warrant stitches.

Jimmy’s light brown hair was tangled and matted with blood. A small chunk of it was missing from the side of his head. By now, Jimmy was shaking so much she was afraid that he was going into shock, and Missouri moved faster. She pushed him towards the shower, and helped him start the tap.

Then she left, speeding to the corner market, where she purchased a box of black hair dye and a prepaid cellphone.

By the time she got back, Jimmy was sitting on her bed with a towel wrapped around his waist. His suit was on the floor in the adjacent bathroom; the bloody cuff of his sleeve had stained the rug in front of the sink.

He was staring straight ahead of him like it was the only thing he was capable of doing.

Missouri pulled him up and into the bathroom where she sat him down on the toilet. With trembling fingers, Missouri spread the dye over his hair, avoiding the abrasion on the back of his neck where what looked like a necklace chain had cut into his skin. She pulled an electric shaver from under the sink and instructed him to remove his full beard. As he did so, she murmured softly to him what the plan was. Her voice was soothing and her touch was gentle.

Missouri applied antibiotic to his broken skin. She was worried about Jimmy's ribs, and though she tried to maintain the same clinical detachment she’d perfected over her years at the hospital, Jimmy's whine of pain at the gentle brush of her fingers brought tears to her eyes.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” she asked, facing the wall.

Jimmy didn’t say anything. He wiped tears from his cheeks roughly. Missouri pressed her finger underneath his chin, meeting his blank gaze.
“Jim, honey, do you have somewhere safe to go?”

“No, he—” Jimmy choked for a moment, before clearing his throat. “—he’s isolated me so much … my family... I can’t go back to them. They don’t want me.”

“What about a friend?”

“You’re my only friend.” The desperation in his voice wrenched something loose deep inside her and she fought back the tears in her eyes.

Missouri nodded once and walked over to her bed. She opened the cedar chest at the foot of her bed, digging around for a cigar box that she kept her emergency cash in. She pulled most of it out and wrapped it up in a thick bundle, placing it in Jimmy’s uninjured hand.

“It’s not much, but it will get you somewhere safe. Be careful with this. Make it last,” she said.

“I can’t take your money,” he protested, handing it back to her.

“I want you to have it,” she said; her tone brooked no argument. “Get to the bus station. Go to Atlanta. Then, you get on another bus and don’t you look back, you hear, honey?”

She pulled more clothes from her late husband’s closet and put them in a leather duffle bag Clarence used to use for his business trips. Jimmy watched as she dumped the contents of his pillowcase onto her bed and then packed them into the duffle as well. He didn’t notice when she put the rest of her emergency cash in a pair of socks and dropped it down into the bottom of the bag.

A few minutes later, a timer went off in the bathroom and she helped him to the edge of the tub, where she rinsed out his hair. Jimmy stared at himself in the mirror. His once light brown hair was now almost black, bringing out deep blue of his eyes. Missouri sat him down in front of the mirror and picked up a pair of scissors and a comb.

He watched, silent, as she cut his hair shorter than it had been in a years. Now that it was out of his eyes, the bruise around his temple seemed even more pronounced. His long hair had hidden much of the damage that Bartholomew caused. Which of course, was exactly why he kept it long in the first place.

More often than not, his long curls distracted people from seeing the deep circles beneath his eyes. Instead of the gaunt outline of his cheekbones, and the bruises only so much makeup could cover, they focused on his curls.

His hair felt too short now; he didn’t recognize himself. Jimmy felt vulnerable.

Missouri waited in the kitchen while he dressed in a faded pair of jeans, an old t-shirt, and tennis shoes that were half a size too big. He met her at the front door where she handed him a hoodie and he pulled it over his head, feeling alien in clothes that were not his, with hair that wasn’t his.

They got into the car, where Jimmy pulled his hood up and hid as she backed out of her driveway and onto her quiet street. She went the long way, avoiding Holland Road. As they pulled out onto the highway, the first few drops of rain fell onto the windshield.

Night had settled in and the streetlights were coming on as they pulled onto the pitted asphalt of the bus station parking lot. Missouri parked by a burnt out light post. She pulled the hood over his head and handed him a pair of thick framed reading glasses.

“Put these on,” she said, her voice trembled. She wrote her phone number down on a slip of paper
and handed him the prepaid phone. “Call me as soon as you get settled somewhere safe, all right?”

Jimmy nodded. He got out of the car and leaned down to the open window. Rain was coming down in earnest now, landing on the windshield as he looked at her one last time.

“Thank you, for everything. I won’t forget it.”

“Oh, honey, you’re welcome.” Jimmy turned to leave. “Wait!” she called out, and Jimmy turned back to face her. She dug around in her bag. “Here, take this, too.”

She handed him a small statuette. It was an angel, carved out of white marble, and small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. The stone was well worn in some places, one base’s corners was chipped. It was obvious that Missouri had carried it around for a long time.

“What is it?”

“It’s a charm for Castiel, the angel of Thursday. His name means ‘Shield of God’,” Jimmy looked up then, into her dark eyes. “It’s supposed to protect you,” she said.

He smiled at her. “Thank you,” he said.

“You stay safe now, y’hear?” She patted him once on the hand and put the car into drive. And then she was gone.

Jimmy limped toward the bus station, careful to keep his face obscured by the hood of his sweatshirt. The duffle bag was getting heavier by the second, straining his bruised ribs.

The glasses Missouri had given him were ill fitting; the increasing raindrops obscured his vision. The bus station was teeming with people, all trying to get to where they were going. A woman with a baby was sitting on a bench, a vintage suitcase at her feet. A man in a rumpled business suit was yelling at a teller, trying to catch a bus to Memphis. It was busy enough that Jimmy was able to pass through the station undetected, keeping his eyes on the scuffed tile floor.

Jimmy wiped the glasses. He did his best to ignore the sleepy-eyed attendant’s double take, quietly ordering his ticket to Atlanta. He paid with a pair of folded bills from the money Missouri gave him. The attendant counted out his change and printed his ticket, but paused, distracted by the sound of sirens in the parking lot.

Jimmy froze. His heart rate spiked. He grabbed the ticket from the attendant, who was more interested in peering around his side to the front doors, trying to see what all the ruckus was out front.

The lights reflected off of the rain splattered windows, casting an eerie glow on the room. Jimmy strode away quickly, towards his bus terminal. He bought the earliest bus out of Boston towards Atlanta, and it departed in five minutes, but that might be too late.

Jimmy kept his head down, even as he heard a voice that made his heart stop. He was surely caught now, just like last time. Only this time, he knew he couldn’t go back to that house on Holland Road. He couldn’t—no, wouldn’t—go back. Jimmy cut to the left, crossing between two whirring buses. Up ahead, he could see the flashing lights of his bus, signaling its imminent departure.

He climbed aboard, ignoring the pungent odor of carpet cleaner and dust. Jimmy nodded once at the driver, a middle aged woman with a prim demeanor, and made his way to the back of the bus, where he took his seat. He looked out the window.

A man held up a badge and boarded the bus next to theirs. Jimmy pulled the hood even further down his face and turned away. The windows were tinted. He wouldn’t be spotted. *Just breathe,* he
The bus driver finally made her opening announcements and Jimmy heaved a sigh when she closed the door and pulled away from the loading dock.

He didn’t fully relax until they were out of Boston, when the city lights faded away into hilly countryside. By then, night had truly fallen. The rain stopped somewhere around Philadelphia, but the air was colder there. The driver pulled over at a Gas N’ Sip somewhere in Maryland and Jimmy got out to use the restroom.

He kept to himself, not meeting anyone’s eye as he purchased a bag of chips and a water and retook his place in the back of the bus.

They drove for another hour before he felt safe enough to sleep.
Collect your Courage

Chapter Summary

Jimmy felt tears well up in his eyes and furiously wiped away a tear. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said, walking over to the man.

The man smirked. “Yes I did. Coulda just as easily been me.” The man was handsome, Jimmy thought. His eyes were soft and his low voice was soothing. Jimmy studied him for a moment, watching the heat touch his pale blue eyes.

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: for uses of homophobic slurs.

Chapter Two: Collect Your Courage

Chapter Track: Silver Wings, Thrice

August 18, 2003

Boston, Massachusetts

Jimmy glanced down at his watch, sighing. His shift didn’t end for another two hours and the day had dragged by. Hannah had begged him to take her lunch shift that afternoon and he’d agreed, partly because he needed the extra tip money for his water bill, but also because he owed her one. Now, as he stared out at the nearly empty bar, he wished he hadn’t.

It was three o’clock on a Tuesday afternoon, too early for the dinner crowd and too late for the lunch rush. A handsome man in a gray suit sat at the end of the bar, nursing three fingers of expensive whiskey, while a couple sat holding hands in a booth near the corner. When Jimmy had brought them their beers, he’d noticed that the man wore a plain band on his left hand, but the woman did not. They had barely acknowledged his presence, and he’d quickly retreated back to the highly polished bar to refill the man at the end’s glass.

The restaurant was one of the finest in the city, an old oyster bar that had been around since the Puritans, one he’d never be able to afford as a customer. The clientele was exclusive and very wealthy and Jimmy had been lucky to get a job here shortly after leaving Pontiac for bigger and better things. He had moved to Boston because it was far enough away that no one would know him, and it was progressive enough for him to feel relatively safer than he had in the tiny, intolerant town he’d grown up in.

Jimmy ignored the pang of sadness prickling in the corner of his eyes. Claire was probably just getting home from pre-school. He cleared his throat and pushed the thought to the back of his mind. Later, he thought. You can think about that later. There was a time and place to think about Claire, and work wasn’t it.
He was in the process of wiping down the bar for the third time when a group of five men entered the restaurant. They were loud as they made their way over to the bar. One of them, an attractive man with perfectly styled brown hair held up his hand and Jimmy put away his rag before approaching the men.

“I’ll have a round of Guinness and keep them coming,” he’d said with a watered down version of what Jimmy was coming to recognize as Brahmin accent. Cas studied them. They were dressed in crisp name brand golf clothes, and one of them had a sunburn across his high cheekbones. They were obviously wealthy, and they moved through the bar with ease.

“Sure thing,” he said and he set to work.

“Did you hear about Andrew?” A tall man with dark eyes asked. The other’s replied negatively as Jimmy placed chilled glasses in front of them.

“No, what happened, Will?” another one replied.

The tall man, Will, took a sip of beer. “He got caught with his pants down at Charles’ reception,” he paused for what Jimmy could guess was dramatic effect, “with his stepmother,” he added gleefully.

They all burst out into laughter. “I’m not surprised,” the man with brown hair said. “I mean, she is only what, a year older than he is? Hanover’s old man always was a dirty old coot,” the others whooped and hollered.

“What are they going to do now?” one of them asked and Will shrugged.

“His old man kicked them both out last I heard,” he replied. Jimmy turned away from the group. “Won’t pay Drew’s tuition or anything.”

“Poor Drew,” the pudgy one said. Jimmy rolled his eyes as he walked away from them, toward the man in the gray suit.

“Poor Drew my fucking ass. Elizabeth is a hot piece of tail. Plus she’s an heiress in her own right. I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Need another?” Jimmy asked him. The man quietly placed a hand over the rim of his glass. Jimmy smiled briefly at him, distracted by a round of raucous laughter from the other end of the bar. “Let me know when you’re ready to close your tab,” he said and the man nodded.

They were interrupted by the group of men laughing obnoxiously at the other end of the bar. “Hey you!” a short pudgy man called out. “We could use another round over here!” Jimmy barely contained an exasperated expression before filling another pitcher of beer.

He had just set it down when the man with brown hair frowned at him. “Do I know you?” he asked. “Yeah! Yeah I do, you’re that Jimmy dude that Paige brought with her to last week’s party on campus. You made out with that faggot Raphael in the hot tub.”

All the color rushed from Jimmy’s face. He didn't remember much about that night except that he’d woken up with a stranger in a bed he hadn’t recognized. He must have made more of a fool of himself than he originally thought. But it had been nice, to forget about his life for a while. To be himself for the first time ever. To not be afraid of his feelings. But he was at work now, and he needed to get out of this conversation quickly.

Jimmy tried to play it off. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”
“No, no it was definitely you,” the pudgy man chimed in. Jimmy bit his lip and backed away.

“You have me mistaken for someone else.”

“Oh come on princess, did you at least fuck him after all the work did in the hot tub? Or wait, I bet you play catcher. Am I right? I am. I’m right.”

“He’s definitely a bottom bitch,” one of them said. Jimmy felt like he was shrinking.

The group of men laughed and Jimmy flushed bright red. He needed to get out of there. “Look I—I,” he stuttered and they laughed again. He took a deep breath. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” he said, mustering up enough courage to look the leader of the group in the eyes. They were pale blue, and bloodshot. His pupils were pinpricks. The man smirked then he deliberately tipped his beer forward until it clattered to the polished bar top. It shattered, and beer splattered down the front of his black work shirt, staining his blue tie.

“Oh really, faggot? You and what army?” Jimmy glanced at the couple in the booth, flushed. They were staring at them, watching the whole exchange. The woman’s lips were turned down in a slight frown but the man’s face was neutral.

“Please leave,” Jimmy said again. The shortest one snorted.

“No,” he said. “We would like to order some oysters,” he said smoothly, and Jimmy tasted bile in the back of his throat.

“I really think you should leave,” he asserted again and he cursed the tremble in his voice.

“Oh is little bitch gonna cry?” said Will, followed by a mock sob. His smirk was cruel and Jimmy felt his hand clench into a fist.

Suddenly he heard a voice from down the bar.

“Knock it off guys,” the voice said. The man in the gray suit was facing the group of men.

“Oh yeah? who’s gonna stop me?” The leader asked.

The man flashed a badge and Jimmy felt his heart begin to race.

“Do you know how easy it would be for me to make your life hell?” he asked, his voice low and dark. “For instance, that lovely aroma of weed coming off you, that could cause problems right? Mess up your scholarships. Your nice little degrees that mommy and daddy are paying for… poof! All gone. And those pretty blonde girlfriends I’m betting all you putzes have… they ain’t gonna stick around for a felon. No matter how big your bank account is. So I would suggest, strongly, that you leave your homophobic bullshit at the door if you ever wanna be welcome here again.” The silence after the man’s speech was heavy. Jimmy could only hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

They suddenly scattered. Will tossed a hundred dollar bill down onto the bar and they left the dining room. The man watched them go.

Jimmy felt tears well up in his eyes and furiously wiped away a tear. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said, walking over to the man.

The man smirked. “Yes I did. Coulda just as easily been me.” The man was handsome, Jimmy thought. His eyes were soft and his low voice was soothing. Jimmy studied him for a moment, watching the heat touch his pale blue eyes.
“Thank you,” Jimmy said. The man held out his hand. “I’m Bartholomew, but my friends call me Bart.”

“I’m Jimmy Novak.”

“Nice to meet you Jimmy.” Bart’s hand lingered in his, his thumb brushing the top of his fingers.

“Likewise,” he said. For the first time since those jerks walked in, Jimmy smiled.
In These Bodies We Will Live

Chapter Summary

Bobby Singer may be like a father to him, but he sure had questionable taste in television shows.

Chapter Three: In These Bodies We Will Live

Chapter Track: Black Coffee by Ella Fitzgerald

April 1, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

Dean Winchester stood behind the counter of his convenience store, working on inventory for the following week’s delivery. He could hear the television playing Tori and Dean upstairs in the loft’s rec room and shook his head.

Bobby Singer may be like a father to him, but the man had questionable taste in television shows.

“You wanna turn that down?” Dean hollered up. He looked down at his watch. “The bus’ll be here in fifteen minutes Bobby, and I’ll need your help with the rush!”

“I heard ya! Keep your pants on Dean,” Bobby yelled back, but the theme music of the show became quieter.

“Hey! Will you make a fresh pot of coffee? The customers always bitch when I make it!”

“Hell no, Princess. You’re more than capable of making a pot of coffee, and ‘sides, my show is on.”

Dean smiled as he went to refill the filter and start the water.

He looked up as the screen door leading to the dock slapped against the doorframe. He needed to fix it, but hadn’t found the time. He glanced outside, looking for Ben, and spotted him right where he’d left him, fishing off the edge of the dock. Emma was napping on the couch in his back office, just out of sight.

School had let out early that afternoon which had left Dean in a bit of a childcare predicament. With Emma in preschool and Ben in elementary school, Dean had all day to work at the store. Usually they went to the local YMCA’s after-school program or he had Charlie babysit until Dean switched shifts at five. Then, he would pick them up, take them home, and make dinner. Then, it was bath time and story time and bedtime and then, finally, he would have an hour or two to himself.

Dean finished his order and called it in just as the Greyhound bus squealed to a stop outside at the pump. He glanced at his watch. It was right on time. Dean smiled. Naomi must be driving. She was almost never late.

The bell over the front door opened as the first wave of passengers made their way through the door. An elderly woman asked about the restroom and Dean pointed her in the right direction before
selling a teenage boy with dreadlocks a bottle of soda and a candy bar.

Dean figured he noticed the dark haired man by the soda machine simply because he was going out of his way to be unnoticed.

He was wearing an oversized hoodie, with the sleeves pulled up to his elbows, despite the heat of the southern afternoon. Dean’s habit of catching detail, one born from the kind of training he received in the Army helped him to notice the bruising on his wrists, and the rather prominent one on his temple. Dean felt a twinge of apprehension as he took in the man’s gaunt features, and his extremely thin frame. Despite a strong profile, Dean could see that he’d suffered at least one broken nose in his life.

At that moment, the man, as if sensing eyes on him, turned. He caught Dean’s gaze and Dean had to catch his breath.

He had the most stunningly blue eyes Dean had ever seen. Dean glanced quickly away, feeling exposed.

Just then a woman came stomping up to the counter and Dean mentally sighed. Customers like this, with a sense of entitlement and a tendency towards rudeness, never failed to irk him.

“Excuse me,” she said in a brusque tone that made Dean inwardly cringe.

“Can I help you?” he asked, putting on his most professional face.

“Yes. You can. This is perhaps the worst coffee I’ve ever tasted, and I think you need to put on a fresh pot.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. He glanced over at the carafe of coffee he had made ten minutes prior to the bus’ arrival and bit his lip.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but that is fresh coffee. I made it myself not ten minutes ago.”

“You call that fresh? It’s at least two hours old.”

“No, ma’am. It’s not. I assure you. If the coffee is not to your taste, perhaps you’d like a bottle of water or a soda, but I guarantee you, if I make a new batch, which I’m not going to do by the way, it will taste exactly the same as what you have in your cup right there.”

“Well, then, I demand that I should at least get it for free for my trouble.”

Dean raised one eyebrow and deliberately punched the button on the register, ringing up the cup of coffee.

“That’ll be 97 cents,” he replied.

The woman huffed loudly, as if gearing up to start a scene.

“I want to speak to your manager,” she said with a sneer. Dean glanced around the store, before holding out his arms, palms up.

“Oh, wouldya look at that? I am the manager and owner of this lovely establishment. How can I help you?” he said with a smile.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the man smile as he poured himself a cup of coffee from the carafe.
She blustered some more before finally setting out exact change, in mostly pennies, and then stomped out, bitching and complaining all the way out the door to anyone who would listen to her.

Dean watched her go with a smirk firmly planted on his face.

He rang through a couple more customers, and chatted with Naomi about the incoming thunderstorm expected that afternoon.

Finally, when just about everyone had bought their products, the man that had caught Dean’s eye limped up to the counter.

He placed the cup of coffee down onto the counter and pulled out his wallet.

Dean couldn’t help but notice how long his fingers were. He had beautiful hands.

He cleared his throat and glanced back up at the man’s face, stunned again by the deep blue of his eyes.

The man stared at him expectantly.

“Oh uh, just the ‘mud’ for you, then?”

The man quirked a small smile and nodded.

He placed a dollar onto the table and Dean picked it up. He felt like a kid asking someone out on a date for the first time, and he was just ringing the guy out for God’s sake.

“Thank you,” the man said in a much deeper voice than Dean was expecting. He felt his cheeks heat up as he nodded and handed him back his change.

“No problem. Have a good one.”

The man smiled once more before leaving the store and Dean watched him go with a mixture of embarrassment, interest, and attraction swirling around in the pit of his stomach.
I'll be Home, Safe and Tucked Away

Chapter Summary

As the cabin came into view, Castiel immediately knew it was the place he wanted to call home.

It was small; if he had to guess, he’d say the entire structure would have fit comfortably in the great room of his house in Boston, but that didn’t matter. It looked perfect to him.

Chapter Four: I'll be Home, Safe and Tucked Away

Chapter Track: Brand New day, by Van Morrison

April 2, 2014

Jimmy stood on the dock of the general store, leaning up against the worn wood railing. There were gulls calling overhead and his newly cut hair was windblown. He had finally begun to relax once they reached North Carolina. Naomi had driven through the night, and he’d watched the sun rise over the crest of a mountain, wondering why the beauty of the pink sky against the deep green trees in the hills made him want to cry.

He nursed his coffee as he watched way the water on the Cape Fear River rippled and shimmered in the bright afternoon sunlight.

The air was lighter here; the smell of salt, magnolia and the earthy tones of the Spanish moss hanging on the massive live oaks that lined the riverbank was a stark contrast to the heavy, dirty air of Boston.

Behind him, Naomi, the driver, honked the horn. He turned around to see the rest of his fellow passengers gather up their belongings and return to the bus.

He looked down at the duffle bag he’d taken from his seat only minutes prior and felt a flash of anxiety. What if this was still too close?

But he brushed this wave of thought away. For the first time in years he felt a weight lift off his chest. He could breathe here.

So he rested against the railing once more, lifting his sore foot and placing it carefully against one of the rails.

He watched as the bus honked once more and then closed its doors. He watched it drive off until the bus was no longer in sight. Jimmy then finished his coffee and looked around at his new home, absentmindedly fingering the smooth stone of the statuette in his pocket.

Jimmy spent that first day in Southport just walking around, getting a lay of the land. Southport was small, much smaller than even he realized. He was used to a sprawling urban setting; a concrete jungle broken up by closet neighborhoods filled with people who generally didn’t know your or care, with people who pretended not to hear the fighting of their neighbors.
Here though, trees lined every street. People sat out on their front porches, enjoying the warm afternoon with glasses of sweet tea. Two men were playing checkers on a card table outside a barber shop. There were young kids playing in the park and Jimmy watched as a pair of mothers chatted on benches. He walked the entirety of the village, all four miles of it before ending up back where he started at the banks of the river. Then he started to walk along a path that directed him towards the coast.

By the time he made it to the beach, evening had fallen. The sun was setting behind him as he watched sky above the ocean gradually fade from orange, to blue to black. He sat down beneath the pier, the wooden planks providing some sort of shelter against the wind.

The sand was soft, and Jimmy brushed his hands back and forth across it, feeling the individual grains of sand slip between his fingertips.

That night Jimmy slept on the beach. He had counted his remaining money and decided against staying at the local motel. Better to be uncomfortable for a few nights and still be able to escape than to live in luxury and be stuck.

He needed to be careful with his money. It wouldn’t last long if he wasn’t.

The following day, Jimmy washed up in a public restroom and changed into one of the nicer outfits that Missouri had packed for him. He tried and failed to style his hair in a way that hid the worst of his bruising and meticulously brushed his teeth.

As he did so, he noticed that he was still wearing his ring. He glanced down at the simple gold band and frowned at the mirror.

He rummaged in the bottom of his toiletry bag to the small bottle of lotion that he saw there the previous day.

Jimmy slathered the lotion on his ring finger, coaxing the ring off with some difficulty. He glanced down at the band in his hand for a moment, his eyes catching on the faded inscription on the inside before he walked over to the door.

Jimmy took a deep breath and let the ring fall into the trashcan.

His first instinct was to reach back into the trash to find it. Just in case, he thought. But he didn’t. With hands shaking and his heart racing, he left that ring in the trashcan where it belonged.

Jimmy purchased a small muffin and a cup of coffee from a local bakery and walked around town once more, this time with a purpose.

He couldn’t live off of the money that Missouri had given him for very long. Jimmy needed a job.

First, he inquired at the chain retail stores that had begun to crop up in the outskirts of town, but after glancing at the applications, he realized that it would lead to too many questions.

He needed something local. Somewhere that wouldn’t look too deeply into his past.

As he made his way back to his spot on the beach, he passed a restaurant called The Roadhouse.

The restaurant looked like a biker bar met a fish market and had a love child. Out on the deck, people were eating and laughing, as wait staff bustled around the busy tables with trays of steaming fish.

He sat down on a bench near the entrance and watched the wait staff as they interacted with one
another. A sign over the door said “The Roadhouse, est. 1978”

Jimmy went inside after the lunch rush had cleared out, and went up to a woman in her forties. Her brown eyes were kind even if her voice was gruff.

“Excuse me,” he said softly, and she looked up.

“Can I help you?” she asked, pulling down a fresh glass for a customer and filling it with draft beer.

“Could I please speak to the owner?”

“You found her,” she said. “What can I help you with?”

Jimmy cleared his throat. “Um, I was wondering if you had any positions available? I’m new to town and I need a job.”

She gave him a once over, glancing at his thin frame, not entirely hidden by his bulky jacket and ill-fitting suit. His tie was backwards. She could see where his bruises and scrapes were healing up, and couldn’t help but notice the tan line on his ring finger. He looked so tired, skittish, like a scared animal. But his eyes were kind, gentle. He looked like a man who could use a break in life. Jimmy tried to remain calm as she scrutinized him, but he couldn’t help but shake slightly. He clenched his fists to steady his nerves.

“I’ve been pretty busy lately. I’m sure we could work something out,” the woman said finally.

Jimmy visibly sagged against the weight of anxiety lifting off his shoulders.

“Really?”

“Sure,” she said, holding out her hand. “Hey, I’m Ellen Harvelle. Welcome to the Roadhouse, what’s your name?”

“I’m uh… I’m Castiel Novak.”

“Nice to meet you Castiel. Do you have any experience?”

Castiel smiled tentatively. “Yes, but it’s been a long time. I used to be head waiter at a five star restaurant in Bost—” he stopped suddenly. He hadn’t meant to give so much away.

Ellen raised her eyebrow for a moment, but didn’t say anything about his sudden flush and clenched fingers.

“Well I’m sure we could use your help here. We’re nothing but a down home fish shack, but I’m sure you’ll fit right in.”

Ellen spent the rest of the day showing him the ropes. She gave him a few Roadhouse t-shirts and started him on a couple of tables that night during the dinner rush. It surprised him that she didn’t ask for his identification or fill out any paperwork. Rather she just put his name onto a handwritten roster and asked about his availability. They worked out a schedule and he made it clear that he’d be available any time. She introduced him to the other wait staff and he experienced his first dinner service since he was a young kid working his way through the upper crust of Boston’s finer restaurants.

When the evening ended, he felt tired in a good way, like for the first time in a while his work had actually meant something. That he wasn’t just treading water.
He rolled his new name over his tongue throughout the day, trying to make himself react to it as if it had always been his own.

The next few days passed by in a blur for Castiel. He went to work, built up his nest egg. The weather was beautiful, and warm for early April and the tips were good. Castiel continued to sleep beneath the pier. As the small bundle of cash in his bag began to grow, he started to think about finding a place to live. He knew he’d have to eventually. He couldn’t continue to wash up in a public bathroom forever. And his back was starting to protest long nights spent on the sand.

He mentioned it to Jo, Ellen’s daughter, and the only friend he’d made so far from work, as they were clearing a table and she promised to pass along the message to a friend of hers who was in real estate.

When he’d helped Ellen close up shop that night, Castiel made his way along the beach to his spot beneath the pier. Unfortunately, that night it rained. The pier was slotted and provided little shelter from the rain, and the trench coat Missouri had given him did little to keep him dry. The air was cold and the wind kept him up most of the night.

He awoke the next morning grumpy and exhausted. Once again he washed up in the public restroom on the beach.

Ellen had given him the day off, and Castiel decided to use it to find a place to stay. He used the disposable cell phone Missouri had given him to call Jo’s friend and they agreed to meet up.

A young woman with vibrant red hair showed him around town that afternoon. After describing what he was looking for and the rent he had calculated he could afford with his tips from the Roadhouse, they drove to several locations, looking at rental units.

None of them had seemed right to Castiel and he was frustrated. He didn’t want to be surrounded by people. He figured the best way to stay off people’s radar was to be as far away from them as possible.

He asked about anything a little further outside of town and Anna’s eyes brightened.

“As a matter of fact, my uncle was just telling me about some old hunting cabins he was thinking about letting out just a few weeks ago. I cannot believe that I didn’t think about it before!”

Anna called her uncle and he met her at the library where he worked to give her the key. They drove about a mile outside town towards the old Milton Plantation, turning off onto a gravel road hitting the plantation’s main road, and they drove for another mile or so. The gravel was washed out in a couple of places from the previous night’s rain, but Castiel watched as the light filtered down through the trees, giving the road a surreal, forgotten feeling.

As the cabin came into view, Castiel immediately knew it was the place he wanted to call home.

It was small; if he had to guess, he’d say the entire structure would have fit comfortably in the great room of his house in Boston, but that didn’t matter. It looked perfect to him.

As they exited Anna’s car Castiel noticed that the cabin was on blocks, with a crawlspace area beneath the building, hidden away by some latticework.

“How old is this place?” he asked, his voice quiet as he took in the overgrown patch of grass in the yard and a row of rosebushes that had long since become wild as it stretched across one side of house. The trees had grown tall close to the building, providing a cover of shade that Castiel found comforting.
“It’s probably around 70 years old or so. My grandfather did some work to it back in the eighties, adding electricity and plumbing and gas and stuff, but it’s mostly been left untouched since then.”

Castiel smiled.

The roof was made of tin, while the building itself was covered in weathered wood. There was a spot of rot in the front porch beneath one of the paned windows, and Castiel made a mental note to ask about repairs and maintenance after seeing the inside.

“I’m gonna warn you. It’s a little bit of a fixer upper but it’s furnished and not too far out of town. Chuck’s a good guy and he will give you a good deal with the rent. I’ll make sure he does,” she said as she unlocked the door.

Castiel stepped inside the dusty house. It was a three room cabin. A wall with two closed doors separated the back half of the house from the front. The front room was a half living room, half kitchen. The kitchen was sparse, but neat, with a small Formica table separating the two spaces. The couch was stained, but Castiel figured he could probably get it out with a little elbow grease. There was a large braided rug on the hardwood floor.

Anna took him through to a bedroom big enough for a dresser and a double bed but not much else, and into the tiny bathroom.

The all of the walls were in desperate need of a whitewashing, and the windows were bare and dirty, but Castiel knew it was home. He glanced at the chipped tile in the bathroom floor and the small claw foot tub before turning back to Anna.

“I’ll take it,” he said. Anna smiled and called Chuck, where they worked out a rental agreement and he signed the paperwork she wrote up on the spot.

She dropped him back off at The Roadhouse, where he had stashed his duffle bag carrying all his belongings before meeting up with her and waved hello to Ellen and Jo as he picked up his first paycheck.

The first and last months’ rent had come out of the money that Missouri had given him, and he was determined to put the rest of the dwindling cash away for emergencies only, even if that meant that he’d be eating only staples for a while.

He made it to the bank just before it closed, and cashed out his check, before starting the two and a half mile trek home.

As he approached the cabin, he couldn’t help but feel for the first time in a long time that he was putting down roots that he wasn’t afraid of.

He didn’t feel trapped here, and he felt comforted by that fact, and yet, it still sent a shiver of fear up his spine that for the time being, if he needed to, he probably wouldn’t be able to just get up and leave. He’d have to keep his head down for the next few weeks, just in case.

Castiel unlocked the house and stepped inside just as the light left the evening sky. He looked around. To anyone else, it would just be a small, dirty hunting cabin, a three room building that needed a good cleaning and an airing out.

But he saw possibility. He took his time getting to know the house. He catalogued the places that needed work, like the weak spot in the kitchen floor and the window in the bedroom that was painted shut. He opened the hutch that served as cabinetry in the kitchen and to his surprise, he found a set of dishes and cups.
There were cleaning supplies underneath the skirted farmhouse sink, and a set of dull knives in the drawer of the small cart that served as an island. The refrigerator was probably older than he was, but to his surprise, it worked just fine.

Castiel unpacked his duffle bag completely for the first time since Missouri had packed it. He put his toiletries away first, arranging them in the same way that he’d always done at home, all to the right side of the medicine cabinet and with each label facing out— just the way that his husband had liked it—until he realized with a start what he was doing and deliberately moved his stuff until it took up the entire space, haphazardly tossing in his toothbrush and toothpaste until the cabinet was just messy enough to make his fingers tremble in a good way.

There was a stand-alone shower head above the claw foot tub and he found a stack of mildewed towels on a cart in the corner of the bathroom.

And it was all his.

He turned a circle in a giddy dance before falling dramatically onto the couch, coughing as a cloud of dust rose up around him.

That night, Castiel took his first true shower in over a week, reveling in the way the hot water fell over his back. Sometimes there was nothing better than good water pressure in a shower.

The public restroom at the beach he’d been using had had a shower, for getting sand off, but there wasn’t any hot water and he hadn’t spent more than a few minutes washing his hair and body before jumping out and getting dressed. But here, at what he’d already begun to call home, he took as long a shower as he wanted to, lingering long after the water had turned lukewarm and his fingers had become pruned.

He studied himself in the mirror. Castiel carefully shaved his face and addressed his remaining wounds. Most of his bruises had finally cleared up. His ribs were still darkly bruised, and he knew from experience that they wouldn’t heal up any time soon. That was okay; the pain reminded him that he was free and it wasn’t like anyone was going to see them, but his feet and hands were better. The gash in his temple had finally healed. And now that his hair had faded a little with the sun he’d been getting working on the deck of the Roadhouse, he felt a little bit more like himself. He recognized himself in the mirror again, and Castiel wondered when the last time that had happened. College? Or even before that?

He dressed in his pajama bottoms and a grey t-shirt and fished out the book he had borrowed from the local library. The man who was renting the cabin to him, Chuck, was a librarian there, though Castiel hadn’t ever been there whenever he worked, they had briefly met when Anna had picked up the key earlier that afternoon. He had seemed nice, if a little harried, and Castiel knew that he and Chuck would get along.

Castiel opened all the windows in the small cabin and let the musty air circulate. The air outside smelled fresh and clean, the roses beneath the windows perfuming his bedroom. He went to sleep that night on a lumpy mattress with bed linens that needed a good wash, and he had the best night’s sleep he’d had in years.
They were dancing slowly in the middle of a large outdoor ballroom. The pergola overhead was woven with a fine white gauze, but it was sheer enough to see the bright moon through the fabric. Bartholomew had wanted a large wedding, and there were at least a hundred and fifty people milling about the rented beachside estate. Jimmy could smell the salt in the cool breeze that drifted through the trees from the beach a hundred yards away.

Chapter Five: We Can be Alright

Chapter Track: Heaven, by Bryan Adams

September 25, 2004

Martha’s Vineyard

The fall air was cool against Jimmy’s over warm skin. The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up to his elbows and he was down to his suspenders. But the fine wool of his trousers was heavy and hot, and he had quickly tossed his tuxedo jacket onto the back of a nearby chair. The dance floor was full of people that Jimmy didn’t know but at that moment, he could care less. He was dancing in the arms of his husband and Bryan Adams was playing lowly in the background.

They were dancing slowly in the middle of a large outdoor ballroom. The pergola overhead was woven with a fine white gauze, but it was sheer enough to see the bright moon through the fabric. Bartholomew had wanted a large wedding, and there were at least a hundred and fifty people milling about the rented beachside estate. Jimmy could smell the salt in the cool breeze that drifted through the trees from the beach a hundred yards away.

It was a perfect night. He laughed to himself, and pulled Bart closer.

“What are you laughing at?” Bart asked against his cheek.

“Oh nothing, just thinking about how much I love you.”

“Oh yes, that’s nothing indeed.” Bart’s cheek was rough against his temple.

“I was also thinking about how few people I know here.” Bart pulled back, his pale eyes staring into Jimmy’s dark blue.

“What’s wrong baby?” Bart murmured, trailing his thumb across the bottom of Jimmy’s chapped lip.

Jimmy sighed. “I just thought that Gabriel would show up…” he trailed off.

Bart’s brow knit. “I know how important it was for your family to come to the wedding and I’m sorry they didn’t.” He pulled Jimmy into a tight hug. “You’re mine now. I’ll be your family.”

Jimmy pressed his nose Bart’s neck. “I’m yours,” he said. “And you’re my family now.”
“That’s right, and I will always take care of you,” Bart gestured around the dance floor. “We will be happy Jimmy.”

Jimmy smiled a little and wrapped his arms around Bart’s waist, leaning his head back until they were eye to eye. “Let’s start a family,” he said.

Bart’s eyes narrowed for the smallest moment before the expression disappeared, replaced with an easy smile. “Come here,” he said, pulling Jimmy in for a lingering kiss.
Let the Memories be Good

Chapter Summary

Castiel watched, bemused as she began to punch numbers into the cash register. She couldn’t have been more than five or six but she seemed to know her merchandise. “I’m Emma,” she said as an afterthought. Emma held out her hand.

Castiel shook it. “Hello Emma, my name is Ji—I’m Castiel,” he caught himself.

Chapter 6: Let the Memories be Good.

Chapter Track: Calling My Name, by Neon Trees

April 13, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

The following morning Castiel awoke, and for a brief moment, he couldn’t remember where he was. His mind was fuzzy around the edges from the end of his dream and he didn’t want to wake to realize it was all just the beginning of a nightmare.

The cabin was unbearably hot. He threw the covers off his legs. Light was streaming in through the east facing window of his bedroom and it created warm patches across his faded quilt.

He checked his watch and cursed. He had to work in an hour and a half and it took at least half an hour to walk to the Roadhouse. Castiel jumped out of bed and took a quick shower in his minuscule bathroom, but he didn’t have time to shave.

As he ran a towel through his hair, he padded over to the kitchen. After poking around in the cupboard he found an old fashioned coffee press. He desperately wished he had some beans to make a cup, but he hadn’t yet gotten to the grocery store, and there was no food in the cottage. He ignored the rumbling in his stomach and picked his wallet up from the small table by the front door. As he made his way to the end of the lane separating his cottage from the main road, he took in the beautiful day.

Sunlight was streaming down through the lush green leaves. Wild Magnolia trees lined his driveway and combined with the rich earthy smell of Spanish moss, it was what he imagined peace smelled like.

Castiel bent to tie up his shoelace. The tennis shoes that Missouri had given him had held up surprisingly well, given all the walking he’d been doing. Despite being half a size too big, he had minimal discomfort as he spent the long hours at work on his feet. The restaurant was only a few miles from his house, and Castiel found the exercise to be rejuvenating. A warm breeze drifted across his face and his sleepiness faded. He took a deep breath and continued on his way.

He made it to work just in time to find Jo opening the storm shutters to let the wind drift across the interior of the building. Castiel helped her. They made small talk as they worked. Jo was a petite blonde with dark eyes. She was precocious and stubborn, and kind and Castiel liked her.
immediately.

As soon as he had gotten all of the umbrellas opened out on the deck, Ellen switched on the old jukebox in the corner and the restaurant began to fill up. The Roadhouse was a fixture in Southport, Castiel had soon learned. And everyone seemed to know everyone else. Everyone seemed to belong here. Castiel punched his timecard and put on his apron, ready to begin his day.

As he took his spot next to the waitress stand, rag in hand, Castiel noticed Ellen and Jo having a heated discussion next to the soda fountain. He looked away and picked up his ticket pad as a young family took a seat in his section.

Before he could get to his first table, however, he noticed Jo storm off to the outer deck, and Ellen took a deep breath before turning towards him. He paused as she approached, and for some reason, his heart rate quickened, panic bubbling in the pit of his stomach, making him feel ill.

“Hey Ellen,” he said weakly once she reached him.

“Hey Castiel,” she said, her voice grave. Castiel felt his heart drop. This was it. She was going to fire him.

What had he done wrong? He’d never been late. He always worked hard. What if... what if they found out his secret?

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and Ellen’s eyebrows furrowed. “What did I do wrong?” Nodding over to where Jo was angrily wiping down tables.

Ellen frowned. “You didn’t do anything wrong Castiel. Jo and I are just too much alike. She wants to go to a concert in Raleigh next month over Memorial Day Weekend but it’s one of the busiest days of the year and we just can’t spare her.”

Castiel paused, “I could cover her shift,” he offered. “I won’t have any other plans. To be honest, I could use all the hours I can get. That way she can go to her concert, and you won’t have to fight.” It was the longest string of sentences Castiel had put together since he started working at the Roadhouse.

Jo paused as her rag hovered over another table and Castiel could tell she was listening.

“Oh honey, you’re too sweet, but you needn’t worry about us fighting. We’re bickerers. It’s how we show our love,” she huffed in laughter and her eyes softened. “But if you really want the hours, they’re yours. I’m working on next month’s schedule right now, so I’ll put you down.”

Suddenly, Castiel was engulfed in a hug.

“Thank you so much Castiel!” Jo said against his chest. He hugged back but only briefly, pulling away from her touch as soon as he could without hurting her feelings. He tried to hide the way his breath caught in his chest at the sudden pain in his ribs from her embrace.

“So what did you wanted to talk about?” he asked Ellen as Jo went on to finish her tables.

“Oh, that? It’s nothin’ really. I just need a couple forms of ID for your W2.”

Castiel bit his lip. “Uh, yeah sure,” he said, trying for nonchalance.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He was grateful that Missouri had left him alone long enough to rifle through her paperwork, but he also felt guilty that he’d betrayed her trust after all
she’d done to help him. Castiel handed over the identification, trying to ignore the way his hands shook.

“I uh, I don’t have a driver’s license, but I’ve got a birth certificate and a social security card.”

She looked down at the social security card and frowned. “Clarence? I thought your name was Castiel?”

Castiel smiled like he’d practiced, quirking his lips up crookedly, “My mom had a thing for angels, but I *hated* It’s a Wonderful Life,” he said, using the same excuse Missouri’s late husband had used when they first met. “I prefer to be called Castiel.”

Ellen nodded, accepting his lie. “So you traded one angel for another?” she asked, smiling softly.

“Something like that,” he said, tracing his fingers once again over the base of his statue. He’d taken to carrying it around everywhere he went now, a reminder of the life he’d left behind.

As he took the drink orders for his first table, she made a couple copies of his paperwork before handing him back his ID. It was a long shift, and Castiel tried to lose himself in the work, but he pit of anxiety in his stomach would not abate, he was sure any minute Ellen would come out and . A couple of the regulars had started to recognize him, and though he remained polite, he did his best to remain distant.

After the lunch rush ended and the crowd had died down, the dinner crew clocked on. Jo and Ash, the bartender, asked him out for a drink, but he declined. He couldn’t afford it for one, and he needed to get to the store. It closed early on Sundays, and he didn’t have much time to shop after the end of his shift. They nodded it off as if they expected it and then they headed off arm in arm towards the local bar.

Before he left, Ellen handed him a Styrofoam box with a chicken sandwich and steaming hot fries. He thanked her with a smile and headed out the door. Ellen had been doing it at the end of every shift he’d had since starting at the Roadhouse. At first he’d tried to refuse the meals. He didn’t want to owe anyone anything. But she had firmly shaken her head and pressed the box back into his hands. She’d said something about a free meal during the shift was part of the job and even though it was a weak lie at best, he accepted the meal and all the ones following it.

And Castiel was grateful for her simple act of kindness every day because for several days now, that had been the only meal he’d eaten. He had grown used to hunger however, and only eating one meal wasn’t anything new. Bartholomew had liked it when Castiel was thin, weak. He’d always said he looked sexy, but really he’d insisted on it because it kept him in control. And Castiel had done all he could to please his husband, but he was never thin enough. He was never meek enough. He was never submissive enough. Castiel had taken to eating less and less until the only meal he would allow himself was dinner at night when Bartholomew came home from work. Even then he always ate less than his husband. He hadn’t felt truly full in years.

Castiel walked through downtown Southport heading towards the general store he’d been to on his first day in town. It was only a few blocks from the Roadhouse, and he passed by it every day on his way to work. It seemed much less intimidating than the Piggly Wiggly on the outskirts of town, plus it was on his way.

The building came into view and Castiel stopped for a moment to admire the architecture, something he’d done since before he could remember. If college had worked out, he could have been an architect. As it was, that dream had long since faded away. It was an old fashioned country store, with a wide front porch, sloped roof and white shutters over faded blue clapboard siding. Only half
of the parking lot was paved, and Castiel liked the way the gravel sounded beneath his tennis shoes.

There were seagulls everywhere, and their constant crying was a background noise that he’d grown accustomed to in his short time here. Picnic tables were situated beneath the shade of a massive live oak tree, its spindly limbs branching off low to the ground and swirling up into the air. Tied to the thickest, tallest branch was a tire swing, and Castiel watched as a young boy, probably around seven or eight with dark hair, twirled around and around, dragging his feet against the damp dirt.

They made eye contact as Castiel passed by him, and he felt himself flinch away from the boy’s stare.

Cas climbed up onto the porch and ran his hands over the weathered wood of the railing. The shutters needed a new coat of paint, but the neglected appearance suited the store. Castiel stepped inside, breathing in the smell of hamburgers that a stocky man with a trimmed beard and suspenders was flipping at the grill in the corner. His sailor cap made him look like he was from a different era.

The man nodded in his direction and continued to make the burger, chatting with an older man in a trucker cap and plaid shirt. The well-worn floorboards and beat up shelves gave it an air of loving neglect. Castiel liked that it wasn’t pristine and tidy. It was cluttered, but not dirty. The shelves held most things a normal gas station would, candy and soda, chips and impulse junk food that people often grabbed as they reached the register.

But there were other things too: fishing tackle and bait, motor oil and sunscreen. There was a small selection of sunglasses and hats. Second hand books sat stacked haphazardly in a corner cabinet near the restroom. Out on the back porch by the picnic tables was a potted garden filled with tomatoes, herbs, and peppers.

A few aisles held groceries and sundries, some spring produce from local farms. Castiel grabbed a basket and began to peruse the aisles. He picked up a small Mason jar of honey with the comb still inside and a sweet little gingham cover over the lid and added it to the basket. Then he grabbed a bag of coffee beans, oatmeal, and rice. He tossed a bag of pasta and jar of marinara into his basket and then thought twice, putting the marinara back. He picked up a small jar of peanut butter and a loaf of white bread. He looked around for a bag of dry beans but found none. Finally he added a package of toilet paper and a bar of soap that was made locally from goat’s milk. It smelled like lemons and he smiled as he put it into his basket.

It wasn’t much, he thought, but it would get him through until he got paid again. He thought about the small savings he’d hidden away in an old cigar box at home. There was always that bit of worry in the back of his mind that prevented him from dipping into it. He’d rather go hungry for a while and have the means to get away than to eat well and be stuck if Bart ever caught up with him.

He looked around for a cashier but there was no one. The man at the grill was busy making another burger for a customer and didn’t look like he’d be up front anytime soon.

“Hello,” a small voice said from behind the counter; he noticed a little girl with blonde hair sitting at a table behind the register. She was drawing on a piece of paper with a blue marker and she smiled at him when he approached.

“Hi,” he said, placing his basket on top of the countertop. She climbed up onto a step stool and began to pull his purchases out of the basket. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “You’re a little young to be running a register aren’t you?” he asked, leaning down onto his forearms until he was at her level. Her bright blue eyes sparkled as she laughed in the way that only little girls can, with her entire body as she tossed back her long curls. “Is your mom or dad around?” Castiel asked.
“Uh… no,” she said. “But I can help you,” Castiel watched, bemused as she began to punch numbers into the cash register. She couldn’t have been more than five or six but she seemed to know her merchandise. “I’m Emma,” she said as an afterthought. Emma held out her hand.

Biting back a smile, Castiel shook it. “Hello Emma, my name is Ji—I’m Castiel,” he caught himself. She giggled. “Castiel is a funny name,” she said smiling toothily.

“I know it is,” he replied, his tone mock serious.

“What does it mean?” she asked as she began to bag his items in a reusable canvas tote that said simply ‘Bobby’s’.

“It means ‘Shield of God.’ What does Emma mean?”

“I don’t know. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I think that’s all,” he said. Just then, a man walked in from the back porch carrying a large box of what appeared to be Butterfingers.

“Emma, honey, what have I said about ringing up customers without me?” he asked setting the box down. He came over to the counter. Castiel instantly recognized him as the man who rang him out when he first got into town. It was a hard face to forget. He glanced at the green apron the man was wearing. The name ‘Dean’ was stitched across the chest in white thread.

“Sorry Daddy,” she said as she jumped down from the step stool. Dean glanced at the customer and did a double take. It was the same man who had so captured his attention before. He studied him for a moment. The man was still desperately thin, but he had some more color than he’d had over a week ago. The various injuries to his face and hands were healed, and he no longer limped. His stubble was dark and his cheeks were prominent, if slightly sunburnt.

“Oh, you’re still here then?” he said by way of greeting.

The man flushed and nodded, “Uh, yeah.”

“It’s just, this place usually just a pit stop. For most people ten minutes is enough,” Dean said and they lapsed into an awkward silence.

Dean stood met his gaze and the man’s eyes drew him in once more, distracting him. They were cornflower blue in the waning afternoon light, and rimmed dark around the edges. They weren’t unlike his daughter’s eyes, deep in a way that made you think he was older than his years. If Dean had to guess, he’d say that the man was around his age, maybe a few years older. Dean watched as his hair moved with the breeze coming through the open door.

The man smiled distractedly, but it faded as soon as he looked down, pulling out his wallet. His lips were chapped and pink, and Dean had to remind himself not to stare.

Something niggled at the back of his mind as the man looked away, the warm demeanor he’d had with his daughter closing off until he was just another distant stranger buying groceries. He glanced down at the bag, making sure Emma had rung everything up correctly. There were mainly staples, heavy non-perishable starches that would last and be filling. He was suddenly reminded of the many days he’d shopped when he was just a little kid, purchasing the same kinds of items for he and his brother when his dad was out of town, because they were cheap and filling, he felt a pang of sadness for this mysterious stranger. Dean grit his teeth, looking back up at the man.
“Did you find everything alright?” he asked as he hit subtotal.

The man smiled again briefly, but then caught his gaze again. “Do you have any dry beans?” he asked, and Dean was struck once again by how deep his voice was. It was a stark contrast to the fragile demeanor and behavior of this mysterious man.

“Uh, no I’m sorry. I don’t usually keep those in stock. We have a few canned varieties though,” The man nodded. “Thanks anyway,” he murmured.

“That’ll be 19 even,” he said and the man nodded again. He pulled out a five and fourteen ones, obviously tip money, and placed it on the countertop. Dean recognized the Roadhouse t-shirt beneath his jacket.

_Hmm_, he thought, _I'll have to figure out a way to ask Ellen about him. Or maybe Jo…_

Dean opened the drawer and placed the money inside, “Would you like a receipt?” he asked.

“No thank you,” the man replied.

Emma popped back up onto the step stool. “Have a good day Castiel!” she said excitedly. Suddenly the man’s demeanor changed from the stoic stranger back to the warm person Dean had seen just before coming over to the register.

“You too, Miss Emma,” he said and she smiled shyly.

He pulled the handles of his grocery bag over his shoulder and walked out of the store. Castiel paused for a moment beside Dean’s car and whistled lowly at the mint finish of the glossy black paint before leaving the parking lot on foot. Dean watched him walk away, more curious than ever.

_Castiel. Cas._
In the weeks that followed his first few visits to the store, Castiel had become something of a regular at Bobby’s. He always bought the same things, rice, beans, sometimes tuna, and they hadn’t really gotten past the Have you found everything okay? followed by the Yes, I did, thank you kind of conversation, but Dean didn’t mind. Every time Castiel came into the store, he looked healthier. He’d gained some weight and wasn’t so terrifyingly thin. His cheeks had filled out some and the deep circles under his eyes had faded almost completely.

By the time Castiel made it back to his driveway, a storm had rolled in from the west. The breeze turned cold and the bag of groceries had grown steadily heavier with each passing step, but he did his best to ignore it.

His ribs hurt. He’d tweaked the injury earlier that day helping Ash pick up a keg for the bar and it hadn’t felt right since. He was starting to wonder if maybe they were cracked instead of bruised, but he figured that there wasn’t anything he could do about it either way so he may as well stop worrying about it. He couldn’t afford a doctor and they would just tell him to do what he was already doing.

The cottage came into view just as the first raindrops began to fall. He hurried up the small flight of stairs on his porch, quickly unlocked the door and went inside just as the downpour began to pound against his rusted tin roof. Castiel placed his groceries onto the table and looked around his tiny living space. A leak was starting to form in the corner of the living room by the sofa and he found a bucket to place beneath it. The soft drip drip of the water as it fell into the metal bucket was soothing and irritating at the same time.

A cool breeze drifted across the house through the open windows in lazy bursts, making the moldy brown curtains billow out like a skirt being twirled. He debated whether to close them, but the cabin had a habit of becoming unbearably hot, especially in the late afternoon, when sunlight streamed into the west facing windows.

Castiel put away his groceries and ate the meal that Ellen had given him. He looked around the small room, cataloging the work he needed to do to bring the old cabin back to life. It was in rough shape, but just needed some tender loving care. The cleaning supplies that he’d found beneath the sink would go a long way towards making the place habitable again, as would the supplies that Chuck had promised to bring by later that week.

Castiel had made sure to include any materials needed for repairs in the rental agreement and Chuck had easily agreed, so long as he didn’t have to do the work. Castiel preferred it that way anyway. He could get the job done right, and someone else might not. This was his home, and he took pride in it.
This little cottage belonged to him, and no one else, he reminded himself, and it was going to be the best that he could make it.

After eating, he spent the majority of the evening dusting every inch of the cabin with a damp cloth. Layer after layer of dust had collected into every nook and cranny of the space, and by the time he was done, he was sneezing and coughing, his eyes were red rimmed and watery. But it was better. He fell into bed that night, exhausted, but pleased with his progress.

The following day was Monday, and the Roadhouse was closed.

Castiel took the opportunity to scrub every inch of the bathroom until it shown. He used vinegar on the windows and spent hours on his hands and knees with an old toothbrush, scrubbing bleach into the grout. Once the bathroom was clean he moved on to the kitchen, where he did his best to remove the grime from the farmhouse sink. He cleaned steadily throughout the day.

The weeks passed and Castiel settled into a routine. April faded into May and time continued to pass in this sleepy little town. It became steadily busier at the Roadhouse, and Ellen, pleased with his work, had bumped him up to full time. This, along with the increase in tips he’d gotten from his regulars as they got to know him better, had led to the hidden stash of money growing steadily thicker in his cigar box.

One day Cas was rummaging in his drawer for a pair of socks and to his surprise, he’d found a couple hundred dollars in between the folds of fabric. He figured Missouri had hidden them in there when he wasn’t looking.

After a short deliberation, he decided that he would spend it. His savings had grown enough that he wasn’t afraid of lacking the means of escape, and the clothes that Missouri had given him had helped, but he was getting tired of wearing the same faded pair of jeans and khaki shorts every other day.

He walked to a local thrift store and picked out several items, all of which would have cost him a small fortune at a department store. He bought a couple new pairs of jeans, shorts, and a pile of soft t-shirts. He found a pair of flip flops that were still in good shape. It was hard to believe that there were some people who threw these clothes out given that they were still in fairly new condition.

Castiel felt like a new person. These weren’t the kinds of clothes that he was used to wearing, but he was comfortable. They are his clothes. He had bought them for himself and no one had made him dressed that way. Bartholomew had always insisted that he dressed formally, even if he was just sitting at home.

Chuck dropped off the materials he needed his first weekend at the cottage, and he began to work on the repairs. He worked at the Roadhouse, came home and speckled the divots and chips in the walls. He whitewashed and painted. He sanded the floors until they were smooth as butter beneath his bare feet, and then painted them a cheery yellow in the kitchen.

On his days off, he perused the thrift stores and antique shops that dotted the boardwalk in downtown Southport, where he found gauzy blue curtains with white daisies crocheted into the hem that matched his kitchen floors. One afternoon at the library, he and Chuck had struck up a conversation about how Castiel was liking the new place, and then his landlord invited him to the plantation’s attic to try and find a new sofa after Castiel mentioned he’d taken an unfortunate seat on a loose coil. He’d told Castiel to take whatever he needed, and after an afternoon of sneezing in the cavernous space, he’d found a pair of leather armchairs that were big and soft, and a sun bleached brown. He envisioned many afternoons curled up beneath a quilt reading in those chairs.
To his surprise, he also found a beautiful set of hand painted blue and white china from England. Only one cup had a slight chip in it, but Castiel liked that it wasn’t pristine. It was a little broken but still useful and he knew that the chipped cup would probably end up being his favorite. There was a set of pots and a cast iron skillet that had to have been older than his father. There was a pair of ivory rugs that appeared to have been braided from depression-era flour sacks. He found an old bookshelf that needed some TLC and decided that it would be his next project.

Chuck and his wife Becky helped him move it all to his cottage in an old pickup truck, and Castiel genuinely laughed for the first time in months when Chuck slipped on the wet porch stairs and landed on a pile of new bed linens, sending up a cloud of dust. That afternoon he’d waved them off as they drove away with his broken sofa, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. Once a week he did his laundry at the plantation, and chatted with Becky over coffee while he waited for his clothes to wash, then he’d carry them the mile’s walk back home to place them on the clothesline he’d built during his first weekend at the cottage. He’d learned to be careful what he said to Becky, because she was something of a gossip, but he found her company to be pleasant enough.

A few days later, to his delight, as he crouched beneath his bed tackling dust bunnies Castiel found an old radio. After fiddling with it for a few hours, he got it to work and tuned it to a local station that Ellen often played at work. It played an eclectic mix of genres. The DJ was a quirky young woman named Eva Wilson, and Castiel liked listening to her go off into tangents about the horrors of planning a wedding on a receptionist/DJ’s budget or looking for plate patterns that didn’t make her fiancé cringe. It wasn’t all too long ago that he had been preoccupied with the same stressful decisions. But that was in the past, and it needed to stay there.

It was Symphonic Saturday, and Castiel listened as she played Bach and Tchaikovsky, Chopin and Debussy, letting the music soothe him as evening faded into night.

The following morning, Castiel ran out of coffee beans. He was able to eke out a cup of coffee from the previous day’s grounds and headed off to work. He worked a double that day and by the time the night shift clocked on, Castiel was exhausted.

He walked to Bobby’s with leaden feet, the lack of sufficient coffee had taken its toll on him as the afternoon had worn on. As the store came into view, Castiel glanced at his watch to see that he still had half an hour before it closed for the night.

There were two children playing with army men on the front porch when Castiel stepped into the shade. He smiled and greeted them warmly. Emma, the little girl who had helped him that first time he shopped there, jumped up from their game and gave him a tight hug around his middle.

“Mr. Cas!” she said, excited as ever. “I was hoping I’d see you today.” Castiel smiled. He wasn’t sure where Emma had picked up the nickname but he liked the way the word rolled off her tongue with just a hint of a southern twang. He knew her accent would be much stronger when she was older.

She was such a beautiful little girl, with pale blonde hair and deep blue eyes. Her gap toothed smile was endearing. She took after her father, with a smattering of freckles across her button nose and cheeks. He could picture her in fifteen years or so being a heartbreaker.

Ben was shier than Emma and didn’t approach him, but he waved from his perch on the porch swing before returning to his game. He had dark hair and eyes, and had many more freckles than his sister, and they ran across his cheeks and nose and forehead. He was beautiful in a quieter sort of way than his sister.

School had let out a few weeks previous and Castiel had grown used to seeing the two children
playing outside as he walked to and from work. From what he could gather, they lived in the small white house across the road from the general store. Often Cas watched as Ben emerged from the house with a fishing pole and tackle box. He’d watched Emma playing on the tire swing beneath the Magnolia tree with her dolls.

They were bright, excitable children, and he knew his husband would have muttered under his breath about how a child should be seen and not heard, and where was their mother, who should be taking care of them?

At first, Castiel had wondered the same thing. Through a series of surreptitious questions towards Jo and Ash, Castiel had learned that the store owner was Dean Winchester, and that his wife Lisa had died of cancer a few years previous. He also learned that his brother Sam was a local Sheriff’s deputy, but that had been quite by accident.

Castiel shuddered in embarrassment at the thought of his meeting with Sam Winchester. He’d been working at the Roadhouse one afternoon, minding his own business, when Ash rang the bell from the kitchen, signaling a carry out order’s completion.

As he went to pick up the order, two officers walked into the restaurant. One of them was extremely tall. He had brown hair and hazel eyes, and he towered over everyone around him.

The other was tall as well, but supremely thin, with a nose that was out of proportion to the rest of his face and ears that stuck out at odd angles.

Ellen greeted them as Sam and Garth.

They were glancing around the restaurant, and Cas’ heart leapt into his throat.

“Can I help you boys?” Ellen had asked as she wiped down the bar top. “Y’all looking for someone?”

“We are Auntie,” the taller one said as he leaned down to kiss her on the cheek.

“I swear Sammy, you get taller every time I see you.”

“Nah, Ellen, you’re just getting shorter,” he replied.

“How’s Jess?” she asked. “Her feet still swollen?”

“You know it,” Sam replied. “I told her to take it easy in the third trimester but she kept going on about needing to train her replacement for when she goes on leave, and how her patients need her, you know how she is, she won’t hear of it,”

Ellen shook her head, “Who’re you looking for?” she asked as Castiel shrunk back against the kitchen window.

Jo had looked over at him then, taking in his wide eyes and trembling hands.

“Are you okay Castiel?” she asked, concerned.

“I’m fine,” he reassured her, a bit too quickly. He craned his head towards Ellen and Sam.

“Oh, you wouldn’t happen to know anyone here who owns a blue Chevy truck wouldya? They parked in a handicapped parking space out front with no tags,” Garth asked.

Castiel visibly relaxed. They weren’t looking for him.
“I sure don’t guys,” he heard Ellen say. “Are you and Jess still coming to the Memorial Day barbecue this Sunday?” she asked Sam.

“We should be,” the Sam replied. “Do you know if Dean and the kids are still planning on coming?” he asked. “I need to talk to him about the fireworks show for the Fourth and you know how bad he is about charging his phone.”

“They’d better,” Ellen replied. “I haven’t seen those kids in far too long and he promised, and I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn. You two literally live a mile apart. Or what about stopping by the store? He’s your brother, Sam.”

“I know, I know, but you know how he gets sometimes. He thinks he can do everything by himself. I’ve tried talking to him, believe me, but he’s keeping his distance. I’ll try harder.”

“You better, or I’mma open up a can of whoop ass on the both of you.” Then there was some chatter over the radio on Garth’s shoulder.

“Hey, Sam we’ve got a call out near the pier,” Garth said.

“Right, looks like we’re gonna eat on the road. Do you have our order?”

Ellen looked around then her eyes caught Castiel’s glance.

“Castiel!” she yelled over the bar top. He turned quickly, nearly knocking over a stack of plates. “Do you have Garth and Sam’s order?” she asked.

Castiel held up the paper bag and handed it over. “Sorry it took so long,” he said, barely a whisper.

“It’s no problem,” the taller man, Sam, said. Then Sam leaned over and kissed Ellen’s cheek once more before they left.

It took Castiel the rest of his shift to calm down.

A few days later he’d asked Jo as casually as he could about Dean. She gave him the basics, and Castiel had tried not to let his curiosity show.

The truth was, Dean Winchester and his children were the only people he’d really connected to in Southport, and he really didn’t know them all that well at all.

Sure, the folks at the Roadhouse were nice and friendly, but he had always held back with them. Becky and Chuck were great landlords, but he didn’t want to tell them too much, else they start asking questions. And even with Dean, Cas had kept his distance. But Emma and Ben were different.

They were innocent and judgment free. They were open and safe. They wouldn’t ask too many questions that he wouldn’t be able to answer. He just had to be himself with them.

“I missed you Mr. Cas,” Emma said, pulling him out of his reverie. She hugged him tighter and Castiel smiled.

“I’ve missed you too Emma,” he said, as he knelt down to her eye level. “So what have you two been up to since school let out?” Castiel asked, trying to pull Ben into the conversation.

Emma smiled wide. “I started ballet last week!” she said excitedly. “And I’m going to start soccer with Uncle Sammy in a few days.”
“That sounds like fun,” he said. “What about you Ben? What are you doing this summer?”

Ben shrugged. “I’m catcher on my little league team.”

“Oh yeah? I was a pitcher in high school.” Cas said. Slowly, Ben’s distant demeanor changed.

“Really?”

“Really, I even got a scholarship to college,” Castiel blushed. He hadn’t meant to give so much away. “Is your dad around?”

Ben nodded. “He’s over at the grill with Uncle Benny.”

“Thanks, buddy.” He ruffled Emma’s curls once more and made his way inside the general store.

As the bell overhead rang and Castiel stepped inside. The small store smelled like Pine Sol and sunscreen, two of his favorite smells, and he took a deep breath before beginning to shop.

Dean looked up the moment that the overhead bell rang. He’d heard Cas speaking to his kids out front, but he hadn’t moved from his spot next to Benny. They were in the middle of a heated discussion about the latest Braves game and he figured as much as the guy interested him, he wasn’t trying to make the man uncomfortable.

They’d seen one another a couple times over the past two months, and each time Cas left the store, walking home with his arms laden down with groceries, Dean had grown more and more curious about the aloof stranger with the stunning blue eyes.

After that first visit in early April, when Castiel had asked about the dry beans, Dean had changed his inventory. He’d added three kinds of beans, but only one bag of each: kidney, black, and pinto, and the next time that Cas had come into the store, Dean had made a point to mention where they could be found next to the rice. That day Cas, and Dean had taken to calling him Cas in his head, had bought all three of the bags. He’d asked if Dean had any onions in stock and Dean had pointed to a small bag of them next to the potatoes, but Cas had shaken his head. “I only need one,” he’d murmured and Dean made a mental note of that too.

Since then the beans had always been in stock and he’d gotten some fresh organic onions from the Milton farm. In the weeks that followed his first few visits to the store, Castiel had become something of a regular at Bobby’s. He always bought the same things, rice, beans, sometimes tuna, and they hadn’t really gotten past the Have you found everything okay? followed by the Yes, I did, thank you kind of conversation, but Dean didn’t mind. Every time Castiel came into the store, he looked healthier. He’d gained some weight and wasn’t so terrifyingly thin. His cheeks had filled out some and the deep circles under his eyes had faded almost completely.

Instead of shopping as quickly as he could and fleeing like a wounded animal, Castiel had begun to linger at the shelves, picking up certain items and considering them, before putting them back. He held his gaze at the register now, and his voice was stronger too, less fragile. He was still quiet, but somehow, he seemed less afraid.

Now he’d begun to talk to Ben and Emma when they were alone. At first this concerned him. Should he be letting a strange man talk to his kids while he wasn’t there? And he’d taken to listening in on their conversations, watching them as closely as he could without alarming the man.

And for the first time since Cas came to Southport, Dean could see his defenses drop. Cas would get down on their level and look them straight in the eye when they spoke. He didn’t ever talk down to them or treat them like babies and Dean found he respected that. He included Ben in the
conversation, even though it was clear that he and Emma had a closer connection. Ben had even begun to come out of his shell a little bit around Cas.

Dean had tried everything to get his son to open up, but since Lisa died, Ben had locked himself away deep down where no one could get to him. He played with his army men, or fished, or drew up in Lisa’s painting room on the second floor of the general store. Ben used to be such an outgoing kid, with a vivaciousness and energy that Dean had sometimes wished he hadn’t had, until Lisa died, and a part of Ben had died with her.

Even Uncle Benny, arguably the person Ben was closest with in the entire world, aside from Dean himself, couldn’t bring him out of his shell. But it seemed Castiel could. Cas could make him smile and once Dean had even heard his son laugh out loud at some pop culture reference that Cas had misunderstood; it had been the first time Ben had laughed in ages, and it made his heart leap and his throat tighten.

He needed to spend more time with his kids. He needed to make sure they knew they were loved. Maybe he’d close up shop this weekend and take them on a trip in Baby, just the three of them. Maybe they could go to the beach.

He was lost in his own thoughts when suddenly Benny waved a hand in front of his face.

“You in there brother?” Benny said.

“Huh?” he asked shaking his head from side to side.

“Looks like blue eyes needs some help,” Benny said, turning the grilled chicken breast once more before beginning to layer condiments onto the thick ciabatta bun he’d baked early that morning in his kitchen at home.

Dean smiled sheepishly and walked over to the countertop where Castiel was waiting with a basket of groceries.

“How are you today Cas?” Dean had asked, distractedly.

Castiel’s hands froze over the basket and he looked up wide eyed. Dean realized his mistake immediately and flushed. He’d only ever called him Castiel or ‘sir’ before, and he’d unconsciously called him by the nickname that he only used when he thought about him to himself.

“I’m… fine thanks, Dean,” he finally replied. Castiel looked away and Dean watched, his stomach sinking, as Cas closed himself off again, seemingly uncomfortable with the situation.

He looked down then, all business. “Was there something I could help you find?” he’d asked at the small bundle of russet potatoes Cas had placed on the counter, not expecting an answer.

“Um, yes actually. I was wondering if you had any paint stripper.”

Dean raised his eyebrows. That was one he hadn’t heard before.

“Uh no, but I could probably put in an order for some if you’d like.” Dean pulled out the order sheet for his supply run, which he’d do tomorrow, and added paint stripper to the list.

Cas nodded slightly. “That would be great thanks,” he said haltingly.

“Any specific type?”
“I’m not picky,” Castiel replied. He hesitated again, and Dean watched as he fidgeted with his hands.

“Was there something else you needed?” Dean asked.

Castiel bit his lip, and Dean’s eyes were drawn to his chapped lower lip before he looked up again.

“I was wondering if you had any minute cards for a prepaid cell phone?” His hands were trembling now and Dean wondered why this request was causing him so much anxiety.

“Oh yeah, I think we’ve got some stocked back over by the sunglasses stand.”

Cas nodded tightly before heading over to the small rack of gift cards.

Dean watched him carefully as he turned the rack this way and that, before finally settling on a 60 minute card.

Before he reached the counter, however, Castiel reached out and picked up some sunscreen that Dean kept on a small shelf by the bubblegum and added that to his basket as well.

Dean looked down at the items. It was far more than Cas usually spent, and he could tell that it was weighing on the other man heavily. He glanced down at the bottle of sunscreen a couple times as if debating whether or not he really needed it before finally nodding to himself.

Dean could see that Cas had gotten some sun in the past few weeks, and with the weather only getting better he knew that someone from the north, as he was guessing by Cas’ accent, would need the added protection of the sunscreen. The sun could get really strong here in Southport.

He found that he was glad that this strange man was taking care of himself, even if it was something as simple as a bottle of sunscreen. He’d found himself thinking about Cas more and more, worrying about him. He knew that he lived way out in the boonies in one of Chuck’s old cabins, because Becky had mentioned it not two weeks prior as she gossiped with Anna over coffee one morning at one of the picnic tables behind the grill. Dean had picked up other little tidbits about the man in the short time he’d been there through various people as well.

Over Memorial Day weekend, at the annual barbecue Ellen held, he’d asked an extremely hungover Jo about Castiel in as subtle way as possible, but of course she knew him too well and called him on it as soon as they were alone. Dean had vehemently denied anything going on between the two, but it had gotten him wondering. Was he interested in Cas in that way? He was attracted to him, he found him interesting, but did he want to pursue a relationship? It was the first time since Lisa that he’d actually considered even the possibility of a relationship and that alone was enough to terrify him. Especially since it was so difficult to get a read on Castiel and what he was feeling, whether he was feeling anything at all towards Dean.

Dean couldn’t help but notice that Castiel was beautiful, that much was certain. His appearance, since he’d gotten healthy that is, pushed all of Dean’s buttons. Cas was kind, and he treated his children with respect. He knew that Ellen and Jo and Ash all thought he was nice, polite but mysterious and uninterested in dating of any kind, if Castiel’s polite rejection of Meg’s advances, which Jo had “promised not to tell anyone about so keep your mouth shut, Winchester!” were any indication.

He knew that Castiel was hiding something, that there was a reason he was so skittish and aloof. But Cas didn’t seem all that interested in him, despite the attempts at conversation Dean had made in the past few weeks. But there was something about him that Dean couldn’t shake off. It could just be a
crush, he supposed, but he felt a deeper connection to him than that and he didn’t know what to make of it.

Dean frowned to himself, shaking off these thoughts as he bagged up Castiel’s products. Cas paid him in small bills and hefted the bag over his shoulder. Dean forced himself to smile, despite the depressing turn of his thoughts as Cas waved goodbye. Castiel stopped at a small pile of books that was sitting on a shelf with a sign that said ‘free to good home.’ Dean watched as Cas smiled, soft fleeting thing that made the breath catch in Dean’s throat. He reached out to pick up a battered copy of Cat’s Cradle and put it gently in his bag.

*I’m in trouble, big trouble*, Dean thought to himself as he watched Castiel walk out of his parking lot.
Smell the Sea and Feel the Sky

Chapter Summary

Ben had taken Lisa’s death the hardest, and since then he’d very rarely opened himself up to another person. But here was Cas, teaching him all the things that Lisa used to love. She’d been a catcher in her high school’s softball team, and when Ben came home from school two years after Lisa had died with a permission slip for the local little league team, Dean hadn’t given it a second thought before signing it. He knew it was something he enjoyed, something that brought him closer to a mother who was becoming nothing more than stories as the kids grew older.

Chapter Notes

Song is Into the Mystic by Van Morrison. I'd recommend listening to it.

Chapter 8: Smell the Sea and Feel the Sky

Chapter Track: Into the Mystic, Van Morrison

June 1, 2014

It was three o’clock on a Saturday afternoon, and Dean was up to his eyeballs in customers. It had been that way from the moment he opened the doors that morning at seven, when he found three boats already docked at the pump, waiting for gas. The weather had been glorious and therefore the weekenders had been out in droves.

Benny hadn’t stepped out from behind his grill in over an hour and it didn’t look like it would let up anytime soon. As Dean handed over the change to a man in flip flops and board shorts, he noticed Cas jogging up from the southern road.

He was wearing athletic shorts and a white t-shirt that was too big on him. Sweat was pouring down his temples and Dean had to take a deep breath. Even covered in sweat, and red faced with exertion, Castiel was gorgeous. The bell dinged overhead and Cas walked over to the soda machine, where he pulled a couple napkins from the dispenser and wiped his brow.

Cas looked up and caught his eye and Dean looked away, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

But he could swear he saw Cas bite his lip in amusement at Dean’s embarrassment. Dean didn’t get a chance to dwell on it very long because just at that moment a large van pulled up in the drive. When the doors slid open to reveal an entire baseball team, Dean inwardly groaned. He’d hoped that there would be a lull in business, but no such luck.

By the time the rush was over, Dean was sufficiently stressed out. He leaned heavily against the back counter and ran a hand through his hair. Benny took the opportunity to escape from his grill and he headed straight for the restroom before heading upstairs to the loft.
Dean glanced around. He had lost track of where Cas was. It was a habit he’d formed early on in their acquaintance, even if he didn’t realize he was doing it. He always seemed to know where Cas was in the store. Dean did a cursory check of the aisles but he didn’t see him, and figured that he must have missed him in the rush.

He headed over to the office to check on some paperwork where he found Emma sprawled out on the couch, fast asleep. Her doll was clutched in her hands, one foot dangled off the edge of cushion.

Dean smiled softly and pressed a kiss to her temple before finding the order form he needed. Before leaving the office, he glanced out the window and paused.

Outside, Dean watched as Ben and Cas tossed a baseball back and forth across the small patch of grass in front of their house. Ben was decked out in his catcher’s pads and Cas was crouched in front of him gently correcting his stance.

He stood up then, wiping his hands on the fabric of his shorts before stepping back. He tossed the ball back and forth between his hands as he took his stance.

Dean pushed the window open, letting the breeze drift across the office.

“You ready?” he heard Cas call out to his son.

“Yeah!” Ben hollered back.

“I’m not gonna go easy on you now. Are you sure you’re ready?” Cas smiled. It wasn’t forced or polite, like he’d often seen Cas give him. It was easy, and wide and it made him all the more handsome.

“I’m ready Cas, just throw the ball,” Ben said.

Dean watched as Cas wound up his pitch, sending a slider, which was a pitch Ben had been struggling with all season, straight into Ben’s waiting glove.

Ben looked down at the caught ball and pushed off his mask. Even from across the street, Dean could see that he was beaming.

“I did it!” he exclaimed.

“You sure did, wanna try another?” Cas asked, before Ben ran over to where he was standing and gave him a tight hug.

Cas hesitated for the briefest second before returning the hug, placing a big hand in Ben’s wild curls, and in that moment, Dean felt something shake loose within him, making his heart feel too big for his chest and his belly swirl with an emotion he hadn’t felt in years.

Ben had taken Lisa’s death the hardest, and since then he’d very rarely opened himself up to another person. But here was Cas, teaching him all the things that Lisa used to love. She’d been a catcher in her high school’s softball team, and when Ben came home from school two years after Lisa had died with a permission slip for the local little league team, Dean hadn’t given it a second thought before signing him up. He knew it was something he enjoyed, something that brought him closer to a mother who was becoming nothing more than stories as the kids grew older.

Dean loved baseball too, but because they’d moved around so much, he’d never really gotten the chance to play on a team. It was something that he never had and he felt it was important that his kids have, that sense of family that comes from being on a team.
He could tell that Emma, with her long legs, would be great at soccer, just like her Uncle Sam. He’d started her on a small local team that summer and he hoped she loved it.

Speaking of Sam, he needed to call and see how Jess was. She was almost to term and he knew that Sam was worried about her, if the calls at eleven at night as Sam picked his way through the condiments aisle searching for “horseradish mustard, but not the kind in the tall plastic bottle, the kind in the hexagonal glass jar with the white and green label and only that kind.”

He was excited to be an uncle, but sometimes he remembered how helpful Jess had been during Lisa’s pregnancy with Emma and he pushed the painful thoughts aside. Perhaps that’s why he’d been avoiding their household, envy of his little brother for a life he used to have.

Sometimes, when it was late at night and he was alone in his cold bed, or in the early afternoons that were Lisa’s favorite time to paint, or in the moments that he missed his wife so much he could hardly stand it, Dean could swear he could still feel Lisa’s presence around him, like she was still there with him, watching over all of them as they navigated their way through life, and somehow, everything felt better. It was okay. Their life may not be perfect, but they’re gonna be okay.

Watching Ben hug Castiel gave Dean a similar feeling, as if Lisa was just out of reach, but still there.

Just then, as if Castiel had a sixth sense when eyes were on him, he looked up. Tentatively, he raised his hand before giving a small wave.

Dean nodded in greeting and waved him over.

Castiel suddenly looked nervous, and the crinkle that formed between his eyebrows as he jogged across the street was incredibly endearing.

He moved to the front room as Castiel wiped his muddy feet on the greeting mat before opening the door. The chime of the bell was the only sound in the store, aside from an occasional comment from Benny and Bobby as they watched the Braves play the Marlins in the loft overhead.

“Hey Cas,” Dean greeted him, pulling out a damp rag from his back pocket and wiping down the countertop.

“Hello Dean,” Cas said, his voice oddly somber.

Dean nodded towards the back window. “I saw you were playing catch with Ben,” Dean said conversationally. He still didn’t meet Cas’ blue gaze.

He looked up just as Castiel’s fists clenched in front of him and suddenly Castiel was speaking quickly.

“I’m sorry,” he said contrite. “I shouldn’t have done that without your permission. I’ll leave him alone if you want,” Cas said, backing away from Dean, his hands out in a placating gesture. Dean watched as Cas’ hands began to shake and his breathing became erratic.

Suddenly Dean was backtracking. “No, no, Cas it’s fine!” Dean said. “I was just gonna say, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen him have so much fun. I wanted to thank you for helping to bring him out of his shell a little bit,” Dean chuckled. “He’s been struggling with that damn slider all season.”

Cas’ face changed from near panic to confusion in a heartbeat and Dean watched, anxious, as Cas unclenched his fists.
“You—” Cas began, but he took a deep breath. “—You’re not mad?”

Dean shrugged. “Should I be?”

Cas smiled. “No.”

“Good, I’d hate to lose one of my best customers,” Dean said, a flirty edge to his voice, and his heart sank when Cas closed tensed up again. Dean decided to change the subject before he embarrassed himself further. “Hey, uh, I—your paint stripper came in,” he said, putting his rag away and wiping his hands on his ratty jeans.

“It did?” Cas asked, clearly as relieved for the subject change as Dean was.

“Yeah, lemme go get it for you.”

He hurried to the storeroom by the bathroom and pulled out a can marked “Castiel Moseley” in his block lettered scrawl before returning to where Cas was reading titles from the backs of the abandoned novels. Dean watched as Castiel added a volume of Sherlock Holmes into his basket.

“Here you go,” he said, dropping the can onto the counter.

Castiel jumped, but smiled at Dean. “Thanks,” he said. “I’m gonna look around just a bit more.”

Dean nodded. “If you need anything, just holler,” he said.

As Cas rounded the corner, heading towards the rice, Emma emerged from the office, rubbing her sleepy eyes with her knuckles. Her hair was a rat’s nest and Dean inwardly sighed. It would take him forever to get all the tangles out that night after bath time.

“Daddy,” she said, jumping up into his arms. In a move perfected by years of practice, Dean caught her and lifted her up onto his hip.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Hi there lil’bit, did you finally wake up from your nappy noodle?”

She nodded, pressing her cheek to his chest. “I had a dream that Mommy was rubbing my hair,” she whispered.

And just like that, Dean’s throat tightened up and he felt tears form in the corner of his eyes. “Did you?” he asked, his voice breaking only slightly.

She nodded again. “She was singing too,” she said.

Dean smiled tightly and kissed her forehead. “That sounds like a really good dream,” he said.

“It was,” she whispered. Just then she looked up to see Cas debating between russet potatoes and golden potatoes. “Mr. Cas!” she yelled. Her previous melancholy sleepiness evaporated, and she jumped out of Dean’s arms, leaving him feeling empty and still trying to regain his composure.

She ran over to where Castiel was standing and wrapped her arms around his middle. Cas, just like with Ben, hesitated for just the briefest moment before returning the hug.

“And how are you Miss Emma?” he said, amused.

“I was really sad,” she said.
“You were?”

“Yeah, but I feel better now. Do you get sad sometimes?” she asked with the innocence of a child.

“I think…” Castiel paused. “I think everyone gets sad sometimes,” Cas said. She looked up at him then.

“What do you do when you’re sad Mr. Cas?” she asked.

Cas thought for a moment, and it was almost as if he’d forgotten that Dean was listening to the two of them. It was just the two of them in the room. Then he got down on her level and looked her straight in the eye.

“There was this song that my mom used to sing to me whenever I was sad, and it always made me feel better.”

“A song?” she asked. “What song?”

“It’s called Into the Mystic,” he said, and looked up at Dean.

“Will you sing it to me?” she asked, her big blue eyes a perfect imitation of the puppy dog look she’d learned from her uncle, the one Dean never been able to say no to. It seemed Castiel wasn’t immune to the puppy dog eyes either, and he sighed.

“I haven’t got much of a voice,” he hedged.

“That’s alright,” she said smiling triumphantly. “Neither does Daddy,” Cas huffed a laugh.

“Is that right?” he asked. She nodded. “Well then,” Cas said dramatically, putting his grocery basket down. He held out his arms. “May I have this dance Miss Emma?”

She curtsied, just like they taught her in ballet class and stood on his toes as she took his hands. “Yeah.”

He twirled her around the store for a moment and Dean felt like he should look away as Castiel began to softly sing to her. It felt like he was intruding. He was torn between wanting to watch and feeling superfluous, feeling slightly envious once again of Cas’ ability to bring his children out of their shell. In the end he decided to work on paperwork at his desk, still within earshot of them but giving them a moment, and himself a moment to regain composure.

Emma had called Cas her new friend and Dean felt it was important for his kids to have adult role models outside of immediate family. Cas seemed to fit the bill. And besides, he loved this song.

“We were born before the wind…” Cas sang, slightly off key.

Castiel was in the middle of a complicated whistled rendition of the saxophone solo, and damn he was a good whistler, Dean thought, when the bell dinged overhead. Neither Emma nor Cas stopped the complicated spin move they were attempting to perfect.

Dean emerged from his office to help a couple of lost tourists find their way to the pier. He glanced over to where Emma was giggling and smiled. He crossed his arms and leaned up against the back counter.

Finally, Cas finished his song and they broke apart. He tipped his finger beneath her chin. “Feel better?” he asked.
“Yeah,” she replied, “I like your song,” she said.

“I like it too,” Cas replied.

The tourists left and Dean came up to them.

“Hey,” he said, still feeling like he was intruding on their moment, but unable to keep his distance any longer.

“Hi Daddy,” Emma said before she left them alone to play with her dolls.

They stood in silence for a moment, until Dean’s heart was racing, and he felt he was going to burst with the awkwardness.

“You uh…” he began before clearing his throat. “You don’t give yourself enough credit,” he finally said.

“What do you mean?” Cas asked.

“Your singing voice is just fine,” Dean said, smiling easily.

Castiel flushed. “Yeah right,” he then glanced at his watch before picking up his basket. “You must be tone deaf,” he joked.

“Are you ready to check out?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, just about.” Cas replied. And something shifted then. The tension was still there, but not as strong. Dean didn’t feel like every nerve ending was fire. It was easier to breathe now that Cas wasn’t being fifteen different shades of adorable while playing with his kids.

Cas followed Dean to the register and pulled out his wallet.

Dean rang him up in silence. He bagged Cas’ items and then took the twenties that Cas handed over.

Then, as Castiel picked up the can of paint stripper, Dean started to speak before his brain caught up with his mouth. “Hey, lemme grab my keys and I’ll give you a lift.”

Cas started to protest. “No, no. It’s fine. I can walk.”

“Really, you’re gonna walk all the way home with all those groceries? C’mon, let me give you a ride. It’s the least I could do,” Dean says, and Cas’ brow furrows.

“For what?”

Dean shrugged. “You know, keeping the kids occupied while I dealt with the crazy rush,” Dean tried to be casual about it.

Cas hesitated for a brief moment. “I wouldn’t want to put you out…” he hedged.

“You won’t be,” Dean said and he hurried over to his desk to get his keys. “Bobby!” he yelled up the spiral staircase leading up to the loft. “I’m heading out for a bit, I need you to watch the store!”

“Final inning Dean!” Bobby yelled back, “Game’s tied!”

“Bobby, you recorded that game from yesterday. You already know who wins! C’mon Pop, just get
your ass down here,” Dean said.

Dean smirked as he heard Bobby and Benny grumbling above him as they descended the stairs. He grabbed the can of stripper and handed Cas the groceries.

As they made their way out to the parking lot, Cas pondered why this all felt so foreign to him. He sat in the front seat of Dean’s gorgeous car with his groceries in his lap and it came to him. This was the first time he’s ridden alone with a man besides his husband in years. The thought alone made him tremble, panic bubbling up to the surface, because this was wrong. He was doing something wrong and he should stop it before they get out of the parking lot, before it was too late.

But Cas took a deep breath and did nothing as Dean backed them out of his parking space and waited at the intersection.

“Which way?” he asked and Cas pointed straight.

“Just head out to the Milton Plantation,” Castiel said and Dean nodded. Cas examined the car as they drove in silence. It was in near perfect condition, with soft black leather seats that smelled like tobacco and old spice, though he was pretty sure that Dean himself didn’t smoke.

Dokken played quietly in the background and Castiel smiled; Dean had good taste in music.

“We can listen to something else,” Dean said as he made the right turn onto gravel towards the plantation.


The trip home was much quicker in a vehicle than on foot, and almost before Cas wanted it to be, the ride was over.

They pulled up to the cabin and Dean cut the engine.

“This is it huh?” he said, looking at the building, his tone skeptical.

Cas felt a sense of indignant pride for his home. “It’s not much,” he said, “but it’s home.”

Dean nodded. “I remember staying in a cabin very similar to this for three whole months once in Montana, except it wasn’t in as good of shape. And it was winter.” Dean met his eye then. “I moved around a lot when I was a kid,” he said by way of explanation.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They fell into awkward silence again.

“Well, uh… thanks for the ride,” Cas said, and suddenly the air was thick again.

“Yeah, no problem,” Dean said reaching into the backseat and pulling out the can of stripper.

He handed it over just as Cas opened the door. Their fingertips brushed for the briefest second before Dean pulled away, handing the can to Cas.

Cas smiled tightly. “I’ll see you around Dean, thanks again for the ride.”

“See ya Cas,” he said and Cas tapped twice on the roof of the Impala before stepping back and
closing the door.

Dean pulled out of the driveway just as Castiel unlocked his front door and he honked once on his way out. Cas waved and headed inside. As Dean drove home, however, he found himself turning his music off, humming instead an old Van Morrison song Cas got stuck in his head.
And I'll Kneel Down

Chapter Summary

It was a glorious Tuesday afternoon in June and Castiel felt like going for a run.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Mentions of past abuse and extremely dubious consent in this chapter. If that is triggering to you, please skip the section within the line breaks. Kisses, Lindsey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 9: And I'll Kneel Down

Chapter Track: Storm Comin', The Wailing Jennys

June 3, 2014

It was a glorious Tuesday afternoon in June, and Castiel felt like going for a run. He’d been trying his best, once his ribs healed up, to get back onto his training regimen. Of course, running was different now that he wasn’t stuck at home with a treadmill and an elliptical machine. It wasn’t like he’d been allowed to go to the gym, so he’d settled for the exercise regimen that Bartholomew had laid out for him. Calisthenics and cardio in a dimly lit basement and yoga off a video three times a week, working on his core and flexibility. It hadn’t mattered that the video was out of date or that it skipped terribly right before the most difficult part. Cas had memorized it long before it had started to skip.

Cas had been born extremely flexible, and Bartholomew had liked that, claiming that it was a huge turn on for him. So Castiel had made sure to maintain that flexibility, even if his ribs ached and his kidneys hurt from one too many kicks, Cas always tried to keep up his fitness.

Of course, he never tried to build his strength. His husband wouldn’t have liked that. He liked Cas weak, helpless and under his thumb. He demanded that Cas be thin, effeminate out in public and within their home, and often he used this tactic as a way to humiliate him. He wanted Cas to be shy and submissive, which contrasted highly with his free-spirited nature.

But if it kept his husband happy, if it stopped the beatings, then Cas would have done it. Of course, nothing actually stopped them for long, and Bartholomew had always found something else to be angry with, but Castiel figured he’s have to make the bastard find something wrong rather than provide him with an excuse ready-made. He’d learned that lesson.

And so exercise had become just another grueling chore in his already long days that he grew to resent.

But here, where the air was clear and the sky was blue it was better, with the feeling of the pavement moving beneath his feet and the sunlight on his shoulders. The bruises on his torso had finally
disappeared and with the massive heat wave hitting the great state of North Carolina, it was much too hot to hide under layer upon layer of fabric.

The first time he went for a run without his t-shirt on, he felt ridiculously naked. He had finally put on some weight, and felt much healthier, but his ribs still stuck out, straining against his skin, and he was pale and uncomfortable the entire duration of the run.

So he stuck to the path that was in the woods behind his house, choosing to run all the way through it to the coast, which was about two miles away from his cabin. That day, he took off his shoes and jumped into the water, letting the salt and brine of the Atlantic distract him from his discomfort. He fell asleep on the soft sand in this secluded beach; his own private little sanctuary, and when he woke an hour later, he could feel the tightness of the skin across his shoulders and the tenderness of the back of his neck, which was unused to getting so much direct sunlight.

It had been years since he’d had hair short enough to worry about neck sunburns and as he pressed a finger tenderly to the knob at the base of his spine, he knew he’d regret this particular run for a few days. But in a way, Cas liked that; his subsequent sunburn was a reminder of the freedom he had to make the choice to remove his t-shirt or not. No one was there to tell him to cover up. He didn’t have any bruises or injuries to hide. He was his own person for the first time since he was a young boy. He didn’t have anything to hide anymore. Well—physically—at least.

The next few times he went running, he remembered to apply sunscreen. He ran on the road and, even though it made him nervous, he waved at a few passersby who greeted him. Generally he still avoided going into town, but on this particular Tuesday, he stuffed his t-shirt into the pocket of his shorts and took off in the direction of downtown Southport. It was warm, sunny. The sky was robin’s egg blue and the clouds were giant fluff balls of cotton candy. It reminded him of his wedding day, he thought idly. He shook his head. He was determined to sabotage his good mood apparently.

Cas wished he still had his iPod as he reached the end of the drive, the ground changing from gravel to asphalt beneath his feet. The music would be a distraction from the traitorous direction of his thoughts. In his old life, Castiel hadn’t wanted for anything material. His husband had come from old money, and they had lived off of that for the most part, seeing as his meagre income didn’t exactly pay the bills and he hadn’t allowed Cas to have a job.

He was always bringing home little trinkets and presents for Castiel, handing them over with a possessive kiss to the back of his neck or shoulder, as Cas did the dishes or ironed pants legs. And most often, a gift would come for Castiel after a particularly brutal beating.

________________________________________________________________________

Castiel had gotten his iPod after he’d been knocked unconscious and left stranded on the bathroom floor, because the towels had been folded incorrectly. He’d gotten a bad concussion. Cas had woken up alone and naked in their bed with a perfectly wrapped box resting on the other pillow. He had no memory of being moved to the bed, nor of removing his clothes.

His entire body was sore and when he sat up, the world spun. He’d made it to the bathroom before vomiting, but just barely. He had been too weak to move for almost half an hour afterwards. Cas had then taken a long shower, steadfastly ignoring the blood that trickled down the backs of his legs, turning the water pink.

It was a long time before he emerged from the bathroom. He’d gone about his daily routine after that, despite his dizziness. He applied makeup to the visible bruises and dressed in one of his nicer sweaters and slacks.
Only until he had his suit of armor on did Castiel approach the bribe waiting innocently on the top of the bed. It was wrapped in dark blue paper with a white ribbon. It was his favorite color and that thought made his stomach clench and his fingers tremble.

There was something insidious about the small box waiting so innocently on that pillow. He wanted to throw it in the trash and never think about it again, but he knew that when he came home, he’d want to know how Castiel liked his gift.

So he pulled the ribbon off the package and let it fall to the ground. The wrapping paper was smooth between his fingers as he opened the package to reveal an iPod Classic; his husband had pre-filled it with all of his favorite music. Castiel wasn’t allowed to have a computer anyway.

He took the iPod downstairs with him to attach it to the speaker dock in the living room. He washed the sheets twice, but still wasn’t able to get the bloodstains out. He dreaded telling him they needed to buy new ones.

All day long he played music; when he cleaned the windows, while he prepared supper, when he sorted the rest of the laundry. The music was in the background of his actions, a reminder of the bribe it was. And he let his anger simmer. This time, this time would be the time he stood up for himself. He repeated this all day, a mantra of sorts that made anger bubble in the pit of his stomach.

But when his husband came home, filled with contrition, sweet words, soft touches, he fell for it. He believed the lie, that he was loved, and that it was really all his fault that his husband beat him. He kissed him, soft and sexy because he knew he liked it that way. And he gave in.

His body was submissive, hunched over as he stared at the ground when his clothes were removed and tossed down into a pile at the foot of the bed. He’d have to pick them up later, he knew but right now this is what his husband wanted. So this is what he’d give him.

And for a few days it was all okay. Until the next time of course.

Castiel was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of a horn blaring next to him. He shook his head, trying to clear the unwanted reverie from his mind, and continued to run on.

It truly was a glorious day, if impossibly humid. The heat was different here than it was back home. Here, the heat had a way of flattening a person, making someone feel like they’re under a pile of rocks with no shovel, and Cas lived in a cabin with no AC.

That was part of his motivation for going for a run that afternoon. While it would be hell for the duration, he’d be able to escape the absolute misery that was his cabin for a few hours.

He figured he’d go to the library and shoot the breeze with Chuck. One thing was certain, he wasn’t going home until the sun went down. Or maybe, he thought idly to himself, maybe he’d stop by Bobby’s and get a burger. It’s been a while since I’ve been in to get groceries, and I’m running low on oatmeal…of course, these were all excuses. It had only been two days, he reminded himself. But he really wanted was to see Dean and his kids.

In the few short months Castiel had been in Southport, he’d been very wary of creating personal connections, of becoming too comfortable. Of course he was polite to everyone, if a little reserved, and he didn’t think anyone would specifically call him a ‘friend.’

Except maybe Dean, Ben, and Emma. With them, it was easy to be himself. Of course, they always roused a quiet sadness within him too. He’d wanted children with Bartholomew so bad, but there
was no way in hell he was going to bring a child into the home life he’d endured for so long. At first they had tried to adopt, while things were still good between him and his husband, but the process was long and difficult, and often it was a source of tension between the two of them; eventually Cas had stopped asking about it.

Ben and Emma were sweet kids. Emma was sharp as a whip, and Ben, though quiet initially, had warmed up to him immensely. One day earlier that week, as Emma was playing with a classmate on the porch of the store, Ben and Cas played catch out in the yard and Ben started to talk.

Once he started talking, it was damn near impossible for Castiel to get a word in edgewise. Ben jabbered on about the various crises and dramas a nine year old goes through on a daily basis. He talked about Allison, who he swore up and down was “the prettiest girl in the whole world.”

Ben went on to talk about the bully on his baseball team that thought it was funny to give the other boys wedgies and who called him weird because he threw his fish back into the river when he caught them. “No one deserves to die for no reason, not even fish” Ben had said sadly.

Cas just listened, and wondered how long Ben had been holding it all in. He’d noticed the way that Dean and Ben talked around each other even during his short trips to the store. He would watch Dean try to make a connection with his son, Cas could see that, but there seemed to be a barrier between them.

He wondered if it was the fact that while Emma was just a toddler when her mom died, Ben had been almost five. He would have remembered her. On some levels, Cas felt he could relate to the quiet boy who liked to fish and play baseball and paint. Losing someone so suddenly like that isn’t something you get over quickly.

He took a shortcut, running on a wooded lane through a long abandoned rose garden, and wildflowers had overtaken the space. All along the edges of the path there were small blue flowers that he didn’t have a name for but were in abundance along the ditch. They could be violets but were too light. They were beautiful.

He’d have to ask Becky when he did laundry later that week what they were.

Somewhere, a brush fire was burning. Castiel took a deep breath, wondering where it was coming from. The trees on either side of the road provided shade from the sun, a blessed relief. The air here was earthy, flavorful and heavy. It had recently rained, and the shoulder of the road beneath his feet was soft and pliant, providing a nice cushion to the soles of his shoes that were finally starting to wear out.

By now he was on the other side of the plantation, closest to the town. It was much the same as his side, with worn outbuildings with rusted roofs and rotted out wood. Around a bend in the road, Castiel noticed a cabin, not unlike his own at the end of the lane.

He slowed down. It was in much worse shape than his, and Cas assumed it was abandoned. Just as he passed the building, however, a woman with wild dark hair and freckles across her shoulder blades emerged from the worn out front door, pushing it open with her butt. She was carrying a wind chime.

Cas let out a startled yelp and nearly jumped out of his shoes.

She turned around then, and smiled wide.

“Hello there!” she said, with a slight lilt.
“Uh, hi,” he replied.

“You must be my neighbor,” she said as she wiped her hands on her jean shorts. The woman walked towards him.

“I didn’t know Chuck was letting out any more cabins,” he said. He took her hand and shook it.

“Oh, I don’t think he was planning on it, but he owed me one. My friends call me Ellie,” she said. Her hand was cool against Cas’ sweaty palm.

“I’m Castiel,” Ellie smiled.

“Like the angel?”

Cas quirked a smile. “Exactly like the angel,” he said. “How’d you know?”

Ellie shrugged. “I used to know a nun who was fascinated with angels.”

Castiel nodded and looked down at the ground. She studied him for a moment, her dark eyes sad.

“So you’re not from around here,” she said finally, a statement, not a question.

Cas looked up. “No.”

“Somewhere up north, I’m guessing.”

Cas didn’t say anything, but he smiled tightly.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you Cas,” she said, and Castiel immediately picked up on the use of his nickname.

“You too Ellie,” he replied.

“I guess I better get back to unpacking,” she said with a long suffering sigh.

“In this heat? You’re a braver soul than I,” he said.

She shrugged. “I can’t avoid it anymore.”

Castiel hesitated for the briefest moment. “Would you—would you like some help?” he finally stuttered out.

“Oh! Thank you, but I’m fine. I wouldn’t want to interrupt your run any more than I already have.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” she replied with a toothy smile.

Cas studied her. There was something inherently friendly about her, something trustworthy. “Well, I’m just down the road if you need any help,” he said. “You should… stop by. I’ll make some coffee or tea or something.” His heart was racing. How long had it been since he invited a friend into his home?

“I might just take you up on that.” Cas smiled once more and turned to leave. She waved and he ran on.

By the time he made it into town, sweat was dripping from his hair, it was starting to get shaggy once
again and he reminded himself to stop by the beauty parlor and pick up some more hair dye and maybe some clippers.

He wiped his face with the hem of his t-shirt and pulled it over his head as he stepped up onto the porch.

Cas grabbed a bottled water from the cooler and went up to the countertop, but it there was no one around, which surprised him.

He looked into the office and found Ben and Emma curled up on opposite sides of the couch, taking a nap. Ben had his fingers wrapped loosely around Emma’s ankle and Emma clutched one of her dolls.

There was no sign of Dean however, and the grill was closed.

Not wanting to wake up the kids by calling out, Castiel checked out the back porch and the restroom before he glanced at the wrought iron spiral staircase leading up to the loft area.

He bit his lip before ascending the stairs.

It was there that he found Dean. He was sprawled out on a blue fabric couch, one leg dangling off the armrest and his hand trailing against the whitewashed floor.

He was fast asleep. Castiel watched him. He looked impossibly young in sleep. The line of worry beneath on his brow had softened and his long eyelashes brushed against his cheeks. His freckles, something Cas hadn’t really noticed before, stood out in the stream of sunlight from the large window. He was beautiful. Gorgeous really.

*Stop. Stop right there*, he told himself. *You can’t afford to think about anyone that way right now.*

He twisted off the cap of his water and took a long drink before coughing loud enough to stir the sleeping figure before him.

Dean’s eyes opened slowly, but then he jerked upright. When their eyes met Dean’s widened.

“Oh crap, did I fall asleep?”

“Did you have a nice nap?” Castiel asked, leaning against the wall.

“No you always stare at people as they sleep?” Dean asked, his voice sleep rough and gravelly in a way that made heat pool in the pit of his stomach that Cas didn’t necessarily want to ignore. “That’s just creepy man.”

“I wasn’t staring,” he said, slightly defensive. “I can come back after nap time if you’d like.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t have fallen asleep anyway, especially since I gave Benny the day off. I can’t believe I forgot to lock the door.”

Their arms brushed when Dean passed him by the staircase, and Cas felt himself blush. Dean smelled like Old Spice, motor oil, and sweat.

They had become friends in a relatively short period of time. Cas had found himself spending and more time at the shop, chatting with Dean about inconsequential things long after he’d found all the groceries he was looking for.

Dean was easy to talk to. “Your day off?” Dean asked as he punched in a number on the register.
Cas pulled out two dollars and received his change, steadfastly ignoring the spark that ignited when their fingers brushed.

“Yeah, thought I’d escape the heat a little bit,” Cas said.

“Bobby says the heat’ll break by the end of the day.”

“And how does Bobby know that?”

“He’s got a bad knee. Swears by it. According to him, it tightens up when it’s gonna rain.”

Cas smiled.

“How’d your bookshelf turn out?” Dean asked. When Cas raised an eyebrow, Dean elaborated.

“Em said something about it,” Cas nodded.

“Good, I’m still trying to decide on a paint color for it, but I’ve got it sanded down and ready,” he said.

“I’m supposed to tell you that you should paint it blue.”

“Really?”

“Yep, Emma was very clear that it should match your eyes.”

Castiel laughed.

“So uh, how have you been?” Dean asked. “Haven’t seen you around much lately.” Cas smiled to himself. It had only been two days since he was last in, but maybe Dean missed him as much as Cas did the Winchesters.

Cas shrugged. “Been busy, Ellen’s given me a promotion, so that means more hours.”

Dean nodded to himself. He leaned against the back counter and crossed his arms. Cas started milling about the store, picking up his groceries and placing them in a basket.

They chatted easily, and Castiel lamented the closed grill as he shopped.

“I can make you something if you’d like,” Dean offered, and something about his expression was shy. Cas found it endearing. “Benny ain’t the only one who can fry up a burger you know, and ‘sides, I’m starving,” he said.

Castiel smiled. “That’d be great.”

Cas put his basket on the countertop and took a seat at one of the small tables by the grill. Dean turned on the fryer and let it heat up before picking out a couple rounded balls of ground beef. He cooked quietly, efficiently. When the burgers were done, Dean joined him at the table, handing a paper plate over to Castiel, who thanked him quietly.

Conversation came easily between them. Dean talked about his brother, who’s wife was expecting a baby soon, and Cas talked about growing up in Illinois with his older brothers and sisters.

When Ben and Emma woke up from their naps, Dean made them burgers to. It was so domestic, so familiar, that Cas forgot that they were virtual strangers. Instead, he felt like part of the family.
It seemed everyone was staying inside to avoid the heat, because there weren’t any more customers that day, and when the sun began to set shortly after eight o’clock, Dean flipped the open sign to closed, Castiel was surprised. He hadn’t even realized how much time had passed. Clouds had moved in from the west, and the air was heavier than ever.

“You ready to go home?” Dean asked the kids and Castiel sighed inwardly. Back to the cabin, I guess, he thought.

“Can Mr. Cas come too?” Emma asked. “I want to show him my new dolls.”

“Yeah!” Ben said, animated. He looked at Cas. “It’s Monopoly night Cas! You wanna play with us?”

Castiel hesitated. “Um,” he said, unsure. He met Dean’s gaze. He was smiling softly. “Only if its alright with your Dad.”

“Can he Dad?” Ben asked Dean. “Please?”

Dean shrugged. “Sure, if he wants, maybe someone will finally beat you this time.” he said to Ben.

Ben smiled widely, showing off his gap toothed grin.

Just then, the sky above them opened up and hail started pelting the roof.

“Aw, Crap,” Dean said. “I just washed the car.” Dean rang Cas’ groceries through the register before putting the till back into the safe in his office and they made a break for it, Dean holding Ben’s hand and Cas carrying Emma on his shoulders as they ran across the street in the pouring rain towards Dean’s house.

Dean felt self-conscious as he opened up his front door, allowing Cas and Emma to pass by him into the foyer. Castiel plucked Emma from his shoulders and the kids ran down the hall to retrieve the game from the linen closet.

“This is it,” he said, hastily picking up a pile of dirty t-shirts from the hall and setting them on the washing machine hidden away by a pocket door. “Make yourself at home,” he ran a hand through the short golden hairs on the back of his neck. “Would you like something to drink? I’m gonna grab a beer.”

Dean noticed when Castiel flinched, but it was gone before he could give it any more thought. “Water’s fine,” he said, his neutral expression back once more.

He gestured towards the living room. “Go take a seat, I’ll be right back,”

Dean grabbed a beer and a bottled water and two juice boxes, balancing them precariously with a bowl of chips and made his way back into the living room.

Dean watched him for a moment before entering the room. Cas sat with his back ramrod straight, staring out of the big bay window at the storm. His expression was troubled and he frowned, as if he were trying to figure out a complicated math problem in his head, but Dean’s attention was drawn to Cas’ hands. The fingers of his right hand were twisting around his left ring finger, toying with a ring that wasn’t there. And suddenly, with that simple gesture, something clicked for Dean. Something both familiar and long forgotten.
It was a habit, a tic he’d noticed during his years in the military police. Usually he’d observed it with women, and the occasional man, whose faces were bruised or their bodies broken. Women who sat across from him in his cramped office at CID headquarters, who’d compulsively play with their rings, as if they were shackles binding them to their husbands.

Most often, these women refused to press charges. Or they’d lie about their injuries. Or they insisted that it wasn’t his fault, that they’d provoked him. They burned dinner, or ironed their husband’s dress blues incorrectly. Or he’d been drinking and didn’t realize how rough he’d gotten. And always, always, these same women would come in and swear it was the first time it happened, that they didn’t want to press charges because it would ruin his career and their life. Because everyone knew the Army came down hard on abusive husbands.

Some of the women were different though—at least in the beginning—they wanted justice. Dean had always started the report, ignoring the way his own fingers trembled as they typed up descriptions of the same kind of environment that he and his brother had grown up in. He would read back their statements before asking them to sign it.

It was then that their bravado failed. They’d hesitate and then refuse to sign it. Or if they did, they’d quickly change their minds when their husbands were brought in under arrest. Of course, by then it was too late to change anything and the case moved forward. But if the wife then refused to testify at the trial, very little punishment was meted out.

And more often than not, Dean found those same women back in again a few weeks later, or sometimes he’d have to visit them in the hospital. Once he’d found one in the morgue with thirty seven stab wounds to her stomach and genitals.

That night he’d gone home and cried into Lisa’s shoulder, and she’d held him, humming *Hey Jude* until he ran out of tears.

He’d come to realize that the only ones who truly became free of the shackles of their rings were the ones who went through with pressing charges from start to finish. Because even if they refused to admit it, the life they led was a prison.

Of course, there was another way to escape, even though he’d only ever come across one person who managed to do it. Her name had been Katie, and at first she’d denied everything, and blamed it on herself, not wanting her husband to get into trouble.

A few months later he’d learned that she’d fled. No one, not even her family and her friends knew where she was. No one could find her.

Her husband, angry at her betrayal, had killed a man in a bar fight off base. He’d ended up in Leavenworth, accused of manslaughter, and Dean had grinned in smug satisfaction when the man with empty, cruel eyes had been carted off by an MP after his interview. In that moment he’d remembered Katie and smiled thinking, *Good for you.*

Now, as he watched Castiel toy with a ring that wasn’t there, he felt his old instincts kick in. Cas had been married. All this time, he’d figured something was missing about Cas, something under the surface. That was it. That was the big secret. Castiel was either still married or he wasn’t but it was clear that he was still afraid.

Just then, Emma and Ben burst into the living room; Emma was carrying the game. Cas jumped, but relaxed when he saw who it was. Dean followed his kids into the room and handed out the drinks, twisting the top of his beer off and taking a sip.
They played the game well into the night. The rain provided a nice backdrop to the children’s raucous laughter and banter. Emma accused Dean of cheating in his banker duties. Dean made a learning experience out of the game, by helping them figure out their own change for properties and fines.

Cas just watched as Dean interacted with his children in what was obviously a ritualized manner between them. Ben won, just like he always did, by employing a brilliant strategy of buying up a color on each side, and putting hotels on them.

By the time the game was over, the kids were fighting back yawns and they’d become grumpy and overtired. Dean put on an old Disney movie and Emma quickly fell asleep in his lap.

He carefully stood to take her to bed, her little legs wrapped around his torso and her fingers loose around his neck.

Ben and Castiel were left watching the movie in silence. The young boy leaned heavily on Cas’ side and eventually his eyes drifted shut too, Cas reached out and pressed a hand into Ben’s wild curls, and Ben laid down beside him, stretching out on the sofa. He softly stroked his hair, and Ben’s breathing evened out.

When Dean emerged from the hall to find Ben fast asleep, with his head resting on Cas’ knee, he paused. Cas looked up and smiled softly, and Dean moved forward. He picked up his son, even though he was nearly too big to be carried, and cradled his head between the crook of his neck. With one last glance at Castiel, he gestured that he’d be right back and Cas nodded.

He took the opportunity to look around the living room.

It was cozy. There were the typical marks of a household with young children, drawings pinned up on the walls and various toys scattered around the room. He could see that there were the remnants of a woman’s touch too. It was in the soft curtains on the big bay window to the flower patterned love seat opposite him. It smelled like laundry detergent from the machine in the hall, and popcorn.

Framed pictures were everywhere: pictures of Dean holding a newborn with a pink bow looking down at a little boy bending down and kissing her forehead. There were pictures of Ben facing away from the camera with a fishing pole, sitting at the end of the pier. There was a picture of Emma in a pink polka dotted swimsuit sitting on the bench of a canoe. There was a picture of a man and woman facing the sunrise, holding hands. Only their silhouette was visible, but Castiel figured it was of Dean and his wife.

It was a home, so different from the cold Tudor house he called his prison back in Boston. This one felt lived in. It was messy, but not dirty. It was organized chaos.

Castiel felt tears prickle in the corners of his eyes. He brushed the tears away from his cheeks roughly when he heard footsteps approaching from the hall. Cas put on his best fake smile, looking up at Dean, who stood awkwardly at the entrance of the room.

It was still raining.

Cas looked down at his watch. “I should probably get going,” he said, he stood and picked up his bag of groceries.

“Come on Cas, it’s still raining outside.”

“It’s just a little rain, I’ll be fine.”
“Look, man we’ve got a guest room. I’d drive you home, but I just got the kids down, and I can’t leave them alone.”

Castiel bit his lip. “I really shouldn’t.”

“I don’t want you walking alone in the dark. Just… stay. I insist.”

He hesitated for a moment before finally nodding. “Thank you for the hospitality.”

“It’s no problem at all, I mean it.”

Dean moved forward then and took a seat on the opposite side of the couch. He flipped through the channels for a while and they sat in silence. Without the buffer of the children or a potential customer coming into the store, the air was charged between them.

Dean could feel every inch of space between them and he itched to close the gap. Castiel’s heart was racing and he wanted to escape. He was too close. It was too cozy. The soda that Dean had tossed him during the “seventh inning stretch” of the Winchester Family Monopoly night had gone flat and was warm in his hand.

Minutely, he could feel himself moving closer to Dean. And then he’d pull away, only to find that Dean had moved closer to him.

He wouldn’t make a move, he told himself. Besides, he didn’t even know if Dean was attracted to men. He had briefly mentioned the manner of his wife’s passing during one of their conversations at the store, and Cas knew for a fact that something had gone on between him and Jo, but he didn’t know if that was still happening. Cas hadn’t said anything at all about past relationships.

And it wouldn’t do to start anything now, he reminded himself.

That didn’t change the fact that as Dean flipped through the channels, finally landing on an old western that he claimed was Eastwood’s best film ever, the atmosphere between them was thick with what? Apprehension? Anticipation? Tension?

Even with the growing panic at Dean’s proximity, Castiel found that he liked the movie, despite the canned dialogue and grainy picture.

When the next film started, a B-list horror flick about giant flies, Castiel found himself drifting off to sleep. His head fell back onto the back cushion of the couch, and his fingers went slack from their rigid position on his thigh, falling onto the soft microfiber of the sofa. He curled up into a tight ball on his side of the couch and watched the screen until his eyes were glassy and the picture was blurry.

Finally, just as the credits began to roll, Cas’ eyes slipped shut.

________________________________________________________________________________________

Dean wasn’t really paying attention to the movie at all.

Instead, his focus was on the man seated next to him on the couch. Dean nursed his third beer of the night and listened as Castiel’s breathing slowly evened out. Cas had been extremely tense in the first few minutes of Dirty Harry, but eventually he’d relaxed. Now, he was on the edge of sleep, and Dean didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to wake him, but at the same time he knew that his couch was quite possibly the most uncomfortable piece of furniture in existence.

Eventually, as the credits to the movie ended and a commercial began, Dean decided to poke Cas gently on the shoulder.
Castiel shot straight up, knocking Dean over with a shove. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Castiel said and Dean just laughed silently from his place on the floor.

“It’s alright, just thought I’d let you know I’m gonna turn in,” he said. “I uh…I had a lot of fun tonight,” Dean said, running a hand through his hair.

“Me too,” Cas replied, his voice soft.

“We should do it again sometime. Hang out, I mean,” Dean’s voice cracked and he blushed.

Cas tilted his head to the side, like he often did when confused. “Sure,” he said, “I’d like that.”

Dean smiled widely and for a moment, Cas was taken aback by his breathtaking beauty. In the low light of the living room, Dean’s eyes were almost brown and his freckles on his forearms stood out. Cas watched as Dean fiddled with a colorful friendship bracelet that he assumed Emma had given him.

“The uh, the bathroom is right down the hall, and the spare room opposite it,” Dean finally said. “If you wanna take a shower, just remember to turn the dial all the way to the left, otherwise it’ll be cold as hell. And the towels are under the sink.”

Castiel nodded. “Again, thanks so much for letting me stay.”

“It’s my pleasure Cas,” Dean hesitated for only the briefest of seconds before placing his hand over Cas’ on the sofa between them. “It was really nice of you to accept, it’s been a long time since I’ve had this much fun.”

With that, Dean stood, wiping his slightly sweaty palms on the sides of his jeans.

He waved once and headed down the hall, closing his door, but not all the way.

A few minutes later, after brushing his teeth, he was lying in his empty bed and he heard Castiel tiptoe past his door.

Dean had set out a toothbrush for him and he heard the water start to run, the door to the spare room closed a few minutes later.

For some reason, he fell asleep much quicker that night, knowing that Castiel was safe from the storm outside, that he was safe under his own roof.

Cas, on the other hand, lay awake for a long time, finally falling asleep right as the rain let up its relentless pounding on the roof.

Chapter End Notes

Special thank you to willbakefordean for the inspiration to continue with this chapter even though I had writer's block like you wouldn't believe! Thanks for always leaving me nice comments and critiques. You don't know how much I appreciate it.
And I Fall Short

Chapter Summary

“Who is Michael, Jimmy?” Bart asked almost as soon as he sat down, taking a sip of wine. Jimmy had made steaks that night and he was right in the middle of cutting his first bite of food all day. He was starving, but he’d been too busy working on the garden to stop for lunch, and he’d never liked breakfast. His fork paused right before it reached his lips.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter is a series of vignettes depicting the devolution of Jimmy/Bart’s relationship. Some of these can be triggering. Please exercise caution when reading.

Chapter 10: And I Fall Short

Chapter Track: Nobody Knows, P!nk

April 19, 2006

104 Holland Rd
Brookline, Massachusetts

The front door opened just as Jimmy placed the plates onto the table. He grabbed two wine glasses from the beverage center and poured them each a healthy serving of Pinot Noir, then took a seat, waiting for Bart.

Faintly he could hear the sound of the answering machine in the hallway. Jimmy had been too busy trying to get the flowers potted before the rainstorm that afternoon to check the messages and he mentally reminded himself to try and check it before Bart came home. He had a long enough day as it is. There was no need for Jimmy to make it longer by making him listen to the inane messages their house received on a daily basis.

Bart walked into the kitchen shaking droplets of rain away from his sandy hair. Briefly he pulled Jimmy in for a kiss, pressing his thumbs gently to the hollow of Jimmy’s neck, on either side of his Adam’s apple. Jimmy always loved when his husband kissed him like this. The way Bart pressed ever so slightly against his trachea, almost restricting his airflow, but never actually doing it. It was primal, possessive. And sometimes, when they made love, Bart would press hard enough to leave a mark upon his skin. Jimmy would trace the small thumbprints on his throat through out the next day, the pain edged pleasure reminding him that he was loved. That he was wanted and needed.

His husband took his seat at the head of the table. Jimmy scooped some salad onto Bart’s plate and then his own and handed over the dressing Bart liked.
Serving Bart in this way was a ritual between them. Bart had been very clear that since Jimmy wasn’t working, the least he could do was have a meal ready for him when he returned from the station.

Bart didn’t have to work, his family money afforded them a comfortable lifestyle in the exclusive suburbs of Brookline, but Jimmy knew his husband enjoyed his work and he hadn’t wanted Jimmy to stay on at the restaurant; he wanted him to stay home. As he’d put it, Bart was “taking care of Jimmy.” The least Jimmy could do was return the favor.

Jimmy glanced around their newly renovated kitchen. It had been his most recent project, along with the bathrooms upstairs that were still stuck in the thirties. He’d always had an interest in architecture and most of the design had reflected his interests. Absently, Jimmy reminded himself to check out some more colleges that week.

“Who is Michael, Jimmy?” Bart asked almost as soon as he sat down, taking a sip of wine. Jimmy had made steaks that night and he was right in the middle of cutting his first bite of food all day. He was starving, but he’d been too busy working on the garden to stop for lunch, and he’d never liked breakfast. His fork paused right before it reached his lips.

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“Where were you today?”

“I was in the garden all day, pulling weeds. Why are you asking about Michael?” Jimmy asked, nonplussed.

Bart was too calm. And when Bart was calm like this, a storm was coming. And he was just too tired to fight. He hated fighting and ever since their honeymoon, it had been happening more and more. Usually it started over something innocuous; Jimmy left the air conditioning on when they didn't need it, or the pot roast was over cooked. Sometimes Bart complained about the smallest things because he couldn't find anything major to gripe about. And sometimes he turned something innocent, like a quick discussion with the mail man about the roses in his garden, and turned it into something sinister, something dirty.

“You missed a call from Michael. He’s in town and he wants to, oh what were his words? ‘Have lunch and catch up,’” Bart said. He cut a bite of steak and brought it to his mouth. Jimmy’s heart started to race.

“Michael is a friend from the restaurant. He was at our wedding, don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh well, he was.”

Bart took another sip of wine. “Did you ever fuck him?”


“Oh, so if he were gay you would have fucked him?”

“Bart you’re being ridiculous. We’ve never dated. We’ve never fucked. We were never anything more than buddies who grabbed a beer after a long shift at work.”

Jimmy met his husband’s gaze across the table.
“I believe you,” Bart said. He took a bite of asparagus, looking away.

“I’ll call him. Tell him we already have plans.” Bart nodded, reaching across the table. He grasped Jimmy’s hand, running his thumb over his knuckles.

“Good,” Bart said finally.

Jimmy looked away, swallowing the lump that had inexplicably risen in his throat.

“Good,” he replied. “Pass me the salt would you?”

**July 15, 2007**

Jimmy wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The mid summer heat was bearing down upon his back as the stood at the hot grill, juggling cooking the filet mignons, four vegetable kabobs, and corn with setting the table and refilling the cooler. He had the window to the kitchen open so he could hear the timer go off on the pie.

He was overwhelmed and needed help but he’d be damned if he was going to have to ask for it. Bart had been sitting on his ass for three hours, steadily making his way through the most recent Stephen King thriller and a bottle of vodka. Getting him to help with dinner was like pulling teeth. Most of the time it wasn’t worth the groaning and moaning accompanying Bart’s “help.” Jimmy grit his teeth. It wouldn’t do to start a fight right now. Especially as he needed his husband to be in a good mood, to be soft and happy and pliant for what he was about to ask for.

Bartholomew had grown up in a very privileged household, with maids and nannies seeing to his every whim. His mother had been a homemaker who’s principle duties included hosting Junior League events and planning fundraisers, having lunch at the Ritz or attending afternoon tennis lessons at their club. Jimmy doubted if his mother-in-law had ever cooked a meal or cleaned house in her life.

At first Bart had been adamant that they too get help of some sort, but Jimmy had refused. He wasn’t working. And it wasn’t like he was welcome at community fundraisers or events because the rich conservative wives in Brookline had made it perfectly clear they did not want to associate with the couple who led an “alternative lifestyle” on Holland Road. So why should he hire someone to do the work at home that he had plenty of time to do himself?

Now, as the lonely days stretched on, Jimmy thoughts he might not have minded the company. Jimmy removed the steaks from the grill and turned the vegetables when he heard the timer in the kitchen go off. He hurried inside to retrieve the pie, setting it on the countertop to cool. They would eat dessert later, after the news.

He grabbed a paper towel and wiped his forehead once more before pouring himself a large glass of wine. He took three long swallows and steeled his resolve. Then he grabbed the serving platters and took them back outside.

He busied himself with arranging the food neatly onto the platters—Bart didn’t like it when his food touched— and took his time setting the table.

Finally, when he was sure that everything was right, he called Bartholomew over. Bart stood up and stretched, the hem of his t-shirt slipping up his trim belly. Jimmy let himself admire his husband’s figure for a moment before smily coyly up at him.

Bart wrapped his hands around Jimmy’s neck and kissed him. Jimmy could feel his fingertips pressing into the marks that Bart had made the night before during sex and he smiled into the kiss.
Bart was in a good mood. This might be easier than he thought.

“Baby,” he said, handing over a full plate of food. His own held half as much. Bart liked it when he was thin.

“Yes?” Bart replied.

Jimmy took a long swallow of his wine. “I was wondering if you’d had the chance to talk with the lawyer about Claire.” Jimmy finally said; he flinched when his voice broke at his daughter’s name.

He hadn’t seen her in nearly four years. When they were still engaged, Bart had promised to speak with Inias about fighting for his parental rights back, about setting up some sort of visitation with her. Jimmy wanted his family back. He wanted to hold his daughter again. But Bart had held off, always giving another excuse ‘We’re going on an extended honeymoon, baby, it can wait.’ ‘But we just bought the house, don’t you want to get settled?’ ‘Well I just got promoted, can’t it wait until I get into the groove of my new job at work?’ Every time Jimmy had relented, letting it go until the time was better. Now, almost a year into Bart’s new position, he was ready to ask again and to really fight for it if he had to.

She wouldn’t remember him at all at this point. And dealing with the courts could take months—years. He was running out of time to build a relationship with his daughter.

Bart had bristled every time Jimmy mentioned it and this time was no different. He hesitated for a moment before looking down and cutting up his green pepper.

“I did,” he finally said. “That’s not going to happen Jimmy.”

Jimmy stared blankly at his husband for a moment. Bart had made it seem like it could happen just a few months ago. What had changed?

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because it’s not. You signed over your rights. You’re not her dad anymore.”

“Yeah, but Inias—”

“Inias said that he could look into it. Not that it was a sure thing.” Bart reached over and took Jimmy’s hand.

“Besides. She’s what, eight years old now? What do you know about taking care of an eight year old kid? One that doesn’t even remember you at that?”

Jimmy looked down. He would learn. He was willing to do what it took to have a relationship with her.

“I can learn. I just want to see her Bart. I need to see her. I…I need her to be part of my life. Plus Gabriel said—”

“Gabriel said,” Bart’s tone turned mocking, releasing Jimmy’s hand. “Gabriel said nothing except that little girl calls someone else Daddy.”

Jimmy felt tears prickle in the corner of his eyes. “Please baby, I need this.”

Bart scoffed. “You need this? You need some snot nosed little brat who doesn’t even know who you are to come and what? Visit? Live with us? Who the hell will I be to her?” Bart paused, raising his
eyebrows.

“I—I don’t know,” Jimmy finally said.

“Exactly, we’ll just confuse her more.”

Bart sat back and took the last swig of his drink.

“Get me another one will ya?” he asked.

Jimmy looked away from his husband as Bart loudly burped. He ignored the tear that slipped down his cheek as he reached into the cooler for a beer.

June 19, 2008

Jimmy could smell someone else’s cologne on his husband’s collar. It wasn’t the first time, and he was sure it wasn’t going to be the last, but every time it happened Jimmy was reminded that he wasn’t enough. He wasn’t enough to keep his husband happy. That was more painful than Bart’s infidelity. It was the fact that he wasn’t enough that kept him up at night. It was the fact that he wasn’t enough that caused him to sneak onto Bart’s computer to check his emails. He wasn’t enough, so he wanted to know who was. Who was enough? He needed to know. So he checked Bart’s pager. He checked his phone.

But none of it told him why he wasn’t enough. So he tried harder. He became what he thought Bart needed.

He confronted Bart and his husband begged forgiveness and things were okay for a while until Jimmy smelled another man’s cologne on his husband’s collar again.

He pulled away from the embrace, his nose wrinkling.

“I can smell him on you,” he said and turned back to Bart. Jimmy grabbed the nearest dish from the stack by the sink, hastily squeezing the bottle of dish soap into the warm water. “Which one was it this time? John?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bart said, wrapping his arms around Jimmy’s waist. He planted a kiss to Jimmy’s temple, his teeth scraping against his ear.

“You were with him. I can smell his cheap ass cologne like you took a fucking bath in it.”

“Come on baby, don’t be like this. I was at work. Some perp resisted arrest. Had to wrestle him to the ground.”

“You must really think I’m a goddamn idiot.” Jimmy said, furiously scrubbing at the remnants of lasagna from the casserole dish.

“Watch your language.” Bartholomew’s voice grew quiet, and Jimmy felt the small hairs prickle at the back of his neck.

Bart stood behind him, his hands on top of Jimmy’s shoulders. “Nothing happened. I am your husband.”

Jimmy narrowed his eyes, defiance coursing through his body. “Then fucking act like it,” he mumbled to the dishes.
Bart’s grip tightened on Jimmy’s shoulders and before he knew it, Bart had turned him around to face him, pinning him against the countertop.

His husband grabbed his chin in one hand.

“You wanna say that to my face?”

Jimmy jerked his chin away, he put his hands on Bart’s shoulders and pushed him away, escaping from the countertop. “You don’t get to cheat on me,” his voice trembled, but it was still strong. “You are my husband. And I deserve to be treated with respect! That mean’s you don’t get to fuck someone who isn’t me just because you want to! Oh!”

Bart’s right hook caught him just underneath the jaw. His head snapped to the side and he stumbled back, hitting his hipbone sharply against the corner of the table. He grabbed his jaw, his eyes filling with stinging tears. He met Bart’s gaze, his eyes narrowed.

“What? I’m not allowed to hit you?” Bartholomew’s mocking voice was soft. Suddenly the warm summer air drifting through the open window felt cold against his skin. Jimmy broke out in goosebumps.

Jimmy narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“No you’re not,” he replied, his fists clenched at his sides.

Before he was even done speaking, Bart hit him again, this time the blow landed on his eye. Jimmy felt his skin break just below his cheekbone and he fell back, down to his knees. He bit back a sob. This wasn’t his husband. This wasn't the man he married. This man was a monster.

Stars erupted behind his eyes as pain shot through his entire face.

Bart glanced down at his hand, and wiped away the blood on his class ring. Then he knelt down in front of Jimmy.

Casually, gently, as if it were a caress instead of a violation, he gripped Jimmy by the shoulders until they were face to face.

“I don’t think you understand how it works around here, my darling. You see, I make the money here. Me. I buy your fancy clothes and your nice car. I pay for this house and all the things you fill with it. Me. I do that. I give you everything you need. I make the money. And you know what that means, sweetheart?”

Jimmy looked away, shaking his head. Bart leaned even closer, until their cheeks were touching.

“It means, I can do whatever the hell I want.” Bart leaned back. “Now, I’m going to go out.” He stood up, leaving Jimmy sitting on the floor. “I won’t be back tonight. Randy and I are going to an art show in the city.”

Pain worse than the dull ache radiating through out his entire face shot through him, making his fingertips tingle with shame.

Bart took both sets of car keys from the key hook by the kitchen door.

“And before you think about going anywhere. I’m going to take these keys. You've had too much to drink tonight. I suspect that’s why you’ve behaved so poorly.”
Jimmy glanced up at Bart, but he couldn't make himself say anything. Instead fat tears streamed down his face.

Bart smirked and left.

Jimmy waited until the headlights from Bart’s Jaguar rolled out of the drive way before he let out the sob he’d desperately been holding back.

It took him a few minutes before he was able to weakly stand. He dialed 9-1-1 and had his fingers poised over the call button when he heard a sharp tap on the window of the kitchen door.

He spun around. Bart was standing there, the porch light casting an eerie glow across his handsome features.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, as he opened the door.

Jimmy hit the end call button and thought fast.

“I was getting ready to call your mother. We were supposed to get together for lunch tomorrow.” Jimmy forced himself to smile. “I should probably cancel,” he added.

Bart bit his lip. “You should cancel. The upstairs is filthy. You’re not going to have time to spend the afternoon gossiping anyway.”

Jimmy thought about the spotless second floor and took a shaky breath.

“Exactly, I simply don’t have time,” he finally said.

“Come here,” Bart said. Every instinct Jimmy had told him to run. But he didn’t. Instead, he moved closer. Bart took the phone from him. He checked the caller id, then hit redial. He pressed the phone to his ear.

“Pizza Hut,” a low teenage voice said in the air between them. Bart hung up and handed the phone back to Jimmy.

“Don’t make me regret leaving you alone,” his said ominously. Jimmy took a deep breath.

“I won’t, baby. I promise,” he replied. Bile rose in his throat.

“Come here,” Bart pulled Jimmy closer to him by the lapels of his jacket. He pressed a searing kiss to Jimmy’s lips. Jimmy swallowed back the bile, nearly choking on it.

When they broke apart, Jimmy tasted blood. “Goodnight,” Bart whispered.

“Goodnight,” he finally replied. Then Bart was gone.

Jimmy barley made it to the powder room before he vomited up his entire dinner.
There Will Be Healing

Chapter Summary

A deep ache settled into the pit of his stomach as he watched Cas flick the pan with his wrist, turning the egg he was frying, just like Lisa used to do. It was in these moments of quiet domesticity, that’s when he missed his wife the most. Resentment, an emotion that he had done all he could to dispel in the years since his wife had been taken from him, flared up from the box he’d shoved it into and warred with the gratitude he felt for Castiel’s kind gesture.

Chapter 11: There Will Be Healing

Chapter Track: Domesticity Song, Kristin Mueller

June 4, 2014

Dean woke up the next morning to the smell of food cooking and immediately panicked. In this household, no one under the age of ten should be anywhere near the stove, at least not without help.

He stumbled out of bed, tripping over a discarded pair of tennis shoes, and barely managed to maintain his footing. Dean threw on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and hurtled down the hall, towards the kitchen.

Dean had a sharp word ready for whichever of his children had decided to take breakfast upon themselves, but was brought up short by the sight of Castiel standing barefoot in front of the stove, humming lowly to himself.

There was coffee percolating in the carafe and a small stack of bacon was cooling in a paper towel on the butcher block countertop. Cas, he thought, his heart rate slowly decreasing. It was just Cas. Dean had forgotten about inviting Castiel to stay over. Dean let himself calm down.

Castiel’s hair was wet, sticking up on one side, the white t-shirt he was wearing was tight across his shoulders and it contrasted nicely with the golden tan Dean had just noticed. He wasn’t thin, or sickly anymore. He had filled out and his musculature had changed. His thighs were thick and muscled through his shorts.

Dean let his eyes linger on the plush curve of Cas’ backside, which had also filled out and then they flickered down to the soft hairs on back of his calves and the tendons of his ankles. He looked strong and healthy, with broad shoulders and a tapered waist. He wanted to reach out and thread his fingers through Castiel’s hair, just to see if it was as soft as it looked. He felt heat pool in his belly, but a sudden lump in his throat distracted him and he pushed the desire down until it was just a thought in the back of his mind.

He had forgotten how it felt to wake up to breakfast already made. Lisa had loved cooking, and making breakfast for her family had been one of her favorite things to do. He couldn’t remember how many times he’d awoken to the smell of coffee and bacon, or French toast, eggs and sausage in those few short years he had with her. He remembered watching her flip sausages with a fork, holding Ben or Emma on one hip and swaying back and forth; always with a song on her lips.
He used to come up behind her and press his lips to the back of her head, inhaling her peaches and vanilla scent as he took their son or daughter from her, placing them on his own hip as she turned around and rested her hands at his waist, raising up onto her tip toes to kiss the freckles across the bridge of his nose before pressing her lips softly to his. It was a dance, their morning routine, perfected and choreographed, familiar and loving and perfect. He missed it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Dean wondered how Cas would react if he went up to him then, pressing himself close and letting his lips fall to his messy dark hair. He wanted to. Without thinking about it, Dean took a step forward, but then stopped. He shook that thought off and ran a hand through his own hair.

A deep ache settled into the pit of his stomach as he watched Cas flick the pan with his wrist, turning the egg he was frying, just like Lisa used to do. It was in these moments of quiet domesticity, that’s when he missed his wife the most. Resentment, an emotion that he had done all he could to dispel in the years since his wife had been taken from him, flared up from the box he’d shoved it into and warred with the gratitude he felt for Castiel’s kind gesture. He flushed darkly, and opened his mouth to speak, but Castiel interrupted him first.

“Good morning,” Castiel said as he turned to the griddle on another burner, picked up his spatula, and flipped a pancake. He looked over and smiled at Dean, and like a bubble bursting, Dean’s resentment dissipated, leaving behind only gratitude and lingering panic from the frantic run to the kitchen.

“Uh, good morning,” Dean said, running a hand through his hair. “I thought the kids had decided make breakfast. I was worried they were setting the house on fire,” Dean continued, his tone amused. He tried not to focus on Castiel’s wrists, which were bony and beautiful. Wrists had always been a weakness of Dean’s. “I guess I’m not used to someone else who’s over four feet tall in the house.”

Cas paused, his spatula stilled over the skillet. “I- I’m sorry,” he stuttered, suddenly chagrined. “I shouldn’t have—I-I just wanted to thank you for your hospitality. But I shouldn’t have presumed…” Cas pulled the griddle off the fire and stepped away, pulling in on himself. His breathing had become erratic, and he’d dropped the spatula and started wringing his hands.

Realization dawned on Dean and he hastened to calm him. “No, no Cas. It’s okay, I’m not mad.”

Cas looked up, eyes wide. “What?”

“Thank you,” he paused, his tone soft. He’d moved forward, his hands outstretched in front of him. “Thank you for making breakfast. I really appreciate it,” he said.

And just like that, Cas was suspicious.

“You’re not mad?”

“No.” Cas squinted and Dean’s suspicions were confirmed. Whatever life Castiel had had before Southport, it hadn’t been pleasant. “Really Cas, it’s been… hell it’s been… years since someone’s made me breakfast, so thank you.”

Castiel softened, and he smiled tentatively. “You’re—you’re welcome.” Dean smiled then, wide enough that his eyes crinkled in the corners. He pressed his hand lightly on Cas’ forearm. The weight on his arm was warm, his thumb was pressed against the crook of his elbow. In that moment, Cas felt something shift between them.
Suddenly he was very much aware that Dean was a man and they were standing much too close together. He was a beautiful man, and kind and witty and sexy in his baggy sweatpants and too small Led Zeppelin t-shirt, and Cas knew he needed to be careful, because it would be too easy to fall in love with him. Hell, he was halfway there already, even if he was unwilling to admit it to himself.

So he took a deep breath and tried not to focus on the way the sunlight streaming through the large window above the sink made Dean’s eyes change from green to the color of aged whiskey. Cas ignored the strength and grace of his forearms and the freckles that dusted the sides of his nose and his cheeks.

He pretended the freckle just above the collar of Dean’s shirt wasn’t there, that he didn’t want to explore the rest of his body with his lips just to discover new ones.

Adultery is a sin. The words popped up unbidden, in his father’s cold voice, And those who participate in adultery are damned to Hell. Cas flinched away from the warmth bubbling in the pit of his stomach. He was married. Dean was probably straight anyway and he wasn’t going to go there. Dean deserved better than the sham of a relationship that Cas would be able to give at this point anyway.

He told himself that there was no way Dean was interested in him and that the tension between them was obviously one sided. So Cas contented himself with the knowledge that he and Dean were friends, and no more, and it wasn’t like he was even in a place to be in a relationship now anyway. So why the hell is he moving closer to him, letting his forearm barely brush Dean’s as Dean reached around him for a cup of coffee?

Castiel shook his head and turned his attention back to the pancakes.

The smell of bacon had roused the kids and as they all sat down to breakfast, Cas couldn’t get over the peace of it all. The kids were sleepy and quiet and Dean had this soft smile on his face that Cas didn’t know how to interpret. No one spoke; they just ate quietly, but it wasn’t like the silent mornings that he’d spent with Bartholomew.

Then, he had been quiet, not because he wanted to, but because he had to. He remained silent, his head bowed over his oatmeal and water, as his husband drank his coffee. That silence was cold, indifferent. But this? This was a different kind of silence altogether. This was the silence of a sleepy summer Tuesday full of possibility, the only sounds coming from a bird singing in the magnolia tree in the front yard.

It was a bright, warm day and he found as Dean took their plates from the table and started to fill the sink with soapy water that he didn’t want this small piece of domesticity to end. He didn’t want to walk to his empty cottage to change clothes for work. He didn’t want to leave, he thought. Giddiness welled up inside him at the notion. How long had it been since he hadn’t wanted to escape? He wanted to stay. He wanted to finger-paint with Emma, to go fishing with Ben. He wanted to know more about Dean.

After eating, Dean promised them a day out on the water and the kids went to get dressed. Castiel stood to help Dean with the cleanup. Dean didn’t have a dishwasher and so he washed while Cas dried in companionable silence. Neither acknowledged that they were less than a foot apart from one another. Neither one said anything when Dean’s fingers brushed against Cas’ every time he passed over a wet dish. Dean radiated warmth as they stood side by side, their shoulders touching. Cas looked over at Dean and saw that he was blushing lightly, making the freckles on his cheeks stand out. And Castiel allowed himself to hope that maybe this, whatever it was between them, wasn’t so one sided after all.
Once the kitchen was clean, Cas leaned against the countertop as Dean wiped down the stove one last time.

Dean put the washcloth over the sink divider and leaned against the counter next to Cas, not touching but still close enough for Castiel to feel his body heat against his right side.

“So, uh” Dean began, “What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

Cas shrugged. “I’ve got work later.”

Dean’s face fell. “Oh, I was going to invite you to come with us,” he said.

“Really?” Cas asked, shocked. “Who’s going to take care of the store?”

“I hired a friend of mine, and Benny’s showing her the ropes,” he paused, “You’re not bad company you know,” Dean said, nudging Cas with his shoulder. Castiel smiled.

“I wish I didn’t have to work then,” he said, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice.

Dean paused thoughtfully. “What if you didn’t?”

Castiel raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“What if you got someone to cover your shift? Maybe Jo?” he suggested.

Cas hesitated. “I dunno,” Cas hedged, trying to calm his breathing. He was nervous and excited. Was this a date? Was he ready for this to be a date? No, he thought. I’m not. Plus, Cas hadn’t ever missed a day of work, but as he looked at Dean, who was pulling the most unfair puppy dog face in the world, the thought of playing hooky was certainly much more appealing than spending eight hours on his feet at work, especially with the glorious weather.

“Aw, c’mon man, come with us. What would you rather do, go swimming or boil under the hot sun at the Roadhouse?”

“You make a compelling argument,” Cas replied and smiled. “Sure, why not? Jo owes me a favor anyway.”

Castiel pulled out his disposable cell from his pocket and called Jo, who was more than happy to take his shift. By then, the kids had returned from their bedrooms, dressed in their swimsuits. Emma had on a big floppy hat and denim shorts and Cas saw that she had freckles across the back of her shoulder blades, just like her big brother.

Dean asked the kids if it would be alright for Cas to join them and they both shouted ‘yes’ excitedly. Dean then went to get dressed.

Castiel was coloring at the kitchen table with Emma and Ben when Dean returned from his shower. His hair was still damp and droplets of water had fallen onto the back of his grey t-shirt and Castiel had to swallow a lump in his throat and look away as Dean bent down to retrieve a green cooler from a closet situated beneath the kitchen stairs.

Dean filled up the cooler with sodas and apples, he made sandwiches and tossed them to Ben who tossed them into the cooler. He handed a dollar to Emma and asked her to go get a bag of ice from the store and to give the dollar to Uncle Benny. Cas went with her, holding her hand as they crossed the street to Dean’s store. She was teaching him a new song and they had just gotten to the chorus when they returned a few minutes later, Cas holding a bag of ice in one hand and Emma hoisted on
his hip in the other.

Dean looked up at them and his heart drop to his stomach. She was laughing as Castiel poked her in the side. He set the ice down next to Dean and they continued learning her song from pre-school, something about a lion and an elephant with big green toes. Ben looked up from helping his dad make their lunch and Dean watched as his son’s face clouded over for a moment before he bit his lip and looked away from Emma and Cas bonding at the kitchen table.

He reached over and ruffled his son’s curls. “You okay, Bubby?” Dean asked him, and the contemplative look on his son’s face vanished, only to be replaced with annoyance.

“I’m fine, Dad. Don’t call me Bubby,” but Ben’s lips curled into a smile and Dean nudged his cheek with the back of his knuckle.

“You’ll always be Bubby to me, kiddo, so get used to it,” he joked. Then he turned his son’s face to him. “Seriously, though. Are you alright with Cas coming along with us?” Dean murmured.

Ben’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Dean shrugged.

“I like him, Dad,” Ben whispered.

“You do?” Dean asked.

Ben nodded.

“Me too,” he finally said. “I like him a lot.”

After that, Ben went to color with his sister and Dean and Cas hauled the fishing gear, the cooler, the sunscreen and lifejackets to an old Jeep Cherokee. A speedboat was attached to the jack, and Dean put the cooler in behind the driver’s seat. After rounding up the kids, they all piled into the Jeep.

Their first stop was to Cas’ cottage, where Castiel changed into a pair of swim trunks he’d found at the Goodwill and a fresh t-shirt. He grabbed the volume of Bukowski poems he’d checked out from the library and an old ball cap and hurried out the door.

They drove for about thirty minutes. Emma fell asleep fairly quickly, the hum of the Jeep on the road lulling her into the immediate sort of deep sleep that only comes with childhood.

Ben watched his dad watch Cas from the backseat. Dean didn’t do it in an obvious way, like the way Uncle Sammy watches Aunt Jess; his dad watched Mr. Cas out of the corner of his eye. He’d glance over at him when he didn’t need to, when Cas wasn’t looking. He smiled more when Castiel was around.

Ben had always been much more intuitive than other kids his age, a trait his mom used to say came from Dean. He knew when Emma was sad by the set of her thin mouth, and he was always ready with a song to make her smile. He always knew when his dad was stressed or tired or sad. And sometimes he was able to pull himself out of his own sadness to try and make Dean feel better. Even if it was just by telling a dumb joke, or sharing a small detail about his day. Ben liked making people feel better, even if he hadn’t been very good at it since his mom died.

Ben shook those thoughts away. Today is going to be a good day, not a sad day, he thought, determined. So instead of letting the sadness prick tears into the corner of his eyes, he watched Dean joke about Cas’ ball cap, which was slightly crooked. He smiled. His dad was relaxed for the first
time in a long time. As Castiel and Dean argued over which Led Zeppelin album was better, he realized that Dean was a person outside of being their dad.

He watched Dean smile so wide that the corners of his eyes crinkled and he wondered how long it had been since he’d seen him so happy. He noticed the way his dad looked at Cas like he was searching for answers.

But did that mean Dad… liked Castiel? he wondered, Does he like Cas the way I like Allison? The thought perplexed him and made him uncomfortable. He didn’t want to think about his dad liking anyone like that. It was too weird.

Eventually the steady hum of the wheels against the smooth pavement lulled Ben to sleep as well, and before he knew it, the car had come to a stop and Dean was smacking his hands against the hood, right over his head.

He jumped up and hastened to unbuckle his seatbelt, excitement bubbling up to the surface as Dean packed everything from the backseat into the boat.

“Will you help Sissy, Ben?” Dean asked as he tossed Ben their lifejackets.

Ben had just finished clicking the snaps shut on Emma’s purple life vest when Dean called them over. Castiel picked Emma up from under her shoulders, grunting lightly as he swung her legs over the side of the boat and into one of the seats. Dean ruffled Ben’s curls and held out his hand to steady him as he climbed into the back from the ladder and then winked when Ben rolled his eyes.

“I can do it myself, I’m not a little kid anymore, Dad,” he huffed.

“I know you can, Bub,” Dean said easily and Ben forgave him, just a little bit.

Castiel watched them interact from behind the wheel of the boat trailer, smiling softly.

They are a lot alike, Cas thought, even if they don’t really see it.

Dean followed Ben up the ladder, and then turned to offer out his hand for Cas to climb up.

Cas hesitated for the briefest moment before taking Dean’s warm hand with his own. He stepped up into the boat. Dean fiddled with a few of the controls making sure everything was in order before he turned back to Cas.

“Do you know how to drive a boat?”

Cas nodded. “I used to sail in college, but every now and then my friends and I took the speedboat out on the lake,” Dean’s eyes lit up at this small piece of information freely given and smiled.

“Awesome, I’m gonna lower the boat and then go park, if you could idle right by that dock, I’ll meet you there in a few.”

Cas nodded and took a seat in the driver’s chair. “Kids, why don’t you sit down on that back seat and put your seat belts on,” Cas suggested as Dean jumped down from the boat, wiping his hands on the back pockets of his jeans and Cas flushed. He had to remind himself that there were kids present.

Dean backed the Jeep down the loading ramp slowly. The kids whooped and hollered as the boat slowly inched its way towards the water, and Cas had his fingers on the ignition ready to start it up as soon as the boat was afloat.
It unloaded without a hitch and Castiel expertly maneuvered the boat to the end of a long dock. The marina was calm this morning, with fishermen getting ready to leave the water as late morning set in; there were a few clusters of teenagers here and there in speedboats and pontoons, all in swimsuits and ball caps.

Dean met them at the edge of the dock and hopped in, bending his knees to absorb the impact. The boat shifted slightly to the side and the kids shouted excitedly. Dean horsed around a little bit more, jumping wildly to make the boat tilt, just to make them laugh again and then plopped down in between them on the back bench. He unbuckled his daughter, picked Emma up and swung her head first over his shoulder, tickling her sides until she squealed in delight.

Cas paused from navigating out of the marina and into the bay to watch Dean interact with his kids. Ben had joined in on the tickle fest and Emma was all but crying from laughter. A digital camera was sitting next to him in the cup holder; Dean had placed it there before unloading the boat from the trailer. Castiel reached out and picked it up.

He adjusted a couple of the settings without the family noticing, and snapped a few pictures of them. Dean was extremely photogenic, as were his children, but as soon as they noticed the camera on them, all three of them pinched up their faces in the exact same pose, tongues out to the side and eyes crossed. Castiel laughed and snapped another picture of them before turning the camera off and starting the drive out of the marina and into the bay.

After a few minutes, Dean joined him at the wheel.

“Do you want to drive?” Castiel asked, “You know where we’re going.”

“Nah, it’s fine, just head south and I’ll let you know when to turn.”

“So where are we going?”

“Just south of the river’s edge along the coast, there’s a cove that’s a sweet spot for fishing. That’s where we’re heading.”

Cas nodded. They lapsed into silence, punctuated only by the sound of Emma and Ben arguing over their Dad’s phone. They had some sort of game involving Plants and Zombies open.

Cas felt jittery and out of place. Usually, Cas figured silence was best. The less he talked, the less chance there was of one of his secrets slipping out, but with Dean it was different. He wanted to know more about him, and he wanted to share with him, in a way that was both scary and exhilarating. So he cleared his throat, and tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, but stopped short of speaking.

Dean was slouched into the seat next to him. He was nursing a soda in a faded blue koozie that read “Stolen from Sam and Jess’ Wedding: June 16, 2007.” Cas watched him out of the corner of his eye as Dean looked out onto the water, drumming a beat into his thigh with the tips of his fingers.

He was wearing a cap from Emma’s soccer team and aviators, with a two day beard that made him look older, but in the best possible way. Castiel ran a hand across his own chin. He’d been thinking about growing his beard back out and he’d tried several times, but he could never get past a three day beard before shaving it. Every time he looked in the mirror he’d been reminded of his previous life and he’d panicked.

He supposed that’s also why he’d continued to dye his hair. He liked looking in the mirror and seeing Castiel Moseley instead of Jimmy Novak. He was free from the burden of his reflection when
he hid his true appearance.

Castiel jumped when Dean nudged him lightly with his shoulder. “Turn into that cove just up there on your right,” he instructed.

Cas nodded and made the turn. The marina disappeared from around a bend in the river, and Castiel navigated the boat through the twists and turns.

The silence grew heavy between them, until Castiel felt he would suffocate from it. Cas adjusted his baseball cap and scratched the back of his head. If he didn’t break the silence now, he was going to go insane.

He coughed. “So uh,” he began and Dean looked over at him. Cas could see his reflection in Dean’s sunglasses.

“Hmm?” Dean asked.

He cleared his throat. “Have you always lived in Southport?”

“No, actually. I’m originally from Kansas.”

“Really?” Cas asked. “You’re an awful long way from home.”

“I could say the same for you,” Dean paused, making a decision, “I’m guessing somewhere up north?” Cas looked away, shrugging noncommittally. He had a sudden flash to Ellie asking the same thing the previous day, but he dismissed it. His accent probably gave him away and he shouldn’t think anything of it.

“Thereabouts, but it was never home.” Dean nodded, another puzzle piece falling into place.

“I know what you mean, Southport has always been more of a home than Kansas ever was.”

“Did you move here when you were young?”

Dean bit his lip. “After my mom died, Southport was kind of… my one constant in a life that was always on the move,” he said. “There’s a dock up here on your left, that’s where we’re going.”

Cas tilted his head. He could sense that Dean didn’t want to say anything further and he didn’t push. They slowed down considerably, barely idling along the river; Cas pulled alongside the dock and Dean hopped out. Ben stood and passed his dad the rope and they tied it off.

“Alright, who’s hungry?” Dean said, as he helped Emma out of her seat.

“Me!” Ben said as he jumped off the edge of the boat onto the dock.

“Ben, what have I told you about jumping off boats?” Dean reminded.

“I know, I know, I can slip and fall and get hurt. Sorry, Dad,” Ben mumbled.

“Just be careful, ‘kay?” Dean ruffled Ben’s curls, a gesture Cas was beginning to understand was their thing, and then climbed back into the boat to pick up the cooler.

Castiel grabbed a large canvas tote, filled to the brim with so much food Cas couldn’t identify it all, and followed Dean onto the dock.

“Where do you wanna set up?”
“Hmm?” Dean asked, looking over at Castiel, who gestured to the tote in his hands. “Oh, there’s a spot just down the way. I thought we’d set up lunch before fishing. The kids followed them as they walked through woods on a short path that looked like it had been carved out of the earth with the tires of a four wheeler, until they came upon a clear patch near the river. There, a weathered picnic table sat, its blue paint peeling away in some places.

“So this is your honey hole?” Castiel asked. He placed the tote on top of the table and started to pull out supplies.

“Bobby swears by this spot, says it’s the best place for trout in the tri-state area,” Dean replied. “You want something to drink?”

Cas nodded and Dean tossed him a bottled soda. Cas dug around in the bottom of the bag until he found another “Stolen from Sam and Jess’ Wedding” koozie and took a slow drink.

It had been a long time since he’d had anything other than water or coffee to drink and the Pepsi tasted sweet on the tip of his tongue, the fizz of the carbonation tickled the back of his throat.

He didn’t notice the way Dean quickly glanced away when he swallowed and put the soda down, but when he looked up, he did notice the way Dean blushed blotchy beneath his aviators and he bit back a smile.

Maybe it wasn’t so one sided after all.
Keep the Earth Below My Feet

Chapter Summary

With the windows open, Emma and Ben sang along to an old Meat Loaf song playing on the radio as they drove down the winding highway, completely oblivious to the double meaning of the lyrics. The tops of Cas’ arms and legs were sunburnt from his impromptu nap and he was dehydrated, with the beginnings of a headache, and he couldn’t think of any other place he’d rather be.

He was… happy.

Chapter 12: Keep The Earth Below My Feet

Chapter Track: The Place I Left Behind, The Deep Dark Woods

June 4, 2014

The rest of the afternoon passed by in a state of idyllic tranquility that Cas hadn’t experienced in years. Emma quickly grew bored of fishing so she and Dean caught butterflies in the clearing. Cas and Ben fished in silence at the end of the dock; the lack of conversation afforded Cas the chance to watch Emma and Dean out of the corner of his eye, and if the image of Dean swinging a net with such care and tenderness wasn’t enough to make Cas’ heart melt, the way he interacted with his daughter sealed the deal.

They ran along the bank of the river with nets, and she would shriek in delight every time they caught a new butterfly. Now and then Dean would pick her up and throw her over his shoulder, spinning them both around in a circle. Every time Dean laughed, warmth spread through Cas, all the way down to his fingertips. His joy was a beautiful thing to behold. His eyes crinkled at the corners, making him look his age for once, which Castiel found refreshing.

At around three, after Dean and Emma had caught and released every butterfly in the general vicinity, some more than once, and Emma had started to rub her eyes, Cas carried her back to the boat to take a nap. She lay in his lap, her thick curls splayed across his thigh, soft and bright as spun gold. He read his volume of poems and twirled a lock of her hair through his fingers as she slept and they swayed in the boat. Dean played catch with his son.

Emma was still asleep when he finished reading his book. He yawned and put his baseball cap over his eyes, resting his head on the bundle of a bright orange towel that smelled like sunscreen. With one hand still in the little girl's hair, he let himself drift.

He’d been dreaming of the red leaves that fell from the tree in the backyard of his house in autumn. They’d had two giant Northern Red Oaks just close enough to hang a hammock from, and it had been one of Cas’ favorite places in their Boston home. Cas used to spend hours in that hammock all summer long and well into autumn, the rich smell of decay filling his lungs as the red leaves fell over his face in late September and early October. It had been a safe space for him. Bart was allergic to tree pollen and when they had moved into their renovated 1930s Tudor home, early on in their marriage, he’d insisted on cutting them down. But Cas had stood his ground and insisted that they added value to the house. For once he’d won the argument, but he still cringed when he thought...
about the things he had to do to convince his husband that it really was Bartholomew idea all along that they kept the trees.

When Ben and Dean hopped down into the boat with all their supplies, gear and bags, Cas had jumped a foot in the air. For a moment, he didn’t know where he was. His mind was still in that autumn backyard surrounded by leaves. He could still hear his husband’s voice, controlled but cold, “asking” Cas why the leaves hadn’t yet been raked up. His heart was pounding in his fingertips, and he was short of breath. Cas had nodded off, and a nightmare he hadn’t had in weeks had been interrupted. Dean and Ben apparently caught their limit of trout during his nap, and they were all ready to go back home.

The afternoon sun was waning as they rode back to the loading dock. After hitching up the boat, the kids climbed wearily into the backseat of the Jeep. Dean and Cas loaded the food and supplies in the trunk, both studiously ignoring when their hands brushed.

With the windows open, Emma and Ben sang along to an old Meat Loaf song playing on the radio as they drove down the winding highway, completely oblivious to the double meaning of the lyrics. The tops of Cas’ arms and legs were sunburnt from his impromptu nap and he was dehydrated, with the beginnings of a headache, and he couldn’t think of any other place he’d rather be.

He was… happy.

It had been a perfect day, but as they got closer to home, Cas’ apprehension rose. A big part of him still heard his husband’s words in his ears. Who was he to be this happy? He wasn’t worthy of happiness. He was annoying and constantly messing everything up. He couldn’t for the life of him succeed without someone taking care of him. A thought ran through Cas that turned his veins to ice.

Isn’t that what he was doing here, with Dean? He was getting too close to the Winchesters. He could easily let Dean take care of him, and wouldn’t that make Barty right?

His resolve steeled. Cas wanted to prove him wrong. He could make it on his own. He didn’t need people like Dean to take care of him. Either way, he didn’t deserve Dean’s kindness, and the other shoe was going to drop eventually. It always did. Dean would find out that Cas wasn’t worth his time hand he’d drop him.

Brick by brick, Cas started to rebuild that wall of safety around his heart. Maybe if he pushed Dean and the kids away now, before things got too far, he’d be able to spare everyone the pain they’d feel when he eventually had to leave the safe haven of Southport. Cas’ thoughts flickered back to the growing pile of cash stuck in an old coffee can at home. Would it be enough to get him somewhere new?

By the time Dean stopped in front of the cottage, Cas was shaking and the silence between him and Dean had become awkward. He put the jeep in park. It was quiet save for the music playing on the radio.

“Thank you for a great day,” Cas said softly, breaking the silence. “I really appreciate the invitation.”

Dean scoffed. “It was no problem. I’m glad you came with us.”

The silence fell once more. Cas let his hand rest on the door handle for a moment. “I guess I’ll uh…. I guess I’ll see you around Dean.”

He made to open the door but Dean reached out suddenly, placing his cool hand on Cas’ sunburnt
“Really, Cas, I had a great time. Thank you.”

Cas’ gaze softened. He let his guard down for a brief moment. Cas glanced to the backseat where Ben and Emma were fast asleep; he bit back a smile and opened the door.

Once he shut the door, Cas turned back, leaning down so that his face was framed by the open car window. He waved goodbye.

“Hey Cas!” Dean said as Cas began to walk towards his front porch.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Well uh…” Dean ran a hand through his hair. “The kids and I were going to grill up some of this trout for dinner, and I was wondering if you’d like to join us later? After their nap?”

Cas’ polite smile faded. Dean could actually watch Cas’ walls snap back in place.

“Thank you for the offer, but I can’t tonight,” he said, and he tried not to notice the way Dean’s face fell, but Dean quickly recovered.

“No worries, man,” he said. “I’ll see you around,” Dean paused. “I—I’m glad you came to Southport, Cas. I’m glad I met you.” Dean turned a bright red that had nothing to do with a sunburn and scratched at the short hairs on the back of his neck. He hadn’t exactly meant to be so open with Castiel, especially since Cas seemed to grow more and more distant the nearer they got to his cottage, but he couldn’t help it.

Dean drove home feeling unsettled. Something had changed between them, and he wasn’t sure what, but he’d literally watched Castiel close himself off in front of his eyes.

Cas shut the door as the sound of the Jeep faded in the distance. He rested his head against the grainy wood and closed his eyes for just a moment before looking around his empty cottage. He took a deep breath. The muggy room smelled musty from being shut up during the previous day’s rainstorms. He slipped off his shoes and put his ball cap onto an old hook by the light switch. Absentmindedly, he straightened his shoes until they were aligned perfectly with the braided rug at the entrance. Cas then padded across the room, frowning at the remains of a puddle behind the couch.

Cursing lightly, Castiel retrieved the dish towel from its place on the lip of the sink and proceeded to clean up the musty water. The light had gone behind the trees by the time he finished, making his cottage dim, but not dark enough for Cas to miss the dust bunnies under his farmhouse sink, and the cobwebs in the corners of his living room.

He sighed, and filled a bucket with vinegar and warm water. For the next few hours, darkness fell and Castiel cleaned.

He cleaned the cobwebs from the ceiling, and beat the dust out of the rugs in his living room. Cas spent twenty minutes intently focused on the grime in the window panes. He mopped the floor on his hands and knees with the vinegar water. Cas didn’t stop working until night had deeply fallen, and his stomach growled loudly enough to pull him out of his distraction.

He glanced around his cottage.

The throw blankets he’d found a thrift shop, usually thrown haphazardly across the back of his armchair, were perfectly folded, the corners sharp and placed right in the center of the chair.
All of his tabletops were dusted and polished. The lingering scent of lemon furniture polish was sharp in his nostrils. For some reason, the smell made him anxious. His heart rate jumped as he took in the meticulously organized books on his bookshelf. He cleaned for so long that his back ached and his head pounded from the smell of the harsh chemicals. He hand washed his curtains in the sink until his fingers were pruny and raw. He cleaned and cleaned, compulsively making everything as perfect as he could, because if Bart showed up right now, surely he’d be in for a beating for letting the house get to be such a mess.

And when he ran out of things to clean inside, Cas moved outside. He turned on the porch light and started to sweep the porch floor until he was sure he could eat off it if he needed to. He cleaned every window inside and outside and made note of the trim that needed to be repainted and the gardens that needed to be weeded. At one point, he stood up and the world tilted sideways before he fully straightened. He hadn’t eaten since lunch that afternoon and he was weak, but Bart didn’t like it when he filled out too much. Perhaps it would do him some good to miss a meal or two. It would probably serve as a good reminder.

Cas didn’t stop moving until the sky started to brighten in the east. Finally he stopped. He started a pot of coffee and sat in the now spotless wicker chair on his front porch, just watching as the sun rose over the trees.

He had been so engrossed in fixing all the things that were wrong that he’d worked through the night. The smell of coffee drifted from the open window of his cottage to the porch and his stomach rumbled again.

Mechanically, Castiel stood up. His fingers were trembling and every muscle in his body ached. Cas knew he needed to sleep, but he didn’t want to dream. He poured a cup of strong black coffee and grabbed a Pop Tart from the small pantry by his sink; then he went back outside to finish watching the sunrise, only to find that his chair was already occupied.

Ellie sat with her long legs propped up on the railing of the porch and the chair tipped back so that it was balancing on the back legs. She was wearing yoga pants and a tank top and her long curly hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Shit!” Cas jumped. His Pop Tart, held loosely between two lips, fell from his mouth and landed with a soft thud on the wood floor.

Ellie jumped too, nearly falling out of the chair. She righted herself in the last second and glanced up at Castiel.

“Hiya neighbor!” she said smiling, her fear forgotten. Her face fell as she took in Cas’ weary posture and the dark circles under his eyes. “Rough night?” she asked, understanding laced her words in a way that he didn’t quite recognize.

“You could say that,” Castiel replied. He picked up the fallen pastry and set it on the porch railing. “I haven’t been to bed yet.”

Ellie’s face wrinkled in disgust. “That’s awful,” she appraised him once more. “Couldn’t sleep?” she asked carefully and something about her tone sent up warning signs in the back of Cas’ mind. She seemed a little too invested in the answer for polite conversation.

Despite that, Cas found himself answering honestly. “More like didn’t want to,” he said shortly. She nodded, and her eyes hardened just slightly. Against him? he wondered.

He sat down next to her and they watched the sunrise in silence for a moment before Cas...
remembered his manners.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” he asked, and she brightened.

“I’d love one,” she said. Cas nodded and waved her inside the house where he busied himself with the coffee pot. Ellie looked around his home, no doubt taking note of the filthy mop bucket by the bathroom and the strong odor of cleaning products.

“Cream or sugar?” He asked as he poured coffee into his one remaining coffee mug. They were a matching set that he’d picked up at a thrift shop for fifty cents. One was blue with white swirls, while the one he handed her was white with blue swirls.

She smiled and shook her head. “Nope, I take it black,” she said, accepting the mug from him.

“Me too,” he said. He was starting to feel the effects of his frenzied night of cleaning and took another drink of coffee. He had to go to work in a few hours after all.

She took a sip and closed her eyes in satisfaction. “Is this the brand that’s on stock over at Bobby’s Store?” she asked, looking back up at him. Cas nodded.

“I found an old coffee grinder a few weeks back and Dean’s store is the only one that sells whole beans,” he explained.

Ellie nodded. “He makes a habit of carrying things the other stores in town forget about, but that’s just who he is; always taking care of people,” her eyes were soft, nostalgic.

“Yeah?” he asked. Don’t get your hopes up, he reminded himself. You’re supposed to be letting it go and taking care of yourself remember? Cas ignored that little voice in his head and pressed on. “Like what?”

Ellie’s smiled widely at Cas’ curiosity. “I remember this one year, I got poison ivy so bad I could hardly move without it spreading and he specifically ordered this huge box of oatmeal baths and lye soap for me, then he even brought it by, then he wouldn’t even let me pay for it. He’s such a good man,” she said, then she laughed. “Hell, I bet there are still some oatmeal baths at home, and that was years ago.”

“Do you…” Cas paused before gathering up his courage again. “Do you know Dean well?” she met his eyes only briefly.

“I do, but not in the way you probably think,” she replied. Cas furrowed his brows but said nothing else. Instead, he took a sip of coffee. He’d opened up another Pop Tart and silently offered Ellie the other one. She took it with a smile and broke off a corner.

“So,” Cas began. “What are your plans for the day?”

“I’m thinking of going to the beach,” she said. “Maybe do a little shopping. You?”

“I have to work soon,” Cas said, barely concealing his dread.

“You work for Ellen right?”

He nodded.

“Does Ash still hit on all the new waitresses?”

“Yep,” he replied.
“Has Bobby finally gotten his head out of his ass and married Ellen yet?” she asked.

“Did you work there?” Cas asked.

“No, but it’s a small town. Everyone knows everyone and all that. Not much to do here besides gossip. Plus the Roadhouse is an institution around here. But yeah, everyone’s in everyone else’s business. Some people, like Meg and Ruby, have mastered the art of gossip. It’s crazy, but that’s Southport.”

“But you came back.”

Ellie shrugged. “Yeah well, maybe I like crazy,” she said with a wink. Sunlight caught her dark eyes, turning them cinnamon colored. She finished off her pastry and balled the wrapper up in her fist, then took another sip of coffee. “You know, as long as I lived here, I didn’t even realize these cottages existed.”

“Chuck’s family used to use them as hunting cabins, but when he bought the place from his parents, Becky wanted to rent out the outer buildings.”

Ellie shook her head. “I can’t believe you moved out here.”

Cas’ brow furrowed. “So did you,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but only because I knew someone else was living out here. I knew I wouldn’t be the only person living at the end of a gravel road in the middle of nowhere. It’s so…isolated,” she said.

*That’s why I wanted it,* Cas thought to himself. “It’s not so bad,” he replied. “I like the quiet.”

“Well I hope I get used to it soon,” she said, blowing her bangs from her eyes. “So what brought you to Southport? It couldn’t have been the amazing career potential at the Roadhouse.”

Cas paused.

“What you have any family around here?”

“Nope, just me.”

“Following a girlfriend?” she asked. Cas chuckled, trying to hide a smile.

“Definitely not,” he said and Ellie’s eyes widened.

“A boyfriend then?” There was no judgment in her tone, but a blush stained her cheeks.

Cas decided to take it easy on her. “No, no boyfriend either.”

“So you just moved here?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

Cas didn’t answer. It was the same question that Ellen and Jo and Ash and Meg had asked. There wasn’t an ulterior motive behind it, just natural curiosity, but Cas never knew what to say. He didn’t know an answer that could possibly make sense and he certainly couldn’t tell the truth. Later when he had gotten some sleep, he would probably regret the answer he gave Ellie though.
“I just… I needed a place where I could start over. A place that was 100% mine.”

Ellie took another sip of coffee, silently mulling over his answer. But she didn’t ask any more questions.

“Makes sense I guess. Sometimes starting over is just what a person needs. I admire your courage. I don’t know that I would have been brave enough to do something like that.”

“I’m not brave,” Cas said quietly, then he bit his lip. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“Sure you are,” Ellie replied easily. She took the last drink of her coffee and stood up, wiping her palms on her yoga pants. “Well, I’ve put it off as long as I could. Gotta go get my run in.”

“You run?” Cas asked and she smiled.

“I try to,” she replied.

“If… if you wanted some company I’d be happy to go running with you,” Ellie looked at his slumped shoulders and the deep circles under his eyes.

“Maybe next time. I think you should probably have a date with a mattress.”

Cas laughed genuinely for the first time all morning. “You’re probably right,” he said. He drank the last of his coffee. “Well have a good run,” he said and she waved.

“It was nice talking with you Castiel,” she said. The next minute she was out the door, whistling, her hair swinging from side to side as she descended the stairs.

From his kitchen window Cas watched Ellie as she stretched for just a moment before running to the east. She seemed friendly enough, but Cas wasn’t sure if he was ready to have a neighbor. He liked his little piece of isolation. He liked feeling safe. But he knew living in a small town that his self-imposed isolation would have to come to an end sooner or later. And Ellie was nice. So maybe it was a good thing.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t enjoyed talking with her. And there was something about her. Something… trustworthy. Safe. He wasn’t sure what it was.

Briefly Cas wondered if it was because Ellie was a woman. Cas wasn’t sure he could handle it if a man, no, if a man who was a complete stranger, moved into the cabin down the road.

Cas washed out the coffee cups and put them into the small pantry. The action was so familiar—putting two cups away instead of one after coffee in the morning—that for an instant, Cas was engulfed by the life he’d left behind.

His hands began to shake and his heart rate spiked. He took deep breaths until he felt calm. A few months ago, he probably wouldn’t have been able to calm himself down. But here, with the smell of the woods wafting in through the open window of his cottage and the patch of sunlight that fell across his arms as he did the morning dishes, he was able to conquer the anxiety that sometimes overwhelmed him. Sometimes the anxiety won. Like the previous night for instance. But this morning, he was able to calm himself down.

He took it as a victory. But it also meant that maybe he was getting too comfortable here. If he lowered his guard, he might get caught. And one thing he was damn sure of was he couldn’t go back.
Not ever. Cas sat down in the armchair in his living room and promptly fell asleep, only to wake up several hours later with just barely enough time to take a shower and practically sprint to make it to work on time.
Chapter Summary

He didn’t need them. He could make it on his own. And they certainly didn’t deserve the trouble he’d surely bring them.

Chapter 13: Rain Down, Rain Down on Me

Chapter Track: Spinning Revolver, Chris Carmack and Kyle Dean Massey

June 15, 2014

Cas worked double shifts for the rest of the week. He kept himself busy. In the evenings, he worked on projects around the house. The rose bushes in his garden never looked better. He painted his bookshelf. Becky had given him free reign on the extra furniture in their attic and he spent the entirety of a rainy afternoon poking through the old chests of drawers and sheet covered furniture, looking for—well, he didn’t know what—but he was looking for something to go in his cottage. Eventually he went home with a coatrack that had seen better days and a small side table for his front door. He intended to paint them both the same shade of blue as his bookcase, but had to wait for payday to buy another can of paint.

And he did his best to avoid Dean Winchester.

On Saturday, Cas walked a mile out of his way to shop at the Piggly Wiggly on the outskirts of town rather than shop at Bobby’s. He dipped into his savings and bought two weeks’ worth of groceries instead of one, stuffing two of the large reusable bags he’d gotten from Bobby’s full and lugging them home. Although his stomach tied up in knots of guilt, when Ben called out to him as he passed by the shop, Cas ignored him.

He didn’t need them. He could make it on his own. And they certainly didn’t deserve the trouble he’d surely bring them.

Despite working himself until he could hardly shuffle wearily to his bed every evening, the nightmares didn’t go away. In fact, they grew steadily worse. Cas woke up shaking every morning, and sometimes in the middle of the night, breathing heavily with sweat soaked through his t-shirt.

By Sunday evening, he was wound so tight that Ellen pulled him aside when she caught him wiping down the bar top for the fourth time in fifteen minutes.

Cas followed her into the cramped but neat office and sat down in the squeaky swivel chair. Ellen sat at her desk. Her gaze was stern. They sat in silence for a few moments and his heart started to race. Was he about to be fired?

Ellen’s gaze softened and she reached across the table, grabbing Cas’ hand between hers and holding it tight. She smiled a little and he felt himself relax, if only just a little bit. “I need to talk to you about something important,” she said.

He swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” he blurted out. Maybe if he apologized, she’d keep him. He racked
his brains to figure out what it was he could have done. Sure, he’d been a little distant the past week, and his tips had taken a sharp decline as the sleepless nights caught up to him, making his shifts long and the customers irritating.

“I can do better, just… just tell me what I need to do. I can’t lose this job.”

Ellen quirked a brow. “Cas, calm down, I just need to talk to you.”

Tears welled in the corner of his eyes. She was going to fire him. This was it. There went the cottage, Southport, there went the life he’d built here. Gone.

Numbness overtook him, followed swiftly by resignation. He’d expected it of course. He probably should have moved on long before. He’d gotten comfortable here.

“I finally got around to processing your W-2.”

Warning bells went off in the back of his mind. This was bad. This was worse than he thought.

He took a deep breath. “Did you?” he said, schooling his expression into a mask that he hadn’t needed to use in months. The less he gave away, the more power he had. It was crucial that he didn’t give too much away.

Castiel crossed his arms, hiding his trembling fingers within the folds of his flannel shirt. He started down at Ellen’s desk.

“I learned that Clarence Moseley died five years ago.”

Cas looked up from Ellen’s knotted pine desk. “Well, Clarence is a fairly common name.”

“Cas,” Ellen’s voice was soft. “I need you to listen to me.”

Cas bit his lip. “Okay,” he said.

“I got Ash to delete the information.”

“What do you mean ‘delete the information?’”

“As far as the Social Security Administration is concerned, you were never here. You’re off the grid, Cas, and you’re safe here. I promise.”

His brow furrowed. “Why are you helping me?” Cas met her gaze. “You don’t owe me anything. I lied to you. Hell, I could be an axe murderer for all you know and you’re just going to… help me hide?”

“We both know you’re not an ax murderer,” she scoffed. “Whoever you’re running from Castiel, they’re not gonna find you here. Not if I have anything to do with it.”

His heart was pounding in his chest. “I don’t think you understand. He always finds me.”

Ellen was quiet for just a moment before her eyes hardened. “He won’t find you this time. Ash is a genius.” She sat up straighter, suddenly businesslike. “Now look. I’m gonna have to pay you cash, but as long as you need it Castiel, you have a job here at the Roadhouse.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Oh hush, now get on out there and help Jo with the lunch rush. And please don’t scare away my
customers. I know you’re having a hard week, but lord boy, I had three customers complain about you on Thursday.”

Cas smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, sorry about that.” Ellen waved him off. “Look… Ellen. I want you to know that… I didn’t steal that identification. A… very good friend gave it to me.”

“It doesn’t matter, honey.”

By the time the sun started to set behind the Roadhouse, Cas had made up some of the tips he’d lost through the week, and Cas finished his shift feeling considerably lighter than when it began.

He decided to take the short way home, as opposed to the route he’d taken to going the past week, which was a mile out of his way because at least it avoided the Winchesters. But tonight? He just didn’t care enough to avoid them. He was tired and his feet ached after a long shift and it definitely didn’t have anything to do with the fact that he missed them.

So, the short way home it was.

A cold front had moved in, bringing with it a cool breeze that ruffled his hair. It had grown shaggy, and the sun had lightened the hair dye until it was nearly the same sandy blonde he’d had his entire life. He brushed a hand through the shaggy ends, pushing a lock out of his eyes.

The stars were just starting to come out, and all along Main St. the evening lamp posts turned on, casting an orange glow onto the street.

As he turned the corner the led to Bobby’s General Store; however, his heart started to race. It wasn’t that he was afraid, exactly. It was more a feeling of nervous anticipation. Scenarios played out in his mind of how this meeting would go after avoiding them for over almost two weeks. For one brief moment he allowed himself to fantasize about Dean sweeping him in his arms for a strong hug, him whispering “Man it’s good to see you,” in his ear before the kids tackled him to the ground in an embrace.

But as he neared the little shop with its fading blue paint and large porch, he noticed that all of the lights were off and the Impala wasn’t in the driveway. Neither was the Jeep. He glanced over at the dark porch that wrapped around Dean’s house across the street from the store. No car there either.

Curious, Castiel approached the front door of the general store. Inside was dark as well. He walked around the property until he reached the back door. There, a hastily written sign in scrawled block letters said “Closed for family emergency.”

Ice flooded through Castiel’s veins. Was one of the children hurt? What emergency? Panic filled the spaces between his ribcage and his heartbeat fluttered in his chest.

Immediately, Castiel pulled out his cell phone. Dean had programmed his number into the phone when Cas hadn’t been looking. He’d found it when he was scrolling through his contacts, looking for Gordon’s number to check on a work order Ellen had put in.

He hadn’t known how to feel about it. At first, with a vicious urge to rid himself of everything Dean Winchester, he’d thought to delete the number. But just as his finger hovered over the delete button, he’d paused. What if he really needed it one day? He didn’t need to worry about it then.

Now he was glad he hadn’t deleted the number, because before he could even process his actions, the phone was pressed up against his ear.

Four rings later, the voicemail picked up, and Dean’s voice flooded his ear. It was a short message,
urging the caller to leave a name and number and Dean would get back to them, but Cas felt comforted by the sound anyway. He’d missed the rough growl of Dean’s voice.

He hung up before the message tone, and bit his lip.

Ellen hadn’t mentioned anything about a family emergency that day, so maybe it wasn’t too dire?

He’d picked up on the fact that Ellen, who was not-so-secretly dating Bobby, was like a mother to Dean and his brother Sam. Hell, she was like a mother to anyone really. Ellen was the kind of woman to adopt wayward sons and daughters into her heart without a second thought.

One night, as he and Ash were closing up the back patio, he’d told Cas of the night that Ellen had taken him in. He’d just dropped out of MIT and he’d been wandering down the East Coast, drinking his way through seven states before finally settling in Southport. Ellen had given him a couch to crash on, provided that he help fix her internet connection and help her fix her ledgers. Ash had agreed and, twelve years later, he was something of a fixture around the Roadhouse. Ash lived in an Airstream parked behind the Roadhouse. He ran the books and the bar staff and Cas was never quite sure what to make of the strange man with the outdated hair style. Of course, a few months ago, Cas’ hair was longer than Ash’s mullet, so he didn’t have much room to talk.

Cas had never gotten Ash’s full story. Anytime anyone brought up his life before the Roadhouse, he always became shifty and changed the subject, and Cas knew what it was like to want to keep his life private, so he hadn’t pried.

All Ash said was that Ellen was like a mother to him and that he didn’t know where he would have ended up had it not been for her and Jo.

Cas paused. His thumb hovering over the call button, Ellen’s number listed in bright letters across his screen.

Surely she would have said something if it was a true emergency? And anyway, It wasn’t like the Winchesters were his family. It wasn’t like they were even close friends, really. He’d spent what? One day hanging out with them? That didn’t exactly put him on the “Call when there’s an emergency list.”

Cas locked his phone and put it back in his pocket. Everything was probably fine, he thought.

He set out for his cottage, cursing his worn out sneakers for his aching feet and he resolved to borrow Jo’s Pinto the next weekend weekend he had off so he could make the drive up to Wilmington to get a new pair of shoes.

In the distance, he could see the beginning stirrings of a storm. Lightning struck near the horizon and Castiel wondered if Rufus was planning on going out to collect sand glass that night. He’d overheard Rufus and Bobby talking about it at lunch that afternoon.

Thunder struck a few moments later, and Cas knew if he was going to avoid getting soaked, he needed to pick up the pace a little bit. His feet and back protested. He really, really needed to get new shoes, but he sighed, hefted his backpack over both shoulders and started to jog.

The first raindrops started to fall as he turned into the gravel lane that headed to his cottage. It was a light sprinkling, but Cas knew that it was just a teaser of what was to come, and sure enough, just as the silhouette of his cottage came into view, the sky opened up and within moments he was soaked through.

He made it to the cottage just as a loud clap of thunder burst overhead and he laughed, feeling lighter
than he had in ages. Why was he trying not to get soaked anyway?

Cas threw his backpack onto the old rocker on his porch and slipped off his shoes and socks.

He ran out into the middle of his yard, his arms spread wide as he took in the warm water as it fell in sheets over his skin. He loved the rain.

He was free to do what he pleased. And if that meant he spent an evening playing in the rain, laughing as the thunder and lightning struck all around him, so be it. The water was warm and the air was electric and sharp. And if he wanted to dance in the rain, no one would stop him. No one had that power over him anymore.

By the time large gullies of mud had started to create deep ruts in his front yard, Cas had worn himself out. He pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it onto the porch railing.

He unlocked his door and tiptoed into the cottage, careful to avoid the braided rug in the entry. He’d have to clean up the mud later, but he really didn’t care. Cas turned on the shower and shoved his dirty clothes into the small hamper by the toilet.

He stayed under the spray of the shower head until the water turned glacial and then padded, naked, to his bedroom where he grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt that had seen better days.

Cas ate a quick meal of beans and rice before wiping down the mud prints on his floor, then he climbed into bed, even though it was much too early for sleep. Instead, Cas picked up the copy of Sherlock Holmes mysteries he’d gotten from Bobby’s Store and started to read. He read well into the night, as the thunder and lightning continued to sing all around him and the patter of raindrops on his roof lulled him to sleep.

And when he finally fell asleep, with the book spread over his chest and his reading glasses still perched on the bridge of his nose, Cas slept soundly for the first time in almost two weeks.
She Stole My Heart and Made Me Sing

Chapter Summary

“May you stay in the arms of the angels…”

Dean sheepishly turned down the music. “Sorry, it’s the only thing that gets her asleep sometimes.”

Cas smiled, swallowing the tears. “It’s fine. My mom…. She used to sing this to me when I was little.”

Chapter Notes

You should check out that lullaby.

Chapter 14: She Stole My Heart and Made Me Sing

Chapter Track: Lullaby for a Soldier, Maggie Siff

June 18, 2014

Three days later it was still raining so hard Dean was sure the sky was falling, and he hadn’t gotten a full night’s sleep in a week. The river was swollen and there were talks of sandbagging near the town square.

He was exhausted, but for all that, Dean couldn’t have been happier.

Jessica had gone into labor at two in the morning the previous Wednesday and Dean and the kids had planned to go meet the new addition later that day, but at four o’clock the following afternoon Sam had called him in a panic. Jess wanted a home birth with a doula and a kiddie pool—the whole nine—but after fifteen hours of hard labor with no progress, the midwife had suggested that they go to the hospital.

According to the broken explanation Dean had gotten from Sam, the baby was in breech and they needed to do an emergency cesarean.

By the time Dean had gotten the children woken up from their nap and made the drive up to Wilmington, Sam was a wreck. Jess had gone into surgery only a few minutes previous and they wouldn’t allow Sam into the operating room. He had been pacing when the kids rushed into the room ahead of Dean, who had stopped to ask the staff nurse on duty for an update.

Dean had taken one look at Sam and gave him a solid hug. Sam was clutching helplessly at the back of Dean’s shirt, just like he had when they were kids and he’d had a nightmare. Dean could feel him trembling in the embrace.
He had cracked a joke, trying to get his little brother to relax. “She’ll be fine, if she can live with you, surely she can make it through surgery no problem.”

Sam chuckled, but his shoulders remained tense.

Dean put the kids to work making ‘Welcome to the family!’ cards and directed his brother over to one of the plastic waiting chairs.

One of these days I’m going to have a talk with the administration at this damn hospital, he thought as they sat in the ridiculously uncomfortable chairs. They should have fuckin’ Lazy Boys in these rooms or something.

His mind flashed back to the long nights spent sitting up as Lisa withered away, or the days spent waiting in agony while she was in surgery after surgery to try and remove the tumors that spread like wildfire through her frail body. But this wasn’t like that. They weren’t powerless this time, and Jess had one of the best OB/GYNs in the state tending to her. She’d be fine.

An hour later, a tall, commanding, woman entered the waiting room. She shook Sam’s hand and and then Dean’s and introduced herself as Dr. Kali Bhaskar. She didn’t waste any time and Dean appreciated that.

Jess and the baby were fine. The baby had been in breech and was distressed when the surgery began, but that they’d gotten to her in time and both mom and baby were healthy and anxiously waiting to see their family.

Sam all but sagged against his brother with relief, then his eyes flashed up. “Her?” he asked, and a smile spread across his face. “Son of a bitch. Jess was right. It’s a girl.”

Dean had laughed and patted his brother on the back. “Congratulations, man.” Sam hugged him back and then went to swoop his niece and nephew in a hug.

“It’s a girl!” he hollered and they laughed. “It’s a girl! I have a daughter!”

Little Mary Jo Winchester took after her mother, with pale blonde hair and dark blue eyes. Dean felt a stab of sadness when he heard his niece’s name, but it suited her. Jo had been over the moon when Jess had asked her to be MJ’s godmother.

Jess had spent the next two days in the hospital, and Dean had stuck around, just in case something went wrong, and then Dean insisted on staying with the young family for a while, just until they got settled.

Sammy and Jess lived in a quiet Victorian on Elm that Jess had fallen in love with instantly but Sam and Dean had taken to calling “The Painted Whore,” because while it was beautiful, it was also very costly. There was always something wrong with it, always a plumber around to fix a burst pipe or an exterminator for the infestation of spiders in the attic.

Once, early on in Sam and Jess’ marriage, Sam had called Dean and Lisa at eleven o’clock at night because the washing machine had decided to fill their basement with enough bubbles that it made the foam party he and Jess had gone to in college pale in comparison. Dean had woken Ben and Lisa up, gotten them into swimsuits and they had all gone over to help. And by help they meant dancing around in the Tide scented bubbles with Metallica blaring before they all pitched in to clean it all up.

That had been right before Emma was born, and Lisa, who had had a difficult pregnancy, had laughed harder than she had in weeks. And while Lisa was the photographer in the family, Dean had held up the camera and snapped a picture of her that night, the entire basement covered in bubbles
and Lisa with her head thrown back in laughter, her swollen stomach pale against her black bikini top, holding Ben on her hip. Sometimes when the stress of being a single dad got the better of him, he’d pull the faded snapshot of his wallet to remind himself to laugh every now and again.

Jess was exhausted and the sheriff’s department was stretched thin with a local arsonist case, and needed all hands on deck, which meant Sam was pulling double shifts instead of taking paternity leave, as planned. Dean, for his part, closed down the store and gave Charlie, Bobby and Benny the week off as he’d taken on the role of resident diaper-changing, bottle-feeding, lullaby-singing uncle of the year.

Jess spent as much time with MJ as possible, but the medicine they had her on made her feel like a zombie most days, and the doctor had ordered bed rest from her at least until the stitches healed up.

So Dean took up the slack. He had forgotten how demanding a newborn infant was, but he couldn’t have been happier spending time with MJ, and Ben and Emma absolutely adored their new cousin.

That night, though, Mary just wouldn’t go to sleep. She cried like it was her sole purpose on this earth and Sam and Jess had tried everything, from swaddling to feedings, Sam had changed her diaper twice, finally holding her up in exasperation, staring at her as he let her scream in his face.

Dean lay in the guest bed, one pillow smashed over the top of his ears, listening to her cry. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. He went into the living room, took in their blank, exhausted expressions and plucked the crying infant from Sam’s arms. He curtly sent them to bed, and they gratefully hurried to their bedroom for some much needed rest.

The moment he picked her up, Mary had quieted down.

Dean had always had a knack with babies. Even when he was very young he could always get his brother to stop crying on those long car rides to nowhere when John couldn’t stop the car. Lisa had called him the Baby Whisperer, and he’d laughed it off then, but maybe she’d been right. Mary looked up at him with wide, tear filled eyes and smiled when Dean started humming Smoke on the Water.

He rocked her in his arms as he paced through his brother’s cozy living room; Dean fed her and changed her diaper, then placed her in the bassinet next to the couch.

MJ fell asleep rather quickly after that, but Dean found sleep elusive. His entire body ached with the need to pass out, and he couldn’t make his mind quiet. Thoughts passed idly as he stared up at the small crack in the ceiling. He needed to tell his brother about it in the morning. He worried about a shipment of candy bars he’d forgotten to cancel when he closed the store down.

His mind flit from thought to thought, seemingly without rhyme or reason. One minute he was worrying about the car payment for the Jeep that he’d forgotten to make that week, the next he was making mental notes for the inventory he needed to order for the store; then he worried about when he was going to have time to bake the batch of pies he’d promised for the bake sale Emma’s soccer team was having to raise money for new uniforms. He had to be at the store at ass o’clock in the morning but he couldn’t fall asleep.

He was being pulled in twelve different directions and Dean was starting to feel the pressure.

The rain stopped a few hours later, sometime around Mary’s second feeding of the night, but Dean still hadn’t fallen asleep and Mary was dozing in his arms. Jess had insisted on taking over the following day, so it was his last night on MJ duty. As tired as he was, he’d be happy to extend his time with her.
She looked so much like Emma and for just the briefest moment, as he gazed down at his niece, he was reminded of an evening very similar to this when Emma was a baby. Only then, as he held a tiny infant in his arms humming AC/DC, a pair of long thin arms had wrapped around his back, and a chin rested on his shoulder while he sang to their daughter. Lisa had kissed his temple and even though Dean was terrified—he didn’t know anything about raising daughters—everything was right in the world.

MJ fell asleep quickly after her feeding. Just as he was placing her in his bassinet, he happened to look out the window.

Sam and Jess lived on a tree lined street that was well lit at night. The orange lamps cast an eerie glow on the puddles that were steadily taking over house’s driveway, and Dean had a clear view of the street cutting a curving path in front of the house.

Despite the late hour, the road was occupied. A lone figure was walking down the street towards the house, nothing more than a dark silhouette against the orange light. As the figure drew closer Dean recognized him.

Castiel was hauling an enormous canvas duffle bag across his shoulders. The bag was stuffed full and it looked like Cas was starting to struggle with it.

Dean wondered why Castiel was carrying it around at one in the morning, during one of the greatest rain storms Southport had seen in years, but he figured it wasn’t any of his business.

Cas had been avoiding him. Even before Jess had gone into labor, Dean had noticed Cas’ absence from his life. He’d gotten used to seeing Cas walk to work as Dean drank his morning coffee. He’d gotten used to Cas stopping by and shopping at the store. But he hadn’t seen him at all lately. He missed Cas’ dry sense of humor. He missed watching Cas’ elegant hands reaching out every now and again to absentmindedly straighten the product on shelves when he shopped.

Dean missed him.

But Cas didn’t seem to miss them. He’d heard through Gordon, the owner of Southport’s only coffee shop, when Dean had stopped by for a pick-me-up, that Cas was shopping at the Piggly Wiggly now, and Jo had mentioned that Cas had been in a foul mood when they’d slipped out to have coffee on MJ’s birthday.

And so what if the guy didn’t want anything to do with them? He’d spent, what, a couple days hanging out with him? It wasn’t like they were ‘best friends forever’ or anything.

But for all that, Dean still missed the man’s quiet presence. Ben had withdrawn in Cas’ absence. Once again it was like talking to a wall for all the good it did him to make a connection with his son. And Emma had been devastated when she’d called out to Cas one day and he’d ignored her completely.

But here he was, carrying this huge pack around in the middle of the night. Dean’s curiosity got the better of him. He checked that Emma was sound asleep before slipping the baby monitor into the pocket of his robe and tiptoeing to the front door.

Cas was almost past the house now. It was only when Dean noticed Cas loosely holding a container of Tide in his hand that he put two and two together.

When he’d gone on a milk run earlier that afternoon, he’d bumped into Chuck, who was on the phone trying to find a part for his broken washing machine. Cas probably needed to use 24 Hour
Laundromat over by the feed store until it was fixed. It would explain why he was so far out of his way from home or work.

Dean flipped on the porch light and opened the door. He was hit with a wave of warm air as he stepped out onto the porch.

Dean descended the stairs silently, avoiding the squeaky bottom step.

Cas was humming quietly to himself and didn’t seem to hear Dean as he approached. Dean coughed softly and Cas froze in front of him. His grip tightened on the handle of the bottle Dean saw his fight or flight instinct kick in just in time to duck as Cas swung the bottle towards his head.

“Oh! Whoa there Cas. It’s just me!” Dean said.

Cas relaxed in front of him, but his eyes were still wide. He swallowed thickly and took a deep breath.

“Didn’t anyone teach you not to sneak up on people? I could have hurt you!”

Dean’s lips quirked up in a half smile. “It takes a lot more than a bottle of Tide to hurt me Cas.”

Cas didn’t say anything for long enough to make Dean shuffle in place, awkwardly staring at a puddle.

“I’m sure that’s true, but you still shouldn’t scare someone like that.” Cas’ voice was brittle.

“I’m sorry, man. Next time I’ll cough or something,” Dean replied.

“Next time,” Cas chuckled. “You planning on makin’ sneaking up on me a regular thing?” Cas’ accent, which had picked up a bit of Boston in the years since left Pontiac, slipped through, and Dean filed that tidbit away for a later date.

Dean’s lips twitched. “Do you want me to?”

Yes, Cas thought, followed quickly by a resounding No. But Dean was smirking at him just a few feet away and Cas realized he’d missed him. And this was getting into dangerous territory.

Cas hefted his laundry bag higher onto his shoulder. He needed to change the subject.

“So is everyone okay?”

Dean’s brow furrowed. “Of course, why would you—oh shit, yeah, the sign,” he said. “Nah, man. Everyone’s whole. My sister-in-law had her baby.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, a little girl who’s probably gonna end up taller than me. She was 22 inches long and nine pounds!” Dean gushed.

“She sounds wonderful Dean. I am glad everyone’s okay,” Castiel said. “I was worried.”

Dean’s eyebrows shot up. “Were you?” Castiel furrowed his brow in response. “I mean… you haven’t exactly been around lately.”

“Of course I was worried.”
Dean decided to drop the subject. They stood in silence for a moment before Cas shifted his bag again and Dean automatically moved to take the bottle of Tide from him. Their fingers brushed when Dean wrapped his hand around the bottle’s handle. Cas pulled back like Dean had struck him, stumbling a little and splashing into a puddle. He looked down at his tennis shoes, which looked careworn and dirty, and sighed.

“Damnit,” he muttered under his breath. He’d finally worn a hole in the bottom of the sole and the rain hadn’t helped matters. Now his socks were soaking wet. For a minute, Dean thought Castiel was going to cry.

“Cas,” Dean started, unsure. “Would you like a ride home?”

Cas’ back straightened. His face schooled itself into a mask of indifference and Dean had a moment of whiplash at the sudden change in his mood.

“No, thank you Dean. I am fine.”

“Dude, c’mon. The weather’s horrible and that duffle looks like it weighs a ton. Let me help you out.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

The cool mask of indifference evaporated, replaced with an expression of barely concealed anger. Cas’ chin jut out and his eyes narrowed. Dean swallowed. He’d crossed the line.

“I don’t need your help Dean Winchester. Don’t you fucking get that? I don’t need you to take care of me. I am a grown man and I can support myself.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t suggesting otherwise,” he said, his own anger growing.

“Weren’t you?” Cas retorted. He threw his bag to the ground and took a step forward. It was all Dean could do to stand his ground. Castiel was angry. Very angry. “You’re suggesting otherwise every time you offer me a ride or give me free groceries. You’re suggesting otherwise when you invite me into your home to stay knowing that I could never really repay the favor. We’re…” Cas paused and pulled at his hair, which had grown shaggy in the past few weeks. He took a deep breath.

“We’re out of balance, Dean.” Castiel took a step closer. “Don’t you see that? You’re too good for me, so just do me a favor and just stop…. doing me favors.” Cas shook his head and picked up the canvas bag again.

Dean watched him warily. Cas is just lashing out, he told himself. It’s nothing personal. Given what you suspect of his background, just back off Winchester. Give him the space he needs, the investigator in him urged.

Dean took a deep breath. “You’re right. I am sorry.” He held out the bottle of Tide and Castiel took it.

“Just…” he began. “I get it Cas. You want people to think you’re just fine by yourself, but don’t… don’t shut out the kids. They miss having you around. Ben especially. We—” Dean indicated between them, “don’t have to be friends if that’s what you want… but please don’t hurt my children. They’ve been through enough loss in their lives. They miss you,” Dean said. I miss you too.

And just like that Cas’ blustery demeanor shattered. He let out a breath and looked away. “Of course,” he said. “I-I’m sorry. I won’t.”
“And stop shopping at the Piggly Wiggly!” Dean said, trying to break the tension that sat between them. “They overcharge and it’s out of your way.” Dean caught Cas’ eye and Cas smiled.

“Alright,” he said. In the distance a crack of thunder sounded and Cas cursed under his breath. A moment later the baby monitor in Dean’s pocket went off, MJ’s wails filling the silence between. Them.

“I better go,” Dean said, silencing the monitor. Cas glanced up at the sky.

“Me too, if I wanna make it home before the next shower.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?” Dean asked. “I’m going to take Mary out in the car…Maybe the engine will get the little tyke to sleep.”

Cas bit his lip.

“It’s no trouble?” he asked.

Dean smiled, sighing. “Not a bit, just lemme get her ready and we can go.” Dean gestured for Cas to follow him into the house and he turned back to the front porch. The baby was screaming at the top of her lungs when he made it back to the living room, with Cas hovering in the entry way, unsure if he should follow.

Just as Dean picked the infant up, Ben turned the corner of the stairs, rubbing his eyes. “Dad?” he said. “Do you need some help with the baby?” he yawned and looked down into the entry way. “Cas?” he asked, and suddenly he was wide awake. He bolted down the stairs and ran in to Castiel’s arms. “What are you doing here?”

Cas patted the back of Ben’s head once and Ben pulled away. “Your dad was gonna take the baby for a ride when he offered to give me a ride home. Turns out the Laundromat is lot further away from home than I originally thought. How you doin’ kiddo?” Cas asked, crouching down slightly as Ben tried to stifle another yawn.

“I’m good I guess. I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in a while, but me and Uncle Sammy have been planning the most awesome fireworks show ever this week!”

“A fireworks show?” Cas asked.

“Yeah. For Fourth of July? Me, Dad and Uncle Sammy do it every year. Are you gonna come see it? I wish you would.”

The Fourth of July was the Friday after next. He hadn’t had any plans, save for working the lunch shift. Maybe working a double if Ellen let him; he needed the extra tips. But maybe instead of overtime, he’d spend time with the Winchesters.

“I don’t see why not. I have to work the lunch shift but I get off right before the parade.”

“Awesome!” Ben said as Dean walked into the entry way, sans robe, dressed in a pair of sweatpants that hung way too low on his hips and a black AC/DC t-shirt. He was holding the baby against his chest and Cas swallowed thickly. The baby wasn’t crying and Cas just watched her snuggle her head under his chin, her blonde curls flying out all over the place.

“You ready to go?” Dean asked and Cas glanced up.

“Uh yeah,” he said.
“Ben? What are you doing up?”

“I thought you might need help with MJ,” he said and Dean smiled. He walked over to his son and ruffled the top of his head.

“I’m good Bubby, why don’t you go back to sleep? We got a long day tomorrow.”

Ben hugged Dean’s side and then hugged Cas again before heading back upstairs. As he turned the corner in the staircase he looked back at Castiel. He was looking at his dad hold his cousin, and Ben smiled as rounded the corner of the hallway to the small guest bedroom he was sharing with his sister.

Cas followed Dean the driveway where the Impala was waiting. Dean brushed a hand over the top of the hood, wiping away some of the condensation that had collected on it, before he crouched down and opened the backseat.

He placed MJ in the waiting car seat and buckled her in with the swiftness of an experienced parent, then he straightened up.

“You can put your bag in the back if you want,” he said before opening the driver door.

Cas did as he was told and then climbed into the passenger seat.

Dean started the engine and the radio kicked on. “Lullaby for a Soldier” began to play, a woman’s lilting voice filling the cab with the haunting lyrics. Castiel felt his chest tighten and tears pricked the corner of his eyes.

“May you stay in the arms of the angels…”

Dean sheepishly turned down the music. “Sorry, it’s the only thing that gets her asleep sometimes.”

Cas smiled, swallowing the tears. “It’s fine. My mom…. She used to sing this to me when I was little.”

Dean glanced over at Cas, who was trying to gain some composure. He went to turn it off, but before he could, Castiel grabbed his fingers. “Don’t,” Cas whispered. Dean left it on.

They fell into silence for a moment and Dean wanted to break it. “My mom used to sing me Hey Jude.” he said simply. And he felt Cas looked up.

“It was her favorite Beatles song.”

“I love that song,” Cas replied. “It’s a good lullaby.”

“Yeah,” Dean said, his own voice rough.

Dean drove through the quiet town. In the distance the storm picked up intensity. The windows were down and Dean could smell the rain moving in from the west. He took a deep breath.

The song had ended by then, filling the cab with silence save for the roar of the engine and the thunder overhead. It was peaceful, Cas thought as he rested his head against side of the car, staring up at the patches of stars that peeked through the thickening clouds.

Dean didn’t want to take Cas straight home. He wanted to drive around for a while, just enjoying his company. They didn’t speak. They didn’t need to.
Cas’ hand rested on the bench seat between them, and for just a moment, Dean thought about reaching out and taking it.

He’d actually lifted his hand from the steering wheel to do it when the baby started to cry. He snatched his hand back like he was burned and slowed down, glancing in the rearview mirror at MJ.

Dean reached out and pushed the Cassette tape back into the deck and her lullaby once again began to play.

It had played twice more by the time Dean pulled up in front of Castiel’s cottage. Cas smiled tightly and got out of the car. MJ had fallen asleep and as quietly as he could, he opened up the back door and pulled out his laundry.

Then he bent down at the window.

“Thanks for the ride,” he whispered.

“Not a problem. Thanks for the company.”

Cas smiled and turned. “Hey Cas!” Dean said in a loud whisper. Cas turned back. “Will you be coming to the store soon?”

Cas hesitated before nodding. “Of course, Dean. I’m running low on some things. When does it reopen?”

“Tomorrow,” Dean replied.

“I have to work all week, and I don’t get paid until Friday, but I can stop by sometime next week?”

“Emma and Ben would love that,” Dean said.

Would you love it too? Cas thought.

“I’ll see you later Dean,” he said instead, and he hoisted the bag over his shoulder again.

Dean waited until Cas was inside before he drove away.
I Could Not Put up a Fight

Chapter Summary

Jimmy finished preparing supper just before the news ended. He placed the potato crusted halibut onto the table just as Bart stumbled into the dining room. Jimmy pursed his lips. Bart was on his third drink in an hour.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for domestic violence/abuse in this chapter.

Special thanks to Her-Roses-Never-Fall for giving me the confidence to publish this chapter, to push through the negativity and to just write. I owe you C, and I won't forget.

Chapter 15: I Could Not Put up a Fight

Chapter Track: Don’t Leave Me Now, Pink Floyd

December 28, 2010

Brookline, Massachusetts

The months after he received the iPod passed slowly for Jimmy. Days turned into weeks and then months; Jimmy pushed his growing anger down, creating a routine for himself. But it was never long before he would mess up again, and they would fight. Then Jimmy would wake up the next morning with fresh bruises to cover up. Bart would come home from work later that day with a gift or a loving word, full of apologies and contrition, and for a few days or weeks, everything was fine. Until Jimmy did the next thing that set Bart off.

Sometimes it was nothing more than the way he’d arranged the canned goods in the cabinet or improper folding of the kitchen towels. It was in the way Jimmy “flirted” with his husband’s coworkers at barbecues or dinner parties. Sometimes Bart would come home, three sheets to the wind, and accuse Jimmy of sleeping around on him. Those were always the worst beatings.

And he took it and took it. Until one night Jimmy couldn’t take it for one more second.

Christmas had been a tense affair. They had celebrated the holiday with Bart’s parents. Jimmy spent the majority of the weekend in the Hamptons pretending he had the perfect marriage, and he was exhausted. He had been tense and alert the entire time, careful not to let anything slip. Bart hadn’t lost his temper once in the weeks leading up to the holiday, and Jimmy was grateful he didn’t have to maneuver around an injury on top of the lies he was telling Bart’s parents. Because one false move, one sentence said too flippantly and he would have paid for it.

As a result, he’d been walking on eggshells for nearly four days. He knew it was only a matter of
time before the other shoe dropped.

It finally happened at dinner.

Bart had come home in a foul temper. Through a series of grunts and clipped words, Jimmy learned that Bart had been passed up for a promotion at work. Bart had poured himself a tall gin and tonic and sat down for the news.

“Come home from a shitty day at work and dinner isn't even ready,” Bart muttered darkly as he left the kitchen. Jimmy bit his lip, determined not to say anything. He pushed the bubble of anger down to the pit of his stomach, where it churned like bile. It didn't matter that he’d made Bart’s favorite meal. It didn't matter that he’d worked all day baking bread from scratch, making the perfect coleslaw for tomorrow’s pulled pork sandwiches, that he spent an hour alone chopping the vegetables for Bart’s wilted spinach salad. Or that he had spent twenty minutes at the grocery store he walked to because Bart didn't allow him a car figuring out which one was the perfect filet of fish. None of that mattered because Jimmy didn’t have dinner on the table when Bart came home from work.

Jimmy finished preparing supper just before the news ended. He placed the potato crusted halibut onto the table just as Bart stumbled into the dining room. Jimmy pursed his lips. Bart was on his third drink in an hour.

He wrapped his hands around Jimmy’s waist and pressed a kiss to Jimmy’s temple. “Smells good, baby.”

“Thank you,” he murmured leaning into the kiss. Bart sat down at the head of the table. Jimmy speared a few asparagus onto his plate and added a spoonful of wilted spinach. Bart didn't wait for Jimmy to fill his own plate before he began to eat. Jimmy sat down next to his husband and poured them both a glass of wine. Dinner, as usual, was a quiet affair. Bart didn't like it when his digestion was interrupted by “mindless chatter.”

Jimmy ate quickly, a habit he’d picked up in the recent months. The shorter he kept their interactions, the less chance he had of pissing Bart off.

The wine was bitter on Jimmy’s tongue, but he continued to drink. It made everything fuzzy.

Bart had two glasses of wine. Jimmy always counted his drinks because on a night like tonight, a five plus drink night, Jimmy might end up with a cracked rib or concussion. He had to mind himself on a five drink night.

“Are you ready for dessert?” he asked quietly as Bart belched loudly. His husband nodded and polished off his wine.

“What’re we having?”

“Bread pudding,” Jimmy said. He bussed the table, returning with dessert. As discretely as he could manage, he pulled the bottle of wine from the table, intending to take it to the kitchen. Before he could take two steps however, Bart’s cold voice rang out through the dining room.

“You think I’m done with that?” he said and Jimmy froze.

He thought fast. What was the best way to get out of this situation? “N-no, of course not. I was just going to put this up and get you some Brandy. It goes better with dessert.” He took a deep breath and
made eye contact with Bartholomew.

Bart’s eyes narrowed. “If you have something to say, just say it.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” Jimmy replied evenly. His heart was beating in his chest. This wasn’t going to end well. Maybe if he played it off, pretended like nothing was wrong, Bart would forget and he’d drink his brandy, eat his dessert and pass out on the couch to mindless reality tv. “Which brandy do you want? I will fill you a —” He’s cut off by the sound of glass shattering.

Bart’s hand was bleeding and the wine glass was in a million pieces all over the dining room table and floor. “What do you want from me Jimmy?” his voice raised. Jimmy snapped his mouth shut. “I take care of you, I feed you. I buy your fancy clothes and your expensive appliances. I gave you everything you’ve ever needed. And just because I want to have some wine with dinner you decide to throw me attitude?”

“N-no baby, that’s not—Bart please!” Bart stood up suddenly, unsteady on his feet. Jimmy backed away, toward the kitchen but he trapped himself between the dining table and the door.

Bart stalked forward, placing a hand at Jimmy’s throat. Jimmy felt his airway tighten and his hands scrambled against Bart’s sweaty dress shirt. He slammed Jimmy’s head against the glass windows of the china hutch. “I told you not to talk back to me,” he said, his voice suddenly deadly calm.

Jimmy felt tears well up in his eyes and swallowed them down. Tears only egged Bart on. He shook his head, willing himself to break eye contact with his husband.

“Please!” Jimmy gasped. “Don’t—”

That’s when the first blow landed. Jimmy grunted as Bartholomew punched him hard in the gut. The breath left his body as another blow caught him in the ribs.

“You’ll speak when I tell you to speak,” Bartholomew said, every word punctuated with another hit. Bartholomew was careful not to hit his face. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew it was because they had the New Year’s Eve party at Bart’s work that weekend.

It was then that he began to float. Time went away, punctuated only by his husband’s fists. Eventually Jimmy fell to the ground. But that didn’t stop Bart. He just started kicking him instead. After one hard blow to his groin, Jimmy passed out.

By the time Jimmy woke up, Bart was gone. He was sprawled out on the hardwood floor, his face pressed into the carpet. He tried to stand, but every muscle in his body ached.

Glass shards were embedded into his palm. It was the first pain he recognized but not the last. Jimmy’s entire abdomen was aflame. He forced himself to his knees, ignoring the agony that radiated through his chest.

By the time he made it to the bathroom, Jimmy had broken out into a cold sweat. He stood in front of the full length mirror, groaning as he lifted the hem of his dress shirt.

There were deep purple bruises on his torso. He took a deep breath and gasped. His ribs were throbbing.

Jimmy met his own gaze in the mirror, but he looked away. What kind of weakling can’t even stand up for himself? he thought.

He pressed against his abdomen, making sure it wasn't rigid. Nothing. He took a deep breath,
assessing the damage, making sure he didn't have to go to the hospital. His right side was where he took the most hits but nothing felt broken.

Tentatively he took a few steps towards the toilet. He unzipped his pants with some difficulty and lifted the toilet seat. Jimmy sighed in relief. His urine was pale yellow. No traces of blood. *This time*, a traitorous part of him said.

Jimmy went through his routine of patching himself up. Though nothing was broken, his ribs still took the brunt of the hits and were likely bruised, and there wasn’t much he could do about that. He cleaned the shallow cuts on his palm from the broken glass and took a large dose of ibuprofen, then limped slowly back downstairs to the kitchen where he collected the broom and dust bin from the pantry.

Jimmy took his time cleaning up the mess. The glass on the china hutch was cracked but it hadn’t broken. There were tiny shards of the wine glass everywhere. When he was absolutely sure all traces of glass were cleaned up, Jimmy began to move the dishes to the kitchen. The water stung and burned his cut palms as he vigorously washed each dish and dried them.

Bart still wasn’t back by the time Jimmy finished cleaning. He probably wouldn't be back until the next morning. Jimmy let out a sigh of relief. Before moving to the living room, he grabbed one of the large gel packs Bart had gotten after his back surgery two summers ago from the freezer. He limped over to the couch, where he laid the ice pack over his torso before turning on the tv. He turned it onto an old cartoon channel, where a Road Runner marathon was playing and zoned out for a couple of hours. He only got up once to change ice packs.

While up he was in the kitchen, he’d decided to check his phone. It was flashing and Jimmy opened up his phone to see that Bart had texted him. He’d gotten called into work. Bart had been loaded when he left the house. There was no way he was sober enough to work.

He shook his head and sent a quick ‘okay, be safe.’ as a response before closing his phone and returning to the living room. He picked up the remote and switched it to the evening news before curling up in a ball on the couch.

He was feeling better now. The ibuprofen had kicked in and his muscles weren't so sore. It wasn't as hard to breathe now. His ribs weren’t broken, he was sure of it.

Jimmy turned his focus to the news. There was some broadcast about the dangers and precautions one should take with their Christmas lights, and another segment about the local events for New Year’s Eve that weekend, then the weather. In the middle of Sports, there was a bit of excitement as the camera panned quickly over to the anchor’s chair.

> “Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt Sports to bring you breaking news from Brighton. A woman’s body has been found in her home in the 700 Block of Market Street. Ann-Marie St. John was found dead in her apartment building today after a call to 911 from a concerned neighbor. It is unconfirmed, but sources say that Mrs. St. John was killed by her husband after a domestic dispute turned into a deadly situation. Marcus St. John is now listed as a suspect in this investigation. At the scene is Molly McNamara with the latest.”

Jimmy sat up, eyes riveted on the screen. A young woman with prominent cheekbones and mousy brown hair came onto the screen. Behind her was a house that was cordoned off by yellow tape.

> “I’m here at in front of the St. John residence in Brighton where a young woman has lost her life. It is believed that Marcus St. John killed his wife after a domestic dispute and is now in police custody awaiting charges. Neighbors who prefer to remain anonymous say that Mr. and Mrs. St. John had a
strained relationship, one described it as abusive. One neighbor heard their argument, but didn't think anything of it until he heard the gunshot. Oh! It appears they are bringing out the body now!” The camera panned to the house and Jimmy’s eyes widened.

There, standing at the doorway as a black body bag was carefully lowered down the small flight of stairs in front of the quaint house, was Bart.

He didn't look good. Jimmy watched his husband scrub his face with the palms of his hands. Even from across the street, with the camera zoomed up as tight as it could to get a clear shot of Mrs. St. John’s body as it was put into the coroner’s van, Jimmy could tell his husband was still very intoxicated. He hid it well, but Jimmy knew the signs. From the way that Bart steadied himself on the railing to the way he ran a hand through his hair, his tells were clear. Jimmy could see the hastily bandaged cuts on Bart’s palm when he flashed his badge at the cop at the door to get into the house.

Rage, white hot and sudden, filled Jimmy from the bottom of his stomach to the tips of his fingers. Bart was at that woman’s house, helping to solve her murder when not two hours prior he’d been the one beating Jimmy’s ribs in?

The hypocrite. Jimmy removed the ice pack from his stomach and stood up. His hands were trembling as he climbed the stairs to their bedroom.

Bart wouldn’t be back until morning, but by then Jimmy would be long gone.

His first stop as soon as he made it to the second floor, dizzy and wheezing, was to the small guest bedroom that Jimmy had once hoped would have become a nursery.

He turned on the light, and crouched down at the foot of the bed. There was a tiny hidden lip between the box spring and the wooden brace and Jimmy tapped his fingers along the lip until he felt a thick bundle of cash. He pulled the money out.

It was the product of two years of meticulous saving, starting a week after the first time Bart hit him. Singles and fives smuggled away one by one, from money left in his husband’s pockets as he did laundry, pulled from Bart’s wallet when he was passed out on the couch, money from tips he never gave to hairdressers or pizza delivery boys, money set aside until Jimmy had the chance to leave.

Jimmy carefully counted the bills, crouched on the floor of his guest bedroom. Fifteen hundred dollars. He was still well shy of his goal, but enough was enough. Jimmy knew without a doubt that he had to leave now and not a moment later.

Jimmy stood quickly, ignoring the dizzying wave of pain that spread throughout his middle. He limped to the bedroom, where he pulled out the smallest suitcase from their matching luggage sets. Jimmy packed imprecisely, not paying attention to what he put into the suitcase.

He changed into a fresh pair of jeans and a loose t-shirt and grabbed one of Bart’s Red Sox ball caps. He checked his watch. If he called a cab, he could make it to Logan, and if he was lucky, catch a red eye flight somewhere far away from this hell he called home.
You'll be Happy and Wholesome Again

Chapter Summary

“I’m Castiel.”
“Charlie,” she said. “So you’re the famous Cas,” she gave him a once over that made him feel naked. “Jo was right. You are dreamy.” She smirked.
“Oh uh, um,” Cas stammered. Was she coming on to him? “Th-thank you but I um… bat for the other team,” he said, flushing from root to tip.
Charlie laughed and held up a hand, a rainbow colored bracelet covering her wrist. “Me too, dude. I was just messing with you,” she said. Relief flooded through him. It had been a long time since he’d spoken with someone else who was gay. He chuckled.
“You had me,” he replied and she laughed.

Chapter 16: You’ll be Happy and Wholesome Again

Chapter Track: The Greatest, Kenny Rogers

June 26, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

As promised, Cas stopped by the shop the following week. It had been a busy week, but Ellen had given him the day off. He’d spent most of the morning in the garden he’d planted when he first arrived in Southport.

He cut a nice bouquet of roses for his kitchen table and several of his sunflowers had bloomed. His tomatoes were coming along nicely, helped by the sudden influx of rain to the region. Of the four plants he had, three of them were overflowing with ripe fruit.

Cas had gotten the seeds from Becky a few weeks after moving in and they had become something of a blessing. Early in the spring, it was something he could do that was mindless and productive, it was calming. But it also provided him with food that he couldn’t necessarily afford at the store.

He ended up picking nearly four basketfuls of vegetables, a small bumper crop in the middle of summer and there was no way he could eat it all before it went bad.

Along with tomatoes, he filled the baskets up with cucumbers, peppers and squash. His herb garden on the front porch was also doing well. He picked bunches of rosemary and thyme, parsley and basil and added them to the baskets. The first basket he took over to Becky, and on the way home he set the second on Ellie’s front porch. He left the half full basket on his kitchen counter, picking up the freshly cut sunflowers and the final basket before shutting his front door.

He walked slowly to the store. It was one of the warmest days he’d seen during his short time in North Carolina. Sunlight was beating down upon his back and more than once he had to bring the red bandana he’d taken to carrying in his back pocket out to wipe the sweat from his brow.

But the walk was short and before he knew it, Bobby’s Store came into view ahead. It looked the same as it ever did. The sounds of a baseball game were coming from the open second story
Cas glanced over at the white house across the street from the shop and smiled. Emma and Ben were sitting quietly on the front porch. Ben had a battered novel resting on his lap as he lay on the porch swing, quietly shifting his weight back and forth across the blue concrete floor, swinging as he read. Emma was on the steps, sorting through what looked to be a massive pile of baseball cards. Her hair was tied back in an intricate braid.

He smiled and crossed the street. He’d rather talk to the kids than fight the bus crowd.

He whistled and both Ben and Emma glanced up. Emma’s face brightened, giving Castiel a wide toothy smile. She closed the shoe box of baseball cards and ran over to meet Cas at the gate.

“Mr. Cas!” she yelled, pulling the gate open and engulfing him in a tight hug. “I missed you!”

“Oh, Miss Emma,” he replied. He glanced up at Ben, who had smiled briefly and set his book down onto the swing. He crossed over to the front porch and went inside. Cas wondered at his chilly reception for a moment before glancing back down at the little girl clinging tight to his middle. The week before Ben had been happy to see him. That could have been because he was half asleep, a cruel part of himself reminded him.

Emma pulled back, and there was a crease between her light eyebrows that made her look more like her father than ever. “Where were you? Did you go out of town? Cuz you were supposed to come play baseball with me and Ben and you never did!”

Castiel stooped down until he was eye to eye with her. “I’m very sorry I haven’t been around lately. I was really busy, but that’s no excuse. Do you accept my apology?”

Emma bit her lip before her stern expression softened. “Yeah I guess so,” she said.

“Good, cuz I gotcha something.” Cas reached behind him and pulled out the small bouquet of sunflowers from the basket. “These are for you. They’re from my garden.”

Her eyes lit up. “Thank you!” she said and pulled him in for another hug.

She held out her hand and he took it, and they walked up the cracked walk way to the front porch. “What have you been up to these past few weeks?” he asked, sitting down beside her.

She shrugged. “Same old stuff. Soccer ended cuz Uncle Sammy had MJ and he couldn’t coach anymore,” she pulled the shoebox over until it rested between them. “Do you wanna see my baseball cards?” she asked. “Uncle Benny gave them to me and Ben.”

“Sure. Which one’s your favorite?”

She thought for a minute before she dug through the faded yellow cards. “This one,” she said, pulling out a replica Hank Aaron card.

He held the card in his hand. “I used to have one of these,” he said, handing the card back to her. “Except mine was his rookie card. My brother Gabriel used to collect them with me.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” she said, placing the card back into the box carefully.

“I have four brothers and three sisters,” he replied.
“Where are they?” she asked.

“I suppose they’re back in Illinois,” Castiel said, “That’s where I’m from.”

“I thought you said you were from Massa-massechu-shets,” she said and Cas had to bite back a laugh. Her missing teeth gave her the cutest lisp.

“That’s where I used to live, but I am from a little town outside of Chicago.”

“Oh,” she replied. “Uncle Sammy says Grandma and Grandpa Winchester were from Illinois too.”

“They were?” Cas asked.

“Oh huh, but that they moved to Kansas before Dad was born.”

“Do you know where in Illinois?”

Emma shrugged.

“They were from Normal.” A voice behind him said. Ben was standing in the doorway, the screen porch between.

“Really?” Cas said, carefully. Ben opened the screen door and leaned against the doorframe.

“Yeah. That’s where Grandma and Grandpa were buried. We went there once on a road trip.”

“I was from Pontiac,” Castiel said and Ben furrowed his brow.

“Is that the place with the really big Route 66 painting?” he asked. He took a tentative step forward.

“My Aunt Hester painted that sign,” Castiel said.

Ben’s frosty demeanor slipped away and his face lit up. “Really?” he asked. “That’s so cool,” he said.

Castiel smiled. “Yeah,” he helped Emma straighten her baseball cards for a minute.

“What were you reading?” he asked quietly as Ben took a silent seat next to him on the steps.

“Harry Potter,” Ben replied. “Uncle Sammy gave it to me,” he said.

“It is pretty good,” Cas said.

Ben shrugged. “It’s okay I guess.”

“Don’t lie Benny,” Emma piped up. “You’ve been reading the books non-stop since you got them. You love it, you love it so much you wanna marry Harry Potter!”

“Do not!” Ben replied hotly.

“Do so!” Emma yelled back. “You got all mad at Daddy because he made you turn off the light when ‘it was just getting to the good part’ yesterday.”

Ben scoffed. “That doesn’t mean I wanna marry him, Emma.”

Ben just rolled his eyes. “Whatever Em,” he said. “Boys can’t marry boys anyway,” he replied.

Cas turned his head to Ben. “Well, you’re right. Boys can’t marry other boys here. But in some places in America, they can.”

“Really?” Emma said,

Cas nodded. “I was married to another man,” he said simply, ignoring the way his heart started to pound in his admission. *Careful Cas, don’t want to reveal too much,* the inner voice in his head warned.

“You were?” Emma’s eyes bugged out of her head. Cas nodded again.

“Yeah,” he said. He didn’t say anything else. Generally he didn’t talk about his sexuality with others, and he almost never talked about it with kids. You never knew whose parents would freak out on you. He didn’t think Dean would, but he couldn’t be too careful, he’d already revealed much more than he wanted to.

Emma rounded on Ben. “See?” she asked, accusatory, “You could marry Harry Potter if you wanted to. Just not here.”

Ben rolled his eyes again. “Drop it Emmalee,” he said, turning beet red but staring her down.

Emma just shrugged and Castiel let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans and stood up, taking the basket of vegetables with him.

“I’ve got to go get my groceries,” he said, and the kids just nodded. Emma hugged him once more.

“Wait!” she said, running up the stairs to the front door. She returned seconds later with a cardboard box full of what looked like homemade soap. “Mr. Garth brought these by for Daddy, but he wants us to stay on the porch. Garth said they’re for the store. Will you give them to him?”

Castiel took the box. “Sure thing, sweetheart,” he replied. “How about we go to the little league park next Thursday and throw the ball around?” Cas glanced up at Ben.

Ben shrugged. “We can’t, we’re going over to Uncle Benny’s for a barbecue.”

“Hmm,” Cas said. “I work almost every day for a while.”

Ben hesitated. “What about next Friday, before the parade?”

“I get off lunch shift at two, how does that work?”

Ben nodded. But we have to be back before five. Dad and Emma and I are in the parade. We’re gonna show off Baby.”

Castiel smiled. Ben didn’t inherit much from his father, in the way of looks, but he sure loved that car like Dean did. “Okay sport, I’ll see you then.” He ruffled ben’s curls and set his basket on top of the box of soap.

Cas crossed the street feeling lighter than he had in ages. The bus had come and gone by then, and the store was nearly empty save for a couple of boaters in swim trunks filling up their speedboat out on the marina.

Cas pushed the door open with his hip and glanced around. The sounds of the baseball game were
louder inside, drifting down from the loft. He heard a voice announce a triple for the home team.

The door shut behind him with a clang of the bell overhead and from the grill Benny waved at him. Standing at the front counter was a small girl with fiery red hair. She was poring over a battered copy of *The Hobbit* and only glanced up when the bell rang.

“Hello,” said, taking in Cas, holding the basket of fruit and the box of soap.

“Oh,” Cas said, glancing around. He couldn’t see Dean anywhere. “Hello,” he said. He placed the box onto the countertop and held out his hand. “I’m Castiel.”

“Charlie,” she said. “So you’re the famous Cas,” she gave him a once over that made him feel naked. “Jo was right. You are dreamy.” She smirked.

“Oh uh, um,” Cas stammered. Was she coming on to him? “Th-thank you but I uh… bat for the other team,” he said, flushing.

Charlie laughed and held up a hand, a rainbow colored bracelet covering her wrist. “Me too, dude. I was just messing with you,” she said. Relief flooded through him. It had been a long time since he’d spoken with someone else who was gay. He chuckled.

“You had me,” he replied and she laughed.

“Sorry man. You looking for Dean?” she asked and Cas felt himself flush again. Was he that obvious?

“Um, yes. Emma asked me to drop this box off for him.”

Charlie smiled and ran up the spiral staircase, taking them two at a time. “DEAN!” she yelled. “You have a visitor. A really cute visitor!” Cas pressed his fingertips to his face. Charlie was something else.

“Charlie! What have I told you about screaming up the stairs?” Cas heard a familiar voice yell down the stairs.

“I only take your example,” she hollered back from the top of the stairs. Cas watched as Dean emerged from the small tv room in the loft.

Dean glanced down from the landing and a broad smile lit up his face. “Cas! I was hoping you’d stop by,” he said, bounding down the stairs.

“I told you I would,” Castiel said, glancing down at his shoes. He put his hand in his pockets. Dean glanced at Cas’s flushed face as he passed by Charlie on the staircase and raised an eyebrow.

“You been flirting with my customers again?” he asked.

“Relax, it wouldn’t have done either of us any good anyway,” and Cas felt his throat close up. Was she about to out him?

She winked Cas’ way and pointed to her watch. “My shift was over twenty minutes ago by the way. Are the Braves at least winning?” she asked.

Cas felt his heart rate slow down, but he didn’t miss the way Dean had glanced his way.

“Nah, losing again. We need a new pitching staff,” he said. Cas slowly counted to ten. “Go on home. I’m sure Dorothy is pissed at me for keeping you.”
“She’ll get over it.” Charlie said and she kissed Dean on the cheek, “See you tomorrow. It was nice to meet you Cas!” she said and Cas waved at her.

Dean turned back to him. “So,” he said. Once Charlie was gone, it had become distinctly awkward between the two. Dean looked around, trying to find something to break the tension.

“We got some new beans in earlier this week,” he finally said and Cas bit back a smile.

“Good thing I’m really low on beans,” he replied. Dean pulled his hand out of his pocket, tapping it lightly onto his thigh. He then reached over to where the beans rested on the top shelf of the nearest aisle.

He handed them over and Cas remembered what he brought.

“Oh I almost forgot,” he said and turned away from Dean. He reached over and picked up the box and basket. “Emma asked me to give this to you.” He handed over the box of soap.

“Oh great, I was wondering when Garth would drop that off. You saw the kids?” he asked, and Castiel nodded.

“Yeah, they were on the front porch and I said hello.” Dean smiled.

“They sure missed you.”

“I missed them,” Cas replied, his voice slightly deeper than usual. He wasn’t just talking about the kids. Cas watched as Dean bit his lip. “I brought you something too,” Cas said, quickly changing the subject.

He pulled the basket out and handed it over to Dean. “It’s from my garden,” he stated. “I had a bit of a bumper crop and I wanted to thank you for the ride.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Dean said, but Cas shook his head.

“I do, please Dean, just take them. The tomatoes are good on a sandwich.” His tone brooked no argument. Dean inclined his head.

“Thank you then, for the ‘thank you’ vegetables.”

“You’re welcome.”

Dean ran a hand through his short hair and set the basket down on the back counter. “So uh, is there something I can help you find?” he asked, and Castiel smiled.

“Did you change things around while I was gone?” he teased.

“No, not really,” Dean said.

“Then I think I’ll be fine.”

Dean huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, of course, sorry,” he said. “Holler if you need me,” he said and Cas nodded. He watched as Dean took a seat where Charlie had been, glancing through the basket of vegetables Castiel had brought him.

Cas smirked and picked up a shopping basket. He spent a few minutes in the aisles, picking up his necessities and splurging a bit on a garden spade.
Dean watched him shop, willing the fluttery feeling in his chest to go away. What had Charlie meant when she said her flirting would have done neither of them any good? Did she mean what he thought she meant? But Charlie wouldn’t out someone like that would she?

Dean didn’t know. He supposed if she thought he’d already known… but Dean didn’t already know. Not for sure. He sighed.

Castiel brought the basket of food up to the counter and picked up another reusable bag from the small display by the counter. He’d forgotten his own. Dean rang him up in silence. Castiel handed over two twenty dollar bills and Dean gave him his change. They didn’t say a word to one another.

“Cas,” Dean began when Cas picked up his bag of groceries. “I was wondering…”

“Yes?”

Dean looked like he steeled his resolve. “I was wondering if you’d like to come over for dinner next Thursday? Benny is hosting a barbecue and man, if you thought his burgers were good, you’ve gotta try his ribs,” Dean glanced up, hopeful. Cas tried to avoid looking into his deep green eyes, lest he do something he’d truly regret, like pulling the beautiful man to him and kissing away the smirk on his full lips. “That’s alright Benny?” Dean raised his voice, asking the man at the grill a question.

“Yeah, man. More the merrier. Andrea and I always seem to make enough for an army anyway.” Benny glanced back from Dean to Cas and shook his head, like he was trying to puzzle something out. Cas furrowed his brow. He should refuse. Keep his distance.

But his mouth started to water at the thought of barbecue ribs. And the kids had seemed pretty disappointed that he wouldn’t be able to see them until Friday.

What the hell? he thought. “Sure, Dean. I’d like that.”

“Awesome,” he replied. “It’s over on Magnolia St, the blue house with the black shutters. You can’t miss it,” he said. “Four o’clock.”

Castiel took his bags. “I’ll be there,” he said. He sucked in a breath when his and Dean’s fingers brushed on the bag handle.

Dean let out a shaky breath of his own and smiled once more. “See you then buddy.”

Cas left the store feeling giddy. He waved over at Ben and Emma and whistled all the way home.
Chapter Summary

Dean was crouched down, stacking the wood in a neat teepee-shaped pile. He was whistling and Cas took a moment to study him. Dean was wearing a pair of worn jeans and an olive green shirt over a dark t-shirt. His hair was styled carelessly, as if he’d run a hand through it that morning and let it go. Cas felt heat pool in the pit of his stomach, reminded once again of his attraction to Dean. He was so beautiful it was difficult to be around him sometimes. Especially tonight, when he wore a color that, in the twilight, brought out the gold flecks in his eyes. Just then Dean turned around and smiled widely.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Her-Roses-Never-Fall for her help on this chapter and for the use of a fantastic line!

An extra long one for y'all for your patience during the hiatus.

Chapter 17: Love me and Mend

Chapter Track: Honey Bee, Tom Petty

July 3, 2014

“Daddy!” Emma screeched outside his bedroom door and Dean shot straight up from a deep sleep, instantly awake. Dean reached under his bed for the knife he kept between the mattress, panic bubbling in his chest. “Daddy! Benji took my favorite cereal bowl and he broke it!”

He looked over at the clock and groaned. It was five in the morning. Dean collapsed back onto his pillows and took a deep breath and slowly counted backwards from ten.

By the time he got to four, Emma burst into his bedroom. She was wearing a pair of plaid pajama shorts and one of his Braves t-shirts, and her hair was wild with curls.

She’d been crying.

“Emma, baby,” Dean said, pulling the covers back from the corner of his bed as she climbed in next to him. “It’s five o’clock in the morning. The sun isn’t even up yet. Why are you and your brother fighting over cereal bowls?”

Emma snuggled up next to him and he brought his thumb up to her splotchy cheeks.
“It was my favorite bowl Daddy, and he dropped it on the ground and there’s milk everywhere.”

“Which one did he break?”

“The blue and white one with the really deep bowl.” she sniffled and Dean felt his heart drop.

“Mama’s bowl?” he asked and she nodded against his chin. He sat them both up then and pulled her into a tight hug.

“C’mere bug,” he said. “Let’s go clean up the mess and then later we’ll go to Dorothy’s and we can get a new bowl okay?”

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and Dean’s throat tightened as another tear fell down her cheek. “It won’t be the same,” she said.

“I know,” he replied. He turned his back and patted his shoulder. “Up you get. Let’s get the glass cleaned up.” he said and she jumped onto his back, wrapping her legs around his middle. “Benjamin Isaac Winchester!” he yelled down the hall.

“Yeah?” Ben replied from the kitchen.

“Don’t move! I am not digging glass out of your feet this early in the morning.” Dean looked back at Emma, who was resting her cheek on his shoulder.

“What are you doing up so early anyway?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I dunno Daddy, we just woke up.” He sighed, then toed on a pair of flip flops and gave Emma piggyback ride to the kitchen. He sat her down on top of the counter and then picked Ben up with a grunt.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” Ben said, his voice barely above a whisper. He stared down at the milk covered floor.

“You’re gettin’ too big to carry, Bub,” he said as he sat his son up onto the counter next to his sister. The ceramic bowl was shattered, its delicate blue and white pattern now scattered across the hardwood floor. Dean picked up a large shard and threw it into the trash can, along with the other bigger pieces.

He grabbed the broom from underneath the stairs and swept up the rest of the mess. Dean wet a dishrag and wiped up the milk before stepping back to inspect his work. When he was sure all the shards were picked up he helped his kids down from the countertop and started to make their breakfast.

Emma, still sniffling over her broken dish, had requested pancakes instead of cereal and Ben, contrite after making his sister cry, had quickly agreed with whatever she wanted.

After cleaning up breakfast the children went to the living room to watch cartoons. Dean glanced around their messy house. It had been a busy few weeks and the laundry piled up in the hallway by the kitchen attested to it.

“Ben!” he called from the kitchen. His son poked his head around the edge of the doorway.

“Yeah Dad?” he asked.

“Will you collect all the laundry? And you and your sister’s bathroom and bedrooms could use a
good cleaning too. Get Em to help you.”

“After we clean house can we go get ice cream?” Ben asked and Dean bit back a groan.

Ben had a crush on Allison, the daughter of the woman who owned the local ice cream shop, and lately getting ice cream was Ben’s favorite thing to do in the world. He glanced at his watch. It would take until lunch time at least to finish the laundry and they were due at Benny’s to help set up for the party at two. Plus he needed to make the cucumbers and onions for supper and go to Dorothy’s before it closed to pick out a new bowl for Emma. He didn’t think they had time.

And Andrea had said something about apple pie and homemade vanilla ice cream for dessert. The kids didn’t need it twice in one day.

“We’re going over to Uncle Benny’s house this afternoon for the barbecue, and I think Auntie Andi was making homemade ice cream,” Dean replied, drying the last dish and putting it away in the cabinet.

“Awesome!” Ben said and he hurried to collect the dirty clothes.

They had a veritable mountain of laundry in the hallway once Ben and Emma returned with their hampers full to the brim. He set about sorting the clothes while he listened to the kids bickering down the hall as they cleaned their bathroom.

After starting a load of whites, he grabbed the furniture polish and an old rag. The living room could use a good dusting and there were cobwebs in the corners of the dining room. He might as well clean as he waited.

As he began to dust, his thoughts settled on seeing Castiel that evening. He was excited to see him, to hang out with him. It had been weeks since Cas’ impromptu sleepover and Dean found he had missed his dry humor. He missed the way Cas slipped into his Boston accent every time he got excited about something.

Dean knew that he had a crush on the guy, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to pursue a relationship with Castiel. First of all, he barely knew him.

Plus they lived in a small southern town, and he knew that Charlie and Dorothy had their difficulties from the community about their “lifestyle” according to the old biddies at the beauty shop. Dean had overheard them gossiping about the young couple when he’d taken Ben and Emma to get their hair cut last month. He knew how hard it was to maintain a relationship that went against the grain in a town as small-minded as Southport.

Are you happy when he’s around? a small voice in the back of his head asked. He frowned. He was happier around Cas than he had been in a long time. Dean liked hanging out with him. He liked arguing over Bukowski poems as they split a Pepsi on the picnic tables out behind the store on Cas’ afternoons off. He liked making him laugh. He was definitely attracted to the guy, he couldn't even try to deny that, and he was pretty sure that Cas was attracted to him too. Then why would you give a shit what others think? The little voice reasoned.

Maybe I should test the waters tonight, he thought as the timer for the washer dinged.

“Emmalee Anne Winchester! Benjamin Isaac Winchester!” he called out as he changed over the load. They had been suspiciously quiet the past twenty minutes. “That bathroom better be spotless when I go in there!”

He didn’t turn around, but heard them scurrying back into the bathroom from Ben’s bedroom and
smiled when he heard the water tap came back on.

They spent the morning cleaning house. Ben helped Dean make pickled cucumbers and onions, using the cucumbers that Castiel had brought over from his garden. They were delicious, crisp and fresh with a hint of tang and they paired nicely with the onions and vinegar.

He and Ben cleaned up their mess and put the salad into the refrigerator to chill, then Dean made them peanut butter and banana sandwiches, something Sam had introduced to them while they had stayed with them after MJ was born, and that they’d immediately fallen in love with, despite Dean’s protests.

He made himself a turkey sandwich and they ate on the veranda. The last load of laundry dinged just as they were cleaning up their mess and he tossed the load of towels into the dryer.

They got dressed then. By the time they were ready the towels were done, but Dean left them in the dryer. They wouldn't wrinkle and they only had about an hour before Dorothy closed up shop at the antique store and left for the barbecue.

As they walked out onto the front porch, Dean took a deep breath. The magnolia tree was in bloom, perfuming the air with their flowery scent. It was one of his favorite smells in the world.

“Let’s ride our bikes today,” he said as Ben began to head towards the Impala. “I need to put new brake pads in Baby anyway,” he added when Ben dropped his head.

Ben didn’t like to ride his bike anymore. That had always been something he’d enjoyed before Lisa had died. But it was something they did together.

Dean opened the shed and pulled out Emma’s pink tricycle. He grabbed his bike as Ben pulled his own from its place in the neatly organized shed and then pointed at the helmets hanging on the wall. He tried not to notice how Ben’s face fell when he saw Lisa’s old bike hanging in the back of the shed.

They clicked their helmets into place and they made their way to downtown five blocks away to Dorothy’s store. Dorothy was Charlie’s girlfriend, and he wasn’t sure what to make of her yet.

He’d known Charlie for only a brief time, but they had become fast friends. She and Dorothy had moved to Southport the previous winter and Dean had met Charlie shortly after that. Dorothy had come into town to set up a new business, and following the death of her mother, Charlie had come too, leaving her low level corporate job in Chicago to follow her heart in small town North Carolina.

She had helped Dorothy set up shop but they quickly realized if they were going to maintain a healthy relationship, they needed to work separately. She and Dean had become friendly as soon as she moved to town, and when she’d approached him about a job, he’d given it to her without hesitation. But Dorothy had always been rather distant with him. He’d tried to make a connection with her, for Charlie’s sake, but so far he hadn’t cracked that icy demeanor yet.

By the time they made it to the antique shop, the summer heat had gotten to all of them. Dean was sweating through his over shirt and he pulled it off, leaving it in Emma’s basket blocking the container of cucumbers from the hot sun.

Dorothy waved once from the front desk as the children rushed into the store.

Dean approached the desk. “You comin’ to the party later?” he asked and Dorothy looked up from the novel she was reading.
She smiled. “Yeah, but I don’t close up ’til four and I need to make the ambrosia, so we’ll be late.”

“I’ll see you then,” he said and waved goodbye. She turned back to her novel.

They went through the aisles one at a time, searching for just the right bowl to replace the one she’d lost. Emma insisted that she would know it when she saw it, and Dean just let her be.

He knew how much the bowl meant to Emma. She couldn’t remember her mother, she was just two when Lisa died, but when Dean had told Emma that the blue and white ceramic bowl had been made by her mother, she’d decided that it was her favorite and she wouldn’t eat cereal from any other bowl.

He and Ben headed over to the case that held vintage hood ornaments for cars as Emma searched.

Ten minutes later, she still hadn’t found it. There were bowls everywhere. White bowls with delicate red pastoral scenes painted on them, heavy ceramic bowls hand crafted by local artisans, there were ugly green and yellow glass dishes with turtles painted on them. But none of them were right.

None of them were Mom’s bowl. After digging through all the aisles of dish ware in the store she went back over to Dean.

“Dad, none of them are right.” she said.

Dean looked down at the little girl wrapped around his torso.

He crouched down until he was facing her, wrapping his big hands over her shoulder. “What’s wrong about them?” he asked and she shrugged.

“They just ain’t like Mom’s.”

“Oh, baby,” he said, pushing a tendril of her hair out of the way. “None of them are gonna be just like the one you lost.”

“But I want one that’s perfect, just like her’s,” she sniffed.

“Well why don’t you show me some that you didn’t hate.”

She grabbed his and and pulled him over to the dishware. She passed by the metal mess kits and the Chinese restaurant cast offs, she glossed over the ugly turtle bowls and finally came upon a small shelf of ceramic and crystal dishes.

She pulled out a bright yellow bowl with a shallow basin. It had a sunflower pattern and Dean held it up, inspecting it.

“Don’t think this will work Bug,” he said, setting it down. “Too shallow. It won’t hold enough cereal.”

“That’s what I thought too, but I really like the flowers,” she replied. “They were like the ones Mr. Cas gave me.” she paused. “What about this one?” she asked, holding up a white ceramic bowl with a glazed mint green interior.

Dean studied it. “I don’t think that’s quite right either,” he glanced at the bottom shelf where there was a half off sign. There, behind a pair of cracked salt and pepper shakers in the shape of dolphins was a lone crystal bowl.

He reached out and picked it up, checking the price on the bottom.
“What about this one?” he asked. The bowl was in near perfect condition, save for one little scratch down its side. It was clear cut crystal, with a sunflower pattern etched into the side. The edge of the bowl was scalloped, and it was just deep enough to house a good portion of cereal and still leave room for the milk.

“But it has a scratch on it,” she said, picking it up.

“Yeah, it isn’t perfect, but it sure is pretty.” he replied. “And it has the flowers on it that you liked from the other one.”

“That’s true,” said and she considered it again.

“I like it,” Ben added from behind them. “I think you should get that one, Sissy.”

Dean smiled. “Plus, it’s clear. Which makes it different from all our other bowls at home. It makes it special.”

She smiled widely up at him, showing off the gap in her teeth. “Let’s get this one!” she hugged Dean.

“Thank you Daddy,” she whispered against his chest.

“You’re welcome sweetheart,” he kissed the top of her head. “Ben, did you find something you wanted?”

“No, but Dad, can we get some fireworks?” Benny asked, glancing at the tent across the street.

“Sure, as long as you promise to pick them up from Benny’s yard after you shoot them off,” he said.

They paid for the glass bowl and Dorothy wrapped it up in newspaper and put it in a canvas tote with the words “Over the Rainbow Antiques” screen printed on the front. Dean placed the bowl carefully in his basket, wrapping it carefully in his shirt. They purchased an entire basketful of fireworks before they finally cycled the half mile down to Benny’s house.

They were early, but already the smell of barbecue filled the entire block. His stomach rumbled at the thought of Benny’s ribs.

The kids made their way to the backyard. There they found Remy and Arsen holed up in the treehouse as Margot played with Sam’s new puppy, Riot. Emma squealed and went to play with the dog. The boys lowered the ladder for Ben and he climbed up to join them.

“Hey sweetheart,” he said. “Where’s Sam and Jess?” he asked, kissing Margot on top of her head.

“Hey Uncle Dean,” she replied. “They’re sleeping in the guest room. MJ kept them up all night and Papa made them all take a nap cuz they were grumpy.” Dean laughed.

He waved hello to Benny who was standing over the grill, a kiss the cook apron tied loosely around his middle, then he went into the kitchen. Dean found Andrea in the kitchen, elbows deep in a sink of dirty dishes. There were red beans and rice cooking on the stove, homemade sausage waiting on a butcher block cutting board to be added into the beans.

“Need any help?” he asked as he put the cucumbers in the refrigerator.

“Can you dry?” she asked. They washed dishes in companionable silence.

Dean glanced over at Andrea. She was a beautiful and intelligent woman, and he’d known her for a
long time. He and Benny had served together in the military and Benny had met Andrea on a furlough to Greece. He had never looked back. Andrea was the love of his life.

He’d retired a few years after Dean and moved his family down to Southport to be nearer their godfather. Andrea was a doctor at Dosher Memorial. She and Lisa had been coworkers and were extremely close. When Lisa had gotten ill, she took it hard, but she was unwavering in her support for her friend.

Andrea took a leave of absence at the hospital and becameLisa’s caretaker full time. She was there to help with the chemo and the surgeries and she was there when the treatments didn’t work. She nursed Lisa through her last few months on earth and helped her keep as much dignity in death as she could. She helped write dozens of letters to Ben and Emma when the tumors reached Lisa’s brain and she could no longer write. Dean made a mental note to get Emma’s birthday letter out from the desk in the loft at work.

She helped Lisa in ways that Dean, overwhelmed with fear and grief, who was trying to keep the store running and take care of the kids, could not. He and Andrea had never been as close as he and Benny, but he would always love her for her compassionate and attentive care of his wife in the last months of her life.

“So Benny tells me you invited a new friend over?” she asked, handing him a mixing bowl.

“Uh, yeah. His name is Cas,” he replied. “He’s a good guy,” he said.

“That’s what Benny said. So tell me, what’s he like?”

He stopped drying the dish for a moment, and frowned. “He’s quiet at first, but has this really dry sense of humor when you get to know him. He is also very kind and he’s great with the kids… what?” he asked when Andrea started to laugh.

“You’ve got it bad for him huh?”

Dean’s face colored. “What?” he blustered, shaking his head.

“Oh come on. I’ve known you for years Dean. I know when you have a crush on someone.”

Dean deflated, looking down at the plate he was drying. “I seem to have lost my poker face.”

“Oh honey, you never had a poker face when it came to love.” She put her hand on his shoulder.

“So maybe I do like him,” he admitted and Andrea smiled widely. She pushed the window above the sink open.

“Benny Lafitte! You owe me twenty bucks!” Dean’s mouth dropped.

“You bet on it?” he asked, incredulous.

Benny spun around from the grill “What happened to ‘brothers before lovers’ Dean?” he yelled across the lawn.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. Dean shook his head. “What was the bet?”

“Who you’d crack to first.”

Dean smirked and turned back to the yard. “If it makes you feel any better Benny, she forced it out of me!”
Benny crossed the lawn. “Andrea Belle Lafitte! We swore that we wouldn’t try to goad him into
admitting it! I call foul!”

“All I said was ‘you’ve got it bad,’ and he cracked. I don’t think that counts.”

“Oh it totally counts, I wouldn’t have admitted it otherwise.”

“So there!” Benny said. “Pay up!” Andrea laughed and pulled a twenty out of her back pocket.

“I don’t even care that I lost,” she whispered to him as she passed by him to the porch door. “I’m just
happy you’ve finally found someone.”

Dean smirked. “Cheaters never prosper Andi,” he whispered back and kissed her on the cheek.

“I would have won either way,” she replied.

Sam and Jess woke up an hour later, looking much more rested than they had in a while. MJ was in
good spirits and everyone crowded around to play with the baby.

Guests began to arrive just as the ribs finished cooking and Benny switched to hamburgers.

Dean made pleasantries with Benny’s neighbors, but he always had his eye on the back gate, looking
for Cas.

Finally, at a quarter after four, he showed up with a small tupperware container. Dean excused
himself from Bela and Ann-Marie and abruptly left them, making his way to the gate.

“You made it,” he said, blushing slightly at the relief in his tone.

“I was invited,” Cas replied. “I’m sorry I’m late, but the Jello wouldn’t set.”

***

Cas opened the lid of the container holding the jello mold as Dean let out a great big belly laugh,
throwing his head back with the force of his laughter.

“You didn’t have to bring anything,” Dean said, taking the container from Cas’ hands and gesturing
towards the house. “Come on in, let me introduce you around.”

Dean put the jello in the fridge, next to his cucumbers. He took him over to where Jess and MJ were
playing in the living room. She had smiled widely at the introduction and held out her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you Castiel,” she said just as the baby burst into tears. “Oh gosh, must be dinner
time. I’ll see you guys later.” She picked up the baby and headed to the back room to nurse.

Cas was nervous being around so many strangers.

A small voice in the back of his head said that he should relax, have a good time and just see where
the night takes them, but he couldn’t help but notice the way Dean stood just a little too close than
what was normal. His hand hand hovered over the small of his back as he led him through the crowd
of neighbors.

He greeted the children, who were ecstatic to see him, as they hadn’t known he was coming, and
played ball with Ben, Remy and Arsen for a while after Dean left to make sure Andrea didn’t need
any more help setting the long picnic tables set up on the large back porch.
The afternoon wore on and soon everyone had arrived for supper, including Charlie and Dorothy. Bobby showed up with Ellen and Jo, with Ash following close behind. Briefly, Castiel wondered if Ellie would show up, but as the afternoon moved to night and she didn’t show up, he assumed she hadn’t come.

Benny had outdone himself on the grill. His barbecue ribs were fall off the bone tender. The cucumbers that Dean had made were so delicious that it made Castiel feel ashamed of his jello mold.

But Dean had taken a big scoop of the jello and complimented him sincerely about it.

After dinner the children cleaned the kitchen, putting leftovers in disposable containers for the guests to take home. Cas volunteered to help as well, but Andrea had waved him off.

“And adults cook, children clean up. That’s the way we do it around here,” she said. She pushed Cas gently in between his shoulders. “Why don’t you go help Dean set up the bonfire?” she asked, with a smile in her voice.

Cas squinted. She looked like the cat who ate the canary, wearing a satisfied expression that made him want to be in on the joke. Andrea handed Castiel two bottles of beer and he took them before heading over to the fire pit.

Dean was crouched down, stacking the wood in a neat teepee-shaped pile. He was whistling and Cas took a moment to study him. Dean was wearing a pair of worn jeans and an olive green shirt over a dark t-shirt. His hair was styled carelessly, as if he’d run a hand through it that morning and let it go. Cas felt heat pool in the pit of his stomach, reminded once again of his attraction to the man. He was so beautiful it was difficult to be around him sometimes. Especially tonight, when he wore a color that, in the twilight, brought out the gold flecks in his eyes. Just then Dean turned around and smiled widely.

“One of those for me?” he asked, standing up and wiping his hands on his thighs. Cas swallowed and nodded. He held out the beer. “Thanks.” Dean opened the bottle and held it out for Cas to clink, the Dean lit a piece of newspaper, stuffing it into the middle of the stack of wood. The fire lit quickly, helped along by the lighter fluid Dean had snuck onto the waiting pile of newspaper.

“And you wanna sit down?” Dean asked before he took a long pull of his beer. He pointed to a wooden swing erected beneath one of the large live oaks in Benny’s back yard. It was just close enough to the fire that they could still feel the warmth of the flames on their cheeks.

Cas nodded and they sat down, keeping a carefully measured six inches between their thighs.

Cas took a drink of his beer. It had been years since he’d had one and it tasted bitter on his tongue. But after a few pulls the acrid bitterness faded, leaving behind a nutty aftertaste.

The silence between them was thick. Cas was painfully aware of Dean’s arm slung behind the back of the swing’s seat. They weren’t touching, but he could feel the warmth of Dean’s skin so close to his back.

If he didn’t break the silence soon, he was going to go crazy. Cas took a deep breath and opened his mouth. “Where’s the kids?” he asked, exhaling. His heart should not have been racing at such an innocent question, but he had to will himself to calm down.

“It’s just Dean, he thought. It’s just your friend Dean. Calm down. You’re acting like a kid at his first date.
Dean pointed toward a large group down by the dock that led to one of the many creeks in Southport. Sam and Benny were standing with them, taking turns lighting the fireworks that Dean had brought with them.

“I have a feeling they’ll be occupied for a while,” he said, glancing at Cas from the corner of his eye.

Without the buffer of the children between them, the atmosphere felt stilted. They Cas felt unsure. He didn’t know what to talk about. He didn’t know what this was. If he knew whether or not this was a date, then he’d have more sure footing, but he didn’t know that.

“Can I ask you something Cas?” Dean said, finishing off his beer. Nothing in Dean’s tone suggested where this was going, so Cas proceeded cautiously.

“Sure, I guess,” he said.

Dean took a deep breath and Cas steeled himself. “Do you—I mean—are you uh, shit,” Dean looked down, second guessing himself.

“Am I what, Dean?” Cas asked. He knew where Dean was going now, and he wasn’t going to make it easy on him. He turned in his seat until he was facing Dean, making eye contact with him. If he was about to be ridiculed or have his friendship rejected, then he was damn sure going to make sure Dean felt just as uncomfortable about it as he was beginning to.

But when their eyes met, Cas didn’t see anger or fear in them. Dean’s wide eyes were curious and his expression was open as if he simply wanted to know.

“Are you attracted to men, Cas?” Dean asked and Cas’ brow furrowed.

“Are you asking if I’m gay?” he finally asked. Dean studied him for a moment.

“No, I asked if you were attracted to men.” he shrugged. “So, are you?”

“Are you?” Cas asked, evasive.

Dean smiled, his eyes crinkling in the corners, and heat pooled in Cas’ belly again. “Why are you answering a question with another question?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Cas retorted.

“Why won’t you answer?” Dean said, confused. Cas felt the first stirrings of anger. But it wouldn’t do to get angry until he knew Dean’s motivations.

“Because generally, Dean, when a man like you asks if I am gay, its the preface to a sound beating. And I don’t feel like losing our friendship just yet.” Cas let a bit of the anger he was keeping at bay slip through.

Dean leaned back and his face crumpled. He looked up and his expressive eyes betrayed how hurt he was.

“Guys like me?” Dean asked. He put his beer bottle down on the ground and crossed his arms. “What exactly are you trying to say Cas? That I’m a bigot?” he paused, biting his lip. “I’m not a bigot,” he said, looking away.

All of a sudden, Cas’ anger dissolved and he felt guilt take its place. “I—I’m sorry Dean. I just
wasn’t expecting that question I guess,” he said, looking down at his hands in contrition.

“Cas,” Dean said softly. “Look at me.” Castiel felt a pair of warm fingertips lift his chin. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have sprung that on you, I would never hold it against you if you were.”

His voice was sincere and Castiel believed him. “Yes,” he whispered. “I’m gay.”

Dean held his gaze for a moment before he nodded. “I’m bi,” he replied and Cas’ mouth fell open.

Oh, he thought. “Is that why you asked if I was attracted to men instead of if I was gay?”

Dean shrugged. “I don’t like labels,” he replied. He held out his hand for Cas empty beer bottle. “D’you want another one?” he asked.

Cas shook his head. “I’ll take a soda if you don’t mind,” he said, handing over the bottle. He didn't miss the way Dean's palm pressed against the top of his hand as he took it.

He watched Dean walk toward the cooler by the back door, feeling lightheaded with giddiness.

***

Lightning was buzzing under Dean’s skin as he picked two cans of Pepsi out of the cooler. Testing the waters, finding out of Cas was even attracted to men, had been a success. Now he needed to see if Castiel was interested in taking things further.

Just because he’s into dudes doesn’t mean he’s into you, dumbfuck, the pessimistic voice in the back of his head chided. Dean stopped dead in his tracks and frowned. He hadn’t factored that into the equation. Oh God, he thought. What if he doesn’t actually like me and I am making an ass of myself?

He looked over at Castiel, sitting alone on the swing. As if on cue, Cas looked up and caught his glance. He smiled crookedly at Dean and he felt goosebumps rise on his arms, despite the warm night.

All he can do is say no right? he thought. Dean steeled his resolve and walked back over to where the other man sat.

Dean handed Castiel a soda and he gratefully accepted it.

“Show’s about to start,” Cas said as Dean sat back down, noticeably closer than before. “Looks like you weren't the only one who brought fireworks.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Ash brought an entire trunkful of the big ones,” Castiel replied. Dean watched as Castiel shifted in his seat, leaning against Dean’s forearm. Cas’ back was warm through his soft t-shirt. Dean bit back a ridiculous smile and pressed his arm close until all he'd have to do was wrap his palm around Cas’ shoulder if he wanted.

He’d moved to do just that when suddenly a bottle rocket launched across the yard, straight at them. Dean didn’t think. He grabbed the back of Castiel’s head and pushed him down until they both fell onto their knees in the dirt.

The rocket swirled and looped above them, finally landing in the roses behind the swing.

Dean started to laugh, but stopped quickly when he felt Cas trembling beneath him. “Cas? You okay? Cas?” he asked beginning to panic. “Did it getcha?”
“G-get off me,” Cas whispered, his voice hoarse. Dean moved away immediately.

“I’m sorry man,” he said sitting back on his heels. Cas had crouched down, his head between his knees. He took shallow breaths. “Cas, buddy. It’s okay.” he said quietly.

“I’m—I’m sorry Bart,” Cas said and Dean frowned. “I’ll do better,” his voice was barely above a whisper now. He began to rock back and forth on his heels his head almost touching the dirt with every forward motion.

*Who the hell is Bart?*

Carefully, Dean reached forward, placing the tips of his fingers on Cas’ shoulder, a barely there kind of touch he’d perfected during his time in the Army. Cas’ head snapped up, his eyes wild for just a moment before they settled onto Dean. The fear left immediately. Castiel closed his eyes and he took a deep breath.

“Forgive me, Dean.” he said quietly.

“It’s all good Cas,” Dean said, but he was worried. “Just a bottle rocket.”

“I don’t know why I reacted like that,” Cas said.

“It’s okay, man. No worries.” Dean reached out his hand and helped Cas up. Cas looked around, as if trying to see if anyone was watching them. “They’re all focused on the fireworks,” he murmured close to Castiel’s ear.

They sat back down just as the first big firework erupted in the sky.

“You know,” Dean began. “When I was in the service I saw my fair share of traumatic flashbacks. I want you to know I’m not going to pry, but if you want me to, I will listen. I won’t judge you.”

Cas didn’t say anything, instead he glanced up as a bright blue star exploded in the sky. Hesitantly, he reached out, placing his hand on top of Dean’s knee. Dean lifted his hand, pausing for just a moment before he set his hand on top of the one resting on his thigh.

They sat in silence for a moment, both smiling like fools until a big green cluster shot across the creek right towards the cluster of people sitting in armchairs on the other side.

Dean laughed as he watched Ellen and Jo jump up from their lawn chairs. Ellen yelled at Bobby to aim better or she was cutting him off. Castiel joined him, as Dean brushed his thumb across Cas’ knuckle.

*When was the last time that I’d felt so light just holding someone’s hand?* Dean thought. But he didn't want to push too far. As much as he was enjoying it, he needed to break this bubble a little bit.

“I love fireworks,” he said and Cas looked over at Dean. “Fourth of July 1996. My dad was out on a job, which ain’t nothin’ new. He never did seem to be around on holidays. But my brother and I stole this huge pack of fireworks from one of those roadside tents, right out from under this guy’s nose. Man, we lit those suckers and they were so bright, they made this field look like freakin high noon at midnight.”

“Sounds like a good memory,” Cas said.

“It was, ’til we burned the field down.”
Castiel laughed out loud. “Oh man, no way.”

“Yes way,” Dean replied. “The farmer that owned the land made us cut firewood for two weeks in the heat of July to pay him back for the wheat crop we burnt.” He paused. “But that was nothing compared to the whoopin’ Dad put on me. He didn’t even let me pick my own switch for that one.”

Cas’s hand tightened on Dean’s thigh. Dean bit his lip, wondering if he should take this further. But Cas’ thumb was brushing gentle circles over his leg and Dean wanted him to know it was okay to open up to him. And what better way to do that than to open up himself? He wanted to open up to Cas. He wanted him to know all about his past.

“Still wasn’t as bad as Flagstaff,” he finally said.

“What happened in Flagstaff?” Cas asked, and Dean looked over as the ‘grand finale’ began. Cas’ blue eyes shone in the dark.

“It’s a long story,” Dean said, suddenly nervous. He hadn’t ever told anyone this particular story. Not Bobby. Not Benny. Not even Lisa. And Sam only knew his side of it. He didn’t know about what happened between Dean and John. But he knew Cas would understand. He wouldn’t pity him.

“Sam and Dad had never been very close.” Dean brushed his free hand through his hair, then set it back across the back of the bench. “They were too alike. Always butting heads.”

Cas glanced over at Sam, who was holding his daughter, laughing at something Jo said.

“You two seem quite different. Do you take after your mother then?” he said.

“I guess so,” Dean replied. “I was really young when she died.” Dean leaned forward and busied himself with building up the fire, which had started to dwindle.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said to his back.

Dean shrugged. “It was a long time ago. But Dad and Sam? Two peas on a pod.” He pulled his hand away from Cas’.

Dean turned towards Castiel, pulling his leg up onto the swing, they swayed back and forth for a moment. “We were up in Arizona and Dad was two days into a week-long bender.” Dean looked away, towards Ben and Emma, who were helping Benny clean up the debris from the fireworks show. “I uh, I don’t talk about this a lot,” he said, and he cursed the faint tremble of his lip.

“I won’t judge you Dean,” Cas said, parroting Dean’s earlier words. Dean smiled.

“I know that.” He took Cas’ hand again and Cas let out the breath he felt like he’d been holding since Dean had let it go. “Anyway, Dad was drunk off his ass. Sam was, I don’t know like thirteen. I think it was the summer before I finally got fed up and packed me and Sam up, headed here. But he and Dad got into a huge fight over something stupid, and Dad left, like he always did. But not before the standard ‘Watch after Sammy, Dean.’” Dean imitated his father’s low voice and chuckled under his breath.

“Have you ever been to Flagstaff?” Dean asked and Cas shook his head. “The air is really thin up there, and I’ve never been great with high elevations. I had this monster headache that would not go away, and I kept passing out.”

“Understandable,” Cas replied.
“Right, well three days after Dad ran off to have his bender in peace, Sam and I were in the motel and he was going on and on about how much he hated our life and how he wished we could stay with Bobby all the time, and I lost it. I yelled at him. I didn’t feel good and he was annoying me and I was a real dick. But he shut up and I finally fell asleep. When I woke up, Sammy was gone.”

“Where’d he go?” Cas asked.

“Sumbitch took half the food money from my wallet and ran off while I was asleep. I looked everywhere for him. The library, the school, I called his friends. Eventually I started calling the hospitals and morgues. He was just gone. I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my entire life.” Dean chuckled darkly. “About the time I got through the list of hospitals and morgues, and called Bobby to see if Sam had shown up here, Dad came home.”

Castiel felt dread pool in the bottom of his stomach. He had a pretty good idea where this was going. Dean had begun to tremble next to him.

“I had to look him in the eye and tell him that Sam was missing,” Dean said, and he caught Cas’ gaze. “I still bear those scars,” he murmured into the dark.

“So,” Cas said, then he cleared his throat. “How did you find him?” he asked.

“We didn’t. After two weeks, the kid ran out of money and came back,” Dean shrugged.

“What happened then?” Cas asked.

“Nothin’. We packed up our shit and headed on to the next town. Dad didn’t say a word to him. Said all he needed to say to me I guess.”

“I am sorry you went through that Dean,” Cas said.

Dean shrugged. “Just another Tuesday in hell,” he said. “Like I said, we got outta there a year later. Came here. Sammy got to go to the same high school all four years. Then he got into Stanford. Life went on.” He paused. “Life goes on, Cas.” Cas met his gaze. Dean’s eyes were bright in the firelight and Cas’ eyes flickered down to his full lips.

Cas wanted to kiss him. He had even leaned forward, his eyes slipping shut before he remembered where he was. Not here, he thought. Not with everyone around. Cas didn’t know how ‘out’ Dean was to his friends and families, and he wouldn’t have felt comfortable kissing Dean yet, regardless.

“Dad!” Emma yelled and they jumped apart. Cas hadn’t realized how close they were sitting to one another. The little girl hopped onto Dean’s lap, resting her head on his shoulder. “Please please please can we stay here tonight? Aunt Andi already said yes. Please?”

Dean looked up at Ben who had hung back. He was staring at the small distance between he and Cas, a crease between his eyebrows. “Ben, did you wanna stay over too?” Ben’s eyes snapped up to his dad’s.

“Yeah,” he replied, moving closer. “Remi has the new MLB game and he bet I couldn’t beat him. Can we Dad? Please?”

“Yeah,” Dean replied, moving closer. “Remi has the new MLB game and he bet I couldn’t beat him. Can we Dad? Please?”

You two should have asked me before you asked Auntie,” Dean said sternly and they looked down at the ground.

“Yes sir,” they said in unison.
“I’ll be back to pick you up tomorrow at lunch and we can go down to the fair,” he said. The kids looked up and they both crushed him into a hug.

“Thank you Daddy!” Emma said.

“You’re welcome baby, but you better go tell Auntie Andi and Uncle Benny thank you for their hospitality, and I expect you both to act like angels, you understand?”

Castiel smiled. He reached out to where Emma was sprawled across her father’s lap and ruffled her curls.

“Go on. I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Dean sad. They ran off. “Hey!” Dean yelled and they turned back around. “I love you!”

“Love you too Daddy!” they said in unison.

Dean turned back to Cas once they’d disappeared into the house. “Look at that, I have a night off from Daddy duty.”

Castiel laughed then glanced down at his watch. Most of the other guests had begun to leave and he knew he should get going too.

“Castiel,” Dean began and then he cleared his throat. “Would you like to come over to the house and hang out?”

Castiel bit his lip. He wanted to. He really wanted to. But what if Dean expected something he wasn’t sure he was ready to give?

“Just to hang out,” Dean hastened to add at Cas’ hesitation. “We can watch a movie and just chill.” he chuckled. “And maybe fold some towels.”

Castiel laughed out loud, throwing his head back. “Oh well, if we’re gonna be folding towels, I’m in.”

Dean smiled so widely that Cas was sure he was looking into the sun and he had to remind himself not again not to get too close or he might burn up.

“Can you hang on for just a minute?” Dean asked, standing.

“Sure,” Castiel said.

“I’ll be right back.” Dean approached Benny. He glanced back at Cas once and Cas waved. “Benny,” Dean said when he was closed enough “I need your help.”

“Sure, brother. What’s up?”

“Well, uh, I kinda just invited Cas over to hang out, and I was wondering if I could borrow your truck cuz I only brought my bike?

Benny’s shit eating grin was almost more than Dean could handle. “You’re gonna ‘hang out’ huh?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah Benny. We’ll watch a movie, maybe drink a beer. No big deal. I just didn’t wanna walk two miles home dragging a bike behind me. I’ll bring it back tomorrow when I pick up the kids.”

“You good to drive?” Benny asked, an old habit from their military days when more often than not,
Dean hadn’t been sober enough to drive home.

Dean laughed. “Yeah man. One and done tonight.”

Benny shook his head. “Sorry man, old habits die hard.”

“It’s all good. So can I borrow the truck?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure, the keys are on the ring in the foyer.”

“Thanks buddy,” Dean hugged the other man quickly and headed inside to get the keys. When he returned, Cas was still sitting on the swing. Dean had half expected him to be gone, but he wasn’t sure why.

He held up the keys, jingling them. “You ready to go?” he asked and Castiel nodded. “I borrowed Benny’s truck. We rode our bikes over.”

“I’m fine walking,” Cas said and Dean shook his head.

“It’s no big deal Cas.”

“If you’re sure…” Castiel trailed off when Dean nodded.

They made their way out the back gate towards a truck with a covered cab. Dean got in and unlocked the passenger side door for Cas. He started the truck and they pulled out of the driveway in one fluid motion. The radio was off and Dean rolled down the windows to let the warm air into the cab that smelled like fish and pipe tobacco.

Outside, Cas could hear the distant rumbles of fireworks as they drove through peaceful neighborhood. They passed the Roadhouse, where they could see Jo and Ash dancing on the deck of the restaurant.

“Looks like they took the party home with them,” Cas said. Dean chuckled.

It was a short drive from Benny’s house and Dean pulled into he drive of his small white house just a few minutes later.

He turned off the engine and they sat in the cab for a moment.

“So uh, do you wanna go in?” Dean asked and Cas looked over at him. Was he giving me an out?

“So would you like me to take you home?” Dean added.

Cas was taken aback. He wasn’t used to being given choices like that. But he didn’t want Dean to take him back to his lonely cabin. He wanted to know what Dean’s favorite movie was. He wanted to spend time with Dean, not Dean The Dad or Dean The Store Owner. He wanted to see who Dean was when his children weren’t around and they didn’t have the pretense of the store between them. He wanted to see what Dean was like as a person—as a friend—or maybe something more.

He turned toward Dean in the cab and deliberately placed his hand over Dean’s knee. “What movies do you have?”

Dean smiled radiantly again and he opened his door. Cas followed him up the stairs to the front porch.

“I’ll watch whatever you want,” Dean said as he opened the front door. “Come on in.”
Dean shrugged off his over shirt, tossing it into the empty hamper by the washer. Castiel toed off his shoes in the doorway and followed Dean down the short hallway into the kitchen. “You want something to drink? Water or tea? I can put on a pot of coffee too,” he said.

“Tea, please.” Cas said. He sat down at the kitchen table and watched Dean put water in an ancient kettle. Dean tossed Cas a metal canister that held a variety of tea bags and Castiel picked out an Apple Cinnamon bag before tossing the canister back to Dean who caught it easily.

“So Cas, what kind of movie do you wanna watch?” Dean asked, getting his own tea bag out of the container and grabbing two mugs from the cabinet above the stove.

Cas watched as Dean sat down opposite him at the table.

“What do you have?” The kettle whistled and Dean jumped up to grab it. He picked it up with a pot holder and brought it over to Cas.

“We can go check my collection out in a sec. Do you want some sugar?” he asked, and Castiel shook his head. Dean went about making a cup of Earl Grey, adding liberal amounts of sugar and cream.

After they let their tea brew Dean gestured toward the living room where Castiel set his mug down to examine the movies on a small bookshelf by the tv.

He had a large collection of Disney movies and some old westerns that looked like they’d seen better days. To Cas’ surprise, he found several “chick flicks” that could have belonged to Dean’s wife except that they all came out after she had died.

His eyes settled on a collector’s box set of the Jurassic Park trilogy and Cas reached out to take it of the shelf. He held it up and Dean’s eyes brightened.

“Good choice,” he said.

Cas smirked. “I do make those—occasionally,” he said. Dean studied him. He was sure that Cas had meant for it to be lighthearted, but his eyes had turned down, his smile faltered.

“I always loved the Triceratops when I was a kid,” Dean changed the subject, eager to get Castiel smiling and laughing again. He took the dvd from Castiel and popped it into the player as Cas settled himself into Dean’s comfortable couch. After the previews started playing Dean stood up, turning around to face the other man. He bit his lip. Did he sit on the couch next to Castiel, or respect his space and choose the chair? He glanced back and forth at each option.

Castiel felt a swell of gratitude for Dean’s indecision. He looked genuinely torn. Castiel took a deep breath and patted the space next to him. Dean sighed, relieved that he hadn’t had to make the choice, and settled down into the couch cushion. He put his foot up on the ottoman and leaned back, his head resting against the back of the couch.

He hadn’t rested all day, and he could feel it in the ache of his knees and throbbing feet. He sighed. He was too young to feel old.

As the familiar score began to play Dean felt himself start to drift. He turned onto his side, tucking his feet up behind him. He rotated his ankles a couple of times, trying to dispel the ache in his heels. He sleepily reminded himself to get a new pair of boots.

The characters had just seen the herd of dinosaurs for the first time when Dean felt a tentative pair of hands reach out, pulling at his feet until they were resting in Castiel’s lap.
Dean looked up from the movie and glanced at the other man, raising his eyebrows.

Cas looked down, sheepish. “You were popping your ankles like your feet hurt.” He shrugged. “Thought I’d help out.”

Dean shrugged. “Okay,” he said. “Do your thing.”

Castiel smiled. He pulled Dean’s socks off one by one and set to work on his narrow feet, starting with Dean’s toes and moving slowly towards his heel. His second toe was longer than his big toe.

After a few minutes, Dean relaxed into the unfamiliar touch. He wasn’t used to other people pampering him. It hadn’t happened in a long time and Cas’s warm hands were strong against his aching feet. He closed his eyes.

“That feels good,” he mumbled.

“I’ve always had a knack for pressure points,” Cas murmured. He pushed the hem of Dean’s jeans up, exposing his calf.

The air was thick with tension. Dean’s heart was racing as Castiel methodically pressed his fingers into his sensitive skin. Cas brushed through the soft hairs on his shin, drawing patterns against the goosebumps that had risen on Dean’s skin.

“Is this okay?” he asked quietly, looking down at his lap.

Dean cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah,” he said, wincing as his voice cracked.

Cas wrapped his hand around Dean’s ankle and Dean held his breath. Neither of them were watching the movie anymore. Dean closed his eyes and let himself just feel for a moment. It was such an innocent touch, but somehow it seemed so intimate.

“Have you ever dated another man?” Cas murmured, adding pressure to Dean’s calf muscle.

Dean bit back a groan, pressing his legs closer. Cas was really good at this. “That feels good,” he said. “And no, not really. I mean, like, I had crushes. I went on a few dates here or there, but then I joined the military. And then I met Lisa.” Dean shrugged. Cas nodded to himself. “What about you?”

“I married one.” Cas said and Dean’s eyes shot open.

“I thought you said you were gay?”

“I grew up in a very religious household,” he replied. “Amelia and I had known each other since we were children. We went to high school together,” Cas shrugged. “We were very close. It was… the logical choice given the situation I was in. We had a daughter. Claire. And I was… well I wasn’t happy, but I was content. Until I wasn’t. I was very young. And living in that backwards town, selling ad space for a Christian radio station I didn't even like to listen to, it stifled me. I love that little girl though. More than anything.”

He looked up at Dean, who’s brow was furrowed. “It didn’t work out between you and her?” Dean finally asked carefully. Cas didn't seem like the kind of guy to abandon his family, but it wasn’t like Dean had the whole story either.

“No,” Cas said. “Amelia… didn’t take it well when she found out I was gay.”
“What happened?” Dean asked, he sat up.

“She threw me out. Told me never to come back.” Cas bit his lip. “Then she convinced the courts I was an ‘unfit’ parent because of the possibility that my orientation would corrupt our little girl. The courts believed her.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen your daughter?” Dean asked, and there was an edge to his voice. Did he even fight to see her? None of this added up. Cas was amazing with his kids. He couldn’t imagine him just walking away from his own flesh and blood like that. But did he really even know anything about Cas aside from his suspicions? He knew what kind of rice he liked, and how often he bought onions. He knew that he was good at baseball. But he didn't know him. What if this was the real him? A guy who abandoned his kid? Is that really who he wanted around his kids? In his life?

“Must be going on twelve years now. Amelia forced me to sign away my parental rights so that her new husband could adopt her. She wouldn’t let me see her. Wouldn’t let me say goodbye.” Cas’s voice broke. “Claire probably doesn’t even remember me.” Cas stifled a cry. “My baby was taken from me, and there was nothing I could do to fight it.”

Cas felt a hand on his forearm.

“I’m sorry,” Dean said. He looked at Castiel. “I’m sorry, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want.”

Cas looked up and a small smile quirked up at the corner of his mouth. He wiped away the tears from his eyes. “So how about those Braves huh?” he said, and Dean burst out laughing. He glanced over at the screen.

“Oh this is my favorite part!” he said. He deftly pulled his feet from Cas’ grasp and leaned forward, focusing on the screen.

Cas turned his attention back to the television screen, where the T-Rex had just broken free from his pen.

“I like you, Dean.” Cas said, his heart beating frantically in his chest.

Dean looked over, a smile still on his face from the movie, his eyes brightened. “I like you too, Cas,” he replied. He leaned back until their shoulders were pressed against one another.

Neither of them could keep the giddy smiles off their face. Tentatively, Cas leaned his head against Dean’s shoulder, fitting into the crook of his neck like he always belonged there.
Cas glanced back over to the small family by the window only to catch Dean staring back at him. Dean didn't look away when Cas met his eyes. Instead, he maintained eye contact; his green eyes shone in the early afternoon light streaming through the wide open windows, and Cas felt heat pool in the his belly. He fought the urge to look away and stared back, the corner of his mouth curling up into a crooked smile.

Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter for you guys for all your patience as I reworked and rewrote this fic. Thanks so much for all the kudos and comments. They truly make my day! No real warnings for this fic. It's a fluff fest. Kisses! Lindsey

P.S. Special thanks to HerRosesNeverFall for the beta!

Chapter 18: Keep My Heart Slow

Chapter Track: Fallen Angel, Hostage Calm

July 4, 2014

Friday morning dawned clear and bright through the bay window in Dean’s living room, and Castiel jerked awake. The alarm on his watch was chirping far too loudly for eight in the morning.

His movement jostled Dean and he huffed, waving his hand and tucking his head further down into the soft cushion. Cas gently moved Dean’s feet from his lap and stood up, stretching.

Castiel didn’t remember falling asleep the night before but he groaned as he cracked his neck, relieving some of the tension in his sore shoulders. He’d slept with his head thrown back on the sofa cushion and his neck was sore.

*I’m getting old*, he thought, running a hand through his hair. Dean repositioned himself on the couch, tucking his hands so that they rested under his cheek and curling his knees up underneath himself. In the early morning light, the freckles on Dean’s nose stood out. Cas reached out, brushing his thumb across the other man’s cheeks.

It was a light, barely there touch, but Dean’s eyes snapped open like someone had struck him. He sat up, inhaling deeply, and Castiel snatched his thumb away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said softly.

“It’s alright. I needed to get up anyway.” Dean yawned and stretched. “You want some breakfast?” he asked.
Cas glanced at his watch. It was still early, and he didn't have to be at work until lunch. “Sure,” he replied.

Dean yawned again. “It’s been ages since the kids have had sleepovers on the same night. I’m not used to an empty house.” He stood up, cracking his neck. Padding into the kitchen, he asked, “Coffee?”

“Please,” Cas said.

“Will you get the bacon from the fridge?” Dean asked, adding four scoops of coffee grounds to the maker. Cas nodded.

They worked quietly together; Cas fried a pan of bacon while Dean toasted two bagels and cut up some peaches. Once the bacon was finished, Dean spread cream cheese over the bagels and added a couple slices of bacon to each half.

Cas fixed himself a plate and they sat down at the tiny kitchen table. Dean took his coffee black, as Cas added cream and sugar to his own mug. He usually didn't buy cream for himself, it was a luxury he couldn't regularly afford, but he preferred it this way. He took a drink and closed his eyes. It was delicious.

“You make very good coffee,” he said after taking another sip.

“You think?” Dean asked, taking a sip. “Usually people think its too strong when I make it at the store.”

“I like strong coffee,” Castiel replied. They lapsed into companionable silence as they ate. Cas had thought this would feel awkward.

When Cas had cleaned his plate, Dean picked it up and walked over to the sink. He started some dish water and placed the plates into the sink, then moved over to the carafe. Cas stood to help but Dean waved him off.

“I’ll clean up later.” he murmured. “You want some more coffee?” Cas nodded. Dean filled their cups and Dean motioned to to the porch. “Do you have to work today?” Dean asked, as they sat down on the porch swing.

“Yeah, Ellen’s got me on the lunch shift and then we’re closing up early for the fair and parade. I think Ellen and Ash are going to be running a concession stand at the fair.”

“Yeah, Ellen said something about that a few weeks ago.”

“What about you? D’you have to work at the shop?”

Dean shook his head. “No Charlie’s gonna stick around the store for me and I gotta go pick up Ben and Emma.” He paused. “Will I—um” he cleared his throat. “Will I see you later?”

Cas tapped his chin, pretending to consider the offer. “Do you want to see me later?”

Dean met his gaze, and for a moment Cas forgot to breathe. “Yes,” Dean replied. They broke eye contact and Cas took a shaky breath.

“I promised the kids I’d play catch with them after my lunch shift. If—if that’s alright with you of course,” Cas hastened to add.
Dean smiled widely. “Of course! It’ll give me a chance to clean up the car before the parade. What time do you get off?” he asked.

“I told the kids I’d meet them at the store at two and we’d all walk over to the park and then I’d drop them off at four for the big show.”

Dean nodded. “That sounds fine,” he said. Then he brightened. “Hey! Do you wanna ride with us in the car? Come to the fair with us after?”


Dean smirked. “Do you have a phone number I can reach you at?” he asked and Cas hesitated. He didn't like to give his number out.

“Um,” he hedged, biting his lip.

“It’s just in case there’s an emergency while you guys are playing ball.”

“…Sure,” he finally said and he pulled out his cell phone. Cas scrolled through his contacts until he found the number Dean had programmed into it weeks ago and opened up a new message.

“I sent you a text,” he replied and Dean nodded. “Can I ask you something?”

Their eyes met. “Sure.”

“Why did you program your number into my phone last month?” Cas asked, picking nervously at a fingernail.

“I hoped you’d call,” Dean said. He tentatively reached out, taking Cas’ hand. Cas glanced up from their joined hands to meet his gaze. The gesture was so familiar, the act of taking another’s hand that for a moment, Castiel forgot where he was, who he was with. He let instinct take over. Cas licked his lips, leaning forward.

What the hell am I doing? he thought. Dean’s eyes had slipped shut and he leaned closer. Their lips were a breath apart when a seagull landed on the porch railing, squawking loudly. Both of them jumped apart. Dean’s cheeks were tinted red and he brushed a hand over the back of his neck, letting out a short breath.

“I should probably go,” Cas said, glancing down at his watch. He was due at work in almost two hours and he needed to get home and change clothes.

“Do you want a ride?” Dean asked. “I gotta go pick up the kids anyway.”

“No thanks,” Cas said. “I need to get some exercise in anyway.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he replied. Cas stood up from the swing. He brushed a hand through his hair and took a step forward. He leaned down and pressed his hand to the top of Dean’s shoulder. The warmth of Cas’ hand seeped through the fabric of Dean’s t-shirt.

Dean felt the easy pressure like a brand seared upon his skin.

“I’ll see you later, Dean.”

“Sure uh—sure thing Cas,” Dean said. Castiel walked away, making a left turn at the end of Dean’s
driveway. Dean watched Cas leave, half wanting to catch up to him and kiss him silly, half wanting to run away from the feelings swirling in the pit of his stomach.

Dean wasn’t ready for this. He wasn’t ready to love someone else. How could he even consider it? And what did he really know about this guy anyway?

_You trust him_, he thought. _He won’t hurt you._

But what if he does though? What if he leaves? What if Dean falls in love with him and he loses Cas? Like he lost Lisa? Dean shook his head and picked up Cas’ empty coffee mug. He distracted himself by washing the dishes, setting them to dry on the wooden rack by the sink.

Dean took a quick shower and dressed then picked up his old leather duffle bag, the one he’d had for practically his entire life. He packed up the Fourth of July shirts Jess had made for Emma and Ben because they wouldn’t have time to come back home that afternoon after baseball with Cas and added a shirt for himself as well. He put the change of clothes in the back of the Impala and then drove Benny’s truck back over to Magnolia Street.

Andrea was braiding Margot’s hair into intricate double French braids and Dean reminded himself to get a couple lessons from her as he walked up the path to the porch. Emma’s hair was getting long and if she continued with soccer he’d need to know how to tie it back so it didn’t get into her eyes on the field.

Andrea looked up as he approached and smiled “Hey there!” she yelled as she finished off the last tie to Margot’s braid.

“Hey,” Dean said. tossing Andrea the keys. “Where’re my little monsters?” he asked and she pointed to the living room. Dean pressed a kiss on top of Margot’s head and rested his fingers into Andi’s shoulder. “Were they good?” he asked.

“They were little angels.” Andi replied, like she always did.

Dean waved at Benny, who was busy at the stove making pancakes. Ben, Emma, Remi and Arsen were sprawled out on what looked like the remnants of a blanket fort in the living room. Morning cartoons were playing softly, but only Emma was watching them. The other three were cuddled together under a black and white quilt, fast asleep.

“Hey Monster,” Dean said, sitting down next to his daughter on the couch. He kissed her shoulder “What’s on?”

“Road Runner,” she replied sleepily, curling up next to him. Dean ran a hand through her curly hair.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked and he felt her nod against his chest. Benny rounded the corner, a plate of pancakes in one hand and a spatula in the other.

“You want somethin’ to eat, brother?” he asked, smiling softly at Dean cuddled up with Emma.

“Nah man I had some breakfast at the house.”

Benny raised an eyebrow.

“Brother, in all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never turned down my homemade buttermilk pancakes. Not once.”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno what to tell you man. I made breakfast at home.”
“You knew you were comin’ over and you made yourself breakfast. Then you ate it, alone? When you love my food.” Benny laughed, “Hell, sometimes I suspect you love my food more than you love me, Chief. But you went an’ ate at home when you knew you’d be coming over?” Benny’s eyes narrowed.

“I was craving a bagel, man. I don’t know.” Dean glanced down at Emma, whose eyes had slipped shut, her fingers clenched in his t-shirt.

A look of understanding dawned across Benny’s face. “Oh,” he replied. “You weren’t—”

“Shut up,” Dean said with a pointed glare, gesturing towards Emma, and Benny pursed his lips together, but then he smiled knowingly. “I mean it, Benny.” Dean whispered. “Drop it.”

Benny held up his free hand in a gesture of surrender. “Wasn’t saying nothin’”

“Yeah, well you were thinkin’ it awful loud.”

Benny smiled. “Breakfast is almost ready, can you rouse the little ones?” he asked and disappeared back into the kitchen, leaving Dean to wake the children.

Dean ended up eating Emma’s leftover pancakes anyway. Benny invited the kids to play a game of football with them and they spent the morning in the back yard, Winchesters vs Lafittes.

By the time Ben and Emma were dressed and ready to go, it was almost lunch time. They rode their bikes home. Then he left the kids to play in the backyard while he crossed the street to check on things at the store.

Charlie was working the counter while Bobby manned the grill. They both waved as he entered and went back to their customers. He spent a few minutes in the office, checking to make sure there was enough petty cash for the shipment of wine he was expecting the following day and writing a bonus check for Bobby and Charlie as a thank you for working the holiday for him.

He put the checks into an envelope, scrawling ‘Thank you!’ onto it and set them into their drawers in an old fashioned cabinet that used to hold a library’s card catalog. Dean and Lisa had found it for a steal at a flea market in Wilmington and had repurposed it. Dean now used it as cubbies for his employees, their names scrawled in block letters on the yellowed parchment tabs.

He waved as he left and headed back across the street to his house, whistling as he went.

Dean checked his watch. Cas was meant to get off work in an hour and a half, and he was starting to get hungry again. But the early afternoon heat was thick and the air was heavy. Dean really didn't want to cook, but he knew the kids would be getting hungry soon.

Then he had a brilliant idea.

Ben was playing with army men in his room when Dean knocked lightly on his door.

“Hey bud, what d’you say we go to The Roadhouse for lunch?”

Ben glanced up at Dean. “Sure,” he replied.

"Go get Sissy and we’ll go bother JoJo and Cas at work, yeah?”

Ben smiled and brushed passed his dad. Within ten minutes, Ben and Emma had collected their baseball gear and they all piled into the Impala, heading towards the pier. The Roadhouse was
packed, but Ellen had seen Dean from the lobby and waved them over to the last available table. She hugged the children and then Dean and they all sat down.

“I’ll have someone come get your drink order,” she said, pressing her hand to Dean’s shoulder. “It’s good to see you in here again,” she whispered quietly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

Dean tried not to press into her touch. He loved Ellen, but sometimes he wasn’t sure what to do with the maternal affection she expressed towards him. It wasn’t something he was used to—and it was something he’d desperately missed growing up. When she did things like absentmindedly kissing his temple or brushing her fingers along his cheek, it stirred something deep with him, like a half-remembered lullaby hummed to him as he fell asleep.

They hadn’t come to The Roadhouse in almost a year and a half, partly because things were sometimes still awkward between him and Jo after the night neither of them talked about, and also because it had been Lisa’s favorite restaurant.

Automatically, as he did every time he visited the place, his eyes drifted over to a picture hanging up on the wall, lost among the hundreds of other 4x6 shots of happy families eating at the restaurant. It was a picture of Dean, Lisa, Sam and Jess. Sam was holding Jess’ hand towards the camera, a small ring on her left hand. Dean and Lisa were facing one another, unaware that Jo had snapped off the picture. Her eyes were bright and her head thrown back in laughter. Dean was staring at her in wonder, one hand placed gently on the swell of her stomach. Ben had started kicking right as Sam and Jess announced their engagement, and it had been the first time Dean had ever felt it.

He reached out and pressed his hand to the back of his son’s head for just a moment, remembering the pure unadulterated joy that had coursed through him as he realized that the little nudge against his hand was his child.

“Dad!” Ben whined, pulling his head away from Dean’s fingers; he looked so much like his mother when his nose crinkled up in annoyance.

Ignoring the pang in his heart, Dean smiled and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the top of Ben’s head, and then Emma’s, who was busy drawing swirls on the paper tablecloth with a bright red crayon.

“What?” Dean asked as Ben shied away from the affection. “I love you guys,” he murmured softly. He’d promised himself to always make sure his children knew how much he loved them. God forbid something happen to him and they never knew.

Just then, Castiel sidled up to their table. He was glancing down at his order tablet and hadn’t noticed who was sitting at his table until Emma exclaimed “Mr. Cas!”

He looked up then and smiled. “Well hello there,” he said.

“Are you still gonna come play baseball with us after lunch?” she asked, putting her crayon aside.

Cas glanced at his watch. He’d get getting off work in an hour. “Of course,” he said. He glanced up at Dean. “If you want, after lunch, you can leave them here and go take care of your errands.”

Dean nodded. “I actually already brought their baseball stuff if that’s okay? I figured we’d be finishing up right around the time your shift ends.”

Cas nodded and smiled. “So what can a get you all to drink?” he asked.

“I want a Shirley Temple, with extra cherries.” Emma chimed in.
“Me too!” Ben said.

Dean glanced back up at Cas, who was writing down their drink order. “Make that three,” he said and Cas smirked.

“Hittin’ the hard stuff early?” he teased and Dean shrugged.

“What can I say? I have a soft spot for cherries,” he replied, winking. Surreptitiously he leaned back into his chair, until his wrist brushed against Cas’ forearm.

Cas blushed. “I’ll be r-right back with your drinks,” he stammered. He hurried away and put the order in at the bar, willing his rapidly beating heart to slow down.

For Christ’s sake, he’d woken up cuddling with the guy that morning and a simple touch and a wink in a crowded restaurant was making him panic? But maybe it was because it was so public. He had been very careful to maintain a bit of distance with everyone since arriving in Southport, but Dean always seemed to break through his defenses.

Cas glanced back over to the small family by the window only to catch Dean staring back at him. Dean didn't look away when Cas met his eyes. Instead, he maintained eye contact; his green eyes were bright in the early afternoon light streaming through the wide open windows, and Cas felt heat pool in the his belly. He fought the urge to look away and stared back, the corner of his mouth curling up into a crooked smile.

“Cas!” Castiel jumped at Jo’s loud voice behind him. He turned around just as Dean smirked and turned back to his kids.

“Yes?” he asked.

Jo held up the tray of Shirley Temples. “Drink order for Table 8 is ready. I’ve been saying your name for like a minute and a half.”

Cas shook his head. “Sorry,” he said, taking the drinks, but Jo held onto the tray. Jo glanced over at the table where Dean was playing spitball with his son, blowing balled up straw wrappers at Ben’s wild curls.

Her brow furrowed. “Do you know the Winchesters well?” Cas shrugged.

“Well enough, I guess.”

Jo nodded slowly. “He’s a good guy, and those kids are family to me,” she said after a long pause. “I wouldn’t want to see any of them hurt.”

Cas met her gaze. “I don’t intend to hurt anyone,” he replied, his voice even. He maintained eye contact until she nodded and finally let go of the drinks.

“Good,” she said and Cas left the bar.

Cas exhaled a shaky breath as he weaved through the crowded tables.

“You all ready to order?” he asked, setting the drinks down. He handed Emma her Shirley Temple first, then Ben’s. But when he handed over Dean’s, Dean wrapped his hand around Cas’ as he took the glass, his finger brushing lightly along the top of Cas’ knuckles.

He pulled away as if electrified, but Dean just smirked.
“I think we’re ready,” Dean replied. He folded up the menus and handed them to Castiel. “Emma wants the chicken strips. Ben wants the grilled cheese, and I’ll have the cheese—wait—who’s cooking?” Dean asked.

“Andy,” Cas replied. Dean pursed his lips.

“Okay, then Emma wants chili cheese fries, Ben wants the reuben and I want buffalo wings. And we all want a slice of the pie.” Cas raised an eyebrow at him. “What?” Dean asked. “We have it down to a science. If Aaron’s cooking, Emma gets the chicken strips, Ben grilled cheese and I get the burger. If Casey’s cooking, we all get the pulled pork with cole slaw. But Andy’s cooking so…” Dean trailed off.

 “…so you order the chili cheese fries for Miss Emma, the reuben for Ben and buffalo wings for you?” Cas finished and Dean held up his hands, shrugging.

“Exactly.”

Cas glanced down at his order. “You want bone-in or boneless?” he asked.

“Bone-in, of course,” Dean replied, smirking.

It took him a moment, but when it clicked Cas shook his head, biting back a smile. *Walked right into that one,* he thought.

“I’ll have it right out for you. Our pies today are pecan, chocolate pudding, and coconut creme.”

“One of each then,” Dean said.

Dean handed Cas the folded menus and Cas walked away, warmth rising from he pit of his stomach.

“You look downright cheerful,” Andy remarked as Cas approached the kitchen window. He pushed his hair back from his forehead with his forearm, scrutinizing Castiel’s wide smile.

Castiel shrugged. “I’m having a good day. Can you put a rush on this order for me?”

Andy took the ticket from Cas and smiled. “No problem, man.”

“Thanks,” he replied. While he waited, Cas made rounds at his other tables.

A little girl with corn yellow hair spilled fruit punch all down the front of her flag patterned dress. Cas helped her clean up the mess and brought her a new drink. Then he manned the host station for a few minutes while Lenore took a smoke break.

Castiel tried to be attentive to all his customers, but he couldn't help his eyes from flickering over to the Winchesters every couple of minutes. Dean and Ben had stopped throwing spit balls at one another and were now coloring on the paper tablecloth with Emma.

By the time Lenore returned, smelling faintly of menthol cigarettes, Andy called Cas’ order up. He held the tray over his head and weaved through the crowds. As he approached, Emma glanced up with a wide smile.

“Food’s here!” she said, and Dean and Ben looked up too.

“Here we go,” Cas said, “One chili-cheese fry for Emma, the reuben for Ben,” he paused, placing
Cas met his gaze with a smirk and it was Dean’s turn to blush. There was heat behind the comment and it caught Dean by surprise.

“M-my favorite,” Dean said, his voice catching. He cleared his throat, cursing his inability to come up with quick, well-timed comebacks.

“If you need anything else, just let me know,” Cas said in reply. Dean nodded. The children hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary with their exchange; both of them engrossed with their meal.

Castiel left them and made another round at his tables. The family with the little girl, whose dress was now stained beyond repair, asked for their check.

They had left him a large tip, over 20%, and pleasure rippled through him as he pocketed the cash. Tips had been good lately. After bussing the table he grabbed a pitcher of water and headed over to Dean’s table.

“You doing okay?” he asked, refilling their water glasses. “Ready for dessert?”

“You bet. We’re always ready for pie,” Dean replied, handing him Ben’s glass so Cas didn’t have to reach over the table for it. Very deliberately, Dean’s fingers brushed against Cas’ when he took it back.

“I’ll have that right out for you,” Castiel fought to keep his voice steady. The pies were housed in a vintage cooler at the bar and he filled their order, lingering in the open door for a moment, the cool air feeling like heaven against his flushed face.

As he walked over to their table, he wondered who would eat each piece. Cas placed the pies down and gathered their empty plates, putting them onto the tray. To his surprise, they didn’t each take a piece of pie. Rather, they placed the plates in the middle of the table and shared, all of them trying every piece. It stirred something deep within him that he couldn’t put his finger on.

Emma looked up at him. “Mr. Cas, I’m so excited to play baseball with you,” she said through a mouthful of pecan pie. Cas crouched down to her level.

“I already have my glove ready to go,” he said and he reached out with a napkin, wiping away a spare bit of chocolate pudding from her cheek. “After you’re done eating and I get off work we can walk down to the park.”

Dean smiled. “What do you say to Cas for taking time out of his afternoon off to play with you guys?” he asked.

“Thank you,” they chorused.

Cas waved them off. “I’m happy to do it,” he said. “Let me know when you’re ready for your check.”

Dean nodded and took a bite of coconut cream pie. His eyes slipped shut in bliss and Castiel felt his cheeks heat. No one should be allowed to be that attractive, he thought. He quickly looked away when Dean’s eyes opened again, and left them to their dessert. Cas felt ridiculous as he made his way back to the waitress station to ring them out.

“You headed out?” Ellen asked, coming up behind him and making him jump.
“Uh, yeah. Just finishing up my last couple of tables.”

“What are you doing today?”

Cas printed off the ticket. “I um, I’m going to play baseball with Dean Winchester’s kids while he gets the car ready for the parade. And then they invited me to join them.”

Ellen smiled. She placed her hand over his and he stilled. “I’m so glad to see you’re making friends Castiel.”

“Thank you, Ellen,” he said. She pressed him into a one armed hug and kissed his temple. He leaned into the gentle touch.

“You can go on home. I’ll finish up your tables.”

Cas nodded. “Thanks again.”

“Oh honey, don’t mention it. I’ll put your tips in the safe and you can pick them up Sunday.”

He nodded and she walked away. Cas glanced over at Dean’s table. They were just finishing up their pies and Cas headed over. He placed the folder in front of Dean with a smile.

“You guys ready to go?”

“I thought you didn’t get off for a little while?” Dean asked as he opened the folder glancing briefly at the bill.

“Ellen let me go early,” Cas said. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Take your time.”

He walked away again, making his way to the back office. Castiel removed his apron and grabbed the duffle bag he’d brought along. Cas punched his time card and headed back out to their table.

He set his duffle bag next to the one Dean brought for the kids and picked up the folder and the pie plates.

“I’ll be right back.” he murmured and Dean nodded.

“You keep the rest,” he replied.

Cas smiled. “Thanks.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Dean winked discretely at him.

Cas didn’t look at the folder until he was at the register. When he did, his jaw dropped. Inside was a hundred dollar bill for a thirty dollar meal. He frowned, and made change, making his way back to the table.

He waved goodbye to Ellen and Jo and they waved back. “I’ll see you Sunday,” he said. They both nodded, meeting one another’s gaze pointedly. “You guys ready?” he said to the children.

“Yeah!” they both said. Cas met Dean’s gaze “Can I talk to you for a second?” he asked.

“Sure,” Dean said, his eyes questioning. “Kids, why don't you go bother Jo and Ellen for some of that taffy you’re always begging me for.” The kids left and Cas crossed his arms.

He set the folder down in front of Dean. “What’s this?” he asked, indicating the seventy dollar tip.
Dean shrugged. “I had excellent service.”

“This is too much Dean,” Cas said, pushing the folder back to Dean. “I can’t take that.”

“Please, Cas, take the tip.”

“That’s not a tip Dean! A tip is a few bucks, not over twice the price of the meal. Dean, please, I would feel bad taking this much money.”

Dean’s jaw set in a stubborn line. “Well, I’m not taking it back. Think of it as a thank you for babysitting the kids this afternoon.”

Cas shook his head. “I didn’t agree to do it to get paid.”

“I know that, but I appreciate it all the same.”

“Still. That’s too much.”

Dean ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not taking that money back Cas. If you really don’t want to keep it, spend it on the kids today or something but—” Dean stopped abruptly as the children walked back over to the table, each of them holding a small bag of saltwater taffy that Ellen is famous for. He pushed the folder back over to Cas and stood up to greet them. “Are you guy’s ready for some baseball?” he asked. He reached down and picked up both duffle bags, handing one to Cas and the other to Ben.

“I’ll pick you guys up at the park at four. Do you want to change clothes before the parade?” Dean asked Cas.

Cas nodded. He picked up the folder and put the tip in his pocket along with the rest of his tips for the day. “I brought a change of clothes.”

“Sounds good,” he replied. Dean crouched down and kissed both of his children on the forehead, giving them each a hug. “I’ll see you guys later,” he said.

When he stood up again, there was an awkward pause before Cas gave a small wave. “I’ll see you at four,” Cas finally said, careful not to touch Dean.

Dean’s brow furrowed but he nodded and gave a half-hearted smile. Dean watched them leave on foot, heading down the boardwalk to the park, a few blocks away, then made his way to the car. He drove down to the only car wash in town, a gaudy monstrosity attached to the truck stop right on the outskirts of Southport, where he meticulously washed the car.

He had a couple of hours to kill before he needed to pick Cas and the kids up from the park and Dean didn’t necessarily want to be alone. For the first time in a long while, instead of polishing the chrome on the Impala, he’d much rather be helping Emma with ground balls, or teaching Ben catcher’s signals. He’d rather be watching Castiel play ball with his children.

Dean sat back on his heels, frowning as the rag he was using to dry the fender fell to the ground. Usually, working on the car was his time to unwind from the constantly moving nature of his life as a single parent.

Before Lisa had gotten sick, they had tossed around the idea of having a third child. Lisa had been hesitant, saying that they’d be outnumbered, going from man-to-man to zone defense. Dean had been confident that Team Winchester could handle anything that was thrown at them, but now that she was gone, he was beginning to understand what Lisa meant. Dean was constantly running zone
defense, with no partner to back him up. He never had enough time to finish one crisis before needing to deal with the next.

Dean finished drying the car, careful not to leave any fingerprints or smudges, and then headed to the print shop, where he picked up the banner Charlie had insisted, despite his protests, he make for the parade, with the store’s logo printed neatly on thick canvas.

He paid Frank Devereaux for the sign and rolled it up, heading back to the car where Dean checked his watch. It was only a little after three. Dean didn’t know what to do with the rest of his afternoon; cleaning the car had taken much less time than normal. Or maybe, a small voice in the back of his head said, you didn't focus enough, didn't complete the task with as much of a discerning eye as you normally did. Dad didn't give you the car for you to treat her like shit.

He frowned and did a once over on the body of the car. It was clean. There were no signs or rust or areas that needed touching up. Dean had changed the oil last month. There was nothing more that needed to be done besides hanging up the sign, and he refused to do that until the parade started.

He found himself with nothing to do for the next hour. Dean didn't have anything to do at the house that would occupy him, and he already had his change of clothes for the parade. Dean headed over to the small fireworks tent that was erected in the field by Frank’s shop and picked up some poppers and sparklers for the kids then went back to the car.

Dean debated for only a moment before he turned on the ignition, pulling out of the parking lot and heading to the baseball park. He’d rather be with his family than alone. Dean pulled up into the parking lot of the ballpark and the familiar sound of the Impala’s engine caught Ben’s attention; Dean watched as he missed the grounder that Castiel pitched him.

From a distance, Dean heard him holler “Dad!” before Ben removed his mask, running over. Emma was close on his heels. Dean watched Cas glance down at his watch and frown. He got out of the car in time to grab his kids up in a bear hug. He looked up as Cas stood in front of him.

“You’re early,” Cas said, his voice clipped, and Dean couldn't help but notice the way his lips pressed into a thin line. Cas crossed his arms, taking a step back.

“I finished up the car, thought I’d come play some baseball. Hey kids, can I talk to Cas for a minute?”

Ben glanced from his dad to Cas and slowly nodded. “Come on, Sissy,” he said.

“What’s going on Cas?” Dean asked as soon as his children were out of earshot. “Things have been weird since lunch.”

Castiel bit his lip. “Why were you early Dean?”

Dean’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“You were supposed to be here at four.”

“Cas, I finished the car early and I missed my kids.” Dean hesitated. “I missed you.”

Cas’ eyes narrowed. “Then what was up with the tip?”

Dean looked up at the sky, trying hard not to roll his eyes. “Look, Cas, if you’re really uncomfortable about the tip, I’m sorry. I’ll take it back. I just wanted it to be a nice gesture,” he said.
Immediately, Castiel pulled the money out of his pocket and held it out. Dean didn't take it.

“It felt like a bribe, Dean.” Cas said. “Or a handout. And I… I need you to understand that I can take care of myself. I don’t… I don't need your money, Dean. Your company is enough.”

“Oh, Cas, I didn’t mean—”

“—but that’s how it felt,” Cas finished for him. “It felt like you were…buying me, or something.”

There was a tense pause in which Cas met Dean’s wide gaze.

Finally Dean spoke. “I’m sorry Cas.”

Cas nodded slowly. “So you… weren’t checking up on me?”

“What? No. I just didn't want to be alone. I… I’m not very good at being alone.” Dean’s tone shifted to one that was much more serious and Cas got the sense that he wasn't just talking about an afternoon off.

“I believe you,” Cas said.

“So…we good?” Dean asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Just… no more freebies okay?”

Dean held up four fingers. “Scout’s honor,” he said.

Cas couldn't help but smile, holding up the correct gesture. “It’s three fingers, Dean.”

Dean’s nose wrinkled, and he waved his arm. “You know what I mean,” he replied. “Now, how about you show me that slider you were bragging about last week?” Dean smiled easily; his green eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

Cas tentatively smiled in return, putting the money back into his pocket. “It’s not that hard Dean. Just gotta know when to break the ball.”

Hesitantly Dean put his arm around Cas’ shoulder, his hand splaying out over the top of Cas’ arm. “Are you sure we’re okay Castiel?”

“Yeah Dean. We’re fine.”

“Then batter up, Cas.”

By the time four o’clock rolled around, they were all sweaty and ready for the parade. Dean rounded up the batting equipment while Cas herded Ben and Emma into the car.

“Where is the parade starting?” Cas asked when Dean pulled the car out of the lot.

“At the pier, but I promised my brother that we’d meet them at town hall so he could see the kids’ outfits. Jess wants to get a family picture.”

Much of downtown was closed for the parade, but Dean navigated the back streets with ease, pulling up at the parade loading zone near the pier with plenty of time for Cas to shepherd the children into the family bathroom of Town Hall to change their clothes while Dean called his brother. Cas took the opportunity to change out of his Roadhouse uniform as well, stepping into one of the stalls to put on the nicest pair of jeans he owned and a dark blue t-shirt.
Ben and Emma were wearing white t-shirts with a tie-dye red, white, and blue flag, hand made by Jess, and dark blue jean shorts. Dean had quickly swapped his t-shirt for a red one while Ben and Emma changed clothes. When they all emerged, Castiel laughed.

“We coordinate,” he said and Dean glanced down at his shirt.

“So we do.”

Jess held up her camera, handing MJ off to Sam so she could take the picture.

“Alright, Ben, Emma, Auntie wants to take a picture. Go stand with your dad. You too Cas!” she said when Castiel moved out of the way so Dean’s family could gather around to take a photo. Dean met Cas’ gaze and smiled, waving him over.

“Come on Cas!” he said, a secret smile quirking the corner of his mouth. Castiel hesitantly moved to join the small family. He tried not to stiffen when Dean wrapped his arm around his shoulder, pressing his hand to the top of his arm.

Jessica took the picture, then Castiel insisted that he take one of the whole family, then they all headed out to the parking lot. After a few minutes, Sam and Jess hugged the children goodbye, and Dean made plans to babysit MJ for a couple days the following week, then Sam and Jess made their way to the carnival to get a caricature portrait done.

Castiel held out the children’s duffle bag and Dean took it. They walked down to the pier and out to the car, where Dean hung the sign across the passenger side of the Impala. He put the duffle bag in the trunk and helped the kids into the back seat.

Cas handed them each a flag and Dean pulled into the parade formation, right behind a group of rough looking bikers wearing red white and blue flower crowns on top of their helmets. Ben and Emma stuck their flags out of the window, waving at the parade goers. Cas watched the crowd as they drove slowly through the streets of Southport. It seemed like the whole town had turned up for the parade.

Street vendors were stationed on the sidewalks of downtown, and Cas could smell popcorn and sizzling meat in the air, along with funnel cakes. He took a deep breath, taking it all in, trying to ignore his rumbling stomach.

It didn’t take long to make it through the parade route, but by the time they parked the Impala once they got back to the loading zone, the kids were complaining of being hungry. So they made their way to the concession stands on High Street. Cas held Ben’s hand as they walked, while Dean had put Emma on his shoulders. They navigated through the throngs of people until Cas saw the Roadhouse sign on a food truck up ahead. The line was long, but Dean played “I spy” to distract the kids. By the time it was Cas’ second turn to spy they had made it to the front of the line.

Ellen came up to the window of the food truck, her bangs were plastered to her forehead and she tried to blow them away from her sticky skin. It was ridiculously hot outside, and Cas could only imagine how warm the inside of the food truck must be.

“Hey guys,” Ellen greeted them. Ash waved from the grill with his spatula.

“Did you see us in the parade?” Emma asked from Dean’s shoulders. She was almost eye level with Ellen in the truck.

Ellen smiled, reaching her hand out and brushing her fingers across Emma’s curls. “I sure did baby girl. You did so well waving your flag!”
Emma smiled sheepishly and pressed her cheek to the top of Dean’s head.

They ordered their food. Dean protested when Ellen refused to take any money from him and inwardly, Cas felt a sort of vindication. Ellen was immune to Dean’s charms apparently, and it was nice to see that at least someone could resist his puppy dog eyes.

Cas held onto the hamburgers while Dean carried the drinks.

They made their way over to a picnic table set up in the movie theatre parking lot and divvied out the food. Emma and Ben wolfed down their supper. The afternoon of baseball and parade going had given them a monstrous appetite. Cas savored his hamburger. It was the first one he’d had in a long time, and this one was cooked to perfection.

For the most part they ate in silence. Every once in a while Ben complained because Emma was mimicking him, as she nearly always did when they ate. It drove Ben crazy when Emma copied him. Dean had been unbelievably patient with them, diffusing the situation and getting them all to laugh again even though it was clear that Ben and Emma were getting cranky.

When they were finished, Dean gathered up their trash and threw it away while Cas held out the hand sanitizer he always carried in his pocket, wiping their hands before they stained their shirts.

Ben wanted to ride the Ferris wheel and they headed in the direction of the carnival rides.

The heat of the evening was oppressive.

Dean bought armbands for the kids that allowed them to ride all the rides an unlimited amount of times.

While he waited in line for the armbands, Cas took the kids over to one of the booths, letting them each get a full face painting with the tip money Dean had given him. By the time Dean joined them at the booth, Ben and Emma’s face paintings were almost done. Cas leaned up against the booth while the lady set their paint. He stiffened when Dean sidled up next to Cas, resting his hand gently in the middle of Cas’ back.

Dean leaned into his touch. “Is this alright?” he whispered in Castiel’s ear. Cas shivered and nodded.

Dean moved his hand lower and Castiel sucked in a breath. Dean’s cheek was inches from his own as they watched the teenage girl in a 4H club t-shirt finish up Ben’s face.

The spell of the moment was broken when Emma bounded up to them, her nose now painted like a tiger’s, with whiskers painting both cheeks.

Dean and Castiel moved apart. Ben approached them, his face now that of a lion’s.

“You guy’s ready for some rides?” Dean asked and they both shouted in excitement.

Dean put the armband on Ben while Cas slipped one onto Emma’s tiny wrist. Dean handed Cas a handful of tickets as well.

Emma grabbed both Dean and Cas’ hand, standing between them as they walked through the carnival. A country band hand just started playing on a small stage erected near the beer garden, and the smell of caramel apples and funnel cakes in a booth near the Ferris wheel had both of them begging for dessert.
Cas bought them each a caramel apple, ignoring Dean’s protest when he pulled out his wallet.

He also got himself and Dean a frozen cherry lemonade and they all ate their treats quietly as they walked through the loud hustle and bustle of the carnival. The Ferris wheel had a ridiculously long line, and as they waited, Dean threw away the remnants of their dessert.

When he retuned to the line, Dean discreetly slid his hand into Castiel’s. Cas squeezed it for a moment before letting go, noticing the hateful glare a woman waiting by the Ferris wheel fence had shot them.

Dean had quirked an eyebrow at Cas, as he hadn't seen the woman. Cas just shook his head, leaning closer to Dean.

“We have an audience,” he whispered, nodding over Dean’s shoulder at the woman. Slowly, Dean turned around, meeting the woman’s gaze.

He scoffed. “I don’t care,” he murmured when he turned back to Cas. The truth in Dean’s eyes astonished Castiel.

“At all?” Cas asked.

Dean deliberately took Cas’ hand again. “When I was younger, it used to bother me, but now?” Dean said, shrugging. “Life’s too short for that shit, Cas.”

“Daddy!” Emma’s voice boomed between them. “You owe a quarter to the swear jar!”

Dean squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, having forgotten there were young ears present. “Sorry, Monster,” he said. He scooped her up into his arms and kissed her temple. Emma’s hands rested on his shoulder as he held her, balancing her weight on his hip.

His heart beating wildly in his chest, Cas reached out, lacing his fingers with Dean’s. Cas barely caught the Dean’s wide smile before Dean glanced away, at Ben.

Ben was staring down at their clasped hands with an expression on his face that Dean couldn't decipher. Ben’s gaze flickered up to his dad’s face for a moment before he deliberately turned around, facing the line for the ride.

They were up next, and they climbed into the four person cart, Ben and Dean sitting in one seat and Cas and Emma in the other.

As it moved slowly up one spot for the next patrons to climb aboard, Cas felt Emma shift closer to him, wrapping her skinny arms around his waist.

“You alright Honeybee?” Cas asked as the Ferris Wheel began to rotate around and around. Her grip tightened on his waist.

“I… I’m scared Cas,” she whispered.

“Of the ride?” he asked? She nodded.

“Don’t tell Daddy,” she looked up. Her bright blue eyes were wide with fear. The ride came to a stop when they were at the very top, giving them a panoramic view of the town.

Cas glanced over at Dean who was horsing around with Ben, trying to make the cart swing in the air.
“I always liked being high up,” Cas said into her ear. “It always felt like flying.” Castiel pulled the statue of Castiel out of his pocket. “But sometimes I get scared too.” He held the statue out to Emma and she took it from him.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“It’s the angel Castiel.”

“Were you named after him?”

“I was, Claire-bear,” he replied and then froze. This little girl wasn’t Claire. It was Emma. Emma. This was not his daughter. It was Dean’s daughter.

“Who’s Claire-bear?” she asked, innocent and curious.

Cas bit his lip. “I’m sorry, Emma. You just reminded me of a little girl I used to know,” he said. He searched her face for a moment. He saw the similarities between Emma and Claire and sadness clawed at him from the pit of his stomach scraping its way to the tips of his fingers. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a faded photograph of his daughter, taken a few months before Amelia kicked him out.

He showed her the picture. “This is Claire,” he said. “My daughter.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You have a daughter?” she asked loudly and her shrill voice caught Ben’s attention. He looked over at Emma and Cas.

“How old is she?” he asked, moving to Cas’ side of the cart to get a closer look at the picture.

Dean watched his children as Cas moved over, allowing Ben to sit down. “She’ll be seventeen soon,” Castiel replied.

“Why doesn’t she live with you Mr. Cas?” Emma asked.

Castiel put the picture back in his wallet. “She lives with her mommy,” he said simply.

“Are you divorced?” Ben asked and Cas stiffened.

He wasn’t divorced. He may not be married to Amelia anymore, but he wasn’t currently divorced. Cas didn’t want to lie to them. Sure, almost everything he said to this family was a lie, but lies of omission were different from outright lies, right? He tiptoed around the question. “Amelia and I aren’t married anymore.”

Ben nodded, seeming to accept this answer. “Katie’s parents are divorced,” he said. He handed the statue that his sister had given him back to Castiel and went to sit with his dad. Dean ruffled his hair.

The ride moved on. As it spun around, the hot wind hitting their faces, Cas examined the cart they were riding in. It looked like it was held together with chicken wire and bobby pins and he felt a bit of unease, even though Dean had insisted that the ride had passed inspection earlier that morning. Instead of focusing on whether or not the Ferris wheel was dangerous, Cas occupied himself by staring at the crowds below him.

The streets were filled with people. It appeared that everyone in Southport had come to the fair that evening, but that only made sense. Southport was a small town, and an event like the Fourth of July parade and fair was sure to be one of the highlights of the year.
The Ferris wheel stopped again, and some of the passengers exited while others climbed on. Cas found himself examining people more closely. He recognized a few of the people in line as regulars at The Roadhouse and he could see Benny and his family by the beer garden. Cas’ eyes began to scan the crowd then, traveling from group to group, searching for a familiar face.

Suddenly, he froze. Bart. He was searching for Bart. He hadn’t done this in weeks, hadn't searched for his husband this way in so long that he hadn’t recognized his actions for what they were at first.

Cas deliberately turned his gaze away from the crowds then, trying desperately to calm down. Bart wasn’t here. He was safe. Ben was looking out at the fair below them while Emma played with the statue. Cas focused on Dean’s face.

Dean stared out at the view. The sun was beginning to set now, giving his eyes a golden amber hue that Cas thought he could fall into if given the opportunity.

Dean turned his attention from the setting sun to Castiel. Their eyes met and Cas felt something warm come to life in the pit of his stomach. Dean didn't break his stare, even when the ride started to move once again, their cart slowly descending back down to the platform.

The kids jumped off the cart as soon as the carnival worker opened the gate but Dean, paused, allowing Cas to go in front of him. He followed close behind. Cas could feel his presence, feel every one of Dean’s breaths, could smell the Old Spice on Dean’s clothes.

Dean was too close. Too close for him to think clearly, because all Cas wanted to do was get closer.

Then again, why couldn't they? Cas brushed his hand against Dean’s arm.

By the time night had begun to fall, they had long since dropped the concept of personal space, easily moving closer to one another until Cas wasn't sure why he had resisted it for so long, because it felt good.

He allowed his hand to press against Dean’s shoulder as Ben helped Emma onto the flying swings. He brushed his fingers on the back of Dean’s neck with the pretense of fixing the collar of the black button down shirt Dean had thrown on as the night began to cool. He allowed himself to touch the small of Dean’s back as they walked through the midway.

They watched the kids ride the rotating swings, the Egyptian boat, and the tilt-a-whirl over and over until Emma was dizzy and sick to her stomach. The entire time Dean leaned against the railing next to Cas; he was close enough to touch. And Cas could touch him. He did touch him.

Cas could reach out his hand, taking Dean’s and they could walk through the town like a regular couple, without being afraid, and when had Cas start to think of whatever he and Dean had as such? He felt jittery and self-conscious as they walked toward the pier. The fireworks would be starting soon, and they wanted to get a good seat. By the time they made it through the crowds heading towards the water, night had truly fallen.

Without warning, as they moved from the pier to the sand, Dean’s hand pressed softly against the small of Cas’ back and it appeared that he had no intentions of removing it as they walked along the beach. It was the first time that Dean had touched him back in a while.

Dean spread a blanket he had gotten from the Impala out on the slightly damp sand and then pulled out four bottles of water. Dean handed one to Cas and then headed over to Ben and Emma, giving each of them a bottle. He made them drink their water before he started a punk and lit Ben and Emma’s sparklers.
Cas sat down. The faded green and white quilt was soft beneath his fingertips. He watched the kids play with sparklers as he nursed his water. Dean sat down next to him on the blanket, they craned their eyes up at a sky that was just dark enough to see the stars.

Dean had brought with him a small portable radio and was fiddling with the tuner when it happened.

One of the sparklers had flared up in Ben’s hand as he went to light it with the punk and with a shout, Ben had dropped it onto the ground. He stood in the sand, holding his burnt hand and Cas hadn’t thought. He shot up and ran over to the little boy, taking his hand gingerly into his own and examining the wound.

It wasn’t a bad burn, but Cas could tell it hurt by the fat tears that welled up in Ben’s eyes. He helped Ben back over to the blanket and sat him down with Dean who took one look at the burn and kissed the top of Ben’s head.

“Cas, there’s a first aid kit in the trunk. Can you go get it?” Dean asked, tossing him the keys. Cas nodded.

He ran to the car, quickly finding the first aid kit and a flashlight and sprinting back to their spot on the sand.

He took a seat next to Ben on the blanket and pulled his hand towards his lap. Carefully he cleaned the burn with some triple antibiotic ointment and then wrapped it carefully in some gauze.

When he was finished dressing the wound he pulled Ben’s hands to his lips, kissing the top of the Gauze. “A kiss for good measure,” he murmured. Ben smiled weakly, his chin wobbling in pain.

“Thank you,” he said, pulling Cas in for a hug. Cas returned the gesture just as the first firework exploded overhead.

The fireworks show was brilliant against the night sky. The water illuminated the pink and blue and purple lights, making it seem even bigger than it was.

It wasn’t a long fireworks show, but it was beautiful, and Castiel was reminded of the many Fourth of July’s he’d spent on the water while he was in school, and the many more he’d spent in Boston with Bart.

He couldn't remember the last time he’d felt as at peace as he did in that moment however, as he held onto Ben and stared up at the sky.

He felt Dean reach down, grabbing his hand and lacing their fingers together and he rested his head onto Dean’s shoulder, listening to the patriotic country music montage as the fireworks finale showered the sky in greens, golds and purples.

It was, all in all, a perfect day.
Chapter Summary

“There is nowhere you can hide that I won’t find you Jimmy,” Bart’s voice was cold. “I know you. I know how you think. I know where you’d go.”

Jimmy blinked and Bart came into clearer focus. His heart stopped. Bart had his gun and he was gently tapping it against his thigh.

Slowly, Bart stood.

“You will never run away from me again, do you understand me?” he said.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Warnings for a scene of coerced consent in this chapter and a scene of non-consent. Sex and violence go hand in hand with Bart’s particular brand of abuse and this is showcased in this chapter. Please, if you’re triggered by explicit sexual content without consent, do not read this chapter. Kisses, Lindsey

Chapter 19: You Have Been Weighed, You Have Been Found Wanting.

A/N: Warnings for a scene of coerced consent in this chapter and a scene of non-consent. Sex and violence go hand in hand with Bart’s particular brand of abuse and this is showcased in this chapter. Please, if you’re triggered by explicit sexual content without consent, do not read this chapter.

December 28, 2010

Boston, Massachusetts

The wind was bitterly cold against his face as Jimmy walked out of the airport terminal and limped to the bus station. The cab ride to the airport had been a waste of time and money. Tickets for even the shortest flights were exorbitantly priced because of the holiday. Not only that, every airline was grounded due to the snowstorm that had moved in earlier that afternoon.

The bus station wasn’t far from the airport terminal, but it might as well have been miles away as the snow thickened around him, making the sidewalk slick and difficult to navigate. Panic bubbled up within him, making his fingers go numb and his breathing became erratic. He was never going to make it there before Bart returned home to find him gone. He wouldn’t have a big enough head start.

Snow had begun to fall steadily now and the trench coat Jimmy had put on in his haste to leave his
The house was not warm enough. He shivered, rubbing his hands together to create some sort of friction, some sort of warmth in the frozen night.

When he finally made it to the bus station, Jimmy let out a sigh of relief. He shook the snow off his shoulders as he entered the blissfully warm station, only to discover to his dismay that all outgoing busses had been delayed until the snow plows could clear the roads.

Jimmy glanced out the large windows to the steadily growing layer of white covering the outside world. He did the math. By the time the Department of Transportation cleared the roads, and lifted the driving ban, Bart would have figured out that he hadn’t gotten on a plane, and the next logical place he would look was the bus station. Jimmy needed to be long gone before that happened.

He thought briefly about calling Gabriel, but rejected the idea. He and Gabriel hadn’t spoken since Jimmy called to tell him that he would be dropping his pursuit of getting parental rights back for Claire. Gabriel couldn't understand how Jimmy could let Bart get in the way of reuniting with his daughter and when he pressed the issue, Jimmy had snapped at him. He screamed and cursed at his brother to mind his own business. Gabriel had hung up on him, and he never called back. Jimmy didn’t bother trying to contact him either, he was too proud to try.

He needed to stretch his money, and he had no access to any extra funds. Bart could easily trace any credit cards he used. Suddenly feeling very tired, Jimmy took a seat on one of the wooden benches in the old bus station.

He had nowhere to go. No safety net. He was trapped.

With trembling fingers, Jimmy reached into his pocket and pulled out the cell phone Bart had gotten him for Christmas. He dialed the number from memory and pressed the phone to his ear.

“What?” a curt voice snapped over the speaker. Jimmy felt the world open up beneath his feet; his stomach dropped and he broke out into a sweat as he began to speak.

“Bart? I… I need you to come get me.”

****

It took Bart three hours to get to the bus station and in that time Jimmy thought up every possible excuse he could give for his behavior, played out every scenario in his head. Every single one of them ended with him in pain. So when Bart showed up, just as the sun was beginning to rise over the snow plowed roads, Jimmy had worked himself into a state a panic.

To Jimmy’s complete shock, Bart rushed towards him. Jimmy flinched, _Was he going to hurt me out here in the open?_ Instead, Bart enveloped him into a tight embrace. He kissed the top of Jimmy’s head and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, rubbing his palm up and down Jimmy’s bicep, trying to create some warmth through Jimmy’s trench coat. Bart helped Jimmy to the car; his bruised ribs had stiffened overnight, and he could barely move without fire burning through his chest. Bart carefully maneuvered his husband until Jimmy was comfortable in the passenger seat, then he turned the heater up as far as it would go. The drive home was silent save for the soft piano solo issuing from the speakers.

Bart helped Jimmy into the house where he deposited him on the couch, pulling a worn Afghan blanket over his shoulders then headed to the kitchen. Jimmy could hear Bart moving around and soon the savory smells bacon, eggs and coffee made their way into the living room. Bart brought the breakfast over to Jimmy on a dinner tray.
Then he sat down on the arm chair next to Jimmy, where he watched his husband pick at the meal; the coffee was too strong and the bacon was more on the crispy side than Jimmy preferred, but he was too frightened to say anything at that point. Jimmy ate every bite he was given, then placed the tray onto the coffee table.

The entire time, Bart never said a word. Jimmy opened his mouth to speak, to apologize, but Bart cut him off with a wave of his hand, shaking his head. Jimmy’s mouth snapped shut and he looked down at the ground. His heart was racing. He didn't know what Bart was going to do about him running away, but he didn't want to do anything that would set him off, not when his husband’s reaction had been relatively tame thus far. If Bart didn't want to talk, then they wouldn't talk.

Bart grabbed the tray, taking it into the kitchen. Jimmy heard the water begin to run. Tentatively, he stood up from the couch, heading into the kitchen. Bart was standing at the sink, his back facing Jimmy as he stood in the doorway. Jimmy took a moment to study his husband. His hair was a mess, and his white dress shirt was wrinkled. There was a spot of dirt on the left cuff of his slacks. He wasn't wearing shoes, and Jimmy could see that his left dress sock had a hole in the heel. He looked tired. Cautiously, Jimmy approached the counter. He refilled his coffee, adding a bit of sugar. He searched the refrigerator for cream, but they were out. Silently, he added ‘cream’ and ‘eggs’ to the grocery list pinned to the refrigerator door.

Jimmy stiffened when he felt Bart’s hand cover his, taking the pencil from him and adding ‘toothpaste’ to it in his precise handwriting.

He felt bile rise up from his stomach when Bart gently leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I'm so sorry, Jimmy,” he murmured, before pulling away, returning to the dishes. Jimmy took his coffee back to the living room, where he turned on the morning news. After Bart had cleaned up the dishes from breakfast, he went upstairs to their bedroom. Jimmy sat frozen on the couch. That’s it? he thought. He makes me breakfast, then cleans up and goes to sleep? Bart wasn’t going to say anything else? He wasn’t going to do anything?

Jimmy felt in his coat pocket for the wad of cash he’d hidden away when Bart arrived and sighed in relief. It was still there. He waited an entire hour, until he was sure that Bart was asleep, sitting silent and terrified on the couch. Then Jimmy tiptoed upstairs to the guest bedroom, putting the money back in its hiding place. He dreaded going into his bedroom, but he was exhausted. He needed to sleep.

He eyed the neatly made guest bed. I’ll just lay down here, he thought, toeing off his shoes and collapsing into the soft bedding. Just for a minute or two. Within moments, his sleepless night caught up to him, and he fell fast asleep.

Hours later, Jimmy awoke to the sound of the master bedroom shower and his husband’s off key singing. He smiled, for a moment filled with affection for Bart's inexplicable love for ‘90s boy bands. But the smile slid abruptly off his face as he remembered the previous night.

Every detail, from their fight, to the beating, to the bitter cold air as he walked to the bus station, and ultimately to the silent car ride home when Bart finally came to pick him up, it all flooded back to him and he felt sick.

Jimmy groaned as he sat up, clutching at his injured side. His entire body ached. He stood slowly, and meticulously remade the guest bed, careful to fold the covers back the way Bart liked it. As quietly as possible, he tiptoed into the bathroom he shared with Bart.
Bart smiled widely at him through the glass shower door as Jimmy limped past him into the closet. Tentatively, Jimmy smiled back.

This was not the reaction he was expecting. He thought for sure Bart was going to beat him stupid for running away, but Bart was acting as if nothing was wrong. Like Jimmy hadn’t just run away from him, from their marriage. But, he thought as he headed to the vanity to brush his teeth, if it means not going to get hit, he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He changed clothes just as Bart emerged from the shower, a towel wrapped carelessly around his waist.

He brushed a towel through his hair and came up behind Jimmy, who was trimming his beard. Bart wrapped his arms tight around Jimmy’s torso and Jimmy hissed as pain shot through him.

Bart didn’t seem to notice as he pressed his lips against Jimmy’s neck. “Zachariah gave me a few days off,” he murmured against the pressure point behind Jimmy’s ear, the one that always made Jimmy’s knees go weak.

Jimmy tried deftly to loosen Bart’s hold on his ribs, leaning back into Bart’s chest.

Bart kissed his way down Jimmy’s neck, onto his shoulder. Jimmy’s skin was crawling, but he couldn't help but lean into the touch when Bart began to gently caress his hips.

“Come to bed, baby,” Bart murmured as he pulled at Jimmy’s sweater, leading them into master bedroom.

“Bart, honey, I have so much to do today…” Jimmy hedged, his voice breathless.

“Show me how much you love me, Jimmy,” Bart continued. “Please, come on baby.” His words were soft, pleading, but Jimmy heard the underlying command in his husband’s tone. He knew he couldn't refuse without consequence. But he had to try.

“Bart, really…” Jimmy began, leaning his face away from Bart’s grip on his arm tightened painfully.

Jimmy felt a tear slip down his cheek, but with a shuddering breath, he nodded.

He allowed himself to be led to the bed, where Bart undressed him. He worshipped every inch of Jimmy’s body, taking special care to kiss every bruise he’d left on him the night before. Over and over he murmured apologies to Jimmy. Eventually Jimmy’s skin stopped crawling at the attention Bart was giving him and his body relaxed.

Tentatively, he began to participate.

He brushed his hand through Bart’s short hair, pulling him close, because he knew that’s what Bart wanted. He stared into his ice blue eyes and moaned and sighed, because Bart liked it when he did that.

But soon, Jimmy dropped the act and it was all just sensation. His moans became real, his breath rising and falling rapidly as he felt fire spread through his body. Bart’s cold fingers against his skin, his body moving slowly against him, and he forgot about the bile rising in his throat. he forgot about the fear and anger and hurt. He just let himself pretend and feel loved for the first time in months—no—years.
Bart was careful and gentle as he prepped Jimmy, avoiding the large bruises on Jimmy’s torso, touching him softly as he entered him. He moved slowly, covering every inch of Jimmy’s body with his own. Jimmy moaned as pleasure rippled through him, clutching his husband’s shoulders while he was pulled apart and put back together again.

For once he was able to ignore the bitter voice in the back of his head, screaming at him to run far away as fast as he could, because Bart wouldn't kiss him like that if he didn't love him. He wouldn't touch him with such gentleness. He wouldn't press the tips of his fingers against the jut of his hip with such reverence if he didn't cherish Jimmy, right? Sure, he lost his temper sometimes, but Jimmy never felt like he wasn't loved, not really.

When they were finished, Bart pulled Jimmy close and they curled up together in their large bed. He pressed the softest of kisses to Jimmy’s nose before he drifted asleep. Jimmy followed him soon after.

****

As dusk fell, Jimmy emerged from their bed, humming a little as he went. He felt light, happier than he had in weeks, perhaps months. Bart was still dozing, his arm flung across Jimmy’s pillow.

Jimmy dressed quietly and headed downstairs to the kitchen. He took a painkiller that was leftover from a broken wrist the year prior and set about making supper. First, he put a pot of water on to boil and pulled a package of spaghetti from the cabinet. Jimmy then pulled a pair of chicken breasts from the refrigerator that he’d set out to thaw the previous evening, before Bart had lost his temper.

Jimmy shook his head, pulling out the cutting board. He began to cut the chicken into cubes, careful to make them all equal sizes. *Don’t sugar coat it,* he thought. *He didn’t “lose his temper,” he beat the shit out of you. Again. And then you went back to him. Again. You spread your legs like a little whore and forgave him.*

The joy vanished, replaced by shame. The knife hovered over the cutting board for a moment before he rinsed the blade and put it in the dishwasher.

He limped over to the freezer, pulling out a steamer bag of broccoli and set it next to the microwave, then tossed the chicken into a skillet. He cooked quickly, efficiently, cleaning up as he went so that there were few dishes when he tossed the pasta and chicken into a creamy garlic sauce, adding the steamed broccoli at the last moment.

Jimmy opened up a bottle of wine and had just finished setting the table when Bart appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. His hair was ruffled from sleep, and he was wearing a pair of faded sweatpants and a Patriots t-shirt. Jimmy felt heat pool in the pit of his stomach, followed quickly by more shame. *Such an easy little slut aren’t you?* he admonished himself. Ignoring the blush rising up his neck, he set a fork and knife onto the table in front of Bart’s chair and sat down, not meeting Bart’s gaze.

Bart smiled at him and grabbed the dish holding the pasta, bringing it to the table while Jimmy poured them each a healthy serving of Pinot Grigio. Dinner was a quiet affair, as it usually was. Jimmy had given himself half a portion of pasta, waiting to begin eating until Bart had started. Bart had two glasses of wine, and when he was finished eating, he placed his hand tenderly on top of Jimmy’s.

“I love you,” he said. Jimmy closed his eyes. Bart’s grip on his hand tightened and Jimmy glanced up at his husband.
“I know,” he replied, turning his palm up until he could lace his fingers with Bart’s. “I love you, too.” The lie felt bitter on his tongue. Later, after Jimmy cleaned up the dishes and started a load of laundry, he and Bart curled up on the large couch.

Bart turned on the football game while Jimmy picked up the last of the books he’d checked out from the library the week before. He’d have to ask Bart to take him back to the library so he could get some more.

Reading was one of the few things he did for entertainment. The book was a thriller he’d been looking forward to reading for some time. It had been out for over a year, but every time Jimmy had gone to the library to get it, it had been checked out.

They spent the evening in easy-going silence. Bart sat on the couch with his feet propped up on the ottoman, his hand resting on the armrest, his other hand resting on Jimmy’s collarbone. Jimmy lay on his back, with his head resting against Bart’s thigh.

Jimmy had gotten the ice pack and lay on it, and the pain was starting to ease up now that the medicine he’d taken before supper had kicked in. He felt heavy and warm, and he could barely pay attention to the words on the page in front of him. Every now and again, Bart’s lips would brush across Jimmy’s forehead, or his hand would trail down from his collarbone to his belly button, creating a slow burn in Jimmy’s belly that he tried to ignore, but Bart didn’t stop his attention.

Every pass of his hand down Jimmy’s body went lower and lower, until finally Bart’s fingers slipped beneath the waistband of his jeans, brushing lightly over Jimmy’s cotton boxers for just a moment. Jimmy jerked at the momentary contact, arching his hips to prolong the feel of Bart’s fingers against him, but Bart pulled back, resting his hand once more at Jimmy’s pulse point.

Jimmy heard Bart chuckle, low and deep, and he felt something come loose within him and he wanted him. Because this? This part of their relationship was familiar to Jimmy; it was an easy role to fill. Jimmy turned over, pulling himself up onto his knees until he knelt on the couch next to Bart. Bart was sprawled out, his legs opened wide in invitation.

He was hard, his sweatpants tented obscenely; Jimmy licked his lips.

He felt Bart’s hand come up, trailing along his back until he had fistled his fingers through Jimmy’s long sandy brown hair. Jimmy bit back a moan as Bart pressed his head toward his erection. Jimmy had always loved giving head, and Bart knew this. He often took advantage of it.

Bart gestured toward his pants and Jimmy pulled them down, his heart jumping a little as Bart’s erection sprang free. The sound of the football game behind them was the only noise in the room aside from their heavy breathing. Jimmy climbed down onto the floor until he was positioned on his knees between Bart’s thighs.

They moved slowly, leisurely, like they had all the time in the world. Bart turned the TV off and wrapped his hands around the sides of Jimmy’s face, positioning Jimmy’s mouth to where he wanted it and his hips jerked with one smooth thrust, hitting the back of Jimmy’s throat with his cock. Then he pulled back until just the tip was inside. Jimmy’s tongue slid up the bottom of his shaft until it rested against the slit.

Bart then stopped moving, holding Jimmy still, filling him up. Jimmy moaned, trying to convey everything he couldn’t say with his actions—how sorry he was for running away, how he was a failure at being a good husband, a good lover— Jimmy let his body apologize for him. He pressed the heel of his hand onto his own erection, desperate for some friction.
They stayed still for quite some time, until Jimmy was all but drooling around Bart’s cock, his tongue sweeping slowly across his slit until Bart’s eyes rolled back and he couldn’t hold off any more.

His grip on Jimmy’s hair tightened and he thrust hard, hitting the back of Jimmy’s throat. Jimmy took a deep breath, careful not to gag around Bart’s length. Bart controlled the pace, as he always did in their sex life, thrusting harder and faster. Jimmy released his own cock from the confines of his jeans, stroking himself in time with Bart’s thrusts.

It wasn’t long before Jimmy felt Bart stiffen, releasing inside of his mouth without warning.

Jimmy swallowed and Bart pulled him to his feet. Then he leaned forward and took Jimmy into his mouth. Bart sucked hard, hollowing out his cheeks and pressing his fingers into the flesh of Jimmy’s ass until he felt the beginnings of a bruise forming.

He thrust once, twice, three times before he came with a loud gasp, all but collapsing onto Bart’s lap. They stayed wrapped up in each other’s arms for quite some time, as Jimmy came down from his euphoric high. Bart was stroking his long hair. All of a sudden, Jimmy felt very tired and he snuggled into his husband’s arms. He fell asleep a few minutes later.

The last thing he registered was Bart carrying his thin frame up the short flight of stairs to their bedroom.

****

**December 30, 2010**

Brookline, Massachusetts

Sunlight was streaming into the kitchen, warming Jimmy’s frozen hands as he thinly sliced the red onion for their salad. Bart liked his vegetables diced in tiny pieces, even the lettuce. This meant that making a salad for supper took at least forty five minutes, because each piece had to be the same size. It was meticulous, frustrating work, and Bart often liked salads with his meals.

He put the knife down for a moment, wiping the tears from his eyes. The onion was strong. He checked the potatoes in the chowder, checking to make sure that they were tender and added cream, sugar, flour and butter, stirring until it was thick and creamy.

He lowered the heat and set the soup to simmer while he finished making the salad.

Bart always had excellent timing, and this night was no different. “Oh hey, babe, lunch will be done in a few minutes,” Jimmy said, not looking up from the cucumber he was cutting. “After we eat, can you take me to Macy’s? I need to pick up a gift for Rebecca and Theo.”

Bart didn’t answer. He entered the kitchen slowly, stumbling a little over the lip of tile in the doorway.

And just like that, Jimmy froze. His senses moved into overdrive. Bart was drunk. The past couple of days he hardly drank at all, but now, he stumbled to the fridge, where he pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer.

Jimmy tracked Bart’s movements from the fridge to the small table in the corner of the room. He drank from the bottle and Jimmy gripped his knife just a little bit harder, trying to stop his hands from trembling.

He pulled the dutch oven off of the flame and grabbed a ladle for the soup, scooping out a bit for
both of them into a pair of bright yellow bowls. He pulled off a piece of bread for himself and for Bart. Carefully, he placed Bart's food in front of him and then brought the salad bowl over to the table.

He also grabbed a glass for Bart, placing it with a soft thud onto the white tabletop. There was a tension in the air that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He took a bite of the soup and broke off a piece of bread, watching as Bart mimicked his movements.

Jimmy took a deep breath.

“Honey,” Jimmy began but then stopped. He swallowed thickly. Jimmy put some salad onto Bart’s plate, handing over the bleu cheese salad dressing that Bart preferred. He cleared his throat. “Bart, I need to go to the store after lunch,” Jimmy said.

Bart looked up, meeting his gaze. “You're leaving?” his voice was so broken, frightened. Jimmy swallowed.

“No, no Bart, I’m not leaving. I just need to go to the store. We haven’t gotten Rebecca or Theo’s gift yet and we can’t show up at the party tomorrow night without getting a Christmas gift for your partner and her husband.”

Bart nodded slowly, his eyes bleary and unfocused. He poured a glass of vodka, spilling some over the rim and onto the table.

Jimmy wished that he had made something more substantial than chowder to eat. He offered Bart his piece of bread, but Bart pushed it away roughly.

“You're not leaving,” Bart said. “You’re not leaving me, Jimmy.” His tone was flat, definite.

Jimmy felt his heart sink. “Of course I’m not going to leave you Bart. I was…wrong to leave the other night. But I came back, baby. I came back. I’m not going to leave you.”

“You’re a liar.”

Jimmy clenched his jaw. Bart didn't say anything else, just picked up his spoon and dug into his chowder. Jimmy bit his lip, but followed suit.

They finished eating in silence. Jimmy tried to think of any of the gifts he’d been given by Bart’s family that he could use to regift to Rebecca and Theo. Jimmy remembered the bright yellow tea kettle that his mother-in-law had given them and sighed. He loved that gift, but it was the only thing they had gotten for Christmas that year that hadn’t yet been opened.

Bart drank another glass of vodka before he stumbled out of the kitchen. Jimmy cleaned up the dishes and went into he living room, where he grabbed the kettle from under the Christmas tree and headed upstairs to the guest room. He pulled the box of wrapping paper from under the bed and set to wrapping it.

When he was finished, wrapping it in a pretty brown paper with swirly script and adding a burlap and lace bow, Jimmy took it downstairs and set it on the table by the front door.

Bart was sitting in the large armchair, his foot dangling off the armrest.

Jimmy slipped his feet into a worn pair of snow boots, pulling a heavy coat from the rack.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”
Jimmy froze. He turned around, facing his husband. “I was getting the mail.”

“No you weren’t,” Bart slurred. “You are leaving me.”

“No baby, I’m not,” Jimmy rushed forward, placing his hands on Bart’s thighs. “I’m just getting the mail.” He pulled Bart into a light kiss. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

Bart’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded. Jimmy practically ran to the mailbox. The air was absolutely frigid, even with his heavy coat. He stomped through the knee high snow, as neither he nor Bart had shoveled the walk the day before.

The mail was wrapped in a rubber band. Jimmy grabbed it, tucking it under his arm and practically running back into the house. When Bart met his gaze, Jimmy let out a sigh of relief. Bart looked so happy to see him standing in the doorway, his legs soaking wet from the knee down.

“You came back.”

Jimmy smiled sadly. “Of course I came back, I told you I would.”

Bart stood up abruptly, crossing the room in two strides. He kissed Jimmy hard, pressing his fingers into his cheeks. Jimmy stumbled back as Bart pressed closer, pushing him against the wall.

“Bart, stop,” Jimmy said between almost bruising kisses. “I came back.”

“No,” he said roughly, “You’re mine, you belong to me. I will fuck you any time I please, and you will be grateful for it you little slut,” Jimmy tried to push him away, but Bart grabbed his arm, pulling him upstairs. Bart roughly pulled Jimmy’s shirt off, tossing it onto the floor.

He pushed Jimmy to the ground, until he was on all fours, having the door to the bathroom. The carpet rubbed uncomfortably against the skin on his knees as Bart spat on his entrance, shoving two fingers into him immediately. Bart took Jimmy roughly, with barely any preparation. It wasn't long before Bart came with a grunt, grabbing Jimmy’s hair and pulling until Jimmy cried out in pain.

Bart withdrew immediately, pulling his pants back up and heading downstairs to the living room. He left Jimmy to clean himself up. When Jimmy got up to go to the bathroom, pain swept through him. He winced, limping to the toilet.

It was too late to make a proper dinner, so Jimmy tossed a frozen pizza into he oven, setting the timer, and got two beers out of the fridge.

The pizza didn't take long to cook. When it was finished Jimmy filled up a plate and grabbed the beer, balancing it carefully as he brought Bart his dinner.

They spent the evening sprawled out on the couch, watching movies.

Several hours later, Jimmy woke up alone in his bed, having no memory of moving to the bedroom. He felt around on the bed for Bart, but didn't find him. Jimmy sat up, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand when his gaze caught onto someone sitting in the armchair by the window. He jerked up with a gasp, but relaxed when he saw his husband’s familiar frame in the meager light coming from the street lamp outside.

“Bart, honey what are you doing? Come to bed.” Jimmy gestured him closer.

“There is nowhere you can hide that I won’t find you Jimmy,” Bart’s voice was cold. “I know you. I
know how you think. I know where you’d go.”

Jimmy blinked and Bart came into clearer focus. His heart stopped. Bart had his gun and he was gently tapping it against his thigh.

Slowly Bart stood.

“You will never run away from me again, do you understand me?” he said.

Jimmy hunched back into the headboard. “Y-yes sir,” he said, staring at the bird pattern on his sheets. “I’ll never leave you. I promise.” Bart brushed a hand across Jimmy’s cheek, then moved so fast Jimmy didn’t see it coming until it was too late.

The butt of the gun struck him on the cheekbone and for a moment Jimmy saw stars before he felt a fist collide with his jaw. He fell back just as another blow landed on his other cheek.

“Please, Bart, I won’t leave you, I promise!” Tears leaked out of the corner of his eyes and Bart pushed him out of the bed. Jimmy fell to the floor with a thud, tweaking his injured ribs and he cried out. “I’m sorry!”

“Sorry? You’re sorry!?” Bart kicked him in the groin and Jimmy huffed out a breath that was half moan, half sob. “You’ll be sorry!” Bart kicked him again. “You will never run away from me again. Is that clear?”

“Y-yes sir4. Yes it’s clear.” Jimmy put his hands up, defensively covering his face, and Bart pulled his arms away, punching him again. The gun was waving wildly in front of Jimmy’s face and for the first time since they got married, Jimmy legitimately feared for his life.

Instead of Ann-Marie’s face on the news, it would be his. Bart was going to kill him right now and there was nothing he could do about it.

Bart raised the gun, pressing the barrel to Jimmy’s temple, and Jimmy felt his eyes slip shut. His entire body was trembling. “You cannot run away. There is nowhere that you can hide that I won’t find you Jimmy. Nowhere. I will find you and when I do, I will kill you.”

Bart then pistol whipped Jimmy so hard that he backed out. When he came to, Bart was sitting once more in the arm chair, his eyes glittering in the light of the street lamp. Jimmy crawled back over to their bed and climbed in it with difficulty. He lay down, shaking. He could feel blood trickling down his cheek onto the pillowcase, but he didn’t dare move.

Neither of them slept for the rest of the night.

The next evening at the New Year’s Eve Party his boss hosted every year, Bart told everyone that Jimmy had come down with the flu and couldn’t make it. He gave Rebecca the present that Jimmy had so meticulously wrapped for her and she loved her new tea kettle, using it every time that Jimmy and Bart came over for dinner from then on.

Jimmy wasn’t able to leave the house for almost a month.
You Will Dance With Me

Chapter Summary

Cas glanced in the rearview mirror to find Ben and Emma fast asleep, Emma’s head resting on her big brother’s shoulders. They were holding hands as Ben softly snored. It was peaceful. Cas smiled. Peace was something that he’d had very little of in his life. He rested his head against the back of the seat, closing his eyes. On the radio, Led Zeppelin was playing lowly.

“What’re you thinking about?” Dean’s voice broke the stillness in the cab of the car.

Castiel looked over at him, smiling widely. “I’m happy,” Cas shook his head as his voice broke. “I’m so happy.”

Chapter Notes

As always, a special thank you to HerRosesNeverFall for her beta. This one's for you Cayla. <3

Warnings for discussions of past abuse.

Chapter 20: You Will Dance With Me.

Chapter Track: Since I've Been Loving You, Led Zeppelin

July 4, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

The ride home from the beach was quiet. Traffic was terrible, as everyone in the town and surrounding area had come to the beach for the fireworks show. The Impala moved by inches down the crowded streets. Dean had rolled down all the windows and a breeze had picked up from the east, bringing the smell of salt air into the car, and making the hair on Cas’ head fly around wildly.

I need to get a haircut, Castiel thought, running a hand absentely through the messy locks.

Cas glanced in the rearview mirror to find Ben and Emma fast asleep, Emma’s head resting on her big brother’s shoulders. They were holding hands as Ben softly snored. It was peaceful. Cas smiled. Peace was something that he’d had very little of in his life. He rested his head against the back of the seat, closing his eyes. On the radio, Led Zeppelin was playing lowly.

“What’re you thinking about?” Dean’s voice broke the stillness in the cab of the car.

Castiel looked over at him, smiling widely. “I’m happy,” Cas shook his head as his voice broke. “I’m so happy.”
Dean’s expression shifted to one of tenderness. He reached down and grasped Cas’ hand. “Me too.”

By the time the traffic cleared, Cas could see the moon rising over the horizon. Dean sped up, taking a back road back toward the cottage. He didn’t let go of Cas’ hand.

They made it to Cas’ house just as another round of fireworks erupted to the east. Dean pulled up to cottage and turned off the ignition. He ran a hand through his hair and chuckled softly. “I uh… I had a great time today.”

Cas met his gaze. “Me too.” The air grew thick and Cas’ breath quickened. Dean pressed his fingertips into Castiel’s wrist, leaning forward. Panic threatened to overwhelm Cas at the thought of kissing Dean, but at the last minute, Dean pulled away, shaking his head.

“So I’ll um, I’ll see you around?” Dean asked, breaking the spell between them. His gaze moved to the backseat, checking to see if the kids were still asleep.

“Of course,” Cas said, trying not to let his disappointment show when Dean released his hand.

With a last wistful smile, Cas exited the car. He felt Dean’s eyes on him as he crossed in front of he Impala, heading towards his cottage. Just as he was about to step up onto his porch, Dean leaned out of the window. “Cas, wait,” he said.

Cas turned; he took a few steps closer, approaching the driver’s side. “Yeah?” Cas asked, leaning against Dean’s window. Dean bit his lip before opening the door, getting out of the car. He glanced once more at the kids before he grabbed Cas’ hand.

“Come here,” he whispered, leading them over to a live oak in the front of Cas’ yard. The tree was huge, easily over a hundred years old. It’s limbs arched toward the ground, low enough that Cas could sit on the thickest branch if he wanted to. The tree easily obscured them from view of the car.

Dean studiedCastiel for a moment, before resting his hands on the other man’s shoulders, pressing until Cas was leaning against the trunk of the tree. Castiel could feel the rough bark against his forearms and his skin broke out into goosebumps as Dean’s breath ghosted across his neck.

So slowly Castiel thought he would die from anticipation, Dean closed the distance between them, leaning forward until their lips were barely a breath’s space apart. Cas could feel every nerve ending in his body thrumming; his heartbeat was a jackrabbit thumping rapidly, threatening to burst from his skin if something, anything, didn't happen soon. His breath was shallow and when Dean rested his hands against Cas’ cheek, he felt like he couldn't get enough air.

It had been years since the mere thought of a kiss had affected him in such a way. Dean’s thumbs traced circles against the stubble that had grown on his cheeks and Cas felt his eyes slip shut.

Then it all became too much. With a sigh, Cas moved forward and closed space between them, pressing his lips to Dean’s.

Dean sucked in a breath; his eyes shot open and Cas deepened the kiss. He made a small noise in the back of his throat and stepped closer, taking control of the kiss. His fingers tightened on Castiel’s cheek before they threaded into his hair.

Cas could feel everything, and nothing at the same time. His mind, constantly on edge and alert since leaving Bart, became quiet. His heart thrummed with excitement, but he also felt a unique sense of peace. This was right. This was the way it was supposed to feel.

Dean’s hands tightened in Castiel’s hair and fire blazed through him. Castiel moaned, pressing
closer. Dean reacted in kind, slotting their hips together. Castiel felt powerful. They kissed for so long that when Cas pulled away to breathe, both of them were panting for air. Then Dean pressed forward, meeting Cas’ lips once again.

Overhead, fireworks from the direction of the Milton Plantation exploded in the sky. Cas happened to open his eyes the same moment Dean did, just as a bright explosion showered the air in red sparks, bringing out the green in Dean’s eyes in a way that took Cas’ breath away.

Their lips parted and came back together—once, twice, three times—until finally Cas pulled back, gasping for air. Of its own accord, Dean’s thumb came up to brush away the tears he found on Castiel’s cheeks.

“I’ve got you Cas,” Dean murmured against his lips, pressing their foreheads together. “I’ve got you.” Cas bit back a sob and nodded.

“I know,” Cas whispered back. He kissed him once more then pulled away. “Will you—” his voice was rough, and Cas cleared his throat, “Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?” he asked. He swallowed back the panic that threatened to take control, only to feel the world bottom out at Dean’s crestfallen expression.

“Oh” Dean said. “I can’t—”

“—Oh,” Cas said at the same time. “O-okay.” Disappointment was evident in his tone. He looked down at the ground. Dean pressed his thumb to Cas’ chin, pulling it up until they were eye to eye.

“It’s not that I don’t want to Cas,” Dean rushed to clarify. “It’s just that I can’t do it tomorrow night.”

“Oh,” he said, a smile quirking his lips.

“I promised I’d babysit for Benny and Andrea. It’s their anniversary.”

“Oh, alright.”

“What about a raincheck? When do you have a night off next?”

Cas thought for a moment. “Thursday.”

Dean pulled Cas into another soft kiss. “Thursday it is then. There’s this place up in Wilmington. I think you’ll love it.”

Cas pulled back. “Actually… I want to cook you supper. You’re always doing things for me, and I want to return the favor.”

Dean smiled widely. “That sounds awesome.”

“Come over around seven,” Cas said.

“It’s a date,” Dean replied, pressing in for another kiss. Castiel had to bite back his smile. Then Dean stepped back. “I’ll see you later.”

“Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Cas stepped out from behind the oak tree and onto his front porch just as Dean got back into the car. The door shut with a squeak. Dean pulled out of the drive, and Cas headed inside, grinning so wide that his cheeks hurt.
He could still smell Dean’s cologne clinging to his shirt, and he smiled.

****

Dean drove slowly through the streets of Southport, heading home. Cas didn't live far from him, but the roads were still busy. The town showed no signs of quieting down any time soon.

Overhead, the loud crack of a firework went off and Dean flinched. Sometimes it was still difficult for Dean to distinguish the difference between the sound of fireworks from gunshots. With the big fireworks, usually Dean was okay. He had time to mentally prepare himself for the explosions. But the small explosions throughout the night, the ones he couldn’t anticipate or prepare for, always threw him back into memories he’d rather forget.

Dean checked the backseat in the rearview mirror. Ben and Emma were both still fast asleep. Dean took a deep breath, letting the sight of his sleeping children soothe him.

He pulled up the driveway, parking the Impala in the detached garage behind the house. He’d built it shortly after they moved into their house. It had been built in 1900, and had no garage. The Impala was getting old, and the salty beach air did nothing to help the bodywork that he so dutifully maintained. Lisa had been adamant that the style of the garage had to match the period of the home, and Dean had done his best. It was painted white, just like the house, with a bright green roof and door. The trim work matched the porticos that surrounded his front porch. He and Sam had spent months working on the garage, on afternoons and weekends. And yeah, maybe some of the trim work was a bit rough. but Dean was proud of it anyway.

Six months after he finished building it, Lisa had gotten sick.

As quietly as he could, Dean exited the car, wincing at the door’s squeak. He needed to oil the hinges.

Dean picked Emma up first, wrapping her tiny arms around his neck and carrying her into the house. He put her to bed without waking her up. Gently, Dean removed her shoes one at a time and pulled the red and white quilt up to her neck, tucking her in the way he used to tuck Sam in: feet wrapped up like a burrito, with the sides of the quilt loose about her shoulders.

Dean brushed a hand through Emma’s hair.

“I love you baby girl,” he whispered, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

He turned the small nightlight by the bedroom door on and Dean closed the door, leaving it cracked, then headed back out to the car to get Ben. Ben was sleeping soundly, sprawled out on the backseat, one foot dangling off the edge of the seat. He was sprawled out just awkwardly enough that Dean couldn’t easily reach him without waking him up.

“Ben, buddy, come on. Let’s get you to bed.” Dean reached into the car. Ben mumbled something under his breath, but nevertheless reached his arms out to meet Dean’s.

Dean picked his son up with a groan. Ben was almost ten years old and was starting to get heavy. Soon he’d be too big for Dean to carry. The thought made him sad, but as he carried his son to bed, Dean couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

With a start, as he walked through the front door, he realized it was because Ben never got too big for Lisa to carry. She never got to see Emma become the bright, inquisitive little girls she was today.

He pursed his lips and shook his head as he carefully lowered his son onto the bed. Ben woke up just
as Dean turned bent down to untie his shoe laces.

“Daddy?” Ben’s voice cut through the quiet of the room.

“Yeah buddy?” he asked, pulling the covers up over Ben’s legs.

Ben bit his lip. “Nothing,” he said, looking away.

“Aw come on, sport, you can tell me anything.” Dean brushed a hand through Ben’s curls. “What’s on your mind?”

Ben turned on his side. “Do you love Castiel?”

Dean was brought up short. He sat down on the edge of Ben’s bed.


Ben smiled softly. “I know you do. I… I like him too.”

“Yeah?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. He’s really nice. And he’s good at baseball.”

“He is,” Dean agreed.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you like him more than you liked Mom?”

“What?” Dean pressed his hand to Ben’s cheek. “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know. What if… what if you do fall in love with Cas and you forget all about Mommy?”

“Oh, Ben. Is that what you think?” Dean scrubbed a hand down his face, sighing. “Nothing, and no one could ever replace you mama.” He leaned forward, pulling Ben into his arms. Ben tucked his head against Dean’s chest. Dean could feel him start to cry.

“But what if you do fall in love with him?”

“Then I will love him, Benji,” Dean said. “But that doesn’t mean I will forget about the way I feel about her. Bubby, I couldn’t forget your mama even if I wanted to.”

“Why?” Ben asked, his lip trembling.

“Because I see her every day in you and your sister,” Dean said. “And I will always love your mama because she gave me you two.”

“You promise?”

“I swear,” Dean said. He ran his fingers through Ben’s hair. Dean felt tears well up in his eyes. “I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Dad.”
“Get some sleep. Remy, Margot and Arsen are coming over tomorrow and we’re going to the beach.”

Dean bent down to kiss the top of Ben’s head. “Dad?” he asked his voice slow with sleep.

“Yeah?”

“Will you sing to me?”

“Yeah, little man.”

Dean hummed the first few bars of Ramble On to Ben as his eyes slipped shut. Dean barely made it to the chorus before Ben was back asleep.

That night, Dean cried himself to sleep, clutching the faded photograph he always carried of Lisa tightly in his hand.

****

The following morning, Cas was sitting in the rocker on his front porch, nursing a cup of iced coffee when Ellie ran by his cottage.

Her hair was pulled back and she was wearing jogging clothes.

“Morning!” she said, coming to a stop by the porch stairs.

“Good morning,” Cas replied, smiling widely. “How can you run in this heat?” he asked.

Ellie laughed. “I thought getting an early start would help, but I was wrong,” she said in a drawl.

Cas chuckled. “You want a cup of coffee? We can put it on ice.”

“That sounds divine.” Ellie took a seat on the other rocking chair.

Cas stepped into the house, making another cup of coffee and brought it back to Ellie.

She took it with a murmured thanks and took a sip. She sighed. “You make the best coffee.”

Cas beamed. “Thanks, most people don’t like it that strong.”

“So what have you been up to the past couple of weeks? I haven’t seen you around all that much.”

Cas shrugged. “Oh you know, working keeps me pretty busy.”

“So do certain grocery store owners,” she said, smirking.

Cas pursed his lips, not meeting Ellie’s eyes. “That too.”

“So it is true!” she said. “You and Dean are a thing?”

“Where… where did you hear that Ellie?”

“Castiel, Southport is a tiny town. Nothing stays secret for long. So are you guys together now?”

Cas shrugged. “I don’t know what we are yet.”

“Have you kissed?” she asked.
Cas didn’t say anything.

“You have! You kissed,” she said, her voice triumphant. “So do you plan to kiss again?”

Cas shrugged. “We have a date on Thursday.”

“Oh Cas, I’m so happy for you two.” She pressed her fingers to his arm. With surprise, Cas noted how cold they were, despite the heat outside. He glanced at the condensation on the glass she was holding. “So what are you going to do on your date?”

“I’m going to make dinner, and then I figured we’d see where it went from there.” Despite himself, he smiled. “I really like him Ellie.”

She smiled back. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You both deserve so much to be happy. So what are you going to make?”

“I figured I’d keep it simple. I was going to borrow a grill from Chuck. Make some burgers, corn on the cob, fry up some potatoes, maybe a salad.”

“Dean won’t eat the salad.” Ellie said, taking a drink of her coffee.

Cas furrowed his brow. “Oh?”

She winced, but in a flash, her expression returned to neutral. “Yeah.”

“Do you know him well?” Cas asked, his tone leading.

“Pretty well, but not in the way you’re thinking,” she said. Ellie looked away, down to her coffee mug. “Oh, Cas, this coffee hit the spot. Thank you,” She cracked her neck.

Recognizing that Ellie wanted to change the subject, Cas replied “You’re welcome. So, what have you been up to?”

“Work, work, work,” she replied. “You know how it is.”

Ellie had never talked about her work before. Castiel was curious about the life she led. Her cabin always seemed to be empty when he passed by it on his morning jogs and he’d never seen her around town. For the most part, his neighbor was a mystery to him.

“What do you do?” he asked as he took a sip of his coffee.

Ellie cocked her head to the side, regarding him for a moment. “I’m a counselor, of sorts. I help people come to terms with a loss.”

“So… you’re a grief counselor?”

“Yeah, kinda,” she finished her coffee.

“We’re you… his counselor?” he asked, putting two and two together. She met his gaze, but didn’t respond.

“You should make a pie too,” she said instead, changing the subject again. “Dean loves pie.”
“Good to know,” he said. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” she stood up and stretched. “Well, I better get on with my run,” she said. “You let me know how your date goes, ya hear?”

“I will. Have a good run.”

“See ya around, Cas.”

She stretched, then set off down the path towards town.

Cas finished his coffee and got ready for work.

The walk to the Roadhouse was uneventful. As he walked, he planned the meal he was going to make on Thursday night. He wanted to make something simple, familiar, but he also wanted to make an impression. He could almost remember all the ingredients he put his burger recipe, but there was one ingredient he couldn't for the life of him remember. He pondered on it the entire trip to the Roadhouse, but the answer alluded him.

Worked dragged. When his shift finally ended that night, Cas headed to the Piggly Wiggly to pick up a few things. He hurried home, storing the groceries in the fridge. He then cleaned up the house a bit. An hour later, Cas fell into bed.

The pattern continued over the next few days. Castiel filled his days with mindless chores, trying to keep his anxieties at bay, but by the time Thursday rolled around, he was still a nervous ball of anticipation. It was his day off, so when he woke up that morning, he set the beef and Italian sausage out to thaw, then headed over to Chuck’s to pick up the charcoal grill.

He then went to the barber in town and got a proper hair cut. His hair was getting shaggy, and even though he and Dean had an easy familiarity with one another, Castiel wanted to make a good impression.

He walked home quickly. The sky was overcast, and Cas was afraid it was going to rain, but the weather held. By the time he made it home, the sun was peeking out through the clouds.

Dean was to be over at seven, and the hours seemed to drag. There was nothing to do. All his laundry was done, the house was spotless. The meat for the hamburgers was almost thawed out enough that he’d be able to mold them into patties and marinate them before putting the corn on the cob in the sink to soak.

All that was left was the pie, but Cas had no clue what he was going to make. He checked his cupboard once more. He had all the ingredients he needed to make a crust. Cas sighed. He figured he could head to the store and see what struck his fancy.

Cas grabbed his wallet and walked to Bobby’s Market. Charlie was at the counter when he walked through the door.

It wasn’t busy. Bobby was leaning against the counter of the grill, a fishing magazine open as he thumbed idly through the pages.

Charlie looked up as he passed the counter, and visibly brightened. “Oh hey there, Cas,” she said.

Cas glanced her way. “Hello,” he replied. He picked up a shopping basket.

“Anything I can help you find?” she asked.
“Well,” Castiel began. “I’m making a pie, but I’m not sure what kind yet. What do you have in season right now?”

Charlie’s eyes widened and she smiled widely. “For your date tonight?” she asked in a conspiratorial tone. Quickly, Cas glanced over to Bobby, who wasn’t paying them any attention. “Oh, don’t worry about Bobby.”

“Does everyone know about tonight?” Cas asked.

Charlie scoffed. “No. Southport may be small but it isn’t that small. Dean was just, um… nervous I guess. Asked me for advice. You’re making him a pie?”

Castiel nodded. “A friend of mine said I should, but I don’t know what flavor to make.” Castiel leaned in closer. “What’s… what’s Dean’s favorite?”

Charlie smiled. “Pecan. But he also loves peaches, and we just got some in from a local organic farmer that are to die for.”

“Okay,” Cas nodded. “I’ll take two dozen.” Charlie nodded and headed to the back, where a small produce stand was set up.

Cas tried to remember about the required ingredients for peach pie and what else he’d need to get before she got back.

It was an easy recipe, one he had made several times over the years, and he strolled through the aisles, picking up cinnamon and brown sugar. He was just heading over to the small refrigerated section to get butter when Dean walked in.

“Hey Bobby!” Dean called as he descended the stairs from the shops loft area. “D’you know where I put that—oh! Uh…hi Cas.” Dean ran a hand through his hair, just as Charlie emerged from the greenhouse out back, her arms laden with peaches.

“Here ya go Cas, these should be awesome in a pie—oh hey Dean.” Cas closed his eyes for just a moment, only to open them back up and find Dean still standing there.

“Hi Dean,” Cas finally said. He glanced at Charlie, taking the bundle of peaches from her. “Thanks Charlie,” he said. Charlie left, heading up the spiral staircase to the loft. Bobby was quick to follow her. They were standing a few feet apart and Cas couldn’t figure out if that was too far away or much, much too close. A flush rose to his cheeks as he glanced down at the peaches.

Dean chuckled. “So you’re making a pie?” he asked, running a hand through his short hair. Cas smiled softly at the nervous habit.

“It was supposed to be a surprise. I should have gone to the Piggly Wiggly.”

Dean shook his head. “No! I mean— their produce is subpar at best. And I’ve been dying to have some of those peaches since they came in.” His expression turned tender. “Thank you,” he said. “It’s been a long time since someone has made me a pie.”

Cas waved him off. “A friend of mine suggested it.” He took a step closer, setting his basket on the countertop.

“Thank your friend for me,” Dean took a step closer as well, reaching out and grabbing the hem of Castiel’s t-shirt. He brushed his fingers through Cas’ hair, tucking a stray strand behind his ear. “Did you get a haircut?”
Castiel nodded. “It was getting too long.” He glanced around the empty store.

“I really like your hair,” Dean murmured, taking yet another step closer, until they were barely a breath apart. “It’s so soft.”

“Now would probably be a bad time to tell you I actually have light brown hair huh?” Dean laughed.

“I like it dark. It suits you.” Dean pressed his lips to Cas for a brief, chaste kiss. He pulled back. “I’ve wanted to do that all week.”

“I missed you too,” Cas replied. He pressed his hand against Dean’s chest then stepped back. “I’ll see you in a few hours?” he asked.

Dean nodded. He glanced back at the basket on the countertop. “Do you need anything else?” he asked Castiel.

Cas nodded. “I need butter.” Dean stepped away, walking over to the coolers and Cas tried to steady his breathing. Dean returned with a box of stick butter and stepped behind the counter. “Dean?” Cas began.

Dean looked up from the cash register. “Yeah?”

“Have you told… a lot of people about us?”

“Um, not a lot of people.” He paused, holding the butter. “Family, and a couple of close friends. Why?”

“It’s just… I’m a private person.”

Dean nodded. “I understand. I am too. But you don’t have to worry about anything from my family. They’ve pretty much always known I date men as well. And they won’t spread rumors around town or anything if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No, no!” Cas stuttered. “It’s nothing like that. I was just… You know what? Never mind. I was being stupid.”

“You were just worried about what, Cas?” Dean asked. He pressed the subtotal button and Cas pulled out the money for his groceries.

“It’s really nothing Dean, I promise. I was just… nervous.”

Dean nodded slowly, putting the cash in the register and pulling out a few dollar bills. “You don’t have to be nervous, Cas. We’re just having dinner.”

“I know,” Cas replied, taking the change.

“So what do you want me to bring?” Dean finally asked as Castiel picked up his bag of groceries.

“What?” Cas asked, confused. “You don’t need to bring anything.”

“Look, Ellen and Bobby practically raised me, okay? And here in the South, you don’t show up to someone’s house empty handed. So what do you say I bring some wine or something? Will that work?” he asked.

Cas smiled. “Something tells me you’re not really a wine sort of guy.”
Dean shrugged. “Nah, that’s more my brother, but I know a thing or two about it.”

“Well what if you bring some beer instead? It’ll go better with the meal.”

Dean beamed. “A man after my own heart! Anything else?” he asked.

“Just yourself,” Cas finally replied. Dean left the counter, moving over to the door with Castiel.

“I’ll see you in a few hours then,” Dean said. He pulled Castiel in for another brief kiss and then opened the door for Castiel.

Cas smiled widely. “See you later.”

He walked home with an extra bounce in his step.

It took most of the afternoon to make the pie, but the time went quickly for him. He found peace in the simple process of preparing the dish, from the rolling of the dough, to the perfectly even peach slices as he prepared the filling, everything had a set order, a routine, one he knew well.

Cas put the pie in the oven, then went out to the garden to get some vegetables for the salad. Dean may not eat it, but he’d had a hankering for one all week. Cas picked a couple of ripe tomatoes, a cucumber and a green pepper and then washed them with the garden hose in the back of the house. He set the vegetables in the fridge to cool.

Cas puttered around the garden for a few minutes, picking the weeds that had sprung up after Tuesday’s rain shower. then went inside to get ready for his date.

He took a quick shower, as he had less time than he really wanted to get ready before Dean was due to show up. He towel dried his hair and set about carefully shaving the stubble he’d allowed to grow for the past couple of days, then dressed in the suit slacks that he’d gotten from Missouri’s late husband and a nice dress shirt.

Cas grabbed a blue tie from his closet, hastily putting it on. He rolled up his sleeves. A heat wave had rolled in overnight, and once the clouds had dispersed that afternoon, the air had become muggy. Cas put on a pair of dark socks, but kept his shoes off as he puttered around the house, making sure everything was ready.

****

Cas had just started the briquettes on the fire when Dean pulled up to the house in his Jeep. Dean honked once at Cas, who was standing at the grill on the deck, one handholding a platter of hamburger patties, the other holding a spatula.

Castiel put the platter down and waved as Dean exited the car, carrying a six pack of El Sol beer and a tub of vanilla ice cream.

“I thought it’d go well with the pie,” Dean said as he approached. He was wearing a pair of dark khakis and a blue button down shirt. It was the nicest that Cas had ever seen him dressed and his heart began to race as he took the ice cream from Dean.

“You look nice,” he said, clearing his throat after his voice cracked.

Dean smiled. “Thanks, you do too.” Dean reached out to adjust the blue tie, which had become backwards at some point, then he grabbed the end of it, pulling Cas in for a brief kiss. His gaze moved to the platter of meat. “You’re making burgers?” Dean asked, excited. Cas smiled.
“It’s a specialty of mine.”

Dean laughed. “Well if that’s the case, this might be the best date I’ve had in years.”

Cas smiled tentatively. “The charcoal has a few minutes still. Wanna come in?” Cas gestured to the house, suddenly nervous. He had never allowed Dean into his home before.

“Thanks,” Dean entered the house, removing his boots at the door.

Cas took the ice cream and beer to the ice box, trying not to fidget as Dean inspected his home.

“You’ve fixed this old place up nicely.” Dean said. “When I was a kid, these cabins were a dump.”

“It took a while, but I like how it’s turned out,” Cas replied. He held out is hand. “Would you like to sit at the table?” Dean nodded. “You want a beer?” Cas asked as Dean sat down.

“Sure.”

Cas handed him a beer and opened one for himself, taking a small sip and placing it on the counter.

“I’ve still got some things to finish up.” he said, opening the fridge to retrieve the produce for his salad.

“Do you want some help?” Dean asked, half-standing up.

“No, no. I’m fine. You just relax.” Cas insisted.

He took the prepped corn on the cob out to the grill and put it and the meat on the fire, then returned to the kitchen, where he began dicing the vegetables. Dean watched him work. “Do you like cooking?” he asked. Cas nodded.

“I do,” he replied. “It’s one of my few real hobbies.”

“I like it too. Next time, I’ll make you dinner.” Dean said, taking a sip of his beer.

Cas’ heart fluttered over the words ‘next time.’

“I’ll have to take you up on that. So Dean,” he asked, moving the cutting board over to the table so he could sit down with Dean instead of face away from him. “What do you like on your burgers?”

“Oh I like the works. Anything. Everything.” Dean replied. He glanced down at the tomato Cas was slicing. “You sure you don’t want any help?”

“Dean, don’t feel obligated to help. I want to cook for you.” Cas regarded the guilty expression on Dean’s face. “It’s okay if someone takes care of you every now and again.”

Dean just shrugged. “I feel bad just sitting here, man.”

“Stubborn,” Castiel murmured. He smiled, shaking his head slightly. “Could you go flip the meat?” he finally asked. “I’m almost done with the inside stuff, then we can go sit on the porch.”

Dean nodded.

As Dean stood up, he brushed his fingers down Cas’ arm, and the knife stuttered in his hand. One of the cucumber slices was cut crookedly, much larger than the others. Quickly, before he even realized what he’d done, Cas picked up the piece of incorrectly sliced cucumber and popped it into his
mouth. The vegetables needed to be cut evenly. It was a rule.

Dean didn't notice the reaction. Instead, he padded out to the front porch, where he lifted the lid of the grill and flipped the burgers. He also turned the foil-wrapped corn on the cob.

Cas finished the salad quickly, then put it in the fridge to chill.

He pulled the pie out of the oven and set it on the windowsill to cool, then grabbed both of their beers and headed out to the porch.

The bugs had begun to swarm, and Cas pulled a pack of matches from his pocket, lighting a citronella candle he’d picked up a few days before. Dean took his hand as they sat in the rocking chairs. They didn’t speak, the only sounds were the screaming of the cicadas in the woods and the sizzle of the meat on the grill.

It was a peaceful sort of quiet though. Dean wasn't the type of person to fill the space between them with empty chatter, and neither was Cas. They just sat and held hands while dinner cooked, each of them nursing their beer. By the time the meat was done, the sun had sunk low on the horizon. Cas got up from the rocking chair and headed into the house for a clean platter.

He handed it to Dean, who filled it up with the food, then went back inside, where he set out all the ingredients to make the hamburgers. He then set the table with a salad plate, and a fork and knife.

He put the dinner plates on the counter next to the food, so they could fill them up buffet style. Dean entered the kitchen, where he set the burgers down, then opened the refrigerator. He pulled out the salad and Cas directed him to put it on the table, along with a bottle of ranch and thousand island dressing.

They made their plates in silence, with Dean standing a few inches closer than what was considered polite. Cas could feel his body heat as he added sliced onion and mustard to his burger.

“Do you want cheese?” he asked, and Dean nodded.

Cas got four slices of American cheese from the fridge and handed some to Dean, who unwrapped a slice and applied it to his burger.

Once they filled their plates, they sat down. Cas filled up the smaller plate at the table with salad, adding ranch dressing.

Dean put a little bit of salad on his plate as well, but used the thousand island dressing. It was much less salad than Cas had gotten, and for a moment, Cas felt unbalanced. He glanced down at his plate. It was just as full, if not more full, than Dean’s.

In his old life, Cas never ate more than Bart did at dinner time. But Dean wasn't eyeing his full plate with judgement. Instead, he was taking a bite of the burger that Cas had made.

His eyes fluttered shut and he moaned. The sound went straight to Cas’ groin and he took a deep breath before standing up to get them both another beer.

“Cas,” Dean said from behind him. “This is… this is the best burger I’ve ever had in my life. What marinade did you use on the meat?” he asked, his voice astonished.

Castiel beamed. “It’s a recipe I got from an old friend up in Boston. Soy sauce, garlic and salt and pepper, with some cayenne pepper. I almost forgot the cayenne pepper. It bugged me all week that I couldn't remember the last ingredient.” Castiel took a bite of his burger. It was good.
“Why didn’t you just call her up?” Dean asked and Cas froze, casting his gaze down.

“I… I couldn’t remember her number off the top of my head,” he lied.

Dean took another bite. “It’s so good,” he put the hamburger down and reached across the table, where he took Cas’ hand. “Thank you.”

Cas waved him off. “It was nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” Dean argued. “It is really good.”

Cas ducked his head. “Thanks,” he finally replied. Dean squeezed his hand once and picked up his corn on the cob. He chuckled softly.

“When me and Sammy were kids, any time we had corn on the cob, I used to cut the kernels off of the cob with this old knife I used to carry around. Sammy couldn’t hold the cob without burning himself.” Dean laughed. “To this day, that’s still how he eats his corn.”

Cas smiled. “I had a brother who ate corn like that too,” he said. “But it was because he had braces for like, eight years and couldn’t eat his corn any other way.”

“Eight years?” Dean asked, putting the empty cob back onto his plate.

Cas nodded. “There were only two orthodontists in the whole town. One would keep you in braces for years and years at a time, slowly adjusting your teeth until they were right. The other one had a much quicker solution. He would pull a large portion of teeth at once, like the back molars? And then he would only keep you in braces for a year or two. Three at the most. Gabriel went to the first guy.”

Dean laughed. “What about you? Did you ever have braces?”

Cas shook his head. “No. My parents couldn't really afford it. Gabriel only got them because his teeth were very messed up. What about you?”

Dean shook his head. “I was lucky. Got my dad’s teeth. Never needed braces. Plus,” Dean added as he took another bite of his burger, “Plus, we moved around so much that I couldn't have maintained braces even if I needed them. After we moved here, Ellen and Bobby took Sammy to get braces though.”

There was a spot of mustard on the corner of Dean’s mouth and Cas reached over, wiping it away with his thumb. Dean’s eyes widened at the touch, then darkened when Cas pulled away, putting his thumb into his mouth and licking the mustard clean.

Cas met his gaze and pulled his own burger back up to take a bite.

Dean cleared his throat, leaning back a bit. “Ben got his mama’s teeth. I need to get him into the doc soon, to get him fitted for a bumper but I don’t think Em will need braces.”

Cas smiled wistfully at the mention of Dean’s children. “Claire had a lovely smile. She could light up a room with it.”

Dean wiped his mouth with a napkin. “You miss her,” he stated.

Castiel nodded. “I do, more than anything.”

“Have you ever thought about getting back in touch with her?” Dean asked.
Cas was silent. “Not—erm—not for a long time,” Cas cleared his throat, biting his lip.

The last time he’d thought about seeing Claire again, he’d ended up with several cracked ribs and a concussion.

“Maybe… maybe soon. I can’t dig too deep or—”

“—or he’ll find you?” Dean finished for Castiel. Cas met his gaze, his eyes widened.

“I—I dunno what you’re talking about,” he lied, slowly gathering the plates. His fingers trembled.

“Cas, you don’t have to lie to me. I know you’re running from someone, and I think I know why.”

Dean stood up, standing behind Castiel.

Cas didn’t acknowledge him. Instead he focused on the dishes. “How did you figure it out?” Cas asked.

Dean shrugged, leaning against the counter. “It was a lot of little things, really.” He pulled the rinsed dish from Cas’ hand “You were beat to hell when you first came into town. You kept to yourself. Once I saw you play with a ring that wasn’t there.” Dean took another dish and dried it, setting it on the dish rack. “Couple nights ago, when the firework came at us, you had a flashback didn’t you?”

Castiel nodded. “Yeah,” he said finally.

“His name was Bart?” Dean asked.

“Yeah.”

“Castiel,” Dean began. “Nothing I can say can make what happened to you better. It happened, and I’m sorry. But I want you to know, you’re safe with me.”

Cas stopped washing the dishes. He furrowed his brow at the suggestion in Dean’s tone. “I know that Dean.”

“Do you?”

Castiel bit his lip, looking away. Dean sighed. “I’m gonna go put out the grill, I’ll be right back.”

Dean tossed his beer bottle into the trash can and went outside.

Cas took a deep breath, willing his heart to stop racing. He flinched a few moments later when the door shut with a squeak.

“So,” Dean said, coming up to the sink and washing his hands. “You figure it out yet?”

“Figure what out?”

“Whether or not you’re gonna run outta town the first chance you get.”

Cas bit back a smile. “I think I’ll stick around for a while.”

“Good,” Dean replied sincerely. “That’s good.”

“Yes, look Dean—”

“—Cas, you don’t have to tell me anything. I just wanted to say… you can make up a new story if
you want. And I will back it up. Southport… it can be a safe haven for you.”

“He’ll find me… he always does.” Dean stepped forward grabbing both of Cas’ hands.

“He won’t, Cas, and if he does… we’ll deal with it.”

“How?” Castiel asked, scoffing. “Just ask him politely to leave me in peace? Dean, the last time I left, he almost killed me.” Cas pulled his hands away, turning away.

Dean ran a hand through his hair. “We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it Cas,” he finally said.

Castiel sighed. “I—can we change the subject?”

Disappointment settled like a heavy weight within Dean. “Sure,” he finally said.

Castiel smiled gratefully. “How about some pie?” Dean nodded, and took the peach pie off of the windowsill. Then he pulled the ice cream from the icebox in Castiel’s antique freezer.

They fixed themselves a large plate of dessert. Night had fallen now, and they could hear the sound of the crickets outside the screen door.

“I could make coffee,” Cas offered as they began to eat.

“Nah, I’m good.” Dean said, his mouth full of peaches. They sat in silence for a few minutes, each of them enjoying their dessert.

“But the first time he hit me,” Cas said suddenly, and Dean looked up from the peach he was spearing with his fork. “He told me it was because I made him do it. Because I had the audacity to tell him he couldn’t cheat on me.” Dean reached out, grabbing Cas’ hand. “The second time he hit me, it was because a stain had set in one of his dress shirts and I wasn’t able to get it out.”

“Cas, you don’t have to tell me this,” Dean insisted.

“I want to,” Cas replied earnestly. His eyes shone with tears. “I—I need to tell you this Dean.”

Dean nodded, squeezing Cas’ hand tighter. “Okay, I’ll listen.”

“It was little things at first. He would get jealous if one of his coworkers spoke to me at work events, even though he knew they were straight. He blamed me for everything. The kitchen wasn’t organized, or the towels were crooked on the towel rack. The house was never clean enough. The yard was never manicured enough. I didn’t pick up enough bottles of vodka earlier that week at the store. I either looked so good that it was my fault when others paid attention to me, or I was a horrible ugly mess and no one would ever love me besides him. He belittled me, made me feel stupid. He wouldn’t let me go back to school to pursue architecture; he wouldn’t let me fight for visitation rights of my daughter. And then, a few years after our marriage, he started cheating on me.” Cas took a deep breath.

“I’m so sorry Cas,” Dean said. Cas smiled tightly, exhaling shakily.

“That’s when the beatings began. I knew I should have left long before he ever hit me, but I was weak I—”

“—People who are abused rarely get out, and you did.” Dean finished. “You left him Castiel. You got away. You were brave to get out of that situation, and nothing you could ever say to me would
“I tried to leave once before,” Cas said, his voice trembling. “But he threatened to kill me. The bastard almost succeeded.”

“How did you get away?” Dean finally asked, handing over one of the napkins in the holder on the table.

Cas wiped his eyes. “Pure luck, and the help of a good friend,” Castiel finally replied. “She gave me some money and helped me pack a bag, then took me to the bus station. She gave me her late husband’s identification. But even then,” Cas said, “Even then I almost didn't make it out of there.”

“But you did, Cas.” Cas stood up abruptly, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. One hand was anxiously twirling a ring that was no longer there. Dean stood up, pulling Cas into a tight embrace. “I’ve got you Cas, I’ve got you.” Dean whispered, pressing his lips to Castiel’s forehead.

“Dean, my name, my real name is—“

“—Castiel,” Dean interjected. “Your real name is Castiel.”
The early morning light filtered through the window above the head of his bed. Detective Michelson groaned, blocking his eyes with his forearm as the alarm clock blared in his ears. He waved in the general direction of it, trying to hit the button that would shut it off. When it didn't suddenly quiet with his gestures, he sat up and threw the clock across the room. The glass face shattered, falling to the ground with thud.

The house was sweltering. He didn't like to turn the air conditioning on, not this early in the season. It was too expensive to cool this drafty old house and if there was one thing he hated, it was wasting money. But that spring had been especially warm, and for the first time, Michelson considered breaking his rule in order to get some relief from the heat.

Sweat dripped down his back as he stumbled through the bedroom towards the hallway. Michelson grabbed the last clean towel from the linen closet. He stared at the disorganized closet. If things were the way they were supposed to be, the closet would be full of light green towels, neatly folded and organized in rows on the spotless shelves.

As it was, the closet was a disheveled mess. A light layer of dust covered the white shelves. Spare sheet sets had fallen to the floor, there were no more towels. One lone wash cloth sat by itself, the corner of the green fabric upturned at an awkward angle. Detective Michelson flipped the corner of the cloth back down, until it was sitting neatly on the shelf. Feeling somewhat better, he made his way to the bathroom, doing his best to ignore the pile of dirty suit slacks and dress shirts in the full dirty clothes hamper. Tried to ignore the reason why the laundry wasn't done, why there were dust bunnies gathering in the corners of the room, why the toilet bowl had a filmy ring just above the water line.

By the time he showered and shaved, his blinding headache had dissipated somewhat, but the light filtering in through the windows was still far too bright for his taste. He went downstairs.

The kitchen was a mess. Dirty dishes piled up in the sink, and the entire room was tainted with the
smell of food that had long since gone bad. He breathed through his mouth as he opened the cabinet above the beverage center, pulling out the ibuprofen.

Chasing the medicine with the last two shots from a bottle of vodka sitting on his kitchen table, Detective Michelson rifled through the mail from the day before, but it was nothing but bills and junk mail. He tossed it onto the beverage center counter, along with all the other mail that had been collecting there for the past few months.

A tinny chime from his phone let him know he’d be late if he didn't get out the door soon. Michelson groaned. He needed coffee. Stat. He searched the cupboards, but the bag holding the coffee beans was empty.

Cursing, he opened the fridge, hunting down something he could make for breakfast. But the milk was spoiled, and the bread in the breadbox was molded. He didn't even want to guess how old the eggs were. Michelson threw the bread away and dumped the milk, then headed out the door. He searched the cupboards, but the bag holding the coffee beans was empty.

A tinny chime from his phone let him know he’d be late if he didn't get out the door soon. Michelson groaned. He needed coffee. Immediately.

Dunkin’ Donuts was a short drive on the way to work. He didn't particularly want to waste five dollars for a cup of coffee, but he hadn’t gone to the store in ages and the coffee machines at the station were disgusting, and he refused to drink it.

He parked his vehicle in a loading zone, and stepped inside the overcrowded Dunkin’ Donuts. The line to the counter was long; Michelson muttered to himself as it slowly moved forward. By the time he made it to the front, he was already eight minutes late for his shift at the station.

He ordered a large triple red eye and hurried out the door. Michelson was half-tempted to turn his sirens on as he drove to work, if only to make his commute shorter. But he didn’t. For one, it would do nothing for his headache, for another, he was a good, honest detective who didn't abuse his power, unlike some of his fellow co-workers.

Traffic was abysmal, like always, and twenty five minutes after his shift was supposed to begin, he walked into the station. Detective Michelson checked his gun at the metal detector. Larry, the desk sergeant, waved him through and he headed to the back corner of the precinct, where the detectives’ desks were hidden away. As he passed by, Michelson ducked his head into the Chief’s office, mumbling an apology and spouting off the excuse of traffic for his tardiness, then headed over to his cubicle.

Unlike his home, Michelson’s desk was pristine.

On the cork board above his tabletop was a series of photos. They were all of the same man: fair-skinned in his thirties, but each one was manipulated by photoshop to show different disguises his current target may have donned. All of them showed the same deep blue eyes. Michelson couldn’t bring himself to change Jimmy’s eye color.

He told the other detectives that the photos were from experimentation with the new disguise software, that he was especially proud of how real the photo’s looked so he pinned them up. Of course, this wasn’t the truth, but they couldn’t know that. They couldn't know the truth because they were nosy gossips who would spread lies about him if they knew.

The detective worked diligently for an hour, making notes on a current murder investigation that was about to go to trial. He checked and rechecked his notes, making sure that everything was in order
before he was called to the stand later that week. He then checked his email.

A detective from a precinct downtown had left him an email. The subject line was “Got a lead,” but there was nothing in the body of the message besides a time to meet.

There was only one case that this particular detective would be contacting him about. His heart began to race and for a moment the text on his screen blurred. Michelson took a long swallow from a water bottle he had hidden away in the bottom of his desk drawer, sighing as the liquid burned down his throat.

He sent a quick text to the other detective, instructing him to meet at their usual place, a grease trap halfway between each of their stations. Michelson grabbed his suit jacket, even though the morning was already hot outside and made his way to his car.

It was a short trip to the bar. The entire ride there, Michelson’s heart pounded at the prospect of a lead. It had been three months of nothing, and he was growing impatient for a break in the case. The Novak case had consumed his every waking moment since that rainy night in March. Michelson had become so obsessed he’d let most of his other cases slide.

Detective Michelson spent the first few weeks canvassing the neighborhood where Novak had lived, interrogating all of his neighbors. After that didn't work, he'd fanned out, into other neighborhoods in and around the college near his house.

Michelson had a knack for knowing when someone was lying and most of the neighbors had no idea where Novak could have fled. Their open expressions and honest answers were enough to satisfy and frustrate him at the same time.

But one of the neighbors, Missouri Moseley, who lived three streets down, had stuck out to him, and he couldn't figure out why. They weren’t close neighbors, and she claimed not to know him when Michelson asked, but her answers were always clipped, like she had better things to do than to help with a missing persons investigation. She looked at him as if he were a turd stuck to the bottom of her shoe and he got the distinct impression that she was hiding something.

Michelson had questioned her a couple more times since their initial meeting, but her answer was always the same. She had never met James Novak. She didn't know where he was or who he was with, and she would appreciate it if he left her property. The last time he’d questioned her, the woman had become irate, demanding to see a warrant before she allowed him entry. Michelson had given up then. He couldn’t draw too much attention to himself.

The bar was almost empty when he walked in. The room was stuffy, smelling of stale beer and mildew. Michelson wrinkled his nose and looked around the room.

Crowley was late, which was unusual for him. On a normal day, the man was irritatingly punctual. Detective Michelson ordered a double vodka with a splash of cranberry and waited in a corner booth. He was halfway done with his third drink when Crowley’s small frame slid into the booth seat opposite him.

“Starting the hooch a bit early are we?” he asked in a slimy accent that set Michelson’s teeth on edge. Michelson glared but did not answer.

He tossed back the rest of his drink, setting it aside. “You said you had a lead?” he finally replied, successfully hiding the slight slur to his words.

“I might,” Crowley replied, holding up a manilla envelope.
Michelson reached for it, but Crowley pulled it back. “Do you have what I need?”

Detective Michelson pursed his lips, pulling out a zip drive containing evidence that detailed Crowley’s association with an illegal import/export trade on the docks.

“This doesn't make us even,” Michelson said tersely. He handed over the drive, but pulled it out of Crowley’s grasp as he had done him. “I still have evidence that connects you to at least two counts of kidnapping. And the last guy you ‘questioned,’ he lost a couple fingers didn’t he?”

“Allegedly. Sweetheart, I understand. Your cock is larger than mine. Let us move on.” Crowley pushed the manilla envelope over to Detective Michelson’s side of the table. Michelson did the same with the zip drive.

Crowley tucked the zip drive into his jacket pocket. He took a sip of water as Michelson opened up the folder. Inside was a stack of grainy photographs, taken from what looked like a security camera in a bus station. Michelson frowned. He’d been to that bus station that night and he hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary. He’d questioned the tellers selling tickets and the bus drivers who were on shift that night.

No one had seen him. He felt anger start to rise within him and he swallowed it down. If this was a bogus lead and Crowley was wasting his time, he was going to kill him. He rifled through the photographs.

The first two were rather unremarkable, a man wearing a dark hoodie, his face turned away. Despite the late hour, he was wearing sunglasses. The picture showed him boarding what looked like a greyhound bus. But the third picture set Michelson’s heart racing. The man’s face was zoomed closer in this one. His face was in shadow, but Michelson recognized the split, full lips. He recognized the series of bruises that mottled the man’s jaw and his thin, gaunt frame.

The front of the bus was shown, the word “Atlanta” clearly emblazoned on the destination sign. Atlanta. Jimmy Novak had headed south.

Crowley nodded once and stood up, leaving a crisp one hundred dollar bill onto the greasy tabletop. “A pleasure as always,” Crowley stated as he walked away.

Bart smirked and raised his hand for another drink.
Dean cleared his throat. “My mom used to call me her star baby.”

“She was right. You are positively covered in stars.”

Castiel looked up into Dean’s eyes, and once more Dean was struck by how blue Cas’ eyes were. “You’re such a sap,” Dean said.

“I know. You love it.” Castiel replied, flippant. Then he looked away quickly. He hadn’t quite meant to reveal so much.

“I do,” Dean replied, his gaze steady. “I love that about you.”
“You’re such a sap,” Dean replied. He lifted his head from Castiel’s shoulder, laughing. Cas kissed him.

“I come by it honestly,” Castiel replied. Dean huffed out another laugh against his lips.

“Hello?” The voice of the woman rose up from the store below. “Anyone here?”

“Yeah, sorry!” Dean pulled back and called down. “I’ll be down in just a minute.”

“Better get yourself in order there,” Cas whispered. His hand slid down Dean’s back to his ass, pulling him close. “You wouldn’t want to scare the poor girl away with your little problem.”

Dean sucked in a breath as Castiel gently rolled his hips. “I take it back. You’re not a sap. You’re evil.”

Cas stepped back completely, his expression suddenly blank. Even still, there was a light of mischief in his eyes as he smoothed down Dean’s hair and meticulously straightened his shirt. He bent down to pick up the apron that had been carelessly tossed aside when they first made it up the spiral staircase to the loft. Dean took it from him.

As he tied the apron on, Dean studied Cas. His tanned cheeks were flushed, his blue eyes fever bright. Castiel took a seat on the couch and waved towards the spiral staircase.

“Sooner you take care of her, the sooner we can get back to what we were doing,” Castiel replied evenly, and a flash of heat rushed through Dean, all the way to his fingertips.

“Evil.” Dean flashed Cas a smile as he climbed down the stairs two at a time.

Castiel stared at the old fashioned tin ceiling, listening to Dean rush the woman through her shopping. He smiled. Taking a deep breath, Castiel forced himself to calm down. He hadn’t intended to get so carried away that morning, and he certainly hadn’t intended to make out with Dean in the middle of the general store.

But when he came through the back door that morning to find Dean at the grill, leaning against the wide windowsill that overlooked the riverfront, Cas couldn’t help it. Looking gorgeous in a black t-shirt and jeans, Dean’s green apron was tied around his waist, highlighting just a hint of pudge right around his middle. The light from the open window was hitting him just right, and he was beautiful.

There were no other customers in the store. Dean glanced up and smiled at him so wide, Cas felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. Before either of them could say so much as “Good morning,” Castiel had crossed the room, pulling away the spatula Dean was holding. He slid it under the sausage patties that were sizzling on the grill, and deposited them onto the waiting paper plate. He then grabbed fistfuls of Dean’s shirt and pulled him into a deep kiss. Dean kissed back. They’d had just enough forethought to turn off the grill before Dean led them—still kissing—up the stairs to the loft.

It was Castiel’s first day off in over a week. Like most small towns along the coast, tourism was a big industry in Southport, and institutions like The Roadhouse were busier than ever as July came to a close.

The weather was glorious. Sunlight streamed into the store’s loft from a skylight above. The windows were open, bringing in the salty sea air on the warm breeze. Castiel took a deep breath, and sprawled further out on the small couch. His body was loose limbed and relaxed, though the thrum of excitement still coursed through his veins.
He glanced up as Dean reentered the loft, a lazy grin on his face. Dean crossed the room, kicking his boots off as he went. He climbed onto the couch, straddling Cas’ thighs. Despite being gone for less than five minutes, Dean kissed Cas like a man starved and Castiel chuckled.

“God, I thought she’d never leave,” he murmured against Cas’ lips. “C’mere, Angel.” Cas smiled at the nickname, lifting his neck so Dean could press his lips to the hollow right at his collarbone.

“I thought I was evil?” Cas asked.

“You are, but I missed you too damn much to care, Cas.”

“I-I missed you too.”

“I have half a mind to tell Ellen she’s working you too hard, and that you need more days off.”

“Oh? And what would I do with these days off?” Castiel stifled a groan as Dean’s fingers curled into his hair. He turned his head, capturing Dean’s lips with his own.

“Well, I’m sure we can think of something. Ellen loves me, and only wants what’s best for me,” Dean replied simply. Cas laughed. “Are you going to Jo’s party tonight?” Dean asked between kisses.

“I was invited,” Cas replied.

Dean smiled crookedly, “Wanna go as my date?”

Cas bit his lip, his smile faltering. “Are you sure you’re ready to tell them about us?”

Dean shrugged. “Good a time as any, right? Honestly, I haven’t been fooling anyone. The other day Bobby flat out asked me who I was dating. And besides, they’re gonna find out sooner or later.”

“Oh they are?”

“Yeah, if you keep barging in here and kissing the life out of me,” Dean joked. Castiel laughed. Dean grew somber, pulling back from their embrace. “Cas… I don’t want to hide… this… us.”

Castiel paused before he smiled. “I don’t either, Dean.”

The bell chimed once again below them and Dean sighed. “I should have put the closed sign up,” he muttered.

“I’m distracting you,” Castiel said. He pushed Dean off his lap. “Go back to work, Dean. I’ll see you tonight.”

“I don’t wanna,” Dean pouted. He pushed himself back onto Castiel’s lap. Cas groaned and tried not to grab Dean by the hips and press into the friction. A childlike smile spread across his face. “Let’s play hooky,” he said, suddenly excited.

“Who’s gonna run the store?” Castiel asked, incredulous. “It’s the busiest time of the year.”

Dean shrugged. “They can go to the Piggly-Wiggly. Come on Cas, what’s the point in having a family business if you can’t make your own hours?” He stood up, walking over to his discarded boots. “Let’s go to the beach. Hell, let’s go to Wilmington. Baby hasn’t been on a good long drive in ages.”

Castiel laughed. “Wilmington is only forty-five minutes away.”
Dean shrugged. “So? We’ll take the backroads.” Dean winked.

“What about the kids?” Castiel asked.

“They’re spending the night at Benny’s, and tomorrow Andrea is taking them all to the zoo.” Dean pressed a kiss to Cas’ lips. “Be right back.”

Dean ran down to take care of the new customer. After a couple of minutes he returned.

“That was quick,” Cas murmured.

“I’ve decided. I’m playing hooky. You gonna join me or not, old man?”

Cas shook his head, smiling. “I’m not that much older than you, Dean.”

Dean’s smile was a sight to behold. “Awesome. Come on, get your stuff.”

Cas followed Dean down the spiral staircase. The sign on the door was already up and Cas laughed. Dean instructed Cas to grab some supplies as he ducked over to his house to grab the car.

Castiel grabbed a case of soda and some chips, along with beef jerky and, on a whim, a bag of Peanut M&Ms. Dean returned shortly with an old Coleman. He put a twenty in the register and filled it with ice and their supplies then packed it into the back seat of the Impala.

They stopped by Castiel’s cottage, where Dean waited in the driveway. Cas picked up the gift he’d gotten Jo, along with a pair of swim trunks and a change of clothes, as they wouldn't have time to make it back to the cottage before the party, then they headed out of Southport.

By then it was mid morning. The rush hour traffic had long since quieted down and the roads were nearly empty, but they avoided the highway anyway. Dean whooped in excitement the moment they reached open road. He expertly maneuvered the Impala’s long body around the winding curves of the backroads, heading north. Castiel watched as he drummed his fingers to the beat of the music, occasionally singing along to the lyrics.

“Emma was right,” Castiel said.

“Hmm?” Dean looked over at Castiel.

“You can’t carry a tune to save your life.”

“I can’t. And when I was a kid, I was sure I’d grow up to be a rockstar.”

Castiel smiled. “Somehow, I don’t think that career choice would have worked in your favor.” Dean laughed out loud.

“No, it wouldn’t’ve,” Dean replied. He met Cas’ gaze for a moment before focusing back on the road. “What did you want to be as a kid?”

Cas was quiet for a moment. “I wanted to be an architect,” he finally said. “But my husb—Bart forced me to drop out of school before I could finish my degree.”

“Can I ask,” Dean hesitated, but nodded to himself, steeling his resolve, “how you met him?”

“Well,” Cas began. “After everything happened with Amelia and Claire, I was in a pretty bad place. The Catholic radio station that I sold ad space for fired me, because my ‘lifestyle didn't reflect their wholesome family values.’ A few months later, Amelia sued for sole custody and termination of my
parental rights.” He paused, biting his lip. “How could I fight her? I didn't have a job, I was crashing on the couch of my older brother, Gabriel, the only one who hadn't disowned me in my entire family. I had no money, no prospects, and no place to raise a little girl. Amelia had met someone, and he wanted to adopt her. The day after I signed the termination papers, I got on a bus and headed to Boston. Got a job at a nice restaurant. I got into Boston University.”

Dean whistled. “Sam was looking into Boston University, went with Stanford instead. I know how expensive that place can get,” he said. “So you met Bart at college?”

Cas shook his head. “No, I met him right before my first semester. I was covering a shift at the restaurant for a friend when a group of guys recognized me from a start of term mixer at Harvard someone threw the weekend before. I had… uh…gone with a date. They were just a bunch of homophobic assholes making their voices heard, but Bart was there at the end of the bar. He stepped in, stood up for me,” his voice turned sad. Castiel looked out the window, biting his lip. His expression became distant.

“So, why architecture?” Dean quickly changed the subject, hoping to bring Cas back. Cas looked over at him, pulled from the memory.

“I have always had a fascination with the way things are put together. I liked seeing the big picture come together from all the little details.”

Dean nodded as Cas spoke. “I get that. Sorta like how I am with cars. My dad, he was a mechanic. Taught me everything I know about cars. Damn Marine never forgave me when I joined the Army. But originally, I was part of a transportation unit working on military vehicles. I loved it. Taking care of those vehicles… fixing them. It was a problem I could conquer. Something I could solve. Unlike my life,” Dean chuckled. “No matter how much I tried, I couldn't fix the fact that Mom was dead. I couldn't find the man who set my brother’s nursery on fire. I couldn't fix my dad, or stop him from drinking himself to death. But I could fix those goddamn cars.” Dean’s voice cracked and he scrubbed a hand down his face. “Then there was an opening with CID.” Dean shrugged, changing the subject. “It was better pay, and a promotion. By that time Lisa was expecting Ben. So I transferred.”

“CID?”

“Military police. I was stationed at Fort Bragg.”

Castiel’s eyes widened. “You were a police officer?”

Dean shrugged. “More like a detective. Dealt with crimes committed by military personnel on base.”

Castiel flinched. He twisted his invisible ring again; Dean noticed, but glanced away. Cas drew up close to the passenger door, moving as far away from Dean in the confined space as he could. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Dean wasn’t sure what he’d said to make Castiel withdraw, but he wanted to bring him back. To keep talking, learn more about the quiet man next to him, and to share more about himself.

They had known each other a relatively short amount of time, and while they both knew the broad strokes of their past lives, Dean wanted Castiel to know more about him. Dean wanted to know more about Castiel. Dean took a deep breath. Was he ready to talk about her with Castiel?

“I met Lisa at Fort Bragg,” he said, a little too casually. Dean laughed to himself. “I got the flu. But I was stubborn. Wasn’t gonna let the flu stop me from working. My fever was so high I passed out, fell down a flight of steps and broke my leg.”
Castiel fought a small smile. “I can’t imagine that was very much fun.”

“No, when I came to, I was hopped up on some very good drugs, but everywhere still hurt. Through the haze I saw her. I was so high, I misread her name badge; called her Lisa. And no matter how many times she reminded me, I kept messing it up. Eventually, she gave up, and the name stuck.” Dean smiled sadly.

“You loved her very much,” Cas said. It wasn’t a question.

“I did.”

“How long were you with her?”

“Almost six years.”

The windows were down, and the sweet smell of magnolia blossoms combined with the smell of leather and Old Spice in the cab of the car. Cas leaned his head back against the soft leather seat, intending to take a nap, but Dean turned up the music, some old hair metal band Cas hadn’t even heard of, and took Castiel’ hand. Cas opened his eye, catching Dean’s appreciative gaze.

Nearly an hour later, Dean pulled into the driveway of a one story brick building.

“Are you hungry?” Dean asked.

“I could eat.”

“Good, because once you’ve tasted this barbecue, you will be a changed man. I swear to God.”

He parked the car near the back of the lot and they walked up the gravel drive to the weathered door of the building. Even before they walked in, Cas could smell the smoke of the barbecue out back. His stomach rumbled.

The restaurant was dimly lit, and nearly empty. Dean greeted the man behind the counter warmly, pointing to a booth in the back of the dining room. The man nodded, going back to the glass he was wiping.

“You know the owner?” Castiel asked as he sat down. The table top was slightly sticky, and worn. There were hundreds of initials scratched into the green laminate. It was small. Beneath the table, Cas and Dean’s feet bumped together when Castiel adjusted in his seat.

“Cain and I go way back,” Dean replied, but didn’t say anything more on the matter.

A young woman in a plaid shirt stepped up to their table.

“Hey Dean!” she said warmly. “Haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Hey Tracy. Haven’t come up this way since the kids needed new shoes. How you been?”

“I’ve been good? You?”

“Same,” Dean replied. “Oh, sorry, this is my boyfriend, Cas.”

Cas felt something warm settle in the pit of his stomach at the introduction.

Tracy held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Cas.”
“Likewise.”

She handed Dean and Cas both a menu, and pulled out her tablet. “What can I get you guys to drink?”

Dean glanced at Castiel. “What do you want, Cas?” he asked. Surreptitiously, Dean slid his foot over to his side of the table. Cas felt a boot slide up his calf and he swallowed.

“I’ll take an El Sol draft, Tracy.” He wasn’t driving, and it had been a long time since he enjoyed a draft beer at a restaurant.

Dean smiled. “Sweet tea, thanks,” he added.

“Sure thing,” Tracy replied, and left.

Dean’s foot hooked around Castiel’s ankle, pulling his leg closer. “So, what sounds good?” Dean asked.

Cas pretended not to notice. Instead, he picked up his menu. “What’re you gonna get?” he asked, cultivating a calm demeanor, but it was belied by the trembling of his fingers. He gripped the menu tighter, trying to hide it. *I’m safe here with Dean*, Cas thought, as panic threatened to overwhelm him. Bart used to ask him what he wanted to eat as well. But if Cas ever got the wrong thing, he was punished for it when they got home.

“What do you want?” Dean asked him. Dean wasn’t even looking at the menu, rather just staring at Castiel in the dim light. Cas got the impression he wasn’t talking about lunch anymore.

Cas swallowed. “The pulled pork looks pretty good,” he replied conversationally. Dean’s boot slid higher up Castiel’s leg. Castiel met his gaze, finding Dean smirking at him. Castiel pulled his leg away. “Is there something I can help you with?” he asked.

Dean smiled. “Nope,” he said. He looked back down at his menu.

Tracy made her way up to the table with their drinks. “Y’all figure you what you want?” she asked, setting the glasses down on the table.

Dean gestured towards Castiel, letting him go first.

“I’ll have the pulled pork sandwich.”

“I will too,” Dean said. Tracy wrote their order down on the pad.

“I’ll get that right out for you.” When she was gone, Dean met Castiel’s gaze.

“I know what you’re doing,” Castiel finally said, taking a sip of his beer. It was good.

“Do you?” Cas decided he needed to do something about the smirk on Dean’s face.

As surreptitiously as he could, Cas slipped his hand under the table. He reached down to the boot currently making its way up and down his calf. Dean jerked at the first touch to his ankle. Castiel’s fingers deftly undid the shoelaces, and with some difficulty, he slipped the boot off Dean’s foot. Dean’s eyes crinkled at the corner as Castiel began a methodical massage. Cas lifted his eyebrows, daring Dean to say something.

Dean shook his head, biting back a smile. “*Evil.*”
“You started it, Winchester.”

Dean conceded the point, lifting his hands. He leaned back slightly, pressing his foot into lap. Castiel sucked in a breath.

“So what did you get Jo for her birthday?” Dean asked.

“I found an old hunter’s knife with the most beautiful carving at Over the Rainbow the other day.”

“She’ll love that,” Dean said. “Jo has a bigger knife collection than I do.”

“What about you?” Cas asked, smiling a little as Dean’s other foot made its way to his lap, Dean leaned back a little, making himself comfortable.

“It’s kind of a long story, but every year for her birthday I get her a couple decks of cards.”

Cas raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

“I’ve known that girl since she was in pigtails, right? Well, after her dad died she went through a really tough time. Sam and me, we were here in Southport with Bobby for almost six months. Dad was off somewhere in Nevada, on the trail of the guy who killed my mom. Which really meant he was on a bender. But we got to stay here while he ‘searched for Mom’s killer.’ When Uncle Bill died, Jo was just lost. I knew what she was going through. Granted. I was a lot younger when Mom died.” Dean cleared his throat.

Castiel pressed his fingers into Dean’s ankle. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“It was a long time ago,” Dean replied. “But the only thing that would bring Jo out of her funk was card games. So on her 8th birthday I got her a deck of cards and a book filled with like a hundred different games. I taught her how to play poker. And thus began her career as a card shark.”

Castiel laughed. “So I shouldn’t play poker with her?”

Dean threw his head back in laughter. “Not if you want to win any money.”

“Duly noted.”

Dean glanced over at the bar and suddenly dropped his feet to the ground. Tracy was heading over with their lunch.

Castiel cleared his throat, smiling up at Tracy as she maneuvered the tray. She placed their plates down in front of them and let with a smile. Dean watched as Castiel took his first bite.

Cas practically moaned around the pulled pork, and Dean shifted in his seat.

They ate their lunch as the diner began to fill up, animatedly talking. Dean told Cas about his early years on the road with his father. Cas told stories of his teenage years, but a minute or two after finishing a story about the time his brother Gabriel changed all of the salt in the house out for sugar, he grew quiet.

Dean reached over, brushing his fingers over the top of Castiel’s knuckles. Cas looked up from the salt shaker. “Where’d you go?” Dean asked, his voice soft.

“I miss him,” Cas replied, “My brother. I haven’t spoken to him in years.”

“Why not?”
“Bart was an expert at making sure I felt as isolated as possible. Keeping me from my support system was one of the first things he did.”

“What about your other brothers and sisters?” Dean asked.

Castiel shrugged. “They stopped speaking to me after Amelia and I split up.”

“So that whole time you were with him, you had no one?”

Cas met his gaze. “No. There was a woman who used to walk her dog in my neighborhood. She lived on the other side of the college two streets down from my house. But we became friends. When I knew Bart was busy and couldn’t call the house to make sure I was still there, I’d sneak over to her home.” Castiel took a drink of his beer. He wasn’t sure why, but it was easier to talk to Dean about this than he originally thought it would be. He smiled softly. “Her name was Missouri, and she made her money as a psychic.”

Dean chuckled. “Was she legit?”

Cas shrugged. “I’m not sure. I think she was just really good at reading people and used that to her advantage. She had me pegged in about twenty seconds,” Cas laughed. “But she didn’t say anything about it for months. Not until I came over and didn’t do a convincing enough job at hiding a bruised rib.”

Castiel cleared his throat.

“That hurts like a sonofabitch,” Dean said. “I imagine it wasn’t something easy to hide.”

Castiel smiled wryly. “No, probably not. But I thought I was doing pretty well. Had enough practice anyway. Bart liked to kick.” Cas shook his head, pulling his hand back.

“Do you wanna change the subject?” Dean asked.

“Is this making you uncomfortable?”

Dean shrugged. “No. But I don't want to press on any fresh bruises here.”

“You’re not, Dean. In fact, you’re the first person since Missouri who I’ve felt safe enough to talk with about it.”

Dean smiled tightly, brushing a hand through the hairs on the back of his neck. “Well… I’m…thanks Cas.”

“Is there anything you’d like to know? About—about that time I mean?”

Dean considered for a moment. He took in Cas’ wide, open gaze. The way Cas clenched his thumb with his index finger, picking at the skin around the nail.

“I’m willing to listen to whatever you wanna share, man,” Dean finally replied.

Castiel was quiet for a long time. He stared down at his half eaten sandwich, contemplating before finally glancing back up. He met Dean’s soft gaze.

“My parents called me James, but everyone else called me Jimmy. Outside of our home, Bart called me Jamie. Especially when he talked about me at work, because it was gender neutral, and people could assume what they wanted about it.” Castiel began to play with the label on a bottle of barbecue sauce.
“What do you want to be called?” Dean asked after a short pause.

“Castiel—Cas,” Castiel answered simply, looking up from the bottle. “I want to be called Cas.”

Dean smiled. “Okay,” he said, then took a bite of his sandwich. They finished their meal in silence. After a short argument about who would pay for the tab, they both left a twenty on the table before heading back out to the car. The parking lot was almost full by the time they pulled out of their space. Dean finally got onto the highway, heading north towards Wilmington.

They kept the windows down. Cas let his head fall onto the back of the seat as he felt the warm wind blow across his face. After a minute or two Dean reached over and pulled Cas across the bench seat, until Cas could rest his head against the top of Dean’s shoulder. Dean moved their intertwined hands over to his thigh. The denim was rough against Castiel’s knuckles as Dean’s calloused fingers traced patterns against the deep life line on his palm.

It didn't take long for Castiel to fall asleep after that.

Wilmington wasn’t far from the diner, and with little traffic on the highway, Dean made it to the city center just under half an hour. He glanced over at Cas, who was dozing against him. He could feel little puffs of warm air against his neck as Cas breathed, and smiled.

Gently, he brushed his fingers against Castiel’s cheek.

“What do you wanna do?” Dean murmured. He pressed his lips to the top of Castiel’s head.

Cas opened his eyes slowly. He glanced around sleepily. “We made it,” he said.

Dean chuckled. “Somehow we turned a forty-five minute trip into one that lasted two and a half hours.”

“Great job.” Cas quipped. Castiel sat up, stretching his back with a yawn.

“So, Cas. What do you wanna do?”

“I need to get some new shoes, but after that I don’t really care.”

“What kind of shoes do you need?”

“Nothing too expensive. I need some running shoes and a pair of work boots for the restaurant.”

Dean nodded. “Alrighty.” He shifted the car into reverse and pulled out of the parking space he was in. “There’s a place a couple miles from here. Good product, pretty low prices. They have a buy one get one half off deal going on most of the time.”

Castiel nodded. They drove in silence to the shoe store, where Cas spent twenty minutes finding a pair of sturdy work boots with a non slip sole and a good pair of running shoes. There were also a couple pair of flip-flops on sale that he bought for he and Dean, because Dean had it in his head to go to the beach after they left the store and he didn't want to get sand in his socks.

They changed into their new shoes at the car and Dean navigated the busy downtown district, heading east.

Dean pulled into a parallel parking space one street over from the beach, next to a line of busy souvenir shops. He dug around in the glove compartment before pulling out a Ziploc bag full of quarters. Dean fed the meter to last for three hours, before tucking the bag back into the
“Remind me to feed the meter later, would ya?” he said, and Cas nodded. They grabbed their belongings from the back of the car and, holding the cooler between them, made their way to the beach.

Sand flew up onto Castiel’s shins as they walked through the dunes toward the water. The beach was crowded. Weary mothers dressed in ill-fitting swimsuits chased after their children as they played in the warm sand, still wet from high tide. Fathers in ugly Hawaiian shirts fried up hamburgers on portable grills. A group of college aged kids were playing an intense game of sand volleyball, boys against girls. It appeared the girls were winning, if the frustrated yelling from the boys’ side was any indication.

Dean glanced over and smiled at Castiel. “Do you wanna get a couple chairs?” He pointed at a row of double lounges with brightly colored umbrellas, close to the water but mostly unoccupied.

“Sure,” Cas said.

“Go pick one out and I’ll pay.”

Cas fumbled in his pocket, pulling out some money. “Here, take this.”

Dean held up his hand. “I got it, Cas.”

“Really, Dean. Let me pay my share,” Castiel argued.

“I’ll tell you what, you can buy dinner, and we’ll be square.” Dean winked.

Castiel rolled his eyes, but the gesture was softened by a slight quirk of his lips. “I’m holding you to that.” Cas took the other end of the cooler from Dean. He rested it against his hip for a moment to readjust the strap of the bag carrying their swim trunks and towels.

“I know you are.” Dean replied moving forward to press a quick kiss to Castiel’s lips. Then he turned and walked away, toward the sleepy eyed attendant in a mobile shed a few yards away.

Cas walked toward the row of chairs. He picked one with a green umbrella and began to unpack the bags. He grabbed a beer and fitted it into a “Stolen from Sam and Jess’ Wedding” koozie. The beer was cold and Castiel took a long drag.

“I got it for half price!” Dean said, excited, as he walked up, with two full size lounge cushions tucked under his arm. He set them up on the chair.

“How’d you manage that?” Cas asked.

Dean shrugged. “I didn’t do much. Just asked if there were any specials and the guy gave it to me for half price. Pretty sure he was too high to care about much.”

Castiel laughed.

Then they took turns heading to one of the changing huts set up every couple hundred yards on the beach. Dean went first. When Cas made it back to their chair, slightly uncomfortable in just his swim trunks and flip flops, Dean was rubbing sunscreen down his toned arms. Silently, Cas took the bottle from where it sat on Dean’s lap and opened the lid, squeezing out a generous portion of the lotion. Dean stiffened slightly in surprise—he hadn’t heard Cas approach—but relaxed when Cas’ fingers, cold and slippery from the sunscreen, slipped across his freckled shoulders. He continued to rub in
the lotion on his arms. Occasionally their fingers met as Cas trailed down his shoulders, and each
time was like a jolt of energy between them.

When Castiel had finished applying sunscreen to every inch of Dean’s back, Dean turned around,
pulling the bottle from Castiel’s grasp. Cas turned in his seat. Dean was slower applying the lotion
than Cas was. He lingered on the small of Castiel’s back, where a small scar rested from a night
when Bart used his belt.

Cas stiffened at the touch, but Dean just moved on, reaching around and pulling Castiel’s back
against his chest as Cas applied lotion to his stomach. He rested his cheek against the back of
Castiel’s neck, holding him in a tight embrace. Cas rested his hands on top of Dean’s.

“Get a room!” a kid on a bike yelled as he zipped by their chair and they sprang apart.

Dean chuckled nervously.

“You want a beer?” Cas asked.

“Nah, I’ll take a soda though.”

Cas rummaged around in the icy water, pulling out a Pepsi. He put it in the other koozie and handed
it to Dean.

“Thanks, babe,” Dean said.

Cas raised his eyebrows. “Babe?”

“I could call you sweetheart,” Dean replied, shrugging.

Cas smiled. “Babe is fine, honey.” Cas leaned forward. “But I think I prefer ‘angel.’”

Dean pressed his lips together, hiding a smile.

“Do you want the umbrella up or down?” Castiel asked.

“Wanna put it up? Even with all the sunscreen, I burn like a sonofabitch. Then I freckle.”

“I like your freckles.” Castiel replied.

“Do you?”

Castiel leaned forward, pressing a quick kiss to a cluster of freckles on the top of Dean’s shoulder.

“Hmm, yes. These right here, for example, are a perfect copy of Capricornus. And here,” Cas trailed
his finger down to Dean’s forearm. “Here’s the Little Dipper.”

Dean cleared his throat. “My mom used to call me her star baby.”

“She was right. You are positively covered in stars.”

Castiel looked up into Dean’s eyes, and once more Dean was struck by how blue Cas’ eyes were.

“You’re such a sap,” Dean said.

“I know. You love it.” Castiel replied, flippant. Then he looked away quickly. He hadn’t quite meant
to reveal so much.

“I do,” Dean replied, his gaze steady. “I love that about you.”
Cas felt a flush creep up his cheeks and glanced away. “Now who’s being the sap?” he deflected.

Dean laughed out loud, throwing his head back. “Touché.”

Castiel set about raising the umbrella, then opened another beer, putting his can into a plastic bag they had thought to bring at the last second.

He was warm and comfortable in his lounge chair. The sun was streaming down onto the white sand. He lay back and closed his eyes, content to feel the warm breeze float across his face as they spent the day resting on the beach. The sound of the surf lulled him into a semiconscious state of relaxation.

Castiel reached over and took Dean’s hand.

****

A few hours later, after a long nap in his lounge chair, Cas woke up to find Dean reading a battered copy of Slaughter-house Five.

“How many times have you read that book?” Castiel asked. Dean glanced over at him.

“More times than I care to admit, honestly.”

“What do you like about Vonnegut?”

“I dunno,” Dean replied, he pressed a battered bookmark into the book and set it aside. “I think it is a nostalgia thing. These books kinda got me through a pretty tough time in my life.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Dean shrugged. “It was a long time ago. But remember how I told you my dad drank a lot?”

“Yeah.”

“After my mom died, we began to travel for Dad’s job. Basically, Sam and I lived out of motel rooms for most of our life. And in the Impala. But Dad,” Dean paused for a moment. “He never really got over mom. Drank a lot. And he was… he was a mean drunk.”

“Dean, we don’t have to talk about this…”

“I want to,” Dean said.

Cas rested his hand against Dean’s “Okay.”

“You know, when you’re in the middle of it, you can’t see how bad life has gotten. You’re just focusing on making it to the next day. Making sure Sammy makes it to the next day. Making sure he has his food, gets to school, make sure he doesn’t get in Dad’s way after a week-long bender, and if he does get in between them.”

“Did he ever…”

“A few times, yeah.” Dean said. “Then afterward, he would feel guilty and try to apologize. The only time we were free to just be kids was here at Bobby’s. And Dad would drop us off here couple times a year. And we wouldn’t see hide nor hair of him for a few months. But then he’d come back, clear eyed and full of apologies. He’d bring us toys and stuff, trying to win us back. And we’d go back out on the road. Eventually, I just couldn’t take it anymore. The day I turned eighteen, I packed
Sammy up and we moved out here for good. Bobby didn't even ask questions, just let us in. Sam got to go to the same high school all four years, got into Stanford. I got to get my GED and some community college in before I enlisted. We built a life here.”

“Did you keep in touch with your dad?”

Dean shrugged. “Yeah, some. After he finally got sober. He married this girl he knocked up a while back on one of his road trips. Kate. My half-brother Adam sometimes comes to visit. Dad died a few years ago. Undiagnosed cirrhosis led to liver cancer. He’d been sober for almost ten years, and in the end it was the drink that killed him anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

Dean ran a hand across the back of his neck. “You wanna go for a swim? I’m burning up.”

“Sure,” Cas grinned. “Race ya!” he said, jumping up from his seat and bolting toward the water.

“Cheater!”

Castiel splashed into the water a few seconds before Dean, laughing. The water was a little cold against Cas’ warm skin, and it felt good. The water only came up to his shins. He laughed as Dean wrapped his arms around him from behind.

“I won,” Cas said.

“You cheated.”

“True, but I still won.”

Dean glanced down at his watch. “I’m starving. Wanna get an early dinner?”

“What’s good around here?”

“I’m dying for some pizza.”

Castiel pulled Dean’s watch over so he could check the time.

“I could eat.”

They made their way out of the water, heading back to their chairs, but before they got there, Cas grabbed Dean by the middle, pulling him down into the sand for an impromptu wrestling match. Dean had him pinned in seconds.

Dean leaned down, kissing him deeply. “Did I ever tell you I was state champ in my weight class for wrestling?”

“Were you?” Cas asked. Surreptitiously, he canted his hips upwards into Dean’s. “Did you wear the tights, too?”

Dean sucked in a breath. “I, uh, I wore the required uniform.”

“Tights.” Dean’s grip loosened on Castiel’s arms. Cas canted his hips once more. “Did you like wearing the tights Dean?”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Between you and me?”
“Of course,” Cas replied evenly.

“I did like the tights. A lot.”

Cas laughed loudly. Catching Dean by surprise, Cas used the leverage Dean’s loosened hold on his arms gave him and tightened his legs. He swung up and around, until their position in the sand was reversed.

“You should know I was on the wrestling team as well.” Cas kissed him once and loosened his grip, standing up. He held out his hand, helping Dean get to his feet.

They were covered in sand, but Castiel didn’t care. It was more fun than he’d had in ages.

By the time they decided to pack up their stuff and head over to a local pizza joint, most of the beach traffic had cleared out. They rinsed the sand off in the beach shower next to the changing room and changed their clothes.

When they returned the beach cushions, the attendant was almost asleep in his shed.

They trudged up the steep stairs toward the beach’s sidewalk, still laughing about the way the attendant almost fell out of his chair when they had walked up. The cooler was held between them. As the car came into view however, Dean slowed. There was a ticket stuck underneath the windshield.

“Aw shit,” Dean said, helping Cas get the cooler into the backseat of the car. He walked around the passenger side of the car, ripping the ticket from the hood. “Forgot to feed the meter.”

Castiel froze. “Oh no,” he said. “I forgot to remind you to feed the meter.”

“It’s fine Cas, it’s not the first ticket I’ve ever gotten.”

“No, it isn’t alright. You asked me to remind you to feed the meter and I didn’t. It’s my fault.”

“It’s no one’s fault Cas,” Dean stuffed the ticket into the glove compartment of the car then came around to where Castiel was standing. At some point Cas had stopped feeling his fingers, and he’d dropped the bag containing their beach towels and clothing onto the ground, spilling its contents across the pavement. Dean reached down, picking up the towels and swim trunks, and tossed them carelessly into the back of the car.

When he stood, he pressed both hands to Cas’ cheeks.

“I’ll pay for the ticket,” Castiel promised. “I have some overtime coming this check, and I can take a shift from Jo if I need to to cover the rest. This was my fault, and I should be the one to pay for it.”

“Cas, please just listen to me okay,” Dean urged, but then he softened his voice. “This is not your fault. I don’t blame you. I’m not mad at you about it, and I’m not going to punish you for it.”

Through the haze of panic, Dean’s words struck a chord with Castiel. He took a deep breath, willing the feeling to come back into this fingertips. “You’re not mad?”

“I’m not mad, I swear.”

“I’m sorry. I will find a way to make this up to you.”

“Castiel,” Dean’s use of his full name caught Cas by surprise.
“What?”

“I’m not him,” Dean said. “I don’t need to find a reason to hurt you. I’m not going to hurt you. And I sure as hell wouldn’t do it over a twenty seven dollar ticket. I’m not him,” Dean repeated.

“But you asked me to—”

“—You’re human, Cas. We all forget things. We all make mistakes. But this? This was not a mistake. Time just got away from us. That’s all.”

Cas let out the breath he’d been holding. “You swear you’re not mad?”

“Castiel, I swear on Ben and Emma, I am not mad at you, and I don’t blame you.”

Castiel stepped away from their intimate embrace. “I… I shouldn’t have reacted that way, Dean. I apologize.”

“Cas, please don’t apologize for being human. For having human emotions and reactions.” Dean deliberately took a step forward, getting into Castiel’s personal space. “You’re safe with me. I promise.”

Cas moved forward, meeting Dean in the middle. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to wrap his arms around the other man, pressing his nose into the crook of Dean’s neck. Dean smelled like salt and sunscreen, with a hint of his earthy body wash underneath. The smell calmed him, grounded him.

“You are a good man, Dean Winchester.”

“So are you, Castiel.”

“Please forgive me if it takes me a while to remember that sometimes.”

“We have all the time in the world.”

Cas pulled away, planting a chaste kiss to Dean’s lips. “What do you say we go get that pizza?”

Dean smiled. “Only if you get the sand off your feet before you get in my car.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Dean drove across town to a little hole in the wall restaurant where they ordered two large pizzas and a pitcher of beer. Dean stopped at one glass, but Castiel was feeling pleasantly warm and buzzed by the time they were finished eating.

He normally preferred wine, but the beer tasted good and he was feeling loose and comfortable.

“You better catch up,” Cas said, pointing at Dean’s empty beer glass.

“You know, I’m not much of a drinker anymore, but I might take you up on that later. Andy’s playing sober chauffeur.”

Castiel’s brow furrowed. “Anymore?”

“Yeah, I went through a tough patch after my dad died. Felt responsible, thought I coulda gotten him to stop drinking a lot earlier. I drank a lot more than I should have. My brother helped me though. Got my head on straight.”
“If you’re uncomfortable…”

“No, no, I’m fine. When we get home, I’ll catch up to ya.” Dean winked.

Cas smirked. “We’ll see.”

Castiel paid the tab—Dean argued until Cas let him leave the tip—and they left. The afternoon light was fading now, moving into evening. Cas leaned on Dean’s arm as they walked out hand in hand.

“Well, we got a few more hours to kill. What do you wanna do now?” Dean asked.

“I wanna be alone with you,” Cas finally said, his voice low, leaving no doubt as to why Cas wanted them to be alone.

Dean smiled. “Then let’s take the long way home.”

****

Dean drove slowly on the way back to Southport.

“Your hair is getting long,” Dean remarked. With his free hand, he played with Castiel’s hair. “I like it.”

“I like it longer too,” Cas paused. “I think I’ll keep dying it though.”

Dean smiled. “What’s your natural color?”

“It’s a lighter brown. Like yours. When I let it grow out, it gets blond in the summer.”

Dean studied Castiel. His fingers trailed through Castiel’s silky hair. “I can’t imagine you with blond hair.”

Castiel shrugged. “I can’t imagine you with blue hair,” he teased.

Dean burst out laughing. “Oh God, Jo told you about that?”

“Why on earth would you dye your hair blue?”

“It wasn’t permanent,” Dean argued. “I was heading off to basic training in a few weeks.”

“And that was the only reason you did it?”

Dean hesitated. “There might have been tequila involved. And truth or dare.” Dean shrugged. “But at least Sammy got a laugh out of it.”

“I would have liked to see you with a blue mohawk.” Cas murmured.

“I’m sure Jo has pictures somewhere,” Dean replied. He wrapped his arm around Cas’ shoulder, pulling him close.

Castiel rested his head against Dean’s shoulder “Wanna pull over?” he whispered. “We don’t have to be at the Roadhouse until nine.”

Dean glanced over in surprise. “What do you wanna do?” Castiel deliberately placed a hand on Dean’s thigh. “I want to kiss you properly. And I can’t do that while you’re driving. It’s dangerous.”

“We can’t have that.” Dean bit back a smile. “I know a place we can stop.”
Dean took the next exit, swinging the car around. Dean tapped his fingers impatiently against the steering wheel as he sped north, back towards Wilmington.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a lake in town. It’s beautiful at sunset.”

Cas leaned forward, pressing his lips briefly to the hollow of Dean’s neck. Dean inhaled sharply at the touch. “Quit that. It’s dangerous. Remember?”

“I’m not kissing you properly yet,” Cas whispered. “This is just a teaser.”

Dean groaned as Cas moved a hand down Dean’s thigh, gripping his knee. “You’re so evil.”

Castiel’s fingers traced patterns against Dean’s jeans. “You should know something about me, Dean.”

“O-oh? What’s that?”

“I never was a patient man.”

“We’re almost there,” Dean said. Cas moved back slightly, moving his lips from the hollow of Dean’s neck to the shell of his ear. “If you don’t stop that, we’re not going to make it to the lake at all.”

“What a shame that would be.”

Dean huffed a laugh. He took an exit and then made a left. A wooden sign with faded letters said “Greenfield Lake Park.”

Dean pulled into an empty lot. Before Dean even finished putting the car in park Cas had his lips on him.

Dean wrapped his arms around Cas, pulling him as close as he could. They kissed deeply. It was a messy kiss, all teeth and tongue. Fingers scrabbled at clothing. Cas spread his hands out wide over Dean’s back. It was warm and soft and Dean keened a little at the touch. He pulled away. “You have a sunburn,” Cas murmured against his lips.


“Well, that’s a few more freckles that I get to kiss, I guess.”

Dean surged forward to kiss him again, but Castiel pulled back. “I wanna see this sunset.” Dean pressed his forehead against Cas’. “Alright.” Dean adjusted his clothing, pushing his shirt back down over his belly. “Let’s go.”

He exited the car. Castiel took a deep breath and joined him, running a hand through his messy hair. Cas walked around the front of the car, joining Dean at a trailhead. The park was beautiful, green, and full of summer blooms. Dean held out his hand. Cas took it.

“There’s a submerged forest up here in about a mile.”

“Lead the way.”

The park was practically deserted as they walked along the pebbled path. The sky above shifted from
blue to orange in the fifteen minutes it took them to walk to a bridge looking out over a forest submerged in several feet of water. The roots of the trees branched out into nests, little archways through which several dozen geese waded through.

“It’s beautiful,” Castiel murmured, taking it all in.

“Yeah,” Dean replied. “It’s one of my favorite places in the entire world. Next time, we’ll bring the canoe and go out on the water.”

Castiel glanced over. “You seem sad.”

Dean met his gaze. “Maybe a little bit,” he conceded.

“You used to come here with your wife,” Cas stated.

“We took our engagement pictures here. And both Ben and Emma’s first photoshoots.”

“We can leave if—”

“—No, no! We don’t have to do that,” Dean rushed to say. “I want to be here. I want to be here with you. To share a place I love with you.”

Castiel regarded him for a moment. “Alright.”

The sun was setting in earnest, just a crimson crescent on the horizon. Along the path, solar lamps were turning on, lighting the way back through the park as twilight set in. Dean rested his cheek against Cas’ shoulders.

“I’m falling in love with you, and that scares the holy hell out of me,” Dean confessed, his voice barely above a whisper.

Castiel stiffened. “Why?” he asked.

“You could leave,” Dean replied.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Castiel whispered back.

“Then stay.”

“What if he finds me?”

“You are safe with me, Castiel.” The words were like a punch to the gut. Cas had to wrench himself out of a flash to a warm September night, his husband whispering the same words to him as they danced.

“I’m not thinking about myself, Dean! If he finds me, you might not be safe,” Cas replied. One hot tear streamed down his cheek. “The kids… might not be safe with me around.”

Dean sighed. “Then we’ll figure it out. I’m not going to let him hurt you, or my family. You hear me?” Cas nodded. “We don’t have to worry about that right now. You covered your tracks. And any lead he might have would be stone cold by now.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“Give it time.” Dean kissed Castiel on the cheek. “Come on, we better get back. It would probably be bad if we showed up after the birthday girl at her surprise party.”
Cas chuckled reluctantly. “You’re right.”

“Are we okay, Cas?” Dean asked, suddenly serious.

Castiel traced his thumbs over Dean’s sunburnt cheeks. “We’re okay.” He kissed him gently. “Let’s get out of here.”

They walked back to the car slowly, taking in the beautiful summer evening. The park was empty by the time they reached the Impala. They didn't take the long way home. Instead, Dean pulled out onto the highway.

They drove in silence, the only sound coming from the classic rock station on the radio. Occasionally, Dean hummed along, but they didn't speak. They didn't have to. Castiel liked that about Dean. Even when they sat in silence, it was still comfortable between them. They’d shared more in the past day than they’d had in the past few months, and Cas felt closer than ever to Dean, but it was nice to sit there without having to say a word. Silence wasn’t a prison for Castiel anymore. In fact, it was more liberating than ever. He watched as the stars came out, the highway whipping by as Dean sped home.
Open up my Eyes, Tell me I'm Alive

Chapter Summary

Before their lips met, Dean whispered “I had a really great time.” At the same moment, Cas spoke over him, blurtling out “Don’t go yet.”

Chapter 23: Open Up My Eyes, Tell me I'm Alive

Chapter Track: Somewhere over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful world, Isreal Kamakawiwo'ole

July 28, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

The party was in full swing by the time he and Castiel arrived. The Roadhouse parking lot was packed.

Cas headed to the bathroom while Dean made his way to the billiards room in back, where they where most of the party goers could be found. Nearly everyone had shown up. Even Rufus, who hated social gatherings, was sitting at the bar, a bottle of Johnny Walker open in front of him.

A dance floor had been set up. Dean could see Charlie and Dorothy dancing along to an old REO Speedwagon song, both singing at the top of their lungs. The local radio announcer, Eva, was dancing with her fiancé. Even Bobby and Ellen were swaying along to the music. Bobby’s arm was wrapped around the back of her waist as they leaned against one another, hip to hip.

Dean smiled and shook his head. Eventually, Bobby needed to get his head out his ass and marry her before they all die of the sexual tension. He could smell Ellen’s famous burgers as soon as he walked in the door and his mouth watered, despite having eaten just a few hours before. He never could turn down her burgers.

A long line formed around the permitter of the billiard room, where tables had been set up, all of which were laden down with food. On one table, a giant birthday cake had been set up. Anna had decorated it in greens and yellows, two of Jo’s favorite colors. A few people greeted him as he made his way through the crowds, he said hello and moved on.

Dean found Benny teaching Margot and Emma how to play pool. Margot was standing on a stool, a short stick that was still way too long in her hand. She was concentrating on the shot she was about to make. Benny had Emma over his shoulder like she was a sack of potatoes, tickling her; her little feet were kicking as she screamed in delight. Dean smiled.

Benny’s deep belly laugh drifted over to him and Dean made his way through the crowd towards them. Just as he approached, Margot made her shot. The queue ball glanced off the edge of the ten ball and shot straight into the pocket.

“Daddy!” she yelled. “I got one in!” Benny put Emma down on the ground and glanced at the pocket Margot was eagerly pointing to. He caught sight of the white ball and suppressed a laugh.
“You did, baby girl,” Benny said. He kissed his daughter on the top of the head. “Next time, though, you wanna make sure that the balls with color on ‘em go in, okay?”


Emma took the stick. Dean stood back, unnoticed, watching his daughter as she lined up her shot. Then with the ease of someone who’d done it all her life, snapped the stick forward. The queue ball hit the seven, which slid neatly into the pocket. Dean smiled, proud. The lessons he’d been giving her were paying off. She was on her way to becoming a pool shark.

Dean moved forward. “That’s my girl,” he said. Emma looked up. Her eyes brightened when she caught sight of Dean.

“Daddy!” she yelled, running forward and jumping into his arms. “I made the shot!”

“I saw! You played the angles just like I taught you. Give me some sugar,” he said, turning his cheek. “I missed you, little monster.”

Emma kissed him on the cheek. “I missed you too, Daddy,” she said. He hugged Benny and he and Margot continued their game of pool.

Dean sat Emma down at one of the booths. Like always, he glanced at the photo of his family hanging up on the wall, then looked quickly away. “So, how was your day?” he asked. Emma grabbed a crayon from the glass cup and started to draw a bright red flower.

Mine was okay,” she said. “But Benji cut his hand.” Emma drew an exaggerated loop on the end of the flower’s stem.

“How’d he do that?”

“He was helping Auntie make baklava; she kissed it better.”

“Well that’s good, but I should probably kiss it better too. Where is he?” Dean asked. Emma shrugged.

“I think Ash was showing Ben and Remy a new computer game.”

Dean ruffled her hair. “I’ll be right back.” He passed by Castiel on the way to the back office, where the computers were. Dean leaned forward, pecking Cas gently on the lips. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Cas replied, his voice rather high. He glanced around, his eyes wide. No one seemed to be paying attention to them. “Where’re you going?”

“Gotta find Ben, kiss something better.”

Cas chuckled. “Where’s Emma?”

“She’s over in the booths by the pool tables. Meet you over there in a bit?”

Cas nodded. “Sounds good. See you in a few.” He swallowed, then moved forward, kissing Dean properly. Dean closed his eyes, smiling into the kiss.

Someone wolf-whistled and Dean pulled back. His cheeks were a little bit pink in the dim light of the bar, but he didn’t look ashamed. “What was that for?” he asked.

“I wanted to kiss you,” Cas replied.
Dean smirked. “I’ll be right back.” He headed to the back office. Still smiling, Castiel rounded the corner in the hallway, heading towards the billiard room, and ran smack dab into a woman with dark curls.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Ellie?” Castiel asked as the woman turned.

Ellie smiled widely at him. “Castiel! I was hoping I’d see you here.”

“I didn’t know you were coming to this party,” he said.

Ellie shrugged. “It was kind of a last minute thing,” she said. “I can’t stay long though. I got a call to come into work. So I was going to drop my present off and head out.”

“You’re not going to wait until the surprise?”

Ellie smiled sadly. “I wish I could, but duty calls. It was good seeing you, though,” she said.

She pressed a cold hand to Castiel’s shoulder. Cas smiled. “You too. Let’s get together for lunch some day this week, catch up.”

“It’s a date!” she replied. “Or, well, maybe not a date. As I’m not sure how Dean would feel about that.” Her dark eyes twinkled.

“Be quiet,” Cas murmured, but there was no real heat to his words.

Emma’s expression changed. “Are you okay Cas?”

“I’m fine.” He looked her in the eye, biting his lip. “I just… he told me he was falling in love with me.”

“Oh Cas, that’s great!”

Castiel nodded. “It is, but…” he trailed off.

“But what? Are you not falling for him too?”

“It’s not that. He just… he also said that it scared the hell out of him.”

Ellie smiled sadly. “That sounds like him.”

Cas’ brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Dean is…” Ellie bit her lip. “Dean is a complicated man, Cas. He’s had a lot of loss in his life. And his dad… well. Let’s just say John didn’t do him any favors. Plus you’re the first person since his wife died that he’s allowed himself to care about in that way. I’m sure that would be scary for anyone, but Dean… he loves with everything he has. He puts his whole self into it.”

Cas contemplated her words. “So what should I do?”

“Do you love him back?”

Castiel bit his lip, then nodded. “I do.”

Ellie pressed her hand to Cas’ arm once more. “It’ll all work out, Cas. I know it.”

“I hope so.”
Ellie glanced down at her watch. “I gotta go. But how about this Thursday for lunch?”

“It’s a date,” Cas said, smirking.

Ellie’s lips quirked up in a smile, her dark eyes sparkling and nodded, then navigated around him. He watched her exit the Roadhouse, her hair shining in the neon lights.

Cas headed towards the billiards table. Dean had beaten him back to the table, Ben and Emma on his right side. There were two glasses of beer in front of him on the tabletop. “Hey,” Cas said, and Dean scooted over in the round booth to allow Cas to sit down, then wrapped his arm around Castiel’s shoulder.

“Where you been?” Dean asked lowly.

“Ran into a friend of mine, sorry.”

“It’s okay. You drink El Sol, right?” Dean asked.

“Thanks, honey,” Cas said, taking a drink.

“No problem, sweetheart,” Dean whispered in Cas’ ear.

Ben looked up from his coloring. “Hi Cas,” he said. Cas noticed Ben’s bandaged hand.

“Hi. Ben, what did you do to your hand?”

Ben looked down at the gauze. “I got into a fight with a paring knife.”

Cas chuckled. “Did the paring knife win?”

“Yeah. But Dad kissed it better.”

“That’s good,” Cas glanced over at Emma, who was staring at Dean’s arm around Cas’ shoulder. “Miss Emma, did you have a good day?”

Emma’s eyes shot up to Castiel’s face. “Yeah, Castiel. I did.”

“You guys are staying over with Benny tonight right?” he asked. Briefly, his eyes flickered over to Dean’s. He glanced away, blushing slightly.

“Yeah! And tomorrow we’re going to the zoo!”

“The zoo! I wish I was going to the zoo!”

“Come with us then,” she said. “I can show you my favorite giraffe!”

Cas ruffled her curls. “I wish I could, Em, but I have to work tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay,” she replied, and went back to her coloring.

Cas took a long drink of his beer the picked up his own crayon. They colored for several minutes. Dean made a crude stick figure family on one corner, smirking as he drew wings onto Castiel’s likeness. Cas swatted him on the arm. “What are the wings for?”

“Don’t angels have wings?” Dean whispered.

Castiel shook his head, trying and failing to bite back a smile. “You’re impossible.”
“I know.”

They were both on their second beer when Ellen received a text from Anna, letting her know that they were almost to the Roadhouse.

Jo had been surprised, a feat Dean had thought impossible. Anna had told her that they were just going to pick up a bottle before heading out to the house they shared. When she walked through the door, she nearly cried at the outpouring of love from her friends and family. He couldn't remember a time Jo had ever been surprised at anything.

Ben and Emma both fell asleep shortly after the cake cutting, both of them sprawled out on the red leather bench of the booth.

Dean helped carry them out to Andrea’s Suburban, also helping get Margot, Remy and Arsen ready to go. He kissed the kids and Andre goodbye, shook Benny’s hand and headed back to the billiard room, where he found Castiel playing poker with Jo. There was a pile of pennies in front of each of them. Their stares were intense as they both sent out their blind bets. Jo studied Cas as he organized the cards in his hands.

Dean sat down next to Castiel. “What did I tell you about playing poker with Jo?” he murmured.

Cas shrugged. He pressed his fingers distractedly to Dean’s wrist and turned back to his cards. “What can I say? I felt like playing, and Jo offered.”

“Of course she did. She’s gonna fleece you.”

Cas laughed, glancing down at the pennies they were using as chips. “I think I can stand to lose three bucks.”

Dean shrugged. “Don’t say I didn't warn ya.”

“I have been warned. Now hush and let me play.”

Dean sat back, wrapping his arm around Cas’ middle. His fingers trailed down Castiel’s shoulder to the small of his back, hooking his thumb into the waistband of Castiel’s jeans.

Cas cleared his throat. “I bet seven.” He counted out the pennies and set them onto the table.

Jo glanced at her hand and back at Castiel, studying him for a moment. “I’ll see your seven, and raise you three.”

“Call.” Cas tossed down the pennies. He handed over two cards. “I’ll take two, please.”

Jo dealt him his cards. Then took two of her own. She raised her eyebrow at Castiel.

Cas tapped his cards on the table and set them down. He picked up ten pennies. “Ten,” he said.

“I’ll raise you another ten.”

Castiel’s smile was brief, but Dean caught it out of the corner of his eye.

“Call.” He tossed down the coins.

“Show me what you got, Angel.” Jo said, smirking. Cas laid down his cards, showing five clubs.

Jo, nodded slowly. “A flush,” she said. “Nice hand.” She laid down her cards, showing a pair of
threes. She pushed over the pot.

Cas smirked. He took the small pile of pennies and stacked them neatly on the table in front of him. Then he gestured to the bottle of whiskey on the table. “Drink up,” he said.

Jo laughed, she poured out a shot and threw it back. Coughing, she pointed at Dean. “I like him Deano. You done good.”

Dean smiled. “I like him too. And anyone who can beat you at poker is someone I wanna keep around.”

“Bite me, Princess.”

“You first, YoYo.”

Cas grabbed the deck of cards and started shuffling. He shuffled like a pro.

They played poker for nearly three hours. By the time Jo slid the last of her pennies over to Castiel’s pot, her eyes were glassy. “Where did you learn to do that?” she asked, hiccuping.

Cas was not nearly as drunk as Jo, but his words still slurred slightly as he spoke. “Atlantic City. I used to deal cards there.”

“No shit?” Dean asked. “I didn’t know that.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, baby.” Cas said, smiling widely, all gums. He finished off his beer. “I gotta hit the head.” He stood up shakily, but then bowed low at Jo. “It was a pleasure doing business with you YoYo,” he said.

Jo groaned. “Oh God, not you too. I thought I’d finally gotten rid of that stupid nickname.”

Cas laughed and stumbled off to the bathroom, leaving Jo and Dean alone at the booth.

Jo’s gaze was soft as she watched Dean watch Cas walk away. “You are so far gone on him,” she finally said.

Dean looked at her and smiled. “Yeah.”

Jo reached over, grabbing his hand. “Moving kinda fast there, sparky.”

Dean shrugged. “I guess so, but I dunno, Jo, we just clicked.”

“Are you happy?”

Dean pressed his lips together, contemplating before he answered. “For the first time in a long time, Jo, I am. I really am.”

Jo tightened her grip for a moment then sat up. “Then I’m happy for you,” she finally said. She glanced around the bar. It was practically empty. She glanced down at her watch and groaned. “I gotta work in twelve hours. You gonna be okay getting home?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. I switched to tea a couple hours ago.”

Cas returned then, holding two glasses of water. He handed Jo a bottle of acetaminophen. “I’m cutting you off, little lady.” Dean smiled at Cas. He was loose and easy going with he alcohol in his system, all gummy smiles and hearty laughs. Dean liked this side of Castiel.
“Oh really?” she asked. She took a glass water and popped the pills into her mouth.

“Do you have a ride home?” Castiel asked, taking a long drink from the other glass.

“I’m good. Andy will be back in a bit and he’ll take me home.”

“You sure you don’t want us to wait until he gets here?”

“Cas, I practically grew up in this bar, I’ll be fine.”

“Alright,” Cas hedged. He looked at Dean. “Are you ready to go?”

Dean looked at his watch. “Yeah.” He stood up and kissed Jo on the top of the head. “Happy birthday, Jelly Bean,” he whispered and she smiled sadly up at him.

“Thanks Dee,” she said.

Cas bent down and gave Jo a quick hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. “Drink another glass of water before you go to bed okay?”

“Oh Mom,” she said.

Dean held out his hand and Castiel took it.

They made their way out of the billiard room to the main dining hall. Ash was passed out on one of the pool tables. They had to stifle their laughter in order not to wake him. When they got into the car, however, they both paused. Dean scratched the back of his neck. “So, uh, do you want me to drop you off at your place?”

“Um, sure,” Cas said, trying and failing to hide his disappointment. Dean nodded and started the ignition. Cas didn't say anything else, resting his trembling hand against Dean’s thigh. Dean covered Cas’ hand with his own, his thumb stroking stuttering circles over Cas’ knuckles. They drove in silence. When he pulled out of town, Cas briefly met his gaze, but neither of them spoke. Dean took the road leading to Castiel’s cabin, driving slowly as he took the twists and turns. When he pulled up into the driveway next to Cas’ cottage he turned to in his seat. Dean took a deep breath, leaning in for a kiss.

Before their lips met, Dean whispered “I had a really great time.” At the same moment, Cas spoke over him, blurting out “Don’t go yet.”

They both laughed. Cas cleared his throat and briefly pressed his lips to Dean’s. “I…I don’t want tonight to end yet,” he said, his voice suddenly low, as if he’d gargled gravel in the few minutes it had taken to drive to his cottage. “Will you…would you like to stay here tonight?”

There was a tense pause, but Dean caught Cas’ gaze and held it.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” Dean asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t want to invade your space.” Cas frowned slightly. Aside from their first date, Cas hadn’t really felt comfortable spending their time together at his place. His cottage was a safe place, but it was lonely. He was lonely. He missed the sounds of another person inhabiting his personal space. And he wanted to share it with Dean.

Castiel took Dean’s hand between both of his. “I… we don’t have to… do anything if you don’t want to. I don’t want to pressure you. I just…I missed you this week, and I’m not ready for the day to be over just yet. Stay?”
Dean looked down, smiling. “I’d be honored to stay.”

Cas took a deep breath. His fist unclenched. “Okay,” he whispered.

Dean turned off the ignition and Castiel exited the car. He grabbed the shopping bags from the back seat and picked up the cooler. He set the cooler down by one of the wicker rocking chairs and dug around in his pocket for his house key. Dean watched Cas for just a moment before following him to the porch as Cas unlocked the door. Castiel hesitated. He glanced up at Dean, his fingers trembling as he turned the doorknob. “The house is a mess,” he said apologetically. “I haven’t had a chance to clean.”

This wasn’t the first time Dean had been in his home. But the last time Dean had come over, Castiel had had time to prepare. He’d spent nearly a week cleaning so that he could show his modest little home in its best light.

Behind the weathered cabin door, he knew Dean would see the pile of laundry he hadn’t yet had a chance to take to Chuck and Becky’s. Dean would see the dishes from his breakfast that morning, and his razor left out on the bathroom sink. He’d see the library books left open on the coffee table and an unmade bed.

Dean shrugged. “I’m sure it can’t be worse than the tornado my kids leave behind on a daily basis.” Dean rested his fingers against Castiel’s wrist. “I’m not going to judge you for leaving dirty socks on the floor, Cas.”

Castiel chuckled. “I know that.” He hadn’t known that, not for sure, but it was a relief to hear.

They still didn’t cross the threshold into the cottage. Dean, sensing Castiel’s hesitance, changed tactic. “You wanna sit on the porch with me for a while? Have a beer?” He took a seat in one of the chairs, his feet crossed over ankles. Dean held out his arms in invitation.

Castiel nodded. Leaving the cottage door open, he let the storm door close behind him and headed to the far wicker chair. The air inside the cabin would be stuffy after being shut up all day, and Cas smelled rain on the horizon. He sat down and handed over a beer. Dean took it, opening it with a twist of his fingers and taking a long drag.

“I like this beer,” Castiel whispered, as if admitting an embarrassing truth.

Dean looked over, one eyebrow raised. “Yeah? It’s my favorite.”

“I don’t know if it’s my favorite or not. I never really had an occasion to figure out what I liked best. I never really drank… before. Not around him. And when I did, it was usually a glass of wine at dinner. Bart liked beer, but he preferred vodka.” Cas took another long swallow.

“For someone who didn’t drink before, you sure can hold your liquor,” Dean said. “You and Jo musta polished off that entire bottle tonight.”

Cas smirked. “I was faking most of it. A trick of the trade.” Cas smirked, holding up his beer.

“Ah, the chaser beer. So you’re practically sober?”

“Not for long. Here—with you—I can loosen up, and… and still feel safe.”

The confession sat between them. Dean’s lips quirked into a half smile, warmth filling his belly at Cas’ words. Castiel trusted him enough to feel safe with him. It took some of the sting out of Cas’ reluctance in letting Dean into his home.
“It’s so quiet out here,” Dean said, changing the subject. He stared into the woods. “And dark. Kinda creepy actually. Then again, I almost can’t get to sleep anymore without the big orange streetlight right outside my bedroom window.” The air took on a heavy quality. Dean took a deep breath. Rain was on the way.

Castiel smirked. “I love how dark it is here. It’s a complete contrast to…before.” He paused then suddenly he laughed. “One of our neighbors, ‘Mr. Vernon Tabernathy the Fourth,’” Cas spoke with finger quotes, his voice derisive, “and his beady eyed trophy wife Elyssa, were obsessed with security. Of course, we lived in the most boring neighborhood on the planet. The last break-in happened before I was even born. So about a year after we moved into the house, they put up one of those, oh, what do you call them? Motion detecting lights? Of course, theirs was ‘top of the line,’ or some other bullshit. Which really means it was just super sensitive. They placed it over their garage door, which was across the way from our bedroom.”

“Those lights are terrible. Sam put one up above the Painted Whore’s garage, and it is always going off. I keep telling him to take it down, but Jess insists on keeping it up.”

“What is the Painted Whore?” Castiel asked, confused.

“Oh, uh,” Dean rubbed a hand through his hair, self conscious. “That’s what we call my brother’s house.”

“The Victorian over on Elm?”

“Yeah, sorry… I know its crass, but as beautiful as that house is, there is always something costing Sammy money.”

Cas shrugged. “I lived in an eighty-six year old Tudor house back in Boston. I completely understand the sentiment.”

“So what happened with the Tabernathys? I’m guessing they had more money than sense.”

“Let’s just say ‘Mr. Vernon Tabernathy the Fourth’ never worked a day in his life for the money in his bank account. Anyway, there was this tabby cat who lived in the woods behind our house. A cute little thing, all black except of this patch of grey on its forehead. And every single night, without fail, this cat would walk across their driveway. And that light would turn on. And Bart would wake up. You can imagine how much he liked that,” Castiel paused to chuckle. “One night, this stupid cat walked across the driveway, and the light went off. Except this time I forgot to close the drapes. Bart was so pissed when he woke up he got the shotgun, went down to the Tabernathys’ garage and blasted the light right off their roof.” Cas dissolved into a fit of giggles. Tears streamed down his face. “Oh Vernon was mad. Of course nothing came of it. Not really. Bart’s the kind of man who gets his way.” Cas’ expression turned sour. “Even if he’s in the wrong.”

Dean frowned. It was the most Cas had ever spoken of his time with Bart, and Dean couldn’t tell if it was really a funny a memory for him or if Castiel was putting on a front. It was as if Dean wasn’t quite in on the joke.

Dean finished his beer, feeling warm, buzzed.

Overhead, thunder abruptly crashed. A slow steady rain began to fall. Castiel took a deep breath. The smell of rain always calmed him, and here, mixed with the smell of the magnolia trees out on his road and the roses planted around his cottage, the air was fresh, crisp. The wind picked up, and rain began to spray into the porch.
“Dean,” Cas began.

Dean set his beer bottle down on the table between their chairs. “Yes?”

“You wanna go inside?”

“Okay,” Dean said. He picked up both of their bottles and followed Castiel into the cottage, where they both slipped off their shoes at the door.

Cas bustled around the small space, picking up the dirty laundry and putting it in a canvas hamper. Dean ran his fingers along the smooth, deep blue planes of wood on the bookshelf.

“The bookcase came out nice,” he remarked, taking in the small collection of books already stacked haphazardly on the shelves.

“Oh yeah,” Cas said turning from the dishes he was hurriedly washing in the sink. “Emma picked out a good color.”

Dean came up behind Castiel, grabbing a wet plate from the drying rack. “Where’s your towels?” he asked quietly, pressing a gentle kiss to Cas’ neck.

“You don’t have to help,” Cas replied. He shivered at the touch.

“I know,” Dean said. Cas reached down beneath the skirted sink and pulled up a flour sack towel. Dean took the soft scrap of fabric and dried the plate before setting it back down in the rack. He then picked up the skillet. They finished the dishes quickly, leaning against one another in the small kitchen. Outside, lightning joined the thunder, illuminating the small cottage in its eerie white light.

Once they were finished with the dishes, Castiel excused himself to the restroom. Dean took a seat on one of the armchairs as he listened to Cas curse to himself behind the door, along with the clatter items being hastily put away.

Dean took in the small home Cas had created for himself. The furniture was sparse but well maintained. There was still an air of neglect about the place despite the improvements Castiel obviously made to the place. A water stain in the shape of Florida was on the ceiling in the corner, and there were a few spots where the wooden floor was soft with dry rot.

Dean reminded himself to pick up some new boards for the floor, and maybe see about a can of paint for the watermark. Maybe check the roof while he was at it. The bathroom door opened, revealing Cas. Dean smiled at the way he shuffled into the room.

Dean watched Cas hesitate, staring back and forth from the other armchair to where Dean was sitting. “C’mere,” Dean said. Cas walked over to Dean, standing right in front of Dean. Dean sat up. He reached out, tracing his hands over the contours of Cas’ sides, his thumbs catching on each of Castiel’s ribs. They still stuck out, despite the weight Cas had gained over the past few months.

Castiel sighed as Dean’s lips pressed softly against the flesh of his belly.

“I want you,” Castiel whispered over the crash of thunder outside. “God, I want you so bad.” Cas didn’t miss the soft moan against his stomach at his words, but he forced himself to continue. “But I’m not sure I’m ready yet.”

Dean looked up from, his eyes were bright as lightning flashed overhead. “I will move as fast or as slow as you want, Cas. No pressure.”
Cas’ fingers were trembling when they found themselves laced through Dean’s soft hair. He bent down, pressing a kiss to the top of Dean’s head. His hair smelled like salt and sunscreen. “Thank you for staying,” Cas whispered.

Dean didn't respond. Instead he pulled the other man down until Castiel straddled him, his knees sliding into the leather on either side of Dean’s hips. They both took shuddering breathes as Dean’s fingers splayed out on Cas’ broad shoulders.

Neither of them knew who kissed who first, but suddenly their lips were slotted together, all breathy sighs and bruising strength. Cas ground down into Dean’s hips and both of them groaned.

Dean leaned back, until his head was pressed against the soft afghan thrown on the armchair. Cas followed him, twisting his legs until they were crossed at the ankle behind Dean’s back. Dean slipped his fingers under the fabric of Castiel’s shirt. “I want you so bad,” Cas groaned.

Thunder crashed loudly overhead, and rain fell even harder against the cottage’s roof. They broke apart, both breathing heavily. Cas pulled back, shrinking upon himself. Awkwardly stepped out of the chair. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I got carried away.”

“That’s okay, Cas,” Dean said, his voice deeper than usual. Water began to drip down onto the floor in front of the bathroom and Cas, grateful for the distraction, went to put a pot down to catch it.

By the time he put all the pots down to catch the rain, they had both calmed down. Cas shut and bolted the door. “Are you thirsty?” he asked. “I could make some tea, or coffee.”

“I’m good,” Dean said. He stood up from the chair, looking around the place. His eyes fell on a deck of cards sitting on the side table next to the radiator. “You wanna play cards?” he asked.

Cas turned from getting a glass of water. “Sure. What do you wanna play?”

“I dunno, I’m good at poker, but something tells me you’d fleece me. What about rummy?”

Cas nodded. He took a seat at the kitchen table and turned the overhead light on. Dean sat down opposite him. Deliberately, he pressed his bare feet against Cas’. “You’re trying to distract me,” Cas said as he shuffled the cards.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dean replied easily, taking his cards one at a time as Cas dealt them out. He took the pad of paper on the table top and wrote down his and Cas’ name in a messy block scrawl.

Dean won the first round by seventy points. He gleefully wrote the total down, then dealt out the next hand.

All the while, they played footsie under the table. Cas won the second round, bringing Dean’s lead down to twenty points.

Halfway through the fifth round, the power went out. Dena glanced up at the bulb as if it were a personal affront. He’d been winning.

Cas looked up with a smile. “Do you have a lighter?” he asked.

Dean nodded and pulled his zippo from his jacket pocket. Cas took the lighter, brushing his fingers
along Dean’s, and even in the dark, Dean could see his eyes sparkle with mischief. He stood, moving to the small cabinet in the corner of the room. He pulled out several mismatched candles and lit them, placing them sporadically around the room. Slowly, the scent of sugar cookies mixed with the sharp smell of pine needles as the different candles began to burn.

Dean watched him from his chair. In the firelight, Castiel’s profile became more pronounced, his features stronger, the little cleft in his chin, usually hidden by perpetual stubble, stood out in the shadow left behind by the candlelight. Dean stood up while Castiel’s back was turned, as he placed a candle in the bedroom. Quietly, Dean wrapped his arms around Cas’ middle, placing a tender kiss to the knob where Cas’ shoulder met his neck.

“You are so beautiful,” Dean murmured. Cas shivered.

“And you call me a sap,” he retorted, breathless.

“You are a sap, a beautiful sap.” Dean kissed along Cas’ neck, sucking the tiniest mark just beneath the collar of Cas’ shirt.

“Dean,” Cas murmured. “I’m falling for you, too.”

Dean smiled into the embrace. “Scary isn’t it?”

“Terrifying.” Cas turned around suddenly, and pressed a bruising kiss to Dean’s lips. He walked Dean backwards, towards the bed. Their hands were everywhere all at once. Dean groaned as Cas pressed him down into the bed. “You’re the one who’s beautiful,” Castiel murmured. He pushed Dean’s shirt up and over his head. “And kind.” He kissed over Dean’s chest, paying particular attention to a freckle on his neck. “You’re smart as hell and funny.”

He shamelessly shifted his hips against Dean’s. Dean threw his head back, a small noise escaping even as he clamped his mouth shut. “Oh God, Cas. Just like that.”

Dean met his thrusts with his own and Cas sighed, feeling his erection grow against Dean’s. “You like that, baby?” he gasped.

Dean sat up suddenly, grabbing at Cas’ shirt. He pulled it over Cas head. He moaned, pressing a desperate kiss to Castiel’s lips. “You win,” he said.

Cas smiled into their kiss. “What do I win?”

“This game we’ve been playing all day,” Dean panted. He thrust harder into Castiel, spreading his fingers into the meat of Castiel’s ass.

“Oh?” he asked. “What game is that?” Cas hesitated for just a moment before moving his hand between them, pressing trembling fingers against the front of Dean’s jeans.

Dean gasped at the touch. His hips stuttered. His body was thrumming with excitement, pulsing tingling heat through his veins in time with his heartbeat. He met Cas’ satisfied gaze. “You know what game I’m talking about.” Cas smiled, wrapping his hand around Dean’s erection through his pants. With his other hand, Castiel deftly unbuttoned Dean’s jeans and stuck his hand inside, his fingers tracing over the wrinkled boxer material.

Before he moved past Dean’s underwear however, he paused. “Is this okay?” he asked.

Dean’s eyes found his in the dark. His pupils were blown and his breathing erratic. “God, yes,” he said clearly. “This is okay with me. Are you okay with this?” he asked.
Cas groaned and pulled Dean into a kiss. “I’m more than okay. I’ve been thinking about this all day. Kissing you, holding you, touching you—” Cas pushed his fingers inside Dean’s boxers, grasping his hard cock.

Dean groaned, then reached out. He pressed the heel of his palm roughly against Cas’ tented pants. Cas felt like he was shaking apart. The head of Dean’s cock was smooth, a drop of pre-cum dribbling down the slit and onto Cas’ thumb. Quickly, Cas brought it up to his mouth, licking it clean. Tasting Dean.

Arousal coursed through his veins as Dean’s eyes fluttered to the back of his head, and he redoubled his efforts to unbuckle Cas’ belt. He met Cas’ gaze and Cas nodded once. Dean reached into his pants, feeling for Cas’ cock with his fingertips.

Dean slipped the foreskin back and Cas just about fell apart then, the sensitive head of his cock exposed to the warm air of the bedroom. “Oh God, Dean,” Cas panted. He pulled back then, adjusting them so that he could shuck off their pants. Then they were skin to skin. Cas pressed Dean down until he was lying flat against the soft sheets of the bed, and lined them up so that they were pressed together. He wrapped his long fingers around both of their cocks, right beneath the heads, and gently squeezed.

It was awkward at first, both of them trying to find a rhythm. Cas spread Dean’s legs with is thigh and they both began to tremble.

The room was hot, moonlight streamed into the bedroom in the window above their heads. A slick sheen of sweat covered both of their bodies as they moved together.

Dean wasn’t sure how long they rutted against one another. It all became a blur of teeth and touch, lips and sensation, and trembling fingertips. He knew one thing though, he wasn’t going to last long. It had been years since he’d allowed himself to be intimate with anyone. Not since a particularly lonely night led to him and Jo making a mistake that left both of them feeling awkward the next morning. Since then, he’d practically become a monk, unwilling to taint any more relationships with feelings he couldn't reciprocate.

Until now.

But with Cas, everything was stronger. Every touch sent pleasure through his entire body. Every sound Cas made amplified in the tiny space until it was all he could hear. His muscles tightened, pleasure coiled in the pit of his stomach.

“I’m close,” he panted into Cas’ neck. “I’m sorry, its been a while since I—” his words were cut off by a groan as Cas sank his teeth into his collarbone.

“Me too,” Cas panted. He pressed a gentle kiss over the top of the bite mark. “I, I’m...” His hips stuttered once, twice, three more times before he was coming, his hand clenching around their cocks. The slippery slide of Cas’ come against his cock was all it took to push Dean over the edge. He came with a low grunt, pressing his face against Cas’ chest. His lips found Cas’ nipple and he sucked hard, wringing out another spurt of Cas’ come against his chest, mixing with his own.

Spent, Cas fell down next to Dean, pressing his face into the crook of Dean’s neck as he willed his heart rate to slow.

Dean chuckled lowly, Cas’ hand was still wrapped loosely around their softening cocks. He seemed unwilling to let go. They both fought for breath. Dean stared at a growing watermark on the bedroom ceiling. “That was awesome,” he whispered, and Cas chuckled against his neck.
“It was,” Cas agreed. Cas’ gaze fell into the bite mark on Dean’s collar bone. “Oh, dammit,” he muttered, pressing his fingers against the growing bruise. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Dean glanced down at the mark, then looked up at Cas. “Its okay,” he whispered, as if admitting a great secret. “I actually kinda like it.”

Cas felt heat pool in his stomach, despite knowing he was nowhere near ready for another round. “You do?” he asked, his voice gravelly.

Dean responded by kissing the small bite mark he’d made right where Cas’ collar would meet his neck. “I gave as well as I got,” he said, pressing a finger to the spot. Cas felt where Dean touched and smiled.

“At least you put it where I could hide it,” Cas said. He never thought he’d be happy about hiding a mark, but with Dean it meant something different.

Dean laughed, the endorphins coursing through his veins making him giddy. “C’mere,” he said, pulling Cas close. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a couple of tissues, cleaning up their stomachs, then wrapped both arms around Cas’ shoulders, until they were lying side by side.

“I should blow out the candles,” Cas murmured against Dean’s sun warmed skin.

“You should,” Dean agreed, pulling Cas tighter to him.

“You’ve got to let me go if I’m going to do that,” Cas said.

“I know,” Dean sighed. He let go of him and sat up. “Hurry, would you?” he asked.

Cas got up, tripped over Dean’s discarded jeans, and then practically ran around the cottage, blowing out the candles. The overhead kitchen light was on again. He turned it off and headed back into the bedroom, where he grabbed some sleep pants from his dresser. Even as hot as it was, he still couldn’t go to sleep without clothes on. He doubted he’d ever be able to again.

Bart never let him wear clothes to bed.

He tossed a pair to Dean while he put his own on. Dean struggled with the slippery pajama bottoms, unwilling to stand up and put them on properly. Cas grabbed the pants from Dean and held the waistband out so he could slip his feet into the legs. Slowly, Cas crawled up the mattress, pulling Dean’s pants up as he went.

When he was finally at eye level to Dean, he pressed a soft kiss to the other man’s lips. Dean made a small whimpering sound in the back of his throat and hugged Cas to him. They lay down, Dean pulling Cas to him, and then draping the covers over their legs.

“I didn’t think it was supposed to rain today,” Cas murmured, as thunder crashed outside, louder than before.

“The weathermen around here are never right,” Dean said and Cas huffed a laugh. “What time do you work tomorrow?”

“I’m going in at two.”

Dean groaned, glancing at his watch. “That means I only have twelve hours left with you and we have to waste most of that on sleep.”
“I’m sure you’ll survive,” Cas said.

“When do you have off next?”

“Thursday.”

“Well, what a coincidence. I have Thursday off too. What do you say we go up to Raleigh? Take the kids to Dave & Busters or something? We’ll make a day of it.”

Castiel hesitated. “I can’t Thursday. I already have plans for lunch.”

“Who are you having lunch with?”

“She’s a neighbor of mine. Moved in shortly after I came to town.”

Dean grabbed Cas’ hand. “I’m glad you’re making friends, Cas.”

Cas smiled. “She’s a kind woman, and I’ve been neglecting her lately.”

“Well then, you shouldn’t break your plans with her.” Dean said. “Even if it means I don’t get to see you.”

“Who says that?” Cas asked. “We have lunch plans, but we could do something for dinner?”

Dean smiled widely. “I’d like that. Where do you wanna go? Sam owes me a night of babysitting.”

“I don’t care,” Cas said. “Can the kids come with us? It’s been too long since I’ve seen them.”

“Alright,” Dean replied easily, secretly happy that Cas had suggested it. He liked that Castiel was willing, eager even, to include his children in their relationship.

“Dean,” Cas began.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for staying.”

“Thank you for letting me.”

Outside, the storm continued to rage.
And the Darkness Can Descend

Chapter Summary

Jimmy was gone. He left Bart. And he was never coming back.

No, he thought. No. He was coming back. Bart would find him. He’d find him. And bring him home. He’d find him and bring him home because he loved Jimmy. And he’d treat him better. So that Jimmy wouldn’t leave him ever again.

Not if he had anything to do with it.

Chapter Notes

I've added some reference pics for you guys onto my tumblr. Come check it out!
http://gillasue345.tumblr.com/post/141010840336

Chapter 24: And the Darkness Can Descend

Chapter Track: Independence Day, Martina McBride

July 4, 2014

Brighton, Massachusetts

The grass was soggy beneath Bart’s feet. Water slowly seeped into the fabric of his tennis shoes as he stood in the backyard of Zachariah Alder’s house, making his socks damp, and his temper flare. It was his last clean pair of socks.

The backyard was crowded; Adler had invited the entire unit and their families to his annual Fourth of July barbecue, and the weather had finally decided to cooperate after raining for nearly a week straight. But now, the sun was so bright Bart had to squint. Of course, after six days of torrential downpour, it was too little too late. The Charles River, right across the freeway, was swollen, threatening to spill over any day now. He could smell the fishy water as it rapidly moved through Boston. But that wasn’t his problem, not today.

In an effort to allow officers to spend time with their families, Brighton’s police department had begun scheduling holidays off for each shift, and his unit alternated between Fourth of July and Thanksgiving. They never actually got the time off though, not really, because every year Adler threw a party. Those who weren’t on duty were practically mandated to attend.

Of course, it would be much more fun if Adler had allowed booze at the party. It was a well known secret that Zachariah had been sober for fifteen years, and didn't allow alcohol into his home.

Bart took a drink from the stainless steel cup in his hand, his fingers trembling. The slow burn of the vodka he’d smuggled in soothed his nerves slightly, but the constant scattered explosions of poppers
and firecrackers against the concrete driveway still caused pain to shoot through his temple, one pounding crack at a time.

Along one wall of the fenced in yard was a line of tables, all covered with cheap plastic tablecloths and faded American flags. Food covered the tables, everything from homemade coleslaw to pasta salads, cookies and apple pie. Every officer had brought a dish. One table held an assortment of sodas and fresh lemonade in a large glass dispenser.

Flies were swarming around the uncovered dishes, and his empty stomach heaved.

A few steps away, Zachariah was manning the grill. The afternoon heat was bearing down upon them all, but standing over the open flame of the grill had Adler sweating profusely. Bart watched as he wiped the moisture away from his brow with the back of his hand. The sweat came dangerously close to the end of the spatula he was using to press down on the hamburgers he was grilling. His lip curled in disgust, and he took another long drink of his vodka.

All around, officers and their spouses had broken off into groups and clusters. Detectives Ramirez and Barnes were having an epic squirt gun war with a large group of children near the swing set Adler.

Victor was chatting with some of the wives. Bart snorted. Probably comparing recipes. Victor was often considered the chef of the precinct. He was always bringing in the homemade cookies or pastries, ingratiating himself towards the others. They all loved him for it, but it grated on Bart’s nerves.

Country music was playing on a cheap radio set up right next to the grill, and Bart sighed. He hated country music. If he had thrown this party, he’d have played Motown. Jimmy would have insisted on adding some Van Morrison and Queen, and Bart, being a good husband, would have let him.

Bart didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want to socialize with the simpering, mindless idiots of his unit. He missed Jimmy.

He brought the mouth of the cup to his lips, only to find it empty. Bart cursed softly, making his way through the throngs of people near the fenced gate and walked out to his car. No one paid him any attention. He’d gotten good at that. Staying under the radar had always been essential to Bart. He didn't need any nosy busy bodies to give his life any attention.

The car was overwhelmingly hot. By the time he’d arrived at the cul-de-sac Zachariah’s house was situated, most of the tree covered parking spaces were already taken. Bart had been forced to park right beneath the hot sunshine. And black paint always attracted more heat.

Surreptitiously, Bart refilled his cup. His body was loose and relaxed now that the booze had worked its way through his system, soothing the ache of his hangover. But he winced as he took a long swallow straight from the bottle; it was almost as hot as a cup of coffee. Bart headed back into the party through the house. He ignored the sound of partygoers as he headed to the kitchen, where looking for ice.

Naomi, Adler’s wife, approached him as slipped the lid back onto the cup.

“How are you, Bart?” she asked as she opened the refrigerator, pulling out a bag of organic lemons. She hadn’t even bothered to wash her hands before she pulled out a knife and a cutting board, placing the lemons onto the board. She didn’t even bother to take the stickers off of them before she started to cut them up.
Bart smiled stiffly, his expression slipping into the mask he had perfected over the years. “I’ve been well, Naomi, and you? How are the kids?”

She smiled. “Oh they’re fine, just fine. Hael is in her second year at Brown, and Inias’ wife just had their third child.” She sliced the lemons imprecisely, some slices much thicker than the others. One of them broke off, halfway through the lemon, and Bart had to look away. Everything in him wanted to snatch the knife out of her hands to show her how to do it properly. “And you?” she asked. “Zach and I thought Jamie’d be with you. We missed him at the Memorial Day Picnic.”

Bart’s fake smile froze on his face. Carefully he took a sip of the vodka in his bottle, which tasted much better now that he’d added ice. He took a moment to remember his lie.

“He’s in Enfield this weekend,” he lied easily. “A friend of his from college is in hospice care, cancer, and he wants to be there for her. He wanted to be back in town tonight, but he’d be so tired, and with it being such a long drive, I didn’t want him on the roads during the holiday. So he’s sticking around Connecticut for the weekend.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, sincerely. “Well, you tell him he and his friend are in our thoughts and prayers would you? And tell him to come to the next spouses’ luncheon. We miss having a guy around to open the jam jars,” she joked. She held out the platter of lemons. “Would you like a lemon for your water?”

“No thanks,” he said, practically shrinking away from the offending lemons. Jimmy would have cut them right. He would have cut the lemon in half long ways then sliced them into half-moons like they’re supposed to be. Bart clenched his hand around his water bottle. “If you’d excuse me? I promised Cap an update on a case we’re working.”

Naomi sighed, put upon. “I told him he’s not allowed to talk shop at the party.”

Bart smiled charmingly. “You know how us cops are. Job’s never over.”

She patted him on the shoulder in a matronly way. “Well, don’t work too hard,” she finally said. “Oh!,” she said, “Could you do me a favor and take these out to Zach?” She handed Bart a platter of raw hamburger patties, covered with a piece of plastic wrap.

His lips curled into a smile that didn't reach his eyes as he excused himself with the burgers. The heat outside was even more oppressive coming from the cool kitchen as he opened the sliding glass door to the backyard with his elbow.

He walked over to the grill, where Zachariah was still flipping the first batch of burgers. Bart watched as Zachariah used the flat of the spatula to press the juice out of the meat. The man knew nothing about barbecuing, Bart thought. He was ruining it. They’d be dry and flavorless. Hard. Inedible. Bart would never have pressed the burgers down like that. He and Jimmy would have thrown this party so much better than the Adlers. First of all, they would have set the food up inside, so the flies didn't get to it. And the kids wouldn't have been invited, he thought savagely, as another firecracker went off in the driveway.

Turning towards him, Zachariah smiled as his eyes set on the platter. “Oh good,” he said. “These are almost done.”

Bart looked down at the pitiful hamburgers. They were charred black. Overdone. Dry. Tasteless. Zachariah took the plate from him. “Looking good,” Bart lied, because that’s what Adler wanted to hear.
“You better get them while they’re hot. They go like hotcakes.”

“Will do.” He wouldn’t touch those ruined burgers if his life depended on it.

“So,” Zachariah began. He pressed down on another burger and Bart gritted his teeth. “I thought Jamie was going to be with you today.”

Bart barely adjusted the collar of the Hawaiian shirt he’d donned for the occasion, the one he had bought with Jimmy on their honeymoon to Oahu. Sweat was dripping down the back of his shirt and he felt feverish. He steadied himself against the grill’s handles, hiding the action by leaning as casually as he could against it. He took a shaky drink from his bottle. “Jamie’s out in Enfield. His friend Hannah has cancer,” Bart repeated his lie.

Zachariah made a motion with his hand, looking up in a gesture of self deprecation. “That’s right, you did tell me that. Jamie’s been going up there a lot. How’s he holding up?”

“He’s okay, sad about his friend. I can tell he’s tired though. It’s hard to keep going back and forth like he’s been doing.”

“I’ll bet. Naomi had to do something like that when her Aunt got MS. She spent months going back and forth between here and Worcester. She got more and more tired the sicker Hester got. Eventually Hester decided to move to a nursing home, told Naomi she was better off without her help. Can’t say I blame her.”

Bart took a drink from his bottle, and because Zachariah expected it of him, he smiled. Naomi and Zachariah had been married for almost thirty years. Zachariah liked to tell people that they’d been the happiest six years of his life.

Everyone at the precinct had heart the joke count lies times in the past few years, but they always laughed anyway at Zachariah’s “wit.” Bart took in the portly balding man as he tossed the new burgers onto the grill with his bare hands.

“Next time Jamie’s back in town,” Zachariah added, “why don’t you guys come over for dinner. Naomi misses him. Unless, of course, you two would rather make up for lost time.” He winked.

Bart studied the man. He wondered if the offer was genuine. On days like these, Zachariah liked to pretend he was just one of the guys instead of the precinct captain. He was far from just one of the guys though. He was hard-edged. Cunning. And he had higher ambitions than being the captain of a police department. He was more politician than cop.

“I’ll mention it to him,” he said, neutral.

“Hey, about the St. John case,” Zachariah said. “I think the DA has finally decided to indict. You did good work on that.”

“We had enough to indict the night that bastard killed her, its about damn time.”

“Yeah well, that’s the legal system for you. I wanted to talk to you about Rebecca.”

Rebecca had been Bart’s partner for three years. She’d just given birth to twin boys in May. Bart had been working alone since then.

“It looks like she’s extended her maternity leave indefinitely. She wants to stay home with the little ones. I just found out this morning.”
“So what does that mean or me?”

Zachariah shrugged. “We’ll get you a new partner soon, but the city is in a budget freeze right now, so we can’t just yet. Maybe when the new budget passes.”

“Maybe or probably?”

“It’ll probably be the fall before you get a new one. I’m sorry. I know that means you’re going to be overworked, but my hands are tied. I’ll try and make sure your caseload is manageable.”

“Thanks, Zachariah,” Bart said.

Zachariah motioned with the end of his spatial toward the railing on the patio deck. “Hand me that plate would you? These burgers are about done.”

Bart nodded and grabbed the platter. It was the same platter that Bart had used to bring the patties out to the grill and he saw smears of blood and raw hamburger. Disgusting. Jimmy would have used a clean platter, one without bits of hamburger and grease. Bart set the platter next to the grill.

“I need some more lemonade,” Bart said. “You want something?”

Zachariah shook his head and ruined another burger. He pointed his spatula towards the full glass of lemonade on the railing. “I’m good, but thanks.”

Bart headed towards the house, feeling the sticky blood from the platter on his fingertips, soaking in.


“Drinks are that way remember?” Zachariah pointed to the table of drinks.

“I know,” he said. “I gotta wash my hands before we eat.”

“Make it back fast. Once I set the burgers out they’re gonna go fast.”

Bart stepped around three chattering women and stepped towards the sink. He washed his hand three times, carefully. Making sure to wash underneath his fingernails each time. Through the window, he watched Zachariah set the platter of burgers down on the table, near the other dishes.

Almost immediately, the flies that had been swarming around the table caught the scent of the mutilated meat and descended onto the plate. People ignored it as they all formed a line, shooing the flies away as they loaded their plates with food. It was disgusting.

He and Jimmy would have done it differently. Jimmy would have set the food up in the kitchen so people could fill their plates in a clean cool place. The swarming bugs were disgusting. And the burgers were ruined. And the very thought of eating them made his stomach toll.

He waited until all the burgers were gone before he went back outside. He approached the table, pretending to be disappointed.

“I told you they’d go fast,” Zachariah said, beaming.

Bart loaded his plate with a hot dog and potato chips, got a soda from the drink table and added it to this vodka. When Zachariah wasn’t looking, Bart dumped the food into the large trash can by the shed. He told Zachariah the food had tasted amazing.

Bart didn’t want to leave first, but he was bored. He had refilled his bottle twice more, but this time
he added soda to it each time. It wouldn't do to get too sloppy with everyone around.

He didn't want to offend Zachariah, because the captain wanted to pretend to be one of the guys. Bart found himself with Ramirez and Barnes, but he didn't like either of them. Sometimes when Bart approached them, they stopped talking. Bart knew they were talking behind his back. Gossiping.

But Bart was a good detective and he knew it. Zachariah knew it, and so did Barnes and Ramirez. He worked homicide. He knew how to deal with witnesses. He knew when to question further, when to keep quiet and let the suspect dig themselves into a hole. He was good at putting the guilty in jail.

Eventually though, Bart left. He drove slowly, carefully. He wasn’t drunk. Not yet. But he didn't feel like getting pulled over on one of the busiest days of the year. By the time he made it home, it had started to get dark.

Bart walked through the living room. He resisted the urge to call out for Jimmy. He missed him. If he had been here, the mantle wouldn’t be so dusty. There wouldn't be an empty bottle of vodka on the stained couch.

If Jimmy had been here, there wouldn’t be dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. Dinner would be waiting on the on the dining room table, and Jimmy would be there smiling at him as he walked through the door. He would have kissed him, asked how his day went. Later they would have made love because they loved each other.

He moved upstairs, ignoring the dirty laundry piled up on his floor and stood in his closet. He could still smell Jimmy’s cologne, the one Bart had bought for him for Valentine’s Day. Jimmy had picked up the bottle one day when they were out getting new shoes. He’d taken a whiff and smiled. Bart had gone back the next afternoon and bought the biggest bottle he could.

He remembered the night they’d spent out on New Year’s Eve, Jimmy had looked dashing in his bespoke suit, with his light hair slicked back and his beard trimmed neatly. In the restaurant, he’d seen the way women’s eyes passed over his tall, lithe frame. Even some of the men. But Jimmy belonged to him.

Afterward, when they’d returned home, they made love as the New Year rolled in. Bart ran his fingers over the soft lambs’ wool. A week ago, he’d cried as he held the suit jacket in his hands.

Outside, the crickets had begun chirping and Bart started to cry. He was tired. He hadn’t wanted to go to the barbecue. He hadn’t wanted to talk about Jimmy. To lie about him. Lying wasn’t hard, and with the life he led it was a necessary evil. But it was difficult, keeping up the pretense that Jimmy hadn’t left.

He’d had to invent a whole new story in the wake of Jimmy’s betrayal. And if he repeated it long enough, he could almost believe it himself. Jimmy went to Enfield to help a friend in hospice care. He’d be back at the end of the weekend. Jimmy would make him supper, and then they’d make love, because Jimmy loved him, and they were happy together. But Bart knew the longer that excuse went on, the more hollow it would sound.

People had already begun to wonder about him, where he was, why hasn’t he come to church? How long was he going to be in Enfield helping Hannah out?

They would start to talk.

Talk about him behind his back. They’d say things like Jimmy must have left him, and I guess their
marriage wasn’t as perfect as I thought it was.

He lay down. Night had fallen now, and outside he heard the constant crackle and pop of fireworks as he stared at the ceiling. He couldn’t sleep. The bed was too empty.

Jimmy was gone. He left Bart. And he was never coming back.

No, he thought. No. He was coming back. Bart would find him. He’d find him. And bring him home. He’d find him and bring him home because he loved Jimmy. And he’d treat him better. So that Jimmy wouldn’t leave him ever again.

Not if he had anything to do with it.

Midnight came and went. He thought of his plans for the following day. He was going to go to the next major hub on his list, heading south, as he had every weekend since Crowley given him his lead. So far he’d made it as far south as Pennsylvania, but his next stop was at Maryland. It would be a long drive, and he should have gone to bed far earlier.

But it was no use. The fireworks were going off and he couldn’t sleep. Instead, he went to the kitchen and pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer. There were only three bottles left. A week ago he had gone to the store and bought twelve. He was drinking too much. He should eat better, and stop drinking. He should clean up the house so that its nice for when Jimmy came home. But all he wanted to do was sit at home and drink vodka.

He poured a full glass and finished it in one go, then poured another before walking through the empty house once more. His heart ached, because Jimmy wasn’t there. Bart knew if Jimmy were to walk through that door right now, he’d throw himself on his knees, apologize for hitting him. He’d promise that they’d work things out and then he’d take Jimmy to their bedroom, and they’d make love, Bart would show him exactly how much he loved Jimmy. He’d hold him, and whisper how much he adored him.

But Jimmy wasn’t coming back, and even though he loved him, he made Bart so angry sometimes.

A husband doesn't leave. His husband couldn’t just walk away from the marriage vows they made. Bart wanted to hit, and kick and slap him, pull him by his hair up to their bedroom where he’d punish him for his betrayal. For being so stupid. For being so damn selfish. Bart would show Jimmy that it was pointless to run away from him.

One way or another, Jimmy was going to come back. And he was going to pay.
Dean pressed his hand to Doctor Barnes’ forearm. “Thank you Pamela,” he said.

“Give her ibuprofen for pain. Keep her cast dry,” she said, then turned back to Emma
“And I’ll see you in six weeks.” She left.

Dean picked Emma up, cradling her head against his shoulder.

Chapter 25: Turn South from that Place

Chapter Track: Bound to You, Christina Aguilera

July 29, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

The first thing Dean heard when he woke up was the shower on the other side of the bedroom wall. The tiny room was sweltering, and the sheets were damp with sweat. He kicked the blankets away, groaning a little as the early morning light filtered in through the fogged window. Dean turned onto his side, trying to get more comfortable, but it was no use. The mattress was old and sagging, and a spring was poking him in the upper thigh.

He pouted into his pillow. The smell of Castiel’s shampoo and detergent lingered on the pillowcase and he inhaled. It grounded him. Dean sat up and stretched as the water turned off in the bathroom. Yawning, he padded out of the bedroom toward the kitchenette.

Coffee was waiting in the French press on table. The cards they’d been playing with the previous night were gone. He had put the candles away, and the pans used to catch water the night before were drying on the dish rack.

Dean glanced around the rest of the small cottage. It was spotless. Castiel must have gotten up early to clean. Something about that bothered Dean. He wanted Cas to feel comfortable around him, not to walk on tiptoes and apologize for living. Cas hadn’t needed to lose sleep over the fact that his home, where Dean was intruding, wasn’t clean. He knew this behavior was a result of the abuse Cas suffered, but Dean didn't want Cas to feel that way about him. And he didn't know what to do to make Cas feel more comfortable.

He got a mug from the cabinet in the corner, and poured himself a cup. Dean was taking his first sip when the bathroom door opened. Castiel was running a towel through his hair, wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a faded t-shirt. His bare feet padded over the careworn wood. Dean leaned against the counter, watching him. Castiel hadn’t noticed him. He glanced into the bedroom, stopping short when he saw that Dean wasn’t there.

Dean wolf whistled and Cas spun around. “Good morning. Little spacey in the morning?” he asked, grinning. Castiel’s lips quirked into a smile and he walked over to the kitchen table.
“I’m useless without coffee,” he replied. Castiel walked around Dean to the cabinet, planting a kiss on Dean’s left shoulder as he passed by. He reached up to get a mug of his own and held it out while Dean poured him a cup. They took at seat at the table.

“Are you hungry?” Cas asked, after taking a few sips of his coffee. His hair was still wet, and a single drop was threatening to fall down his forehead. Dean reached over and brushed his hand through Castiel’s hair, capturing the water.

“I could eat.”

Cas finished his cup of coffee and stood. He opened the cabinet, frowned, then moved to the refrigerator. There, he found a container of leftover rice from the stir fry he’d made two nights before, and half a jar of milk.

Dean watched as Castiel cooked. He put the milk in a small saucepan, turning the fire on low, then moved towards a small spice rack. He grabbed the nutmeg, cinnamon, and sugar then added the rice to the low boiling milk. Cas stirred while the rice heated up, adding a pinch of each of the spices to the pan.

Watching Cas cook was a singular experience. Every move he made was methodical. Every measure of spice was exactly how much he wanted to add. Cas made it appear effortless. His actions were smooth, his hands steady as he pulled an apple from a small bowl in the fridge and cut it into wedges.

He added the rice to bowls and brought them over, along with the apple wedges. Dean smiled down at the breakfast cereal. “I used to make this for my brother,” he said, starting down at the mismatched bowls.

“You did?” Cas asked.

“Yeah, we always had leftover rice when we got takeout, and uh…” Dean ran his hand over the back of his neck. “Money was tight, you know? So I did the best I could to make the food stretch.”

Castiel was silent for a beat, then took a deep breath. “Can I tell you something, without you jumping to conclusions?”

Dean’s brow furrowed. “Yeah,” he finally said.

“You promise you won’t get mad?”

Dean reached across the small table, gripping Cas’ hand. “I swear.”

Castiel took a deep breath. “This is comfort food to me, but it came to be that for me in an unconventional way. Bart used to make this for me, and he only made it for me after a beating. It was… his apology, in a way, and in a weird way it made me feel loved. I knew it was a form of manipulation, but it worked. It gave Bart the upper hand, because here he was, asking for forgiveness, being contrite. And if I didn't accept his apology, I was unreasonable. But if I accepted it, I had an excuse to pretend that he hadn’t just beat me bloody.”

Despite his promise not to jump to conclusions, a small voice inside Dean's head did anyway. Was last night so traumatizing he felt the need to eat comfort food to make himself feel better?

Dean took a deep breath. “Okay,” he replied. He didn't say anything else.

After a long moment, Castiel spoke again. “But I want you to know… that isn't why I made it this morning. I made it because I like it. It’s one of my favorites. And it always makes me happy when I
eat it. Also because I didn’t have much else in the fridge.” Cas smiled when Dean chuckled, he squeezed Cas’ hand. “Bart doesn’t get take this away from me.”

Dean thought for a moment, then nodded. He hesitated. “Since you brought it up,” Dean began. “How are you feeling about last night?”

Cas tilted his head in confusion. “I… I had a wonderful time last night. What about you?”

“Me too,” Dean hurried to say. “I did too, I was just… checking in.”

Castiel smiled. He pointed at the bowl. “You better eat before it gets cold.” Dean smiled and took a bite of his breakfast. Once they had both eaten their fill, Cas did the dishes while Dean took a shower. He took his time. Despite Cas’ terrible water pressure, the water was hot, and it took some of the sting out of his sunburn.

Dean found him on the porch, a library book in his hands that he wasn’t reading. He sat down on the top stair, resting his head against the Castiel’s shins. Cas carded his hand through Dean’s hair and Dean couldn’t help it, his eyes slipped shut.

Somewhere nearby a robin was calling. The smell of Cas’ laundry detergent mixed with the fresh air of the woods. The smell of rain lingered in the air. A sense of peace stole over Dean, and he felt his shoulders relax against Cas.

Castiel set his book aside, his thin fingers moved to his shoulders. Dean groaned as Cas began a slow massage.

The tops of his shoulders were still tender, but Dean didn’t care. He carried tension in the back of his neck, and Cas was far better than the Magic Fingers ever were at relieving it. He sighed into the touch, leaning back until he was fully seated between Castiel’s legs. Dean took Cas’ foot into his hands and started to knead the toes between his fingers.

The chime of Dean’s phone made them both jump apart. Laughing, he pulled his phone from the pocket of his jeans, reading the text. Then Dean cursed and locked his phone stuffing it back into his pocket.

Something about his tone made Castiel pulled away from him then, hunching his shoulders. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to calm down. “Is something wrong?” he asked with a voice that didn’t betray the onslaught of emotion Dean’s anger aroused in him.

Dean put the phone in his pocket, and glanced up at Cas. “I gotta head out,” he said shortly. “Emma fell and hurt her wrist.”

“Oh no. She was so excited about going to the zoo.”

“Oh, we’re still going. If she feels up to it, nothing is gonna stop her from seeing the zebras, not if I have anything to do with it. But I gotta go.” He glanced up at Cas. “I’m sorry to cut our day short.”

Cas smiled, running his finger through Dean’s short hair. “It’s fine, Dean. Go be with your daughter. Say hello to the gorillas for me.”

Dean stood up from his place on the patio floor and kissed Castiel hard on the mouth. “I’ll see you later.”

“When?” Cas asked.
Dean deliberated for a moment. “How about you and I go out to dinner on Friday? My treat. We’ll go someplace that has too many utensils on the table and eat food with weird French names.”

Something about the way Dean said it made Cas pause. “Is that what you want?”

“I just thought we could try something different, you know? Something nice.”

Castiel hesitated for a moment. “What if we just got burgers and beer at the Wilmington Boardwalk instead?”

Dean sighed in relief. “What did I do to deserve you?” he asked.

Cas pushed him gently on the shoulder. “Go,” he said. “Give Emma a kiss from me and tell her to feel better.”

Dean leaned down to kiss him once more. “I’ll see you Friday.”

“It’s a date.”

Dean went inside to grab his jacket then departed, waving from the open window of the Impala as he drove away.

He turned the music up as he drove along the gravel road. Benny had assured him she wasn’t in any danger, but worry for Emma niggled in the back of his brain. Despite that, Dean felt lighter than he had in years. The drive to the doctor’s office seemed to take half the time it usually did. As Dean pulled into the parking lot, he saw Benny’s truck parked a few spaces down.

Inside, Arsen, Remy, Margot and Ben were sitting with Andrea in the waiting area. Remy and Arsen were playing Slapjack with a worn out deck of cards on one of the waiting room tables. Margot was reading an old magazine. But Ben was sitting in Andrea’s lap. Andrea was stroking his curls, murmuring in his ear. His cousins were pretending not to notice his tears as Ben clutched their mother.

Dean’s heart broke a little bit at the sight. He swallowed the lump in his throat, and let instinct take over. In one fluid motion, he crossed the room, scooped Ben into his arms, and walked away from Andrea and other kids. He stopped in a short hallway leading to the restrooms.

Something broke loose in Ben then, and he choked back a sob as he pressed his face into Dean’s neck. “I’m sorry Daddy,” he whimpered. “I tried to catch her but…” the rest of his confession broke off, and he began to cry.

“Whoa, whoa, hey Bubby, it’s okay.” Dean rubbed his knuckles over the spot between Ben's birdlike shoulder blades. “It’s gonna be alright. Uncle Benny said Emma’s gonna be fine.”

“But it was my fault!” Ben wailed.

“Oh Benji,” Dean said. “It’s not your fault, baby.”

“It is,” he argued. “If I hadn’t been showing off, she wouldn't have tried to jump off the swing like me and she wouldn’t have fallen.”

Dean pulled his son back. “Benjamin Isaac Winchester, I don't blame you for what happened to Emma. It was not your fault. Do you understand me?”

Ben bit his lip, tears still streaming down his face. “But she wouldn't have fallen if—”
“But that’s still not your fault.” He sat Ben down on one of the benches lining the walls and knelt in front of him. “Of course you want to protect your little sister and make sure she doesn’t get hurt, but that’s not your job. I don’t expect you to do that, and I won’t blame you for it if she gets hurt by accident. Do you understand?”

Ben’s expression twisted, like he was trying to solve a difficult math problem. “I understand, Daddy,” he finally whispered. Dean kissed Ben’s forehead.

“Good. Now let’s go see how Emma’s doing okay?” He pushed Ben’s chin up until his son met his gaze. “You feeling better?” he asked. Ben nodded. "I love you, Ben," Dean said.

Ben grabbed his father’s hand, even though he had teased Emma for doing so just two days ago. They walked down the hallway together. Gwen, the nurse, led the way, knocking twice on exam room three and opening the door.

Dr. Barnes was putting the finishing touches on a blue cast covering Emma’s left forearm. Emma looked up as they entered, and Dean ran to her. He kissed her forehead first then the cast. She wrapped herself around Dean.

“Oh, baby girl, what happened?” he asked, his voice hoarse. He had known she was okay, but to see it for himself burst a bubble of relief. Seeing the heavy cast on her wrist brought tears to his eyes.

Emma was calm, giggling as Doctor Barnes wrote her name in big swirly script onto the cast. “I’m okay Daddy,” she said into his hair.

“How’d it happen?” Dean glanced over to where Benny was sitting in the corner.

Benny stood. “I’m sorry, brother,” he said. “I was getting Arsen and Margot ready for the zoo, and the other kids were out on the swing. I guess they were having some kind of competition to see how far they could jump off the damn things. Emmylou here took a nasty fall.”

Dean pressed another kiss to Emma’s head, “What’s the prognosis doc?” he asked.

“Her radius near the wrist broke on impact. Luckily, it was a stable fracture, so the pieces of bone are still aligned. She’ll need a cast for six weeks. After that she’ll be sore and stiff for a few weeks, but then she’ll be good as new.”

Dean pressed his hand to Doctor Barnes’ forearm. “Thank you Pamela,” he said.

“Give her ibuprofen for pain. Keep her cast dry,” she said, then turned back to Emma “And I’ll see you in six weeks.” She left.

Dean picked Emma up, cradling her head against his shoulder. He reached down, and ruffled Ben’s curls.

“Thank you Benny,” he said, turning back towards the other man as Pamela left the room. He glanced down at the kids. “So, we going to the zoo or what?” he asked.

Both of them looked up, wide eyed. “We can still go?” Ben asked.

“Well, I don't see why not, unless you don’t feel like it Em,” Dean replied. Emma shook her head back and forth so fast her curls swung out around her face. “But first, I think we should get ice cream from Spike’s. I could use a double scoop of mint chocolate chip, and I think Emma deserves some Very Cherry for everything she went through this morning.”
So they headed over to Spike’s, where each of them got massive ice cream cones. They then loaded up the cars and made the three hour drive to Asheboro.

They visited every animal in the park. Emma got to see her zebras. When they went to the children’s petting zoo, Dean made sure that she got to pet one of the baby zebras.

After the petting zoo, Ben wanted to see the gorillas, so they went to the cool, dim monkey house. As promised, Dean said hello to the gorilla for Cas. He took a picture and sent it to him. Cas teased Dean about the "family resemblance" and Dean fired back, sending a picture of himself flipping off the camera.

They gorged themselves on hamburgers, french fries, and lemonade for lunch. Then, sick to their stomachs, they rode the zoo’s tram up to the gift shop, where each kid bought a souvenir.

Finally, the day drew to a close, they left, parting ways. Dean, Ben, and Emma all jumped into the Impala, and the Lafittes honked as they drove away in their SUV. The children, exhausted, fell asleep almost as soon as Dean pulled onto the highway. He glanced back into the rearview mirror and smiled. Ben cradled Emma’s head in his lap. He had draped his hand protectively over her arm so it didn’t fall onto floorboard. Using Emma’s giant stuffed zebra as a pillow, he slept openmouthed, snoring.

Dean smiled and drove on. They didn’t get home until after nine. He carried the kids inside and put them to bed. By the time he got both of the kids to bed, Dean was exhausted. He jotted down a note, reminding himself to get a waterproof sleeve for Emma to use in the shower.

He texted Charlie, thanking him for taking his shift at the last minute. Dean reminded himself to add a bonus to her check, then finally fell into bed.

Tired as he was, though, Dean couldn’t fall asleep. He stared up at the ceiling for hours. The digital clock on the bedside table next to his head illuminated the room in an eerie green glow. It contrasted with the bright orange glare from the streetlamp outside. With a frustrated sigh, he sat up, running a hand through his hair. He got out of bed, taking a moment to use the restroom, then checked on both of the kids.

They were fast asleep. He crept downstairs to the front door, where he slipped on a pair of boat shoes. Across the street, the lamplight from the store’s parking lot illuminated the deserted street.

He glanced out at the river as he crossed the street. Only a couple of fishing vessels were out. He crossed the gravel parking lot, feeling the first few rain drops hitting his t-shirt. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Dean pulled his keys from the pocket of his sweatpants and unlocked the side entrance to the store.

Careful to lock the door behind him, Dean walked across the floor. The store was quiet save for the hum of the refrigerator cases as he climbed the spiral staircase to the loft. He paused to open a window, letting the storm breeze filter into the stuffy space.

He took a seat at the brightly painted desk and pulled a key from the middle drawer. Then he unlocked the side drawer, pulling out a metal safe.

Dean opened the lid and took a deep breath. Sometimes, Dean imagined he could still smell her lotion lingering on the paper. He sighed, pulling the letters out one by one until he found the envelope for Emma’s seventh birthday. Holding the soft paper between his fingertips, two more letters caught his eye.
One of them was wrinkled from being read several times through the years. The other one was still sealed, untouched. It was addressed “To the One” in Lisa’s looped script. He’d been afraid of that letter ever since Lisa had pressed it into his hand, during one of the periods of lucidity before her death.

She gave him his letter first. “Read this after I’m gone,” she whispered, her voice hoarse from disuse.

“Baby,” he’d said, still unwilling to entertain the idea. Dr. Carter had said it would be a matter of weeks now, but he refused to think about that. Not yet. He had time.

“Dean, I want you to be happy,” she said.

“I am happy,” he replied, gripping the letters in his hand. She had given him letters for weeks now, most of them were addressed to the kids. One was for Andrea. But this was the first time she gave Dean a letter.

Then she handed over another letter. “Don’t read this one. It’s not for you.”

"Who is it for?” Dean asked, his voice trembling as he took the letter.

"It’s for the person you fall in love with after I’m gone.” Dean shook his head violently in denial. He wouldn’t even entertain that idea. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But Lisa just kept talking. “I want you to move on, Dean. I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy.”

Tears spilled over, down both his cheeks and he wiped them away roughly with his fingers. “I can't be happy without you, Lis,” he’d said, sobbing.

“You will,” she replied. “I know it.” The certainty in her voice sent a shiver down his spine. Sleep overtook her then, and Dean sat with her, the late afternoon sun coming into their bedroom.

She died a month later, on a cloudy Thursday afternoon. For days afterward, Dean was too numb to read the letter she’d left for him. He couldn't do it until week later, after the funeral. Dean was alone in the hunting cabin, and he finally opened the letter.

Dean removed the letter, gently, as if he were holding something sacred, something precious. A tear slipped down his cheek as he began to read the words he'd memorized years ago.

My dearest Dean,

There are dreams that visit us and leave us fulfilled upon waking, there are dreams that make life worth living. You, my sweet husband, are that dream, and it saddens me to have to put into words the way I feel about you. I’m writing this letter now, while I still can, and yet I’m not sure how to capture what I want to say. I’m not a writer, and words seem so inadequate right now. How can I describe how much I love you?

Is it even possible to describe a love like that? I don’t know, but as I sit here with pen in hand, I know that I have to try.

I know you like to tell the story of how I played hard to get. But when I think back on the night we first met, I think I knew even then that we were meant to be together. I remember that night. Just as clearly as I can recall the exact sensation of your hand in mine. I remember every detail of the cloudy afternoon at the beach when you proposed to me.

Until you came along, I never knew how much I’d been missing. I never knew that a
touch could be so meaningful or an expression so eloquent. I never knew that a kiss could take my breath away. You are, and always have been, everything I've always wanted in a husband.

You’re kind and strong and caring and smart; you lift my spirits and you’re a better father than you know. You have a knack with children, a way of making them trust you. I can’t express the joy it’s brought me to see you holding them as they fall asleep in your arms.

My life is infinitely better for having you in it. And that’s what makes all this so hard; it’s why I can’t seem to find the words I need. It scares me to know that all this will be ending soon. I’m not simply scared for me, though—I’m scared for you and our children, too. It breaks my heart to know that I’m going to cause you all such grief. I don’t know what I can do, other than to remind you of the reasons I fell in love with you in the first place. I don’t know how to express my sorrow at hurting you and our beautiful children. It pains me to think that your love for me will also be the source of so much anguish.

I truly believe that while love can hurt, love can also heal. That’s why I’m giving you another letter.

Please don’t read it. It’s not meant for you, or our families, or even our friends. I doubt that either of us has met the person to whom you will give this letter. You see, it’s for the person who heals you, the one who makes you whole again.

Right now, I know you can’t imagine something like that. It might take months, it might take years, but someday, I know you’ll give that letter to someone else. Please, Dean, I’m begging you. Find the strength to fall in love again.

Trust your instincts, just as I did on the night we first met. You’ll know when and where to do that, just as you’ll know which person deserves it. And when you do, trust me when I say that somewhere, somehow, I’ll be smiling down on both of you. I’ll be watching over you, cheering you on.

Love always,

Lisa

Dean gently folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. For fifteen seconds, he allowed himself to mourn his wife. He held the unopened letter in his hand before sighing, putting it back in the lockbox and shutting the lid. He put the box back into the desk drawer and closed the windows. Then, taking Emma’s birthday letter with him, Dean went back downstairs.

Light was beginning to filter in through the windows and he sighed, resigned himself to spending a long day at work without sleep. Maybe if he hurried back, he thought as he crossed the street, he could catch a nap before he had to open up. Before he collapsed into bed, Dean checked on the kids again. Both of them were still sound asleep.

The last thing he remembered before his eyes slipped shut was the hint of Lisa’s perfume on the air around him. When he awoke three hours later to the blare of his alarm clock, Dean groaned. He hurried through a shower and woke the kids. By the time he got breakfast on the table, jerry-rigged a waterproof sleeve for Emma’s cast, and helped Emma get dressed, Dean needed a nap. And Dean still had a ten hour shift of work ahead of him.
He dropped Ben off at Sam’s house for his piano lesson with Jess, but he took Emma with him to work. She was awkward with her heavy cast, and Dean wanted to keep her close. He set her up with her baseball cards spilling over the coffee table in his office, and went out to face the masses.

Benny was at the grill, and the smell of breakfast sausages made Dean’s mouth water. He hadn’t eaten breakfast with the kids, preferring instead to chug two cups of coffee. But now his stomach rumbled. He pulled a couple bills from his wallet and added them to the till before heading over getting one from Benny.

The morning shift was slow. By the time his break came at noon, only a handful of his regular fisherman had come in. He glanced outside. The clouds had rolled in during the night, and it was a dreary, windy sort of day. The kind of day you stayed inside and played board games or watched mindless television.

Dean went upstairs to eat his lunch. He watched the pre-game show for the Braves game as he munched on a bacon sandwich. The commentators discussed the Dodgers’ chances of winning against Atlanta.

The storm had moved in by three and they all sat up in the loft, watching the game. They only had a couple of interruptions from customers. By the seventh inning stretch Emma fell asleep on Dean’s lap, and Benny took care of the people who came in. The Braves lost and Dean shook his head. Their team was hopeless.

After not getting a customer for over an hour, Dean closed shop at six. The storm had turned into a gale, with sheets of rain pouring down on the lot outside. He called Charlie to let her know they wouldn’t have a night shift that evening. Dean made a run for their house, Emma in his arms, her cast sheltered by his jacket.

Benny texted him when he got home and Dean allowed himself to relax. He made a quick supper of chili mac and corn, and put a movie on for the kids, then glanced at his phone.

He knew Cas would be off, as he usually worked the morning shift on Wednesdays. Dean contemplated calling him. He didn’t like that Cas was all alone out in the middle of nowhere during such a bad storm. And those cabins weren’t exactly in great condition.

Dean made his mind up on the spot.

“Hey kids, wanna go get Mr. Cas?”

Knowing Cas didn’t like it when he stopped by without warning, Dean called him, inviting him over for a game of Monopoly. Cas, surprised but grateful for the invitation, quickly agreed.

Ben and Emma ran for the Jeep. They drove carefully through the wet streets, until finally turning onto Castiel’s drive. It had been washed out in places, and Dean was glad he had taken the SUV rather than the Impala. Baby didn’t do well in heavy rain. They pulled up as close as they could to the cottage. Dean ran to the front door, knocking just as thunder crashed overhead.

Cas opened the door and Dean’s breath caught in his throat. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed him, and it had only been a day. Glancing at the car where the kids were waving, Cas smirked and pulled Dean into the house.

“We don’t have long,” he murmured, “Before the kids start wondering where we are.” He pressed a fervent kiss to Dean’s lips. “How’s Emma?” he asked between kisses. “I would have called, but
work was a madhouse the past few days.”

“Emma’s fine. Broken arm. And it’s weird that the Roadhouse was so busy. We were dead slow all
day.”

“We had a lot of beachgoers come in when the weather turned sour.” Cas pressed Dean against the
wall of the cabin. “I missed you,” he murmured.

“Me too,” Dean replied, breathless. “More than I realized.”

“Oh?” Cas asked, snaking a hand up Dean’s damp t-shirt.

“Yeah,” his words caught in his throat. “I couldn't wait until Friday to see you. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay. I’m looking forward to a night of Monopoly and you.” Cas pressed his thigh
between Dean’s and Dean had to suppress a moan.

“You’re killing me, Cas,” he said, shivering.

“I’m sorry,” Cas said, insincerely contrite. He pulled back, straightening their clothes. “I’ll behave.”
Even as he spoke, his hands lingered over Dean’s torso, his arms, his wrists.

Dean let out a shuddering breath. “Evil man,” he whispered. Outside, the Jeep’s horn blared and they
both laughed. “Ready to go?” Dean asked and Cas nodded. He grabbed a canvas sack from Dean’s
store, and a rain jacket.

“Lead the way,” Cas replied. They ran out into the rain then, toward the SUV. By the time they
made it to the vehicle, they were both soaking wet and laughing. Castiel greeted the children in the
backseat. He climbed in as Dean ran around the front to the driver’s side.

“You guys ready for Monopoly?” he asked as Dean slammed his door shut.

“Yeah!” Emma and Ben said.

Cas examined her cast. “That looks like it hurts,” he said.

She nodded. “Yeah, but Daddy kissed it better.”

He reached into the back seat, holding her hand in his and pulling the plaster to his lips. “I’ll kiss it
better too,” he whispered.

Emma smiled widely. “Will you sign it?” she asked.

“Of course, I’ll do that first thing when we get home okay?”

Dean shot a glance at Castiel. He’d had called Dean’s house home. He probably didn't even realize
what he’d said, but something warm spread through Dean. Unbidden, a fantasy of Dean and Cas
sharing a home together with Ben and Emma flashed through his mind. He wanted it. And as Cas
turned around, Dean reached over and threaded their fingers together.

They played Monopoly late into the night, far later than the kids’ usual bedtime. For the first time in
living memory, Emma won, breaking Ben’s four year winning streak. Ben sulked about it for nearly
twenty minutes. Finally Castiel drew him into a game of Connect Four, which Cas then threw. It
made Ben smile, and in turn made Dean smile.

They made hot chocolate and s’mores over the gas burners of the stove. Then Cas helped the kids
get ready for bed while Dean made pancake batter for the following morning.

Dean felt Castiel’s arms wrap around his middle, a kiss planted to the knot at the base of his neck. He leaned into the touch. Cas moved to his side and began to help with the dishes. It was easy between them. Dean hooked his ankle around Cas'. It didn't take the two of them long to finish up the dishes.

“When’s your birthday?” Castiel suddenly asked, breaking the easy silence between them. It was one of a million questions he wanted to ask, to know about the man who had stolen his heart. But knowing his birthday was a good place to start.

“January 24th,” Dean replied. “Yours?” he asked.

“December 5th,” Castiel said.

Dean frowned. Cas furrowed his brow. "Is there something wrong with December 5th?"

“No it's just...that’s my mom’s birthday.”

“It is?”

“Yeah,” he replied. He bit his lip. “I, uh… I'm sorry, I just I don't have a lot of good memories around that day. Not after she died at least,” he admitted.

Cas paused washing the whisk in his hand. “Well,” he finally said. “We’ll have to make some new memories then.”

Dean smiled. He cleared his throat. “So, uh, what’s your favorite kind of ice cream?”

Castiel laughed. “Mint chip,” he finally replied.

“No way,” Dean said. He went to the fridge, pulling out a half gallon of Mint Chocolate Chip from the freezer. “Mine too.”

Castiel smiled, holding up two clean spoons. They left the rest of the dishes in the sink and made their way back to the living room, where they took turns eating out of the carton. It didn't take long for the two of them to finish it off, occasionally sharing a bite through kisses. They watched and old western on tv, snuggled on a couch that was too small for both of them.

After some inane commercial for beer that made Dean laugh out loud, Cas pressed his lips to his Adam’s apple. “Thank you for saving me from a lonely evening,” he murmured.

“Thank you for losing at Connect Four to save Ben’s ego,” Dean whispered back.

Cas extricated himself from Dean’s arms, and sat up, staring into Dean’s eyes. He traced his fingers over Dean's face, memorizing every wrinkle, every freckle, every eyelash. Dean closed this eyes at the touch. It had been so long since someone had touched him in this way.

“I want you,” Dean murmured.

“I want you too,” Cas replied, closing the distance between them. He pulled Dean up, fumbling for the remote and clicking the tv off. Dean grasped his hand, heading to the bedroom. He glanced into the kids’ rooms out of habit. Emma was asleep but Ben was reading a book under the covers, by the light of a flashlight. Dean didn't say anything to him, pulling the door shut.

Cas followed him to the end of the hall to his bedroom. Dean snuck a glance inside, and deeming it decent for company, pushed the door open. They went inside. Cas pounced on Dean, pressing him
against the wall in a way that took their breath away.

“I love it when you're like this,” Dean whimpered between earth shattering kisses.

“Like what?” Cas asked, nipping the hollow between Dean’s neck and the collar of his t-shirt.

“W-when you take charge like this,” Dean explained, breathless.

Cas practically growled, before remembering that there were children right down the hall. “We need to be quiet,” he said, pulling Dean in for a rough kiss. Dean moaned, pushing at Cas’ shoulders until he backward onto the bed. Dean straddled his hips. Immediately, Castiel flipped them over, pinning Dean’s wrists above his head. He loosened his grip, but Dean didn't move

In the orange light from the lamp outside, Dean’s eyes were brown, the color of whiskey in a frosted glass. “You’re so beautiful,” Castiel whispered. He traced his fingers over the soft fabric of Dean’s t-shirt. Dean settled into their embrace, lifting his hips until his feet hooked around Cas’ lower back.

“And you’re such a sap,” Dean joked.

Castiel encircled Dean’s bony wrists with his fingers. He moved Dean’s hands above his head, exposing a soft line of skin as his t-shirt rode up, and thrust until the friction made both of them breathless. He pulled back then, trailing his hands down Dean’s legs, where he proceeded to remove Dean’s socks. “Why do you like it?” Cas asked conversationally.

“Like what?” Dean asked. He was having a hard time concentrating on the thread of their conversation. He was more focused on the methodical way Castiel was undressing him.

Cas smiled. “Why do you like it when I take charge?” he elaborated, genuinely curious. Dean stilled and sat up, contemplative. Castiel, noticing the shift in the atmosphere, sat crosslegged opposite Dean.

“I’m not sure,” Dean began. Suddenly, he looked sheepish. Cas reached out, grabbing Dean’s hand.

“You don’t have to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“It’s not that,” Dean said. “It’s just… ever since Lisa died, I feel like I’ve barely been keeping my head above water. Without her, I’m everyone. I’m Dad, and Mom. I’m the breadwinner, the hairdresser, the resident kisser of boo boos. I’m the head chef and laundryman, and maid. I can’t remember the last time I wasn’t in charge of a decision, or the last time someone else took the reins.” Castiel reached out, pressing his hands to Dean's cheeks. Dean leaned into the gentle touch and continued. "When I’m with you, when you take control like that, especially when we’re … intimate, I’m just Dean again. Just a guy who gets breathless when his partner gets a little rough in bed. I get to let go, and not be the one who’s in charge all the time.”

Castiel pressed his lips to Dean's forehead “You can let go, Dean,” he whispered. "I've got you,"

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

Cas laughed, pressing a kiss to Dean’s lips.

They settled down on top of the blankets. The atmosphere had shifted from one of heady need to quiet intimacy. Cas didn't continue to undress Dean. Instead they lay down, wrapped around one another. Fingers trailed over bodies. Lips followed. They traded secrets, and they talked late into the night.
Neither of them felt the need to move beyond that. They simply enjoyed one another’s company without expectation of something more. At some point, both of them changed into sleep clothes and settled down for the night.

Dean fell asleep first, his ear pressed against the crook of Cas’ shoulder, one hand resting flat across Cas’ tight stomach. Cas stared at the ceiling, listening to Dean’s breathing become deep and even.

His body relaxed into the mattress. Here, with Dean wrapped around him like a vice, Castiel was happy. He felt loved, and wanted. And safe. For the first time in years, Cas felt safe in the arms of his lover. He sighed, contented, pulled Dean closer, and fell asleep.

***

Three hours later, Cas woke with a start. Predawn light was beginning to filter into the room, brightening the pale walls. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table and groaned. No one should be awake this early, he thought, rubbing a hand through his hair. Thunder rumbled, and Castiel could hear the gush of rain sweeping down the gutter by the window.

Sometime that night, they changed position; Cas was curled around Dean. The blankets were kicked to the side, and their legs tangled together. Pressed against one another, there was a sheen of sweat covering their bodies.

Dean shifted then, and Cas had to suppress a moan. He was hard, pressed up against the warm swell of Dean’s ass. Embarrassed, Cas moved back, trying to put some space between them. His heartbeat picked up at the sound of a soft sigh as Dean chased his movement and closed the distance, his body eager to stay connected to Castiel. Arousal coursed through his veins, settling in that in-between space of his stomach and navel.

Cas moved onto his back, trying to calm down. Dean mumbled something in his sleep, turning over until he was against Cas’ side again. He rocked against Castiel’s thigh, and Cas sucked in a deep breath. Dean was hard too. Cas clenched his hands into a fist and made a conscious effort to put distance between them.

Want warred with fear and self reproach. He wanted Dean. He wanted to wake him up, kiss him, lick and touch every part of Dean and take him—Cas stopped right there.

He’s not supposed to want, to take. He’s supposed to accept what’s given to him. That's what Bart liked. He liked it when Cas was passive. Bart got off on taking what he wanted without any thought to what Castiel wanted. Bart didn’t—but Cas shook his head. This wasn’t about Bart. It was about him. It was about what Castiel wanted. And what Dean wanted. And just because Dean is hard doesn’t mean he wants anything from me, Cas thought.

But, a little voice inside his head asked, didn’t Dean say he liked it when you took charge? Why are you worrying about Bart when Dean said he liked it when you are assertive? Wake him up, ask for what you want. Cas bit his lip.

He turned onto his side, until he was facing Dean in the pre-dawn light. Then he changed his mind again and shifted back onto his back, his heart racing. Minutes passed as he worked through his insecurities.

What’s the worst thing that can happen? A little voice inside his head asked.

He could say no, Cas thought.
So he says no. It isn't the end of the world. You both laugh it off and go back to sleep for a few hours and then make pancakes for breakfast. Life will go on. He loves you. Cas let out a frustrated sigh.

He decided to fall back asleep and forget all about his ridiculous urge to kiss Dean stupid, turning back onto his side toward Dean. He nearly fell out of the bed. Dean stared at Cas, his eyes wide open, a small smile on his face.

*How long had he been awake? Did he see how stupid I've been acting?* Panic coursed through his veins. He got caught. “Did I wake you? I’m sorry,” he said. His voice was breathless.

Dean shook his head. “I’m a light sleeper,” Dean said. He pressed his forehead to Castiel’s shoulder. “Got somethin’ on your mind sweetheart?” he said into the dark. He cupped Cas’ face, tracing a thumb over the soft skin on his cheek. Cas closed his eyes at how gentle Dean was. “What do you want?”

Fuck it, he thought. “You. I want you so much it woke me from a dead sleep,” Cas whispered.

“Then take me,” Dean replied.

Excitement coursed through his veins, and Cas didn’t stop to think about his doubts. He leaned forward and kissed Dean hard on the mouth. Dean moaned. In one swift motion, Cas straddled him, cupping Dean’s cheeks.

All the urgency from before came rushing back to them. Dean sat up, dragging his hands up Castiel’s broad shoulders until he threaded his fingers in Cas’ dark hair. When Dean pulled tight, Cas leaned into the touch.

“I need you,” he gasped. “Please.”

“You have me,” Dean moaned. “Cas, you have me.”

Cas pulled Dean’s t-shirt off and tossed it aside, then quickly discarded his own. He ran his hands over his shoulders, pausing to pull a nipple between his lips. Dean pulled him closer, trembling at the attention. Cas pushed Dean onto his back with a grunt. He traced the soft swell of Dean’s stomach just above the waistband of his boxers.

“Do you want this?” Castiel asked. He sat up, his thighs bracketing Dean’s.

Dean smiled. He reached up, threading their hands together. “Yes, I want you to fuck me right now. Please,” he added as an afterthought.

“Have you ever…?” he trailed off, embarrassed at his crass question.

Dean laughed, but Cas couldn't help but notice the undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. “This ain't my first rodeo,” he paused. “Granted, it has been a while.”

“And you’re sure you want this?” Cas asked.

Dean twisted in their embrace, reaching over to the bedside table. He opened the drawer and pulled out a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube. He glanced back at Castiel, embarrassed. “I uh, I picked these up the other day. Just in case.” He dropped them onto the bedspread.

Cas glanced from the bed back up to Dean, who was flushed, even in the dim light of the room. He inched forward, pressing his hands onto Dean's shoulder. Dean threaded their fingers together, pulling Cas down on top of him. Castiel kissed him, his fingers resting over the hollow of Dean's
neck. His pulse was racing. Castiel moaned when Dean’s hips rose to meet his, pressing their erections together.

The first rays of dawn light breached the room. It was quiet save for their breathy sighs and hushed moans as Cas rutted against Dean. He reached down, palming Dean’s cock through the fabric of his boxers. Dean arched his hips up, trying to prolong the contact. Cas pulled back, grabbing Dean’s legs. He lifted until Dean's calves were resting on his shoulders. He removed Dean’s boxers.

Dean’s erection sprang free, curving up onto his stomach. Castiel climbed out of the bed, removing the rest of his clothes. When he jumped back onto the mattress, he lost his balance and toppled off the other side with a thump.

“Shh,” Dean said through stifled giggles. “You’ll wake the kids.”

Cas climbed back onto the bed, and pulled Dean by the ankles until their cocks brushed back together. Dean’s laugh at Cas’ clumsiness became a hushed moan. Dean reached between them, gripping their dicks together then sliding his hand down in a few quick strokes and it was Castiel’s turn to moan. He thrust into Dean’s hand, fire coursing through his veins. Dean squeezed, scraping his thumbnail over the vein beneath his slit.

“Fuck,” Cas whispered, his hips stuttering out of rhythm. “You’re evil.”

“You’re stealing my line,” Dean teased breathlessly. Castiel hoisted Dean’s calves onto his shoulders. He grabbed the lube and slicked his fingers, then traced Dean’s entrance. He leaned down, pulling Dean’s dick into his mouth. Cas sucked hard and Dean scrambled for the other man’s head, overwhelmed with the wet, hot mouth enveloping him. He clutched Cas' hair between his fingers. Cas breached his hole with one finger. He sucked hard on the tip of Dean’s cock, flicking his tongue out to work the foreskin back and tease his slit.

Castiel prepped him slowly, carefully. When Dean was loose and open beneath him, whimpering for more, Cas set aside the lube, wiping his hand on Dean’s discarded boxers. Castiel put the condom on and lined the head of his cock to Dean’s entrance.

“I love you,” Dean gasped beneath him. He reached up, placing his palm against Cas’ cheek. “I want you, Cas. I want this.” Cas leaned into Dean’s hand. He breached Dean’s entrance with the tip of his cock and Dean inhaled sharply. "Ow," he huffed out. Cas stopped, pulled back the slightest bit.

“Tell me when you’re ready. I’ll go slow,” Cas promised, sliding in one more inch. “I don’t wanna hurt you.”

After a few moments, Dean nodded and opened up beneath him, lifting his hips to meet with Cas’ slow thrust. By the time Cas was fully seated within Dean, both of them were gasping for air. Dean grimaced. The angle was off, causing a fissure of pain to sweep through him. He reached over and picked up one of the pillows, handing it to Cas.

Cas pulled out, lifting Dean’s ass and putting the pillow beneath him for better leverage, then gently thrust back in. Dean groaned, and pressed the back of his hand over his mouth to stifle the sound. They found a rhythm. Cas rotated his hips with the grace of a dancer. He gripped Dean’s ankles, and traced his thumb over the delicate bones.

Dean reached down and stroked himself in time with Castiel’s thrusts. They picked up speed, the only sounds in the room were their muffled sighs and breathy moans. Cas could feel his climax building, warmth spreading from the base of his spine to his fingertips.
“I’m close,” Dean gasped, “Oh, God, Cas right there, baby,” he said when Cas hit his prostate. He groaned. “I’m so close.”

“Me too,” Cas gasped. “Come for me, honey. Let go.”

With a moan, Dean came in several long spurts. He clenched around Castiel’s cock and the sudden tightness pushed Cas over the edge. He collapsed onto Dean, coming hard into the condom. Castiel bit down hard on Dean’s shoulder as another wave of pleasure shot through him. Dean barely stopped himself from crying out. They lay in silence for a few long moments, both trying to catch their breath. Cas withdrew from Dean, kissing away Dean’s wince.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Sunlight streamed into room. It was fully up now and they could hear birdsong just outside their window.

“I’m much more than okay,” Dean replied. Cas kissed Dean just above his left nipple. He could feel the jackhammer of Dean’s heartbeat beneath his lips. Cas sat up, and withdrew to the small ensuite bathroom where he grabbed a washcloth and wet it with warm water. He disposed of the condom and washed his hands, then padded back into the bedroom.

Dean admired him as he walked toward the bed. Castiel’s body was all hard muscle. Dean bit his lip. *Maybe I should take up jogging,* Dean thought. His hair was a riotous mess atop his head. Cas climbed into bed, where he gently washed the drying come off Dean’s stomach. Then he ran the cloth between Dean’s legs and over his entrance, wiping the excess lube from his cheeks. The warm cloth on the sensitive skin of his entrance made Dean gasp at the combination of pain and pleasure. Castiel set the cloth aside and lay down. Dean curled up next to him, throwing his leg over Cas’ thighs. Cas rested a hand on Dean’s shoulder.

“Can I ask you something?” Castiel asked, breaking the easy silence between them.

“Sure,” Dean replied.

“Well, a while back,” Cas began, but he paused, unsure how to continue. “You said you hadn’t been with many men, but you seem… really comfortable as a bottom.”

Dean was silent for a long moment. He gently traced over a mole beneath Castiel’s nipple while he tried to come up with a response.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Cas hurried to say. “I was just curious.”

“No, it isn’t that it’s just…” he trailed off. “It isn’t something I’m proud of. You see, sleeping with men and... dating men are two different things.”

The pieces clicked together then. From what Dean had hinted, his family moved around a lot, living mostly in motels. He knew that John was an alcoholic who was often gone, and that Dean practically raised his brother. That Dean had to drop out of high school to put food on the table because John was too broken to do it himself. “How old were you when it started?”

Dean met Cas’ gaze for the first time. “How did you know?”

“I’m a smart man,” Cas replied, trying to dispel some of the tension that had built up between them.

Dean gave a small smile, but it didn’t last long. “I turned my first trick when I was fourteen, my last when I was eighteen. And that was because I needed gas money to get from Flagstaff to Southport. “Did your…. Did your dad make you do it?”
Dean shook his head. “What? No. He never knew. Sam didn't either,” Dean replied. “It started because we ran out of money for our motel room, and Dad was off on a 'job' which is code for bender. It was our second week at this shithole.” Once the floodgates opened, Dean couldn't seem to stop talking. “I tried every trick in the book. ‘Dad is out getting dinner, but he’ll be right back.’ ‘I am just a dumb kid and I counted out the wrong amount.’ ‘I’ll do some maintenance work to cover the difference.’ But none of it worked. The night manager of the motel said he’d let the rent money slide if I blew him.”

Cas’ grip tightened on Dean’s shoulders, but then he relaxed. “He said what?”

“I didn't know what it meant. Not really. But I learned… and I did it. Dad didn't come back for two more weeks. We ended up staying at that motel for another month after that. I got quite the education.” Dean chuckled bitterly. "Dad just thought I was doing a good job with handling the money."

“I… I am so sorry that happened to you, Dean.”

Dean shrugged against him, pressing a kiss to Cas’ pec. “It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that I was bi, because I thought that the whole sex with men thing was tied up with hooking.” He reached down and threaded their fingers together.

“I’m sorry I lied to you,” Dean whispered.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Cas replied emphatically. He paused for a moment then took a deep breath. “So,” he said, trying to change the subject. "When did you realize you were attracted to men?"

“In the army. One of my squad members at AIT uh….opened my eyes.”

Cas smiled. “Did you fall in love with him?” he asked.

Dean shook his head. “I love him, but I don’t think I was ever in love with him. See, he’s my best friend.”

Cas coughed and shot Dean a look. “Benny?”

Dean looked a little sheepish, hiding is face beneath the soft fabric of the bedsheets for a moment. “Yeah, before I met Lisa and he got back together with Andi, we were together for almost a year.”

“And you still maintained a friendship after the relationship ended?” Castiel couldn't imagine it.

Dean shrugged. “It was more of a natural shift. He and Andrea had been soulmates long before he and I ever got together. When she came back into his life, there was no doubt that he belonged with her, and she him.”

“He broke your heart,” Cas said. It wasn’t a question.

Dean pondered Cas’ words. “No. He really didn’t. He was exactly who I needed at that time in my life. He helped me come to terms with my sexuality. He was there for me through a long tour of duty overseas. Through my father’s death. Through Sam’s thing with Ruby,” Dean said, rolling his eyes.

“Ruby?” Cas asked. “I thought he was married to Jess?”

“It’s a long story,” Dean said and Cas got the feeling now wasn’t the time to get into it. Dean sat up, ran a hand through his hair. “Are you okay with the fact that Benny’s my ex?” Dean asked suddenly.
Castiel frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno,” he said. “Some people have a problem with it.”

“Did Lisa?”

Dean shook his head. “No, no. She loved Benny and Andrea like family. They are family, I just… I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable around him just because we used to date.”

Cas brushed a lock of hair that had fallen onto Dean’s forehead away. His hair really was getting long. "Don't cut your hair just yet,” he murmured.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Quit stalling, are you sure you're okay with it?"

Castiel pressed a gentle kiss to his temple. “Yes, Dean. I am confident enough in our relationship that I am not threatened by your ex. Who, by the way, is happily married and whose children call you Uncle Dee Dee.”

Dean laughed and lay back down, pressing a long kiss over Castiel’s heart. Their conversation drifted to more mundane topics. What toppings should cut up for the pancakes that morning? Did Cas want bacon or sausage? Dean bemoaned the laundry he needed to do that day and Castiel offered to help him. Cas teased Dean about the bike ride they were supposed to take that afternoon, and whether he’d be up for it or not. Eventually both of them drifted back to sleep for about an hour.

When Dean’s alarm went off, Castiel reluctantly got out of bed and redressed. He snuck across the hallway to the spare bedroom, where he was supposed to have slept the night before. He took a quick shower and changed clothes while Dean woke the kids, getting them ready for their day. By the time Cas made it out to the kitchen, Dean had already made a mound of pancakes, and bacon was sizzling on the stove. Cas met Dean’s gaze as he walked in.

He gave Emma a big hug and clapped Ben on the shoulder. Dean reached over and pulled him in for a brief kiss before sliding a plate of food across the kitchen island toward Cas’ seat.

Cas smirked when Dean sat on the stool and quickly adjusted his position with a grimace. He leaned over. “I didn’t even get that rough,” he whispered, low enough so the kids couldn't hear him. Dean shivered at Cas' word choice. He covered it and rolled his eyes, flipping Cas off beneath the table, out of Ben and Emma’s eyeshot.

“Daddy,” Emma said through a mouth of pancake.

“Yes, baby?” Dean said, turning his attention to Emma.

“Are we going for a bike ride today?”

“Uh,” Dean said, his eyes widening.

Cas snorted, choking on a bite of pancake. He tried to cover his laugh with a cough, but couldn’t. Dean shot him an annoyed glance and Castiel sobered up, holding his breath to fight his giggles.

Dean turned back to his daughter. “Well, sweetpea,” he said. “It'll depend on the weather.” Outside, rain was still coming down in sheets, and Emma pouted. He looked around the kitchen. “Plus,” he said, “it’s the last Thursday of the month.” Dean made a face at them, and Emma and Ben groaned.

“Laundry day,” they both lamented.
“Laundry day,” Dean agreed. “But, what if we go to the rental store and get some movies to go with it?” The children didn’t look convinced. “And all the fixings for ice cream sundaes?”

At that they reluctantly agreed and they all drove to Animal House of Movies. Each of them picked out a movie to watch. The kids bickered over who got to watch their movie first on the way home, which Dean settled by giving Cas’ movie dibs. When they got home, the children ran to get their hampers. Dean pulled Castiel into the kitchen to steal a quick kiss before Ben and Emma returned.

It took them ages to get everything sorted. Dean had a system. He didn’t just separate whites and colors. No, Dean was apparently more anal retentive than Cas was when it came to laundry. The whites were separated into whites and ‘nice’ whites. Jeans were a load on their own. And colors had an even more complicated system. Warm colors were separated from cool. And black clothes had their own detergent. Whites were always washed last, because Dean didn’t want to risk bleach stains on the colored clothes.

Cas stared at Dean, openmouthed. “I see why the kids hate laundry day,” he quipped when Dean finished his explanation.

Dean rolled his eyes and added another pair of jeans to the pile. Ben glanced at the hallway connecting the living room to the entryway and sighed. Dean smiled and ruffled his hair. “Don’t worry kiddo, it’ll be done before you know it.”

Emma added her soccer uniform to the warm colors. “You know, Daddy,” she began. “It might be easier to do laundry if we did it more than twice a month.”

“Well, baby,” Dean said, tossing a sock in her direction, “you might have a point there.”

Cas laughed. Dean finally started the jeans and the little family made their way to the kitchen. Dean made sandwiches while Cas started the popcorn. Ben washed carrot sticks and Emma got the ranch dressing and sodas.

They piled their food onto a wooden tray and went into the living room. Ben and Emma pulled the back cushions off of the couch, both lying on their stomachs with their feet in the air.

Dean piled the pillows up behind them and he and Cas curled up together on the couch together. Cas lay with his cheek pressed against Dean’s chest. As Ben put the disc into the player, Dean reached out, lacing their fingers together. Cas threaded his free hand through Dean’s hair. He felt a little self conscious. He and Dean hadn’t been very affectionate around the children yet, but after a few minutes his unease faded. He loved Dean. He felt safe here. He felt safe with this little family, and it was becoming easier all the time to show him that love.

Dean glanced down at the box on the coffee table and snorted. “Forrest Gump?” he asked. “That’s your choice?”

“It’s a classic!” Cas defended. “Plus, Em said it was one of her favorites.”

“We’ve seen it a thousand-million times,” Ben mumbled, but he skipped through the previews anyway.

“Let me guess, Emma asked you to pick this one so she could free up her pick for Tangled?” Dean surmised.

Emma looked up, guilt written all over her face, but Cas shook his head and winked at her. He pressed a, gentle kiss onto Dean’s collarbone. “If you must know, it was actually the other way around. See I really wanted to see Tangled, but I was embarrassed to choose it, so she graciously
took my movie and I picked out Forrest Gump.”

Dean gave him an amused smile. “Uh huh,” he said. He glanced over at his daughter. “For that bit of trickery, Emmabear, Benji’s movie is next,” Dean said.

Ben grinned up at them just as Emma huffed out “That’s not fair!” The menu music started up then, and Ben pressed play.

By the time Jenny was about to strip in her dorm room, and Dean hurriedly reached out for the remote to skip the scene, the laundry chimed. He rose from their embrace on the couch, wincing a little at the movement. I need to get a plug, he thought. Prepare better for next time. He blushed a little at the raunchy thought, but then caught Cas’ eye and had to look away. Cas was appraising him as he stumbled over to the hall closet, where he kept the washer and dryer. He made short work changing over the laundry, moving the jeans to the dryer and loading the warm colors. He sprayed the stained clothes and started the machines at the same time, then ambled back over to the couch. Cas was sitting up, his feet curled underneath him as he watched the scene.

Dean lay down on the couch, resting his head on Cas’ thigh. Maybe in between the Vietnam and shrimp boat fishing, he thought, I can get a nap in. He let himself drift for a few minutes, just enjoying the sound of his children quoting along to the movie. The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was Castiel’s fingers trailing lazily through his hair.

He hadn’t been this happy in years.
Where are you now?

Chapter Summary

“Ah, so you figured the ole’ ball and chain was out of town so you’d come out and party?”

Bart twitched in annoyance. “You invited me out, so I came.”

“And Jimmy won’t care?”

“Jimmy cares about what I tell him to care about,” Bart replied shortly. Uriel processed his words for a moment.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Warnings for slurs.

Chapter 26: Where Are You Now?

Chapter Track: Cold Arms, by Mumford and Sons

August 1, 2014

Boston, Massachusetts

The crime scene was a madhouse. Nearly the entire precinct was on the scene when he arrived. Bart took a long swallow from his water bottle, letting the vodka settle the headache pounding his temple. Bart pushed his way through the mob of press at the tapeline, showing his credentials at the officer posted at the front door.

The officer greeted him with a nod. “It’s… it’s a bad one,” he said.

Bart walked through the scene on autopilot, trying not to notice the blood splatter down the hallway towards the kitchen. CSU was still processing the body, what was left of it. Bart grabbed a pair of gloves. Zachariah was standing in the corner of the room, talking to a tall black man in a rather ill fitting suit. When Zachariah saw Bart he gestured him over.

“Michelson,” he greeted, holding out a hand to shake. “This is Miles Uriel, he transferred in from Illinois.” Bart reached out and shook Uriel’s hand. “He’s going to be your new partner.”

“Oh so the budget finally went through?” Bart asked.

“Well, not technically, but I pulled some strings to get things moving. Uriel, this is Bartholomew Michelson.”

“Call me Bart, please,” he said. He took in the scene. “Caught a good one, huh? What happened?”
Zachariah sighed. “Some guy who worked in the mayor’s office had some kind of psychotic break, ate his wife.”

“He ate her?” Bart asked.

“The suspect, Jack Montgomery, had a moment of lucidity,” Uriel said. “Called 911. When the cops came in, psycho was still chewing.”

“Said something about needing to consume his offspring or something before they hauled him off,” Zachariah said. “It’s open and shut, just gotta process the scene and you’re home free. But we gotta make sure it’s done right. This guy just moved up here from Missouri to work for the mayor.” Zachariah ran a hand over the bald spot on top of his head. “I gotta go deal with the mob outside. Show Uriel the ropes would ya?”

Bart nodded. He eyed Uriel warily. Uriel smiled tightly and knelt in front of the body. “So, what part of Illinois you from?” he asked, pulling the cap off his pen.

“Chicago,” Uriel replied, pulling out a thin moleskin notebook. “The vic was six months pregnant,” he said, shaking his head in disgust.

The coroners finally put her body in a body bag and carted her off on a stretcher. Bart and Uriel set to work processing the scene.

***

Seven hours later, Bart and Uriel signed out of the scene and headed straight to a bar. It was a cop bar in a seedier part of town. But it was close to Uriel’s apartment, and Bart didn't really care where he got a drink as long as it was cold and strong.

Through the smoke and the haze, the place was crowded. They fought their way to the bar, where miraculously there were two open seats. The bartender saw Uriel and rolled his eyes, bringing over a mug of draft beer and plopping it down and turning to face Bart. His eyes were blue.

“What can I get you?” he asked, his voice lilting, flirtatious.


“You got it detective,” the bartender said. He poured a drink, and moved on to the next customer.

They drank in silence. Uriel played it stoic, but the case must have gotten to him, because he downed three beers in under an hour without saying a word. Bart nursed his drink, still unsure how to break the ice with his new partner. Hell, he wasn’t even sure he wanted to break the ice with Uriel. He and Rebecca had a rhythm. They worked well together. And then she had to go and have a baby and quit. Anger flared through him again, and he clenched his fist around the glass. Stupid bitch had to go get herself knocked up, and left him in the lurch. Just like Jimmy. Everyone always left him.

He finished his drink in one swallow and held up a hand for another. Next to him, Uriel scoffed, as if continuing a conversation, neither of them had participated in for some time. “What kind of animal…” he trailed off, taking another swallow of beer. Uriel took a deep breath, glanced over at a pair of women at the end of the bar. Obviously looking for some way to change the subject, he appraised them for a moment. “I think those two are checking us out. Too bad you’re married, huh?” he asked, pointing at the ring on Bart’s hand.
Bart glanced over at them and scoffed. The two women were worn. Dirty cocksucking cop whores. Not like Jimmy. Jimmy was clean and fresh. He always smelled like lemon and mint. He wouldn’t be caught dead in a bar like this, a cop bar with its smokey air and sticky bar top. Bart hated it here. And he hated the whores at the end of the bar.

He raised his hand for another drink. The bartender came over, poured him a double shot. No cranberry. He downed it in one go. The vodka tasted like water.

Two drinks ago, he might not have said anything, but Uriel was just a baby detective in a new precinct. He didn’t have any pull at the station, and it isn’t like the entire precinct didn’t already know he was married to a man. Might as well let his new partner in on it. He pulled the glass towards him. “Yeah, well my husband wouldn’t think they’re much competition.” The bartender met his eyes and smiled wryly and turned away.

That bartender, though… he thought, his gaze slipping over to the fair haired young man behind the bar. Sure, he thought, he may be camp as hell, but he’s got a tight little body and you have needs Bart.

Uriel appraised Bart for a moment, then shrugged. “What’s your husband’s name?”

Bart tore his gaze from the firm ass of the bartender. “James, Jimmy.”

“And what would Jimmy think of you being out this late drinkin’?”

“He doesn’t think anything. He’s out in Connecticut taking care of a sick friend. Won’t be home until tomorrow night.”

“Ah, so you figured the ole’ ball and chain was out of town so you’d come out and party?”

Bart twitched in annoyance. “You invited me out, so I came.”

“And Jimmy won’t care?”

“Jimmy cares about what I tell him to care about,” Bart replied shortly. Uriel processed his words for a moment.

“I see. You wear the pants.”

Bart rolled his eyes at Uriel’s casual bigotry, but he didn’t bother to correct him. It wasn’t worth it. “Sure,” he replied. Uriel caught the eye of one of the women at the end of the bar and winked at her. She looks tired, Bart thought. Empty. She raised her glass at them and Uriel chuckled, straightening his tie. “Go ahead and talk to her if you want,” Bart said.

“I think I will,” Uriel replied. He left Bart to his drink.

The bartender came over. “Top you off?” he asked. His voice was high, lilting.

Bart ignored the double entendre and glanced at his empty glass. “I’ll take another.”

The bartender peered at him through his eyelashes. “I haven’t seen you around here before,” he said.

“Yeah well,” Bart pointed at Uriel, who was chatting up the brunette woman. “my partner recommended it. It’s his neighborhood.”

“I’ve seen him around. He’s been in town, what, three weeks? And every night I’ve worked he’s taken a different girl home. Wasn’t interested in anything I could offer him though,” the man said as
Uriel and the woman walked toward the exit. As he passed, Uriel dropped a hundred dollar bill onto the bar top for his and Bart’s drinks and left.

Bart looked after him long after the door shut. He shook his head. Of course he’d get stuck with a horn dog partner. He shifted in his seat, wondered if Barnes ever came here.

“Am I boring you?” the bartender asked. “I can leave you alone with your drink.”

“You’re not boring me.” The man cracked his neck and smiled, and Bart thought he was better looking when he smiled. No sooner had he finished his drink, the bartender refilled his glass.

“I’m Samandriel, but only my mother calls me that. Call me Dre,” he said.

“I’m Bart.” He held out his hand and shook Dre’s. “I’m not… I’m not very good at this.” That was a lie. He was adept at picking one night stands, but he found that self deprecation tended to work in his favor.

“Not good at what?”

“This,” he replied, gesturing between the two of them.

“We’re just talking,” Dre said. “And you’re doing fine.” He reached over, tracing his fingers over Bart’s hand, then laced their hands together.

“I’m married.”

“I know.”

“Does that bother you?” Dre shrugged, and glanced down at their clasped hands.

“Does your husband know you’re here?”

“He’s out of town.”

“So what? You thought you’d hit the town, pick a guy up?”

“I’m not like that. I love my husband.”

“I should hope so. You married him.” Dre poured him another drink. “I wouldn’t tell your husband you were here if I were you.”

“Why’s that?” Bart asked.

“Handsome man like you in a bar like this? Never know who’ll hit on you,” Dre replied, a flirty edge to his voice.

“Are you hitting on me?”

“Would you be offended if I were?”

“No, I wouldn’t be offended,” Bart studied him. He was attractive. Young and blond. Thin. He had an innocence about him that Bart had always been a sucker for.

“I get off work in thirty minutes.”

“You do?” he asked, his voice slipping down an octave. “And what are you going to do with your
evening?”

“I’m sure I can find someone to do.” Dre pulled out a small pad of paper and jotted down an address. “Meet me here in an hour?”

Bart nodded, took the paper, and tucked it into his pocket. Dre poured him another drink. Bart waited fifteen minutes after Dre got off work to leave the bar.

As he drove, the world around him blurred at the edges. He knew he was too drunk to drive, he knew he was swerving, but it was okay, because he was a good detective. Even if he was pulled over, he knew he wouldn’t be arrested because cops protected one another. And he only had a few drinks anyway.

He got to Dre’s house at twenty after one, and stumbled up the drive to his door. When Dre opened the door, Bart caught his breath. Dre was wearing nothing under the sheet he had wrapped around him. Bart pushed into the house, barely pausing to note the obvious poverty Dre lived in.

He kissed him, but it wasn’t right. The sounds Dre made were too high. They weren’t the low gravel of Jimmy’s voice. Dre smelled different, spicy and animalistic. He wasn’t Jimmy. He wasn’t right. But his thoughts were so jumbled that he couldn’t bring himself to stop. He didn’t like it but he couldn’t stop.

Dre led them to the bedroom, and Bart lay him down. Dre was talking to him, his high reedy voice saying dirty things, begging Bart to fuck him. Bart wanted to tell him to shut up so he could think about Jimmy, but he couldn’t concentrate.

He wrapped his hands around Dre’s arms and squeezed hard. Dre gasped. “Not so hard,” he whispered. Dre reached out, unraveling Bart’s tie. Bart pulled the tie away from him, stuffing it into Dre’s mouth. He squeezed Dre’s arms again just because he wanted to. Dre’s voice was muffled around the tie, but he went limp, letting Bart do what he wanted. Bart grabbed both of Dre’s ankles and pulled his ass into the air.

Dre was already prepped. Ready for him. He was even wearing a plug, just like Jimmy used to do. Early on in their marriage, Bart wanted Jimmy ready at a moment’s notice. He missed Jimmy.

Bart was half hard already and it only took a couple sloppy strokes from Dre to get it all the way up, straining against his slacks. He stepped out of his clothes, pulling his button down over his head so fast he felt a button pop off.

He pried the plug out, tossing it onto the bedspread beside them and lined his cock up to Dre’s hole. In one swift thrust he slid home. Dre gasped at the sudden fullness, gripping Bart’s shoulders.

Bart wasn’t gentle. It was fast and sloppy. He came with a low grunt and withdrew hastily. He didn’t use protection, and he watched his come slide out of Dre and pool onto the sheets.

Sickening. Jimmy would have kept it inside him until Bart told him to clean up. He wouldn’t make a mess on the bed.

Bart lay there, trying to catch his breath. He wanted to leave. He got out of bed, pulling his pants on. Dre sat up, pulling the tie out of his mouth and turning on the bedside lamp. The sight of him, flushed, still hard, made Bart sick to his stomach. “You gonna finish me off detective?” Dre asked. His high voice was grating, further contrasting how different he was from Jimmy. Jimmy would have already come. He wouldn’t have needed finishing off, because Bart’s cock was enough for him.

Bart had to get away from him. “I shouldn’t have come here,” he said, pulling his jacket over his
unbuttoned dress shirt.

“Well you’re here now,” Dre reasoned. He pressed his lips to Bart’s shoulder. “Come on, come back to bed. Imma fuck you good, baby.” Dre ran his hand down Bart’s spine. Before he could reach the waistband of his dress pants, Bart jumped up. He shoved Dre back onto the mattress.

“You don’t get to top, you whore. You get what I give you,” he hissed. “You should have come with me inside you. Like Jimmy does. You don’t deserve to come, you whore.” Bart was in a rage now. Dre’s eyes widened as Bart reached out. He wrapped his hands around Dre’s neck, squeezing for a few seconds. Dre kicked out, catching him in the shins. Bart backhanded Dre so hard that he blacked out.

He had to get out of there. He left the apartment and jumped into his car. He raced down the deserted streets, but he wasn’t swerving now. Guilt was like a tonic to his senses. He’d never felt so sober. He made it home in record time.

Bart slammed his front door so hard behind him, one of the delicate glass panes in the antique window cracked. He frantically ran a hand through his hair. He wanted a drink, but the thought of vodka turned his stomach.

It wasn’t the first time he’d cheated on Jimmy. But this was the first time he’d done it since Jimmy ran away. And he knew, he knew that Jimmy would never forgive him. He’d never come back to their marriage now, because Bart had ruined it.

Jimmy would find out and he would never come home now. Simultaneously, Bart was sure that Jimmy would be home at any moment. He paced his living room. His thoughts were jumbled, and the house was a mess, and Jimmy would be home any minute. He would see the mess and he would know that Bart had cheated on him.

He stumbled to the kitchen, where he pulled out one of the industrial sized garbage bags Jimmy used to collect fallen leaves in autumn. He gathered all the take out containers strewn around the living and dining room and threw them out. All the empty vodka and whiskey bottles went into the bag with a melodic clink of breaking glass.

He put sorted all his laundry into piles and dusted every inch of the house. The house was dirty and if Jimmy saw the dirty house he would know, so he needed to clean. He vacuumed and scrubbed the tile in the bathroom. He washed his sheets and opened all the windows to blow in fresh air.

Dawn came, and turned to morning and still he worked. Bart moved outside as the sun rose high in the sky. He mowed the lawn and gathered up the clippings. He weeded the garden that Jimmy had carefully tended over the years. Bart had let it go over the summer and it was horribly overgrown. He spent hours in the garden tending the flowers.

Then Bart went shopping. He filled the empty fridge with ham and turkey. He bought fresh bread and cut flowers to put on the kitchen table. He filled the pantry with pasta and rice and canned vegetables. Jimmy would be back and he’d cook him nice meals when Bart came home from work. And they were going to be happy.

He hadn’t had much of an appetite since Jimmy left, and he didn’t like to cook anyway. He’d been making do with takeout and dinner from the hot prepared food section at the grocery store, but Jimmy used to have lunch meat and crisp lettuce from their garden. He used to grow tomatoes the size of a man’s hand that were meaty and perfect. But now the garden was overgrown and a mess and the fruit had rotted onto the ground, and Bart had cleaned up the mess but Jimmy would know because the tomatoes were rotten, and he’d never forgive him.
Bart kept up the frenzied pace of cleaning until dusk, when finally he sat down to examine his work.

The house was spotless. He went to the fridge, rummaged around in the freezer for a bottle of vodka. There were four bottles in the freezer. Last week there had been eleven.

He knew he was drinking too much but he couldn’t help it. Bart poured himself a tall glass of vodka and sat down at the table, waiting for Jimmy to come home. Because he would be home tonight. He told Uriel and Zachariah and Barnes that Jimmy was supposed to come home from his sick friend’s house tonight. He’d be there.

Five glasses of vodka and three hours later, Bart was still sitting at the kitchen table, still hopeful that his husband would be home any minute.

When ten o’clock came and went, and the bottle only had an inch or so left in the bottom, a deep rage filled him. He threw the bottle at the wall, where it shattered into a thousand pieces on the hardwood floor.

Jimmy wasn’t coming home, and it was Bart’s fault. Jimmy wasn’t coming home, and that wasn’t fair. He was a good husband. A good detective. He brought Jimmy flowers and gifts. He told Jimmy he loved him and provided him with this big house and expensive furniture. What more could he do to show Jimmy he loved him?

Jimmy left him. He was gone, and it wasn’t Bart’s fault. No. It was Jimmy’s fault. Jimmy was the one who left their marriage. Who ran from him. Who hid away somewhere on the road to Atlanta.

Bart was going to find Jimmy. He was going to find him, and bring him home. And they were going to be happy together. If it was the last thing he did, Bart was going to find Jimmy.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and Bart looked down, vaguely remembered the call he’d gotten the previous morning in traffic. He pulled the phone from his pocket and glanced at the messages.

Crowley had called him three times, but didn't bother to leave a message. He was too careful to leave a permanent record of their deal. Instead he sent text messages that could easily be interpreted as work related.

_Got a lead_, the first one said. Followed by _Answer your phone_, and _I have a lead on your missing persons case_.

Bart smiled. It wouldn’t be long now. Carefully, he dialed the number to Crowley’s burner cell.
So Love the one you Hold

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas!

Of course I used “sunshine” as a term of endearment. I am forever changed by that single line of dialogue. Sue me. I am also still bitter about the World Series.

Chapter 27: So Love the One you Hold

Chapter Track: Tennessee Whiskey By Chris Stapleton

August 3, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

The mug in Castiel’s hand was too hot, but he didn't put it down. The coffee was too good to put over ice, despite the heat of the morning. He took another sip, watching the sun rise over the horizon.

Castiel closed his eyes, resting his head against the wicker back of his chair. He could feel the ache of exhaustion, settled deep in his bones. He pulled three double shifts at the Roadhouse that weekend, trying to make up for the work he missed last week. Plus he had work that afternoon.

But, for now, he had no obligations. And he finally had a moment of peace to think about the offer Dean had made him on Friday.

Ben and Emma would be spending the week with their grandparents in Raleigh. At breakfast Friday morning, Dean invited him to stay at the house while they were gone. It took Castiel aback. He was spending more and more time with the Winchesters, but this was different. All the other times Cas had stayed at Dean’s house, it was because of the rain, or because it was too late to leave the house. This time. it was more than an invitation, it was a plan.

Dean had made the offer nonchalantly, as if it didn't matter one way or the other what Cas decided. But Castiel had become adept at reading people. He had to, with Bart. He needed to know within a few moments how Bart felt about things in order to navigate the minefield of his mercurial mood swings.

So Cas knew that Dean cared. It was important to him, and Cas couldn't help but feel like it was some sort of test. So Cas hedged, telling Dean he’d think about it and let him know.

Dean and the kids were going to Raleigh this morning. Castiel had to let him know his decision by the end of the day.

And Cas didn't know if he should do it. What if Dean had expectations of Cas that he couldn’t fulfill? What if Dean was different away from his kids and Cas was walking into a trap? Or, what if it all went exactly right? Then he wouldn’t have an excuse to keep Dean at arms length anymore. Because if he got too close, too complacent, felt too safe, thats when the other shoe would drop. And he couldn’t bear it. Not now that he had a semblance of a home in Southport.
And Castiel wanted to spend the week with Dean. He wanted it so bad he could taste it. He wanted to see who Dean was without the responsibilities of being a single father. The Dean who had time to laze around because he felt like it. He wanted to know the Dean who was as loud as he wants to be in bed without the fear of the kids sleeping down the hall.

And they needed that. They needed time alone together to build the kind of intimacy that would be impossible with two small children underfoot.

On the other hand, if Cas built that intimacy with Dean and then had to leave… Castiel shook his head. He didn’t think he’d be able to do it. Or rather, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to do it.

Sure, he could do it; his cigar box was full of money. There was enough to get him anywhere in the country, and get set up in a new place. Everything he owned easily fit in his leather duffle bag. If he needed to, Castiel could be gone from Southport in less than an hour.

Despite all that, Castiel worried that when—if he reminded himself—the time came, he wouldn’t be able to leave Dean and the kids. Even if it was the right thing to do.

Cas finished his coffee, contemplating his options. He loved Dean. He loved all of them. Cas couldn’t say it to them yet, not without still feeling a twinge of guilt for betraying his marriage. He knew how ridiculous that was. Bart destroyed their marriage long before Castiel left him. Cas shouldn’t feel guilty for picking up the pieces left behind and making a life for himself.

The crunch of gravel down the road diverted his attention from a hummingbird circling his rosebushes and he looked up.

He saw a figure emerge from around the bend. Ellie waved and Castiel waved back, happy to see her for the first time since Jo’s birthday. He’d missed her.

“Good morning!” she called out.

“Morning,” Castiel replied, setting his coffee down. “Good run?” he asked.

“Miserable,” she replied, wiping the sweat from her brow. Ellie leaned against the porch’s post with a sigh. “But I’ve gotten lazy the past couple weeks. Gotta get back into my routine.” Ellie took a drink of water from her bottle and wiped a stray curl from her forehead.


“You’re welcome to join me. I have another five miles to go, and you know what they say: misery loves company.”

Castiel contemplated it for a moment. “You know what? I’d love to. Wanna go on the beach trail?”

Ellie smiled widely. “It’s one of my favorites. I used to go out there all the time, but it’s been ages.”

“It’s one of my favorites too. Lemme change clothes and we can go.” Cas picked up his coffee mug and went into the cottage. He dumped the dregs of his coffee, rinsed the cup and then grabbed a pair of shorts and a clean t-shirt from the pile of clean clothes on the coffee table. After he changed, Castiel grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and met Ellie outside, where she was stretching against the bottom stair of his porch.

Cas joined her, groaning when his back popped several times, doing nothing to alleviate the dull ache that had settled there since he moved into the cottage. He really had to change his mattress.
They set off at a slow jog to warm up, but by the time they made it off the gravel road and onto the earthen trail that led to the private beach on Chuck’s property they had opened up into a full run. It felt good to run again. Cas hadn’t had time to do so in weeks.

It showed. Less than two miles down the road, Cas slowed them down to a walk. He bent over double, wheezing. He splashed some of the water on top of his head. *What were we thinking going for a run in hundred degree weather?*

“That’s embarrassing,” he said. “I used to be able to run this trail in an hour. Without stopping.”

Ellie shrugged. “I’d rather walk, to be honest. Easier to talk that way.

Castiel took a gulp of water, and bent to tie his shoe. “So how have you been?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you since Jo’s birthday.”

“Work is running me ragged,” she said, following his lead and opening the cap to her water bottle.

“I know what you mean,” Cas replied. “I’m grateful for a morning off.” They both took a seat on a fallen log.

“From what I hear around town, you have been busy spending time with our favorite local grocer.”

Cas felt a dull flush creep onto his cheeks. “Yeah. We’ve been spending a lot more time together.”

“So it’s getting kinda serious then?” she asked. Her shift in tone made it clear that this was the conversation she was really interested in.

“You know, I think so,” he said. He ran a hand through his hair. “He asked me to spend the week with him while his kids are in Raleigh with their grandparents.”

Her brow furrowed for just a moment, but before Cas could decipher what it was that bothered her, Ellie’s expression shifted and she smiled. “And what did you say?” she asked, a teasing lilt at the end of her question.

Cas shrugged. “I haven’t answered him yet. I’m supposed to let him know before my shift at work this afternoon, so he knows whether or not he needs to pick me up from the bar when he gets back into town.”

“Do you want to spend the week with him?” Ellie asked, suddenly serious.

“A big part of me does,” Cas said. He stood up, holding out hand for her to take. Her fingers were cold against his hand. She wiped the tree bark from her pants and the continued on the trail. Up ahead, Cas could see the first shimmering reflection of the ocean on the horizon. He didn’t speak for a few minutes. Ellie remained silent beside him, content to let him work out his feelings on the matter. Finally, Cas organized his thoughts enough that he could voice them. “But another part of me is terrified to go there with him.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Well, because if I do… it will change things. Sharing a space with someone, even temporarily, it changes the dynamic.”

“Okay but, and I don’t mean to sound indelicate here, you two have been together—um—romantically right?” Cas watched as her cheeks flushed. Ellie couldn’t meet his eyes.
“Yes, and I’ve stayed over before, but it was always a decision made for us by some external situation, not a decision we made.”

Ellie nodded. “So this is the first time you guys made a plan to spend multiple days together in a row and it’s freaking you out.”

Cas laughed. “Essentially,” he replied, then he turned serious. “I’m afraid if I do it, there’s… no turning back. No way out.”

Ellie glanced over sharply. “Do you want a way out?”

He shook his head slowly. “No, and that’s what scares me. Because it might not be a choice I get to make.”

“Because the man who’s looking for you might find you,” Ellie stated simply, reaching up to tighten her ponytail.

Castiel stopped dead in his tracks.

“How do you know about that?” he asked. “Who have you been talking to?”

Ellie shook her head. “Cas, I’m a counselor. I know the signs of trauma when I see them.” Cas frowned. Was he really that easy to read? “But is that it? You’re afraid that you might have to leave Dean, that whoever is looking for you might actually find you and when the time comes to run, you won’t be able to make the hard choice?”

It was as if Ellie put a voice to every doubt he had. “He’ll never stop looking for me, Ellie. Never.”

“Cas, I know right now, this man seems like a monster, always hovering in the darkness, always on the periphery of your life. But that doesn’t mean you… stop living.”

Castiel scoffed. “I’m not afraid to live my life,” he said, defensive.

“Aren’t you tho? You’re keeping everyone at arms length, making sure that they don’t get too close, that they don’t have the opportunity to hurt you, but that’s not really living is it?”

Castiel contemplated her words for a moment. “I suppose not.” They turned a bend in the road and the ocean came into view. “So you think I should do it?”

Ellie looked at him, really studying him for the first time. “I think you already know what you want. And I think you’re looking for someone to validate your choice. But I’m not gonna do that because this needs to be your decision.”

Castiel sighed. “So you do think I should do it,” he said.

Ellie just smiled. She inhaled deeply, letting her head fall back. “You smell that air? I swear its a perfect day. Come on, let’s run to the water. I’ll race ya!” she yelled, and sprinted away.

“Cheater!” Cas yelled. He raced after her but she had too much of a head start. She beat him easily, and by the time Castiel caught up, she was splashing around in the water.

He laughed and joined her. The water was cold, the surf high. Cas played in that water like he was a child. Eventually though, they had to get back to the real world. Ellie had to work and so did he.

They walked back slowly, letting the warm August air dry their clothes. It really was a beautiful day, and Castiel kind of dreaded how busy his shift at the Roadhouse would be that day. At least he was
tending bar and not out on the floor. Plus he got off early, and then he’d get to see Dean.

Cas stopped walking, a smile spreading slowly on his face. Ellie chuckled next to him.

“Finally figured it out huh?” she said.

“I’m gonna do it,” he said. “I’m gonna spend the week with Dean.”

The smile that spread on Ellie’s face was nothing short of beautiful. “Oh good, I just won a bet with myself.”

Castiel laughed, full and throaty. “Come on, I gotta get back home to pack!” he said as he picked up the pace to a jog.

Ellie followed him, and they ran home. Ellie kept going when they reached Castiel’s cottage waving.

“I’ll see you later!” she called out as Castiel reached the porch. He bent over double, panting. Castiel chastised himself for not keeping up with his fitness routine. It wasn’t like him not to keep up with something once he set his mind to it.

He took a quick shower, and shaved, then shoved his toiletries in his travel case. Cas took his time getting ready since he wouldn’t be able to change before Dean picked him up, and carefully packed his duffle bag for a week’s stay with Dean. A fissure of anticipation flashed through him at the thought and he smiled.

Once he was packed, Castiel called Dean.

“Hello?” Dean’s low voice on the other end answered after two rings.

“Hi,” Castiel replied. “What are you up to?” he asked.

“Me and the kids are on the road. About to pass through Benson. What about you?” Dean asked.

“How has your morning been?”

“Pretty good. I slept in, and went on a run with a neighbor of mine. Now I’m getting ready for work… and packing.”

“Packing?” Dean asked, his voice considerably lower.

“I figure I’ll need some clothes if I’m going to be staying with you this week. If the offer still stands that is.”

Dean laughed on the other end of the line. “Hell yeah it still stands,” he said.

In the background, Cas heard Emma shout “Swear Jar!” and he smiled.

“Sorry sweetheart,” Dean replied, his voice slightly muffled. “So,” he said, his voice suddenly louder. “What time do you get off work?”

He glanced at his watch. “My shift ends at seven, but Meg needed some extra hours, so I get off at three.”

“Awesome,” Dean said. “We’re about half an hour away from my in-laws place, but I should be back no later than three thirty.”

"Sounds good."
“Hey Cas?” Dean said. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me neither Dean.”

****

Castiel’s shift at work was busy enough that he didn’t have time to think about meeting up with Dean that afternoon. Busy enough that he had to step out onto the floor to help serve one of the sections.

By the time Meg showed up to take his shift at two fifty, Cas was exhausted but his pocket was lined with healthy tips. Enough that he could afford to treat Dean to dinner that night. He quickly washed his face and hands in the bathroom, then went out to the parking lot to wait for Dean.

Cas checked his phone. There were a several texts from Dean. The first one was just letting Castiel know that Dean had gotten the kids deposited at their grandparents’ safe and sound, and that he was on his way home. The second one was from thirty minutes later.

Stuck in traffic, it said. So damn excited to spend a whole week with you. Warmth spread throughout Castiel. He and Dean hadn’t texted much since their relationship began. Cas only had a limited number of texts per month, and Dean was usually too busy. They did most of their communicating in person. But Cas liked it. He sent a quick text back.

I miss you too. Sucks that you’re stuck in traffic. I wish I was there with you. We could find a way to pass the time…

A few minutes later, Dean responded back with a simple Oh, really? Emboldened, Cas took it a bit further.

Really. I can’t wait to hold you, kiss you… take you. We may not sleep at all tonight. He sent the message, his heart pounding. Dean didn’t respond for a few minutes, then a chime came through. Castiel figured he was responding at stoplights.

lol I feel like I’m finally getting to see the real you, Cas. And I gotta say, I like your spunk.

Castiel snorted, and sent him a smirking emoji. I’ll bet you do.

Dean responded so quickly, Cas wanted to admonish him for texting and driving, but when he opened it, all thought slipped out of his mind and his mouth fell open. The text was a photo of a very obvious erection through Dean’s jeans that made Castiel flush from root to tip. He quickly locked his phone, afraid of anyone seeing it.

I told you I missed you. Dean replied.

You can’t just send stuff like that Dean, especially not while you’re driving!

I’m not driving, sweetheart. Look over your shoulder.

Cas looked around. There, across the street from the Roadhouse was Dean’s Impala. All the blood in his body heated. Dean honked and Castiel made his way across the street, his duffle bag heavy against his side.

He was really doing this. They were really doing this.

He sidled up to the driver side door of the car, and Dean rolled down his window. “Hey sunshine,” Dean said.
Cas didn’t think. He leaned into the open window and pressed a hard kiss to Dean’s smirking lips.

“Hello, Dean.” Cas tossed his bag into the backseat and got into the car, scooting as far over on the bench seat as he could. “Drive,” he whispered, nipping lightly at Dean’s pink ear.

“Where should I go?” he asked, his voice breathless.

“Somewhere no one will find us. The things I wanna do to you require privacy.”

Dean nodded, swallowing thickly, and put the car in drive. Castiel pulled back, putting a few inches of space between them, but deliberately pressed his hand to Dean’s upper thigh, where he could feel the bulge straining against his jeans.

Dean bit back a moan, and Cas gripped his erection. “Don’t hold back, baby,” he said. “I want to hear the pretty sounds you make.”

Dean huffed out a breath and gripped the wheel tighter, making a sharp turn on an abandoned road near the ocean. He drove as quickly as he dared on the gravel road until they pulled out onto an abandoned stretch of beach. He slammed on the breaks and put the car in park before practically ripping his seatbelt off.

He pounced, turning into the seat until Cas was pressed against the window. Dean kissed him like a man starved, groaning loudly as he pressed his fingers to Castiel’s hips.

“I want you right now,” Dean gasped.

“You have me, Dean.”

Dean unbuttoned Castiel’s black button down shirt with trembling fingers, and pulled off his own t-shirt. The bench seat was big enough for both of them to crouch down. They didn’t kiss, rather Cas lifted his fingers to the swell of Dean’s stomach, pressing until the flesh gave way beneath his hands. He traveled up the length of his torso, over his shoulders, into the divot of Dean’s collarbone.

“I want to explore every inch of you,” he murmured, trailing his fingers up Dean’s neck, hooking his thumb over the sensitive skin of Dean’s full lip.

Dean laughed. “I haven’t done this since I was seventeen,” he said, his voice breathless.

“Done what?” Castiel asked, smirking.

Dean rolled his eyes. “You know what,” he retorted.

“I do, but I wanna to hear you say it.”

Dean huffed. “I haven’t had sex in my car since I was seventeen.”

“Oh?” Castiel asked. “Why not?”

“I uh…” Dean said, breathlessly as Castiel brushed his lips over Dean’s red earlobes. “I guess I was just weirded out by the fact that I was doing it in the same place I was conceived, if Dad’s story was actually true.”

Castiel laughed out loud. He sat up abruptly, putting a little bit of space between them. “That would weird me out too,” he paused. “We can go home if you want,” he said, but then caught himself. “I mean, we can go back to your place.”
Castiel watched as a slow smile spread on Dean’s face. He sat up too, carefully brushing his hands through his hair. “I don’t wanna go home yet.” Dean reached over, wrapping his fingers around Castiel’s wrist. “I want you now, baby.”

It was all Castiel needed. Instantly, he had Dean flat on his back, his head resting against the plush leather of the impala’s bench seat. Dean reached up, gripping the steering wheel for leverage. Cas pressed his lips roughly to the hollow of Dean’s neck, sucking a mark into his skin.

Dean gasped and arched into the touch. “Take me, Cas. I need you.”

Cas sat up suddenly, reaching into the backseat to grab his bag, where he had a box of condoms and a small bottle of lube stashed. Flushing slightly, he ripped one off and tossed the bag down.

He dropped the condom and lube onto dashboard and leaned over the soft expanse of Dean’s torso. “I love kissing you here,” he murmured. “So soft, pliant. Just enough give for me to hold onto.” Cas spread his fingers over Dean’s belly, pressing until his blunted nails left indentions in the creamy pooch of skin above Dean’s waistband. He trailed his fingertips over the sandy line of hair that disappeared into Dean’s jeans. Dean jerked beneath his touch, huffing out a laugh.

Ticklish, Castiel thought, filing the information away for later.

“You callin’ me fat, sweetheart?” Dean asked, his voice.

“You’re perfect,” Castiel replied. “Perfect, and mine. And I love you so much.”

Dean made a small sound in the back of his throat as Castiel’s fingers brushed over the soft denim of his jeans. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Castiel realized it was the first time he’d said the words aloud to Dean and he was a little disappointed with himself. He had meant to tell Dean when the time was right. Somewhere special, and when both of their heads were clear. And not during sex.

But then Dean gasped beneath him; his hands tightened against his hips. “I love you too, Cas,” he whispered. “I love you.”

Cas slotted their hips together, marveling at the happiness surging through him. He reached down, unbuttoning Dean’s jeans, and pulling the zipper down. He stuffed his hand inside the waistband of his boxers and Dean jerked up into his hand.

“Oh god, Cas” he moaned.

“I love you,” Castiel whispered again, just because he could. “I love you.” He pulled Dean’s jeans down until they were pooled between his still booted feet. Dean’s erection, red and hard, sprang free from his boxers. Dean reached down, stroking his own cock and Castiel watched hungrily. He watched Dean jack off, wanting to know how Dean liked it. Dean flicked his thumb under the slit and gasped and Cas gripped Dean’s hand. “Hands off,” he said. Dean instantly obeyed. Cas sat up, lifting his ass from the seat long enough so that he could pull his own pants down.

Then he bent down and took Dean into his mouth. Dean’s mouth opened in a surprised “O” as sucked him. “Hurry up, man. I ain’t gonna make it very long.”

Dean was hard and velvety soft against Castiel’s tongue, an exercise in opposites. Carefully, Cas slicked his fingers up with the bottle of lube.

He circled Dean’s hole. “I’ve been thinking about this all week,” Castiel whispered. “How you would look, sprawled out above me, begging for my cock.”
Dean’s entire body was flushed. “Holy shit, Cas, you keep talking dirty to me like that and Imma come before we even get started.”

There was a heartbeat of a pause, when Cas looked up, an evil grin spreading on his face. “I’m counting on it.”

Dean’s fists clenched, and Castiel took the opportunity of Dean’s distraction to suck him down once more, thrusting one finger inside Dean in the same moment.

Castiel crooked his finger, searching, until Dean cried out, his hips bucking so that the head of his cock hit the back of Cas’ throat. Cas took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed him down. He added another finger, careful not to push to far too fast. Dean spread his legs beneath him, reaching out to grip Cas’ hair. He pulled tight and it was Castiel’s turn to moan around the hard cock in his mouth.

Cas added a third, then a fourth finger, scissoring them until Dean was writhing, whining. “I’m ready,” he panted. “Oh god, Cas, fuck me.”

He reached over, picked up the discarded condom and put it on. Cas popped off Dean’s cock for a moment, placing a gentle kiss to the tip. He lined himself up to Dean’s entrance.

He went slow, because space was tight in the car. Inch by inch, he pushed his way inside Dean. Dean was tense beneath him.

Cas reached out, smoothing his hands down Dean’s thighs. “Relax, honey. I got you.” Dean took a deep breath, and released his tension. “That’s good.” Castiel wrapped his hand around Dean’s erection, flicking the slit like he knew Dean liked.

Dean’s back arched into the touch. He was trembling when Cas finally pushed all the way inside him. He groaned. “Jesus Cas,” he said.

Castiel pressed his fingertips to the apples of Dean’s cheeks. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Dean took another deep breath. “Yeah, yeah I’m fine.” He grasped the bottom of the steering wheel more firmly and lifted his hips providing the leverage Cas needed to pull out just far enough to have both of them gasping as he thrust slowly back in.

Finally, Dean nodded and Cas picked up his pace. Dean was warm and tight around him, and Cas closed his eyes as the man beneath him began to grunt in time with his thrusts.

Then Cas hit his prostate, and Dean let out a low moan. “Oh yeah, baby, right there. Right there.” Cas fucking into Dean deliberately, with equal, measured strokes. He gripped the head of Dean’s cock and squeezed in time with his thrusts. “Oh, shit Cas. I’m gonna come.”

“Do it,” Cas wheezed, he lifted Dean’s legs enough so that Cas, could rest their thighs together. “Do it, honey. I’ve got you.”

Three strokes later, Dean cried out with his release, clenching around Cas so tight all it took was a couple short thrusts and he was coming. His breath was coming in short staccato pants as he collapsed onto Dean’s limp chest.

Dean wrapped his arms around Castiel’s back and they lay like that. Dean’s come slowly cooled on their stomachs between them but neither of them cared. They didn't want to break their connection.

Cas shifted slightly, still sheathed within Dean, and Dean winced. “You okay?” Cas asked gently,
stroking Dean’s cheeks, tracing his freckles into constellations.

“I’m fine,” Dean muttered.

Cas withdrew, and carefully discarded of the condom in a plastic bag Dean used for trash. He grabbed a couple of napkins from the glove compartment and gently cleaned Dean up, and they both sat up. Dean stretched, making a small sound of discomfort as he reached down to pull his pants back up. “Next time,” Cas said. “I’ll bottom.”

Dean raised his eyebrows at Cas. “Really?”

Cas shrugged. “Why not? Unless you don’t want to?”

“No, no! I want to. God. I want to, I just thought you were… set in your ways I guess.”

Dean tossed Cas his shirt and pulled his own over to him.

“I’m not gonna lie, I prefer to top, but bottoming has its advantages too.” Castiel finished getting dressed.

“So,” Dean said, as if they hadn’t just had mind-blowing sex in the car. “Where to next?”

Castiel’s stomach growled. “I’m starving,” he said, finishing up the last button on his shirt. “Wanna grab some dinner?”

Dean turned in the bench, extricating his legs from Castiel’s. He sat up in the driver’s side and grunted. “Can it be something to go?”

Castiel smirked. “Sore?”

“We’ll see how tough you are, sweetheart, when we get home and it’s my turn.”

Castiel laughed out loud. “Sorry, darling.”

“What do you wanna eat?”

Cas shrugged. “I’m kinda in the mood for a salmon BLT. Or grouper. We can stop by the Piggly Wiggly and get everything we need for it.”

Dean wrinkled his nose. “Fish?”

Cas stared at him. “You live by the sea, with access to some of the best fresh fish around, and you don’t like it?”

“You had me at BLT, but I’m not so sure about the salmon.”

“Well, as my Mother always told me, you don’t have to like everything. But you do have to try it.”

Dean smiled. “Fine, but first come’ere,” he said. He pulled Castiel by the collar of his shirt and kissed him.

“I love you,” Cas whispered.

Dean grasped Castiel’s hand. “I love you too, Castiel. Let’s get out of here.”

They drove back to town, stopping at Piggly Wiggly.
Dean waved at the owner, who was reading a newspaper behind the customer service counter. “Hey Gary!” he called out.

The owner looked up, glancing down briefly at their clasped hands before pointedly looking back at his newspaper.

Dean slowed his steps and Castiel looked over. It was obvious that Dean had wanted to go say hello, but the deliberate brush off had to have hurt his feelings. Dean frowned, and Castiel squeezed his hand more tightly.

“Where’s the seafood counter again?” he asked and Dean’s head snapped up. Dean smiled weakly.

“It’s back by the dairy,” he replied, his voice just a little bit smaller than Cas would like. He reached out, brushing his fingers down Dean’s cheek. “You okay?”

Dean shrugged and they walked away from the customer service counter. “Its been a long time since I’ve had to deal with that kinda bullshit.”

Castiel nodded. “I know what you mean. Our neighborhood was pretty conservative.” They sidled up to the seafood counter and Dean hit the bell.

A sleepy looking teenager approached them from the back freezer. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Cas smiled. He pointed at a display of salmon filets, perfectly portioned. “Can I get two of those please?” he asked. The kid nodded and reached into the counter. He took his time, weighing and wrapping the fish in brown paper.

Cas took it from him, putting the package in the basket he’d picked at the door. “What else do we need?”

“I have tomatoes and bacon at home,” Dean said.

“Mayo?” Cas asked. Dean nodded. “Okay so, tarragon, lettuce and rolls. You think they have ciabatta?”

Dean chuckled. “Prolly not, but they have really good sourdough.”

Castiel sighed. “That’s the only thing I miss about Boston. We had this amazing bakery about ten minutes from my house. I swear heaven itself couldn’t smell better than this place.”

“Our little town could definitely benefit from a good bakery. There’s a storefront downtown that’d be perfect for one. Its beautiful. Lisa used to dream of buying it and turning it into a boutique olive oil and vinegar shop, with a spicery on the second level.” He said ‘spicery' with air quotes, and Cas laughed. “But I think it would work better as a bakery.”

“A spicery?”

“Apparently it was a room in those old time manors that, funnily enough, held the spices.” Castiel laughed. “Oh and she hated it when I made fun of her for it. Lisa never said a fifty cent word when there was a five dollar word out there that meant the same thing,” Dean giggled, wiping a hand down his face. He lapsed into silence.

“Bart used to do the Saturday morning crossword in ink, and it used to intimidate the hell outta me.”

“Sam does that too. It used to make me mad, because then I wouldn’t get a chance to do them.”
Finally we worked out a system. Every other day we switched off.”

Cas smiled. “My brother and I used to deliver papers.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I have four brothers and three sisters.” Castiel replied.

Dean whistled. “Holy shit,” he said. “Eight kids. Your mom musta been exhausted. Or a saint. I can barely handle two.”

“She was one of the strongest people I know.”

“So, are you in touch with your family?” Dean asked.

“No. I grew up in a very religious, very conservative household. The only one who stayed in touch after I came out was my brother Gabriel. But Bart didn’t like him, so we drifted apart.”

“That’s too bad,” Dean said. “Maybe now you can reach out?”

“Not yet.” Cas shook his head. “Bart would expect that.” They rounded the corner of the bread section, and Castiel picked up a loaf of promising looking sourdough. It would work well with the salmon. Castiel paused at a display of desserts. “You want something sweet for dessert?” he asked, looking for some way to change the subject off his family.

Dean reached out and grabbed a blackberry pie. He put it in the basket. They hit the produce section next, grabbing lemons and lettuce. Dean grabbed a handful of tarragon from the selection of herbs.

“Do we need anything else?”

Dean shook his head. “Nothing I can’t pick up at work.”

They made their way to the checkout, where a young girl with dark hair was popping her gum. “Hey there Krissy,” Dean said, putting the basket on the conveyer belt.

“Dean! How are you?” she asked, raising her hand to bump Dean’s waiting fist.

“Pretty good, kiddo, and you?”

“I can’t complain,” she said. She looked around. “Where are the kids?” she asked.

“Up in Raleigh with their grandparents.” Krissy began to scan their items. She looked Castiel up and down. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Dean said. “Krissy, this is Castiel, my boyfriend. Cas, this is Krissy. She babysits for me sometimes.”

Cas held out his hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Your boyfriend, huh?” Krissy asked, grinning.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Speaking of boyfriends, did you finally give that Aidan kid a chance?”

Krissy blushed, suddenly fascinated with their lettuce.

“We’ve gone out a few times,” she replied. “That’ll be $36.97.” Dean went to pull out his wallet, but Cas put a hand on his forearm.
“I’ve got it,” he said.

Dean met his gaze for a moment before he nodded and put his wallet away. “Thanks,” he said.

Castiel pulled out two twenties and handed them over. He dropped the change into a jar by the register raising money for a local animal shelter and they got their bags. They made their way to the door. Dean purposely ignored Gary as they left.

A song with a rockabilly beat came onto the radio as they pulled out of the parking lot and Dean reached over and turned the music up. Castiel hadn’t heard the song before but Dean knew every word. Cas snorted in laughter when a sequence of baseball cut the song in half, with the sounds of two lovers cut underneath it. “I like this song,” he said just as Dean burst out singing along with the next verse.

“Stop right there! I gotta know right now… Wait. How have you never heard this song before? This was like… an anthem for me and my brother. Especially on long car rides.”

Cas shrugged. “Who sings it?”

“Meat Loaf.”

He stared at Dean. “The guy could have named himself anything, and he goes with… Meat Loaf?”

Dean shrugged. “Says the guy who picked the name ‘Castiel.’” Dean replied pointedly. Cas nodded, conceding his point. “I dunno man, but he was ahead of his time, let me tell ya. Rock Opera at its finest. I’m pretty sure I have Bat Out of Hell on vinyl somewhere. When we get home I’ll put on his album.”

The song still hadn’t ended when they pulled into Dean’s driveway, he opened the garage and pulled in. Dean didn't shut off the engine however, preferring to listen until the song faded away and a commercial for the local car dealership came on.

“First rule of Meat Loaf, you don’t leave the car until the song is over,” Dean said, entirely serious.

“Otherwise the song is stuck in your head for the next week.” He got out of the car, and retrieved the groceries from the backseat. He pressed a button on the wall and the garage door descended.

“Noted,” Castiel replied, unable to fight back the smile creeping over his lips. He followed Dean out the side door and back into the driveway. It was just settling into late afternoon. The sun had begun its descent into evening, the heat of the day starting to ebb. Cas took the bags and Dean fumbled in his pocket for his keys, then unlocked the back door.

Cas hadn’t entered the house this way before, and he took a moment to revel in its newness. The backdoor opened into a three season room, a neatly decorated screened-in porch. Sunlight streamed into the room, making the gauzy white drapes over the window shine. He took in the two twin beds set in rustic iron frames, their antique quilts neatly tucked into the mattress. In between the two beds was a wicker table and four chairs. Braided rugs covered the whitewashed floor.

It was peaceful. Dean caught Cas taking in the room. “Have you not seen the summer room yet?” he asked.

Castiel shook his head. “No. I love it though.”

Dean nodded. “I like it too, its one of my favorite places. The kids sleep out here sometimes, when it gets a little bit cooler. They call it ‘camping.’” Dean laughed.
Cas smiled, and followed Dean into the kitchen.

Dean deposited the groceries onto the counter and washed his hands.

Castiel sidled up to him at the sink and washed his too, purposefully splashing Dean with a bit of the hot water. Dean smiled evilly, and before Cas could think about running, he’d grabbed the spray nozzle and pointed it at Castiel. He got him right in the face and Cas spluttered, wiping his eyes.

He held up his hands. “Truce?” he asked, and Dean slowly lowered the nozzle back into his slot on the sink. Cas pulled Dean into a kiss, letting his tongue dart out and trace the line of his lips. Dean moaned into the kiss, gripping the fabric of Cas’ shirt in his hands and pulling him closer.

They kissed for several minutes against the counter, with no urgency. Dean didn’t try to move it further, and neither did Cas. They simply enjoyed one another’s company.

Eventually though, Castiel pulled back, a slow smile spreading on his face. “Can you start the oven?” he asked.

Dean licked his lips, as if trying to taste every last bit of Castiel on his mouth, before nodding. He pulled away from Castiel’s loose embrace “How high?” he asked.

“425. Can you put a cookie sheet in there to preheat?” Cas unwrapped the salmon filets from their packets and seasoned them with salt and pepper. “Where do you keep your knives?” Cas asked.

Dean nodded.

Dean pointed to a drawer beside the fridge. “I keep all the sharps over there,” he said. “And the other cooking tools in the drawer beneath it.” He turned to the lettuce they bought and pulled a colander out of the cabinet above his head.

Castiel nodded. “Thanks,” he pulled out a chef’s knife with a wooden handle. It was perfectly balanced and sturdy. He tested the blade. Sharp. He glanced at the trademark on the bottom and whistled. “This is a really good knife,” he said.

Dean looked up from where he was washing lettuce. “Oh, yeah. Benny bought them for me and Lisa as a wedding present. He went to one of the best culinary schools in the country, so I take his advice when it comes to kitchen stuff.”

“Makes sense,” Cas said. “I love to cook.”

Dean glanced over. Castiel sliced two lemons and juiced them over the salmon. “Yeah?”

“Bart was always in a better mood when he had good food to eat. So it was a mechanism of self-preservation, but it was also an escape. Even on the darkest days… I could go to the kitchen and make something beautiful. It made life a little less terrible.”

The other man nodded. “It’s the same for me. Me and my brother didn’t have a lot of money. But most of the motel rooms had a hotplate, and Dad kept a saucepan in the trunk. It’s amazing how creative you can get when you don’t have enough food to eat.” Castiel stopped skinning the fish filets and glanced over. Dean wasn’t looking at him. He was intensely focused on cleaning the lettuce at the sink.

“I understand a little of what that’s like,” Castiel said. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Dean shrugged. “It’s no big deal. But I think that’s why it was such a good fit, taking over the grocery store. I learned the true value of food. And it’s why I started the meal program.”
“The shell thing?” Cas asked.

Dean nodded.

Every time Cas went into Dean’s store, his eye caught on the dozen or so hurricane jars that lined the back window of the store, full to the brim of seashells. One day in April, before he and Dean had really become friends, and Cas was just a customer and Dean was just the grocer, Cas popped into the store after getting off work. He was tired, and cranky after a long shift, and there was a blister forming on the heel of his left foot. He needed triple antibiotic ointment and bandaids, and he was mad that he had to dip into the tips he usually put away as savings to buy it because payday was still a week away.

A redhead sat behind the counter. There was a homeless man standing patiently in line, as the woman handed over a bag to a mother who was trying to keep her two children from staring at the unkempt man behind them. The homeless man held a beautiful white conch shell in his hand. Once the family had gone, he walked up to the counter and handed it over to the redheaded woman. She ripped off a raffle ticket from behind the counter.

The man took the ticket and walked over to where Benny stood at the grill and handed it over. Then the man went to the fridges to pick out a can of soda. Benny dropped the ticket into a hurricane jar and set to work making the man a grilled cheese and turkey sandwich. Castiel watched from the dry goods aisle as Benny put the sandwich in a brown paper bag with chips, an apple and a couple deli style pickles and handed it to the man, who took his meal out to the tables set up behind the store.

It was one of the most humbling experiences of his life. He quickly finished his shopping, and stepped outside. Castiel pulled out all of his tips from that day and placed it onto the table next to the homeless man.

They didn't say a word to one another. But the man nodded, smiling sadly and put the cash in his jacket pocket.

Castiel knew what it felt like to be hungry, alone, scared with no where to stay and no one who cared. And he was in a position where he could help someone else out like so many others had helped him before he found the cottage and started working for Ellen.

“No one should ever have to be hungry when I have the means to feed them.” Dean said.

Castiel walked over to where Dean was drying off the lettuce. He pressed a tender kiss to Dean’s temple. “As someone who was homeless not too long ago,” Cas whispered. “Thank you.”

Dean pulled Castiel into a hug. “You’ll never have to be homeless again,” he whispered.

Cas tensed at the sincerity of Dean’s words, but relaxed into the embrace as he felt Dean’s lips against his neck. “Is the oven ready?” he asked.

Dean pulled back from their embrace. “Yeah,” he said. “Potholders are in the drawer next to the stove.

Cas pulled one from the drawer and removed the cookie sheet. He drizzled olive oil onto its hot surface, and placed the salmon filets onto it, then put it in the oven. He set the timer for fifteen minutes, and moved to the fridge.

“Hey, honey, can you chop up some of the tarragon for me?” he asked absently.

Dean took the knife from he counter where Cas left it and set to work. They cooked in easy silence.
Dean finished getting the vegetables ready while Cas made the tarragon mayonnaise. Dean pulled some bacon from the fridge, already fried from breakfast that morning, and Cas began assembling the sandwiches.

When the timer went off for the salmon, he removed the cookie sheet.

Dean made a small face at the fish filet before Cas pulled a fork from the drawer and broke off a piece. “Here,” he said. “Take a bite.”

Dean opened his mouth obediently, drawing the flakey fish into his mouth. He closed his eyes.

“Okay,” he finally said. “That is delicious.”

“It’ll taste even better with the sandwich.”

Castiel added the filet to the two sandwiches he had waiting, and Dean pulled out some potato chips from the pantry.

“You want something to drink?” he asked Castiel.

Cas nodded “Whatever you’re having is fine,” he said. He pulled the pie from the countertop and placed it into the oven. By the time they were done eating dinner, it’d be perfectly warm for dessert.

“You wanna eat on the porch?” Dean asked.

“Sure.”

They made their way to the wicker table and chairs. It was just starting to get dark now, casting the porch in deep shadows. Dean made a big show of lighting the citronella candle. Castiel smiled, captivated by Dean’s profile in the firelight. He reached across the table and gripped Dean’s hand.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered. Dean scoffed, rolling his eyes. “What?” Cas asked. “You are,” he argued.

“You hitting the hooch early Cas?” he asked. “I look tired.” He ran a hand through his hair.

Castiel shook his head. “Do you work tomorrow?” he asked.

Dean stretched his arms above his head. “Nope, I took most of the week off. I usually take time off when the kids go up to Raleigh,” he said. “Plus Charlie’s been bugging me for overtime. Don’t say anything but she wants to start saving up for a ring for Dorothy.”

“That’s great! Are they going to go up north to get married or have a civil union here?” he asked. Dean shrugged.

“I don’t really think Charlie’s planned that far in advance yet. I think she just wanted to start saving up. What about you?” Cas’ eyes widened in shock. Dean quickly elaborated. “You gotta work?”

Castiel shook his head, relieved. “I don’t have to work again until Thursday.”

“How’d you get so many days off?”

“Roadhouse is closed Monday and Tuesday and Jo is working Wednesday for me. I have a double on Friday to make up for it though.”

“So,” Dean glanced at his watch. “We have a little over 72 hours to ourselves?” He looked up,
“Looks like it,” Cas replied. He picked up his sandwich and took a bite. It was just as good as he remembered.

Dean followed his lead. “Oh, man” he said through a mouthful. “This is good.”

“I told you,” Cas said. Halfway through his sandwich, the timer for the pie went off and Castiel got up to remove it from the oven. It was perfect. He set it on a rack to cool, then rejoined Dean outside. They finished eating in companionable silence as the sun slowly went down.

When his plate was clear, Dean sat back rubbing at his stomach. “That was awesome,” he said.

Castiel hummed in agreement. “Yes, it hit the spot.”

Dean pushed back from the table. “Thank you,” he said.

Castiel waved him off. “You did just as much as me.”

Dean shook his head. “No, I meant about getting me to try something new,” Dean ran a hand through his hair. “That’s something I tend to struggle with. At least… for the past few years.” Dean stood up, gathering their plates. “You ready for dessert?” he asked.

Cas exhaled, poking his own stomach. “I’m gonna regret saying this, but yes. I am ready for pie.”

Dean laughed. “Oh come on, you’re buff as hell. One piece of pie ain’t gonna kill ya.” Dean bent down and blew out the candle.

Castiel looked down at the compliment, smiling shyly. “I suppose not.”

He followed Dean into the kitchen. Dean placed their dishes in the dishwasher, and pulled two salad plates down from the cabinet; then he pulled a pie cutter from the utensil drawer. “You wanna get the ice cream from the freezer?”

He did, and Dean handed him an ice cream scooper. Dean put a piece on their plates. Cas added a scoop of ice cream to Dean’s plate but not to his own. “I prefer mint chip,” he said by way of explanation.

“Me too,” Dean said, “But vanilla goes better with pie.” But Dean handed Cas his plate without further comment. “You wanna watch tv?” he asked.

“Is there anything good on tonight?” Castiel asked.

“Not sure,” Dean replied. He sat down on the couch, placing his pie on the coffee table. He grabbed the remote and started flipping through the channels. Castiel sat down next to him, insinuating himself into Dean’s space. Dean reached an arm around Cas and pulled him close, until he had Cas’ head tucked into his neck. “No good movies, but are you a Red Sox fan?” he asked. “They’re playing the Yankees.”

“It’d be nice to see the Sox get their asses beat,” he replied.

Dean laughed. “So who is your team?” he asked.

“The St. Louis Cardinals,” Castiel laughed. “Which was one of the many reasons my family and I were at odds with one another. We grew up just outside of Chicago.”
“Oh man, Cubs fans?”

“Completely Useless By September was a banned phrase around my house.”

“Yikes,” Dean replied. He flipped the channel to ESPN, where commentators were discussing the upcoming game. Cas reached out and grabbed Dean’s plate. “What’re you doing?” he asked as Cas got a forkful, lifting it to Dean’s lips. Dean got the picture quickly enough and opened his mouth. He closed his eyes and moaned at the first taste.

“That’s good pie. Almost as good as my mom’s.”

Castiel left his pie sitting on the table, preferring to watch Dean as he fed him bite after bite of the sweet treat. When Dean’s plate was empty, Castiel put it back onto the table. Dean opened his eyes.

“You turn,” he said, reaching over to take Cas’ plate from the table.

“Not yet,” Cas said. “I’m still full.” Dean nodded and put the plate back down. They sat for a few minutes, watching the commentators argue over the merits of each team’s pitcher. Finally, after the singing of the national anthem, Cas reached down to grab his plate.

Next to him, Dean shifted in his seat. Cas looked over. “Yes?” he asked.

“Hmm,” Dean said thoughtfully, tapping his lip with his finger. Castiel reached out and wiped a smear of blackberry filling from the side of his mouth. “I’m not full just yet.”

“You want another piece?” Cas asked, making to stand. Dean shook his head, pressing a hand to Cas’ forearm.

“Not what I’m craving,” Dean said. He stood up, pushing the coffee table out of his way, and settled himself between Cas’ legs. Castiel’s eyes went wide at the sight of Dean kneeling before him, his hands resting on the tops of Cas’ thighs. Cas’ fingers began to tremble around his fork, the bite of pie forgotten. “I think I want something else to eat,” Dean said, looking up at Cas through hooded eyes.

And just like that, Cas’ insides liquified. All the blood in his body rushed straight to his groin. He closed his eyes briefly, painfully aware of the way his breathing had hitched at the wanton look in Dean’s eyes.

“Is that okay?” Dean asked, moving his hands up Cas’ thighs.

Dean licked his lips, and all cognitive thought Cas had up until that point flew out the window. “Yes,” he practically moaned. He set his plate aside, and reached down to unzip his pants, but Dean swatted his fingers away.

“Pick up your dessert, sweetheart,” Dean said, his voice deeper, gruffer. Cas listened to him. He picked up the plate and took a bite. “Let me thank you for a delicious dinner.” Dean trailed his hands up the crease in Cas’ work pants.

Dean pressed his fingertips down, gently pulling Cas’ knees further apart so he could settle between them. Cas tentatively reached out, brushing his fingers across Dean’s cheek, then his hand retreated back to his plate, picking up the fork.

He broke off another bite, but instead of putting it in his own mouth, he held the fork out to Dean. Dean’s smile was pure sunshine as he slowly opened his mouth, taking the bite of pie. His eyes slipped shut, and Cas’ cock twitched in his pants when Dean licked his lips.
Cas finished the pie in a few quick bites, and practically threw the plate down onto the couch, preferring to watch Dean without the distraction of the dessert. Dean trailed his hands all the way down Cas’ legs, until he reached his feet. He was still wearing his shoes, and Dean removed them one by one, placing them neatly to the side.

He put his hands on Castiel’s feet, rubbing his thumb over the bony tops. Fascinated, Dean spent a few minutes exploring them. One by one, he removed his socks, and began a slow massage. Castiel’s feet were narrow, maybe a little bigger than his own. His ankles were slightly swollen, from a long shift on his feet. Castiel grunted, shifting his hips down and resting his head against the back of the couch.

From his new position, his head was nearly level with Dean’s face. Dean continued his slow perusal of Castiel’s lower body. He moved up Cas’ calf, kneading the sore muscles there before squeezing behind Castiel’s sensitive kneecap. He could feel the heat of Dean’s fingers through the fabric of his thin slacks and his erection strained against his zipper. He needed more. He groaned, reaching down to try and palm his erection, but Dean slapped his hand away.

“You’re mine right now.” Dean murmured. “And I don’t want your hands there. I want them in my hair.” Castiel didn’t need to be asked twice. He liked this version of Dean, the one who made the moves. The heady power he felt fistng Dean’s hair in his hand almost made him dizzy. He hadn’t put gel in that morning, and the strands slipped through Cas’ fingers like silk.

He tried to pull Dean closer, but Dean resisted.

“Not yet,” he said.

“I want you,” Cas panted.

“Me too, sweetheart.” Dean turned his head, kissing Castiel’s palm. Cas swallowed thickly. “But this is a treat for me, and I don’t know about you, but I think treats are meant to be savored.”

Dean’s words caused the fire burning in his belly to ignite in to an inferno and Castiel could feel himself begin to tremble with need. “Please,” he whispered. Dean bit his lip, and gently removed Cas’ hands from his face. He reached out to unzip Cas’ pants. The release of pressure against his cock was both a blessing and a curse and Castiel moaned. Dean gripped the fabric of his pants, and Cas took the hint. He lifted his hips so Dean could pull his pants down until they pooled around his ankles. He then removed them, one leg at a time, and tossed them to the side.

Dean sat up. “Take your shirt off, slowly,” he whispered. Cas was sorely tempted to rip the damn thing off his frame, to scatter buttons across the room, but with trembling fingers, he slowed down, opening his shirt one button at a time. Dean’s eyes darkened as Cas performed a slow, methodical strip tease for him, until finally, Castiel was left in only his boxers, while Dean sat fully clothed in front of him. “Beautiful,” he murmured, his eyes raking over Castiel’s flushed, needy body. “Now, lay back and let me take care of you, baby.”

He tiptoed the fingers of one hand up Cas’ bare thigh, teasing all the way up to the apex his leg, then retreated back down. With his other hand, Dean pinched the sensitive skin behind his knee. The dichotomy between pleasure and pain stoked the fire threatening to consume him. Cas bucked his hips, desperate for something more, anything more.

Finally, Dean gripped the fabric of Castiel’s plain boxers, pulling them down and off.

Castiel was harder than he’d ever been. Desperate, needy, he pressed the palms of his hands against the soft fabric of the couch in order to stop himself from getting himself off, because Dean was
apparently in the mood to tease him to death.

“You’re so fucking evil,” he said, gritting his teeth, as Dean leaned down to place a kiss on his inner thigh. The stubble of his two-day beard scratched against the soft sensitive skin there, and Cas jerked at the contact, chasing it.

“Guilty as charged,” Dean replied in a tone that suggested he felt the opposite of guilt on the subject. In one swift move, Dean slid both of his hands up Castiel’s legs. He brushed a thumb over the soft skin of his scrotum before wrapping his hand around Castiel’s straining erection.

Cas sucked in a breath at the sudden pressure on his cock. Dean squeezed once, twice, experimenting with his body. “What do you like?” he asked. “Slow and soft, or fast and hard?”

Cas couldn’t concentrate on Dean’s words, all his mind could focus on was the delicious pressure surrounding his dick. Dean swiped his hand up and down the shaft twice, each time letting the tip of his blunted nail scrape across Castiel’s slit. “I… I don’t know,” Cas finally replied. “I… oh god, I like both,” he finally decided.

Dean nodded like this was an understandable stance. “But what do you want right now?”

“I want you to suck me off hard and fast,” Cas whined. “Please. Oh, god yes!” Cas practically yelled. In one smooth move, Dean had risen up onto his knees and enveloped him with his mouth.

The heat was incredible. Dean’s tongue swirled around the tip, paying particular attention to the pre-cum steadily leaking out of it. Cas jerked when Dean’s hand came up to roll his balls between his fingers, pressing on that sensitive spot on his taint.

Dean was skilled at blowjobs. He worked his mouth open for Castiel’s instinctive shallow thrusts, each time taking a deep breath through his nose and opening his throat up more for him. When Castiel was buried to the hilt in Dean’s mouth, Dean started humming.

Behind them the crack of a baseball bat echoed through the room. The Yankees scored.

“So… good…” Castiel stammered, feeling himself get closer and closer to his release. He slid down further, until his ass was hanging off the edge of the couch, allowing Dean better access, and Cas leverage to thrust harder without fear of choking him.

Stealthily, Dean released the base of Cas cock with one hand, and trailed that hand up and over his chest, down to the hard bone of his hip. He tickled his way down to the meat of Castiel’s ass and kneaded the flesh there before sliding a finger between Cas’ cheeks.

Cas instinctually widened his stance, allowing Dean access to his ass. Dean took that as confirmation that Cas wanted this, and hollowed out his cheeks until the pressure was almost too much to handle, then he gently inserted one finger into Cas’ hole. Castiel groaned loudly, his mouth opening in a short gasp of pain which almost immediately shifted to pleasure as Dean hooked his finger up just right, hitting that spot within him that always made his knees quake and his heartbeat stutter.

He reached out then, gripping Dean’s hair once again. Dean hummed in contentment, nodding slightly, then he pulled out, removing his finger from Cas’ ass. “Use my mouth, baby,” he said, his voice low and hoarse. “Fuck me.”

Castiel planted his feet and situated his cock until the tip was just barely in his mouth. “I love you,” he grunted as he thrust in, feeling the tip hit the back of Dean’s throat, feeling Dean’s mouth go slack around him. He didn’t choke.
He thrust again, picking up his pace, and Dean wrapped his arms around the back of Castiel’s knees in an effort to stay upright. Castiel was close, heat building behind his navel. His fingers tightened in Dean’s hair and his body stiffened in preparation of release. “Swallow it all,” he commanded, and he came.

Dean did, careful not to miss a drop as Cas’s cock twitched inside his mouth.

Cas collapsed back onto the couch, and Dean followed, still enveloping Castiel’s cock with his mouth. He rested his face against Cas crotch for a long moment, as Cas softened inside him, licking at the aftershocks of come still slowly dribbling out of the head of his cock.

Cas released his grip on Dean’s hair, preferring to gently run his fingers through the silky strands instead of pull them. Finally, Cas’ breathing returned to normal, and Dean released him.

Cas wasted no time in reaching down to crush their mouths together, his tongue darting out to taste the remnants of his own release on Dean’s lips. Dean stumbled up and straddled Castiel’s hips, hard and straining against his jeans. Castiel reached down and palmed Dean’s cock.

“Your turn,” he murmured, but Dean shook his head.

“Later,” he moaned. “That was about getting you off. I’ll be okay.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Dean said in a tone that brooked no argument. Dean stood up, unzipping his pants. He removed his plaid over shirt and t-shirt, and lay down on the couch next to Castiel, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his head against Cas’ thigh. “We’re not doing anything until we finish watching the game.” His erection was hard and long against his boxer briefs but Dean ignored it, slipping them off without even touching his cock.

“You’re ridiculous,” Cas said, but he listened.

“Besides, you promised the next time I came, it would inside you, and I want you in my bed for that.” He said it so nonchalantly, so casually, all the excitement from before rushed back. All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room as Castiel inhaled, trying desperately to get some oxygen to his brain.

“We could move to your bed,” he suggested, eager to have Dean’s cock inside him in a way that surprised him.

Dean shook his head. “I don’t have a tv in my room, and I wanna see if the Yankees win.”

Castiel laughed out loud. “I see how I rank in the scheme of things,” he said.

“Right at the top,” Dean said, winking. “Tell me something,” Dean said, and Cas looked at him. He curled into Castiel’s side, resting his hand on the top of Cas’ thigh.

“Anything,” Cas replied, curious as to where the conversation was going.

“Who was your first kiss?” Dean asked.

“Her name was Hannah, and I think we were about six years old, one of those playground dares.”

“That’s cute.”

“What about you?”
“Her name was Robin. I was sixteen.”

“Sixteen,” Cas said, whistling.

“I was a late bloomer, I guess,” Dean said laughing. “She used to give guitar lessons with her mom at the group home I lived at for a while.”

Cas cocked his head to the side in confusion. “A group home?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah.” He didn't say anything else, and Castiel got the sense that it was a difficult subject for him to broach.

“If you don’t wanna talk about it, I understand,” Castiel said.

“It’s not that,” Dean hurried to say. He wrapped his arms around Castiel’s torso. “I just… haven’t talked about it before.”

“Not even with your family?” Castiel’s brow furrowed.

“My brother doesn't even know I lived in one, actually. And Dad… I couldn’t talk to him about it.”

“I’m confused. You said your brother was four years younger than you. So he was twelve when this happened? How could he not notice you were gone?”

“He knew I was gone, but Dad… told him that I was at camp.”

Anger surged through Castiel at this news. “Camp,” he said shortly.

“Yeah. Like sleep away camp? He took Sammy to stay with Uncle Bobby, and went out on a road trip, which was code for bender up at the cabin.”

“So, how did you end up at a group home?” Castiel moved back slightly, so he could look Dean in the eye. Dean sat up. For just a brief moment, Dean looked ashamed. Cas nudged him gently with his knee.

“Well, me and Sam were holed up in this motel in upstate New York. Dad had been gone for a while. Not sure how long, but the money he left for food was almost gone. I was a cocky kid. Thought I could go hustle up some more playing pool or something. It wasn’t my night. Ended up losing it all. Sam was going through a growth spurt, and was literally always hungry. And I knew he’d need something to eat. So I shoplifted some food from the store. Got caught.”

“And that got you sent to a group home?”

“The shopkeeper pressed charges, and when they finally reached Dad, he was so pissed he told them to ‘let me rot’ in jail. The deputy who arrested me was a douche, but keeping a sixteen year old kid in lockup didn’t seem right to him I guess. He took me to Sonny’s.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Castiel said.

Dean shook his head. “Don’t be,” he said. “It wasn’t bad. In fact, my time at Sonny’s was some of the best in my life.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was… stable. There was routine. I got to live in a house for the first time since I was four. Eat three square meals every day. I had a roof over my head that wasn’t constantly creaking with the
sound of cheap sex. Sonny is a good man, and he gave me a little slice of a normal life.”

Tears filled Castiel’s eyes at the sense of wonder Dean’s words held. “How long were you there?”

“A few months. Sonny worked hard to get the charges against me dropped after a few weeks, but when Dad didn’t show up to get me… he said that I always had a place with him if I needed one.”

“And did you go back?”

“Once,” Dean said. “Right after Sammy went to college. Life here at Bobby’s… just wasn’t the same. So I took the car up the coast to visit him. Stayed for a month or two.”

“And then what?”

“9/11 happened, and I couldn’t… I had to do something. So I enlisted.”

“How long were you in the Army?”

“I got out shortly before Emma was born,” Dean said. “I was dealing with some PTSD from my last tour, and as much as I loved the Army, I knew I had to make a change. And Bobby was looking sell the store, so we bought him out.”

Castiel pulled Dean close, until both of them were lying down on the couch, Dean stretched out above him. “What did Lisa do?” Castiel asked.

“She worked at the local hospital.”

The heat of the afternoon still lingered in the house, as they comfortably laid naked on the couch, watching the game.

Cas could feel anticipation thrumming through his veins as the game dragged on inning by inning. Part of him suspected that that was Dean’s plan all along, to ratchet up the tension between them, until neither of them could stand it anymore.

Well, he thought, two can play at that game. Dean was lying on the couch with his head propped up against Castiel’s leg, his hand gently stroking patterns into the meaty part of Castiel’s thigh.

Cas reached down, until his hand covered Dean’s left shoulder. He squeezed hard, then loosened his grip, trailing his hand over and across Dean’s back. He wasn’t paying any attention to the game, preferring to make patterns out of the constellations of Dean’s back, finding Orion, and Draco, Gemini, and Taurus. He even found his name near the divots on Dean’s lower back.

Cas played with the short hairs on the nape of Dean’s neck, and Dean bared his neck at the touch, moaning. Castiel could see his straining erection, leaking slightly as Dean thrust his hips into empty air.

Castiel reached down over Dean’s hip, and flicked the tip of Dean’s hard cock with his finger. Dean groaned. “Do that again,” he whispered, and Castiel obliged, this time sweeping his thumb up and over the red tip of Dean’s cock until he collected the pre-come that had pearled up at his slit. He brought his thumb to his mouth, tasting it. Cas’ eyes damn near rolled to the back of his head, and arousal stirred at the base of his spine, even though it typically took his body longer to respond after orgasm. “You taste good,” he said, and Dean shuddered. Cas felt goosebumps rise over the skin he stroked.
Tentatively, Dean reached up, cupping Cas’ half hard cock in his hand, gently stroking along the shaft. The intimacy of the touch rocked Castiel to the core. It was affectionate, tender. Dean wasn’t doing it for any other reason than to be close to Castiel. And though the fire had begun to build anew in his belly, Dean’s gentle touch was soothing, and Castiel relaxed into it.

Dean played with him absently as he watched the game, until Cas was hard beneath his deft fingers. Cas flicked the head of Dean’s cock again, and Dean groaned, his eyes slipping shut for just a moment before the crack of the bat on tv drew back his attention.

It was a slow sort of intimacy, a promise of something more, but no hurry to get there. It wasn’t rushed. They had all the time in the world to explore one another, and the prospect of just spending time together without anyone having to leave shortly after was intoxicating to Castiel. As promised, Dean didn’t do much more than touch him softly, and Cas took Dean’s lead. His fingers gently explored the other man’s body, just because he could and he wanted to.

Boston scored a run, tying it up, then a double play by New York moved the game into the seventh inning stretch. Dean mumbled a curse good-naturedly under his breath and, after one quick squeeze, released Castiel’s erection. The sudden cold air on his cock was a shock to his system, and he sucked in a breath. Cas pulled his hands back from Dean’s body, and the other man sat up. Dean cleared his throat, bringing a hand up to massage his neck. “You want something to drink?” Dean asked; his voice was raspy, hoarse.

Castiel tried to hide his smirk and failed miserably. Dean smiled, sheepish, and pushed Cas’ shoulder. “Hush,” he said.

Castiel just smiled wider. “Sore throat?”

“I hate you so much.”

“I know you do. But now that you mention it, I am thirsty. What do you have?”

“Lemme check.” Dean stood up and walked, naked and unashamed, down the hall into the kitchen. Cas could hear the fridge opening. “I have soda, water, beer, I can make iced tea if you want. Uh… there’s some wine in here I can open, but I don’t know if its any good. Sam knows more about wine than me.”

“I’ll take a beer,” Castiel called down the hall, and seconds later, Dean returned, grinning, two beers in his hand. He opened them with a silver ring on his right hand and tossed the bottle caps into an ashtray on the side table, then handed it over to Cas. Dean took a long drink of his own beer then set it down on the coffee table.

They sat quietly together on the couch, their hands clasped together, and finished watching the game. Both of their bodies had calmed down now, and they simply enjoyed one another's company, though Cas could feel the thrum of anticipation running through his veins for what was to come.

Boston lost, much to the delight of both Castiel and Dean. Cas yawned.

“Hard day at work?” Dean asked.

“Yeah,” Cas replied. “But two awesome orgasms were probably a contributing factor.”

“Wanna make it three?” Castiel was instantly awake. He nodded eagerly. They picked up their trash and Dean went about his normal routine of locking up doors and turning off lights. Dean held out his hand, and Cas took it.
Cas couldn’t help but marvel at the normalcy of it all. He was safe and loved with Dean. They were going to go to bed together and he was going to stay all night. He was going to open himself up to Dean in a way he never thought he would again. And he was excited about it.

They walked, naked, down the hall to Dean’s bedroom, but Castiel wasn’t self-conscious. In fact, he’d never felt so secure. Cas found his bag resting on Dean’s bed and a surge of happiness swelled through him. He walked over to the bag and pulled out a toiletry kit, then made his way into the bathroom.

Once inside, he opened up the bag, only to see that he’d forgotten his toothbrush. Something sank hard and fast to the pit of his stomach. *How could I have been so stupid?* he thought, scratching his scalp in frustration. “Dammit,” he muttered, checking again to see if it had fallen into the bottom of his bag.

“What’s the matter?” Cas heard Dean’s voice behind him and flinched. “Whoa, Cas you okay?” Dean asked, rushing forward. He touched his shoulder and Castiel jerked his arm away.

“Don’t touch me,” he muttered. Dean raised his hands up.

“I’m sorry,” Dean said.

Castiel’s eyes found Dean’s in the mirror, and the panic that had swelled up like a balloon in his belly, burst. He exhaled shakily. “No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He turned quickly, pulling Dean into his embrace. He gripped Dean’s face in his and kissed him. Dean didn’t kiss back. “Please, please just forget that happened.”

Dean’s brow furrowed. “What’s wrong, Cas?”

Cas shook his head, smiling weakly. “It’s nothing… just old ghosts rearing their ugly heads.”

Dean bit his lip, conflicted. “Can you tell me what caused it?”

Cas shrugged desperate to appear nonchalant. “I just… I’m sorry. I forgot my toothbrush.”

Relief flickered across Dean’s face, followed briefly with anger, and finally understanding. Dean nodded twice.

“It’s no big deal,” he said. He pulled back and Cas felt suddenly cold. Dean bent down, opening the cabinet under the second sink, and pulled out a large package of toothbrushes. “We buy them in bulk.” Dean handed Cas a blue toothbrush, and Cas smiled ruefully.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Dean replied. He pressed his hands to either side of Castiel’s face, and touched their lips together briefly. “It’s just a toothbrush.”

“I know,” Cas replied, guilt settling in his chest. “Like I said… old ghosts.”

“Bart used to get angry at stuff like that,” Dean said. It wasn’t a question.

Cas nodded. “The first time he ever… scared me… was on our honeymoon. I left my sunglasses by the pool. You’d have thought I committed high treason.” Castiel laughed bitterly, gripping the blue toothbrush in his hand so hard he could feel the ridges leave a mark on his palm. “I bought the sunglasses for five bucks at a freaking airport kiosk. It wasn’t like they were the four hundred dollar Ray Bans he insisted on for himself, but it didn’t matter. I was ‘irresponsible’ with the things he
bought me with his money. He made me feel small.”

Dean frowned and shook his head. He reached up to wipe a tear from Castiel’s cheek, and threaded his fingertips through the short hairs of Cas’ sideburns. “You are not small.”

Castiel huffed out a laugh. He pressed his lips to Dean’s cheek. “I know that.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Castiel rolled his eyes, he pushed against Dean’s chest, but Dean held firm. “I know.”

“Do you?” Dean asked. He pulled Castiel’s chin toward him, looking him in the eye. “Do you really, sweetheart?”

He bit his lip, breaking eye contact, and nodded curtly. He cleared his throat, to reassure Dean, but Cas couldn’t say the words. Finally he took a deep breath. “I will…eventually,” he confessed.

Dean pursed his lips, but nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Castiel held up the toothbrush. “Thank you. Now, on to more important things. You made me a promise.”

Dean laughed out loud. “Oh, I never break a promise,” he said. He smiled crookedly, and brought a hand up to brush at the soft skin beneath Castiel's eye. In the harsh light of the bathroom, Castiel knew Dean would notice how tired he looked. Dean studied the deep circles there, his brow furrowed. "Are you getting enough sleep, sunshine?" he asked.

Cas smiled, his grip on the toothbrush loose in his hand. He shrugged. “I've just been working a lot of hours lately. I needed a break.”

"Well, you're mine for the next few days, and as much as I wanna keep you awake all night long, we're gonna both get a good night's sleep tonight."

"I don't doubt it. In fact, I think I'll be sleeping like a baby tonight."

Dean kissed him, but Cas pulled back. “I’m gonna get cleaned up a little,” he said and Dean nodded.

"Sounds good. I'll use the guest room."

“You don’t have to do that, stay here.”


Castiel thought for a moment, as he bent to turn the tap on the sink. “Is it weird that I like seeing you in your own space? How you interact with your home?” Castiel smiled, “I’m curious.”

“Well, I can’t fault you that,” Dean said. He watched as Cas wet the handle of his toothbrush and added paste.

Dean followed suit, and they began brushing their teeth, the only sound between them was the water running in front of Dean’s sink. Castiel caught his eye in the mirror and smiled around his toothbrush. He reached over with his free hand and ran a hand through Dean’s hair, brushing the strands to the side and fisting it gently between his fingers. Dean sighed and leaned into the touch. He removed his toothbrush from his mouth and leaned down to spit, pulling Cas’ grip on his hair.

His eyes slipped shut. Cas smirked, and let go, trailing his fingers down his back, over the
constellation of freckles on his left shoulder, and across a scar just above his hip. There he rested his hand, rubbing his thumb across the divot just above the swell of Dean’s backside.

Dean spit, then rinsed his brush out. He cupped some water in his hand and brought it to his mouth. Castiel let go of Dean’s hip and pulled out a small tube of moisturizer.

The domesticity of it all threatened to overwhelm him, and he had to keep stealing glances up in the mirror to remind himself that he was with Dean. That it wasn’t Bart standing next to him in the bathroom going about their nightly ritual of getting ready for bed, that it was Dean. And it was new. It was safe, with an undercurrent of passion just waiting to be let loose.

Dean didn't seem to be in any particular hurry though. He put his toothbrush away and opened the cabinet. Cas’ attention immediately focused on the items within. There were the usual items one expected to find in a medicine cabinet: headache medicine, bandaids, razorblades, bug bite cream. There was also a prescription bottle for muscle relaxers, and tucked away in a corner, a bottle of lube. Dean reached in and grabbed a small box of Q-tips. He pulled one out and cleaned his ears. Cas reached over and grabbed one as well.

It was like a choreographed dance, the way they moved around one another in the bathroom.

Then Dean swiped the moisturizer Cas had set on the counter. He read the label for a moment before opening the cap and taking a small amount.

Heat pooled in the pit of Cas’ stomach as he watched Dean put his lotion on. He wasn’t even sure why it struck him so much, whether or not it was the fact that Dean felt comfortable enough with him to use his belongings, or that Castiel wanted him to use his belongings. To invade his space. To use Cas’ body for his pleasure.

His breath stuttered and Dean put the bottle down, turning to face Castiel. He rubbed the lotion over his palms, then brought his fingers to Cas’ face. Dean spread the cream over his skin gently. Castiel’s eyes slipped shut.

“I wanna take this slow,” Dean whispered. “So slow, your body is completely strung out, so sensitive that you can’t help but whimper when I touch you. I wanna take this so slow that you’re surprised when you come.”

Castiel let out a shuddering breath.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”
Bart woke up sprawled out on his sofa. Disoriented, he stood up and promptly tripped over a discarded vacuum cleaner. The canister detached from the base, spilling its contents all over the hardwood floor. He cursed and staggered to the kitchen, barely making it before he vomited into the sink.

Bart turned to grab the towel that Jimmy always left draped over the sink divider, only to find nothing. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand instead.

He looked around and blinked. He cleaned the house yesterday. At least, he thought he did. But everything he saw contradicted that memory.

Half finished jobs were all around him. Dust from the vacuum drifted into the kitchen behind him, making him sneeze.

Laundry, still wet, was sitting in the open drum of the washing machine. It had moldered overnight and a fairly disgusting smell was emanating from the utility room.

There were still groceries sitting in a bag on the counter. Bart shuffled over to the bag, pulling it open. He jerked back in surprise. He’d left cottage cheese on the counter. Bart cursed and tossed it into the trash.

The sound of his phone chiming distracted him from the half washed dishes on the counter. He put the glass he’d been rinsing out down and dug through his pockets for his phone.

**Call me**, the text read.

Ignoring his trembling fingers, Bart dialed Crowley’s number. It rang twice, before the smarmy bastard’s voicemail kicked on. He cursed, tossing his phone onto the kitchen table. The speaker turned on, and the tail end of his message burst out into the room.

“…leave a message after the tone.” There was a beep and Bart lifted the phone to his ear.

“What’s the point in calling if you don’t pick up the phone, asshole?” Bart asked. He opened the freezer to find a lone bottle of vodka settled on top of a bundle of brown bananas, the kind that Jimmy used to make banana bread. Yesterday, there had been three bottles. “Meet me at the diner at noon with your lead.”

Bart hung up the phone opened the bottle. It was only eight o’clock in the morning, but he didn't care. He needed it. Bart turned on the coffee maker while he nursed a glass of vodka. He managed to put the filthy dishes in the dishwasher, and restarted the laundry before the coffee pot was full.
He added cream to his coffee, and took it upstairs to get ready for the day.

When he felt a little more human, Bart drank the last dregs of his coffee and went back downstairs. He put his coffee mug in the dishwasher and started it, then glanced at the clock. 10:30 am. The diner he and Crowley usually met at was over an hour away. He had just enough time to clean up the mess from the vacuum before he had to leave.

He poured himself a thermos of coffee and got on the road.

Outside, the sun poked out from behind huge white clouds; midmorning light streamed into the house. Traffic was light, and Bart made good time. No one noticed him when he walked into the dim dining room that housed a “Seat Yourself” sign.

He chose the booth in the back, near the kitchen. The chattering of men speaking in Portuguese, along with the clatter of dishes from the kitchen would hopefully cover their conversation. Plus no one wanted to sit by the kitchens, so the booths and tables around him were empty.

He glanced at his phone. Crowley texted him back. He opened up the message to see a photo of Crowley, naked, taking a selfie with who he assumed was his jailbait lover. He didn't see the young man’s face, just a bare back splayed out over Crowley’s tattooed chest. A message right beneath he photo read: So sorry, darling. Was a bit preoccupied. I will see you at noon.

Disgusted, Bart quickly deleted the photo from his phone. Don’t send me shit like that, asshole. He checked his watch. Just get here. You’re late.

The waitress walked by, smacking her gum. She pulled out her order tablet. Bart wrinkled his nose as she popped a bubble.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“Tea, unsweet with two lemons and no ice. And water for my friend.”

The waitress smiled tightly at his specific instructions but nodded her head. “I’ll get right on that for you,” she said. He didn't miss her roll her eyes as she turned away.

His phone chimed and he glanced down. Be there in ten, darling. Order me a BLT, hold the T.

He tossed his phone onto the sticky tabletop. The waitress came back by with his tea. He thanked her curtly and she left without a word.

Bart took a sip and scowled. It was spoiled. He pushed the glass away from him.

The waitress returned. “Excuse me,” Bart said.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“This tea is old. I would like some fresh tea.”

The waitress crossed her arms defensively. “I just brewed that twenty minutes ago.”

“Like hell you did,” Bart snapped. “Just do your fucking job and make me some fresh tea.”

The woman pursed her lips and nodded. “I’ll get right on that.” She took the glass of tea from the table and wiped up the place where it spilled.
“You do that. And while you’re at it, I would like a BLT, no tomato for my friend and clam chowder in a bread bowl for me.”

She left without a word.

Two minutes later, the chime of the door opening caught his attention. He looked up to see Crowley sauntering into the diner.

“About damn time,” Bart snapped.

Crowley took a seat and began fiddling with the dessert menu sitting on the tabletop.

“How’s the pie in this place?” he asked.

“How the hell should I know?” Bart snapped. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Do you have a lead for me or not?”

“Not one for foreplay are we darling?” Crowley drawled, tracing his finger down the edge of the dessert menu. Their waitress came back with their drinks. “Thank you,” he said. “Could you be a dear and add a slice of your best chocolate pie with my sandwich order?”

She jotted down his order onto her tablet and left them.

Bart sighed impatiently. He wasn’t in the mood for this shit.

“Are you done?” he asked when he was sure she was gone. “Can we get on with it?”

Crowley rolled his eyes, taking a sip of his water. “Fine,” he said. He pulled a laptop out of the canvas bag he carried in with him and opened it. The glow of the screen illuminated Crowley’s face and he fiddled around with the keys for a moment, tapping the track pad twice before swiveling the screen around to face Bart.

It was the same grainy photo that Crowley had given him before. Bart sighed in impatience. “You gave me this already you idiot.”

Crowley held up his hand. “I gave you the photographs before, but after some digging I was able to find the video.” He pressed play.

Jimmy walked slowly across the parking lot, his head hunched and with a heavy limp. The camera angle changed and Bart sat forward suddenly. Jimmy was walking through the doors, but a car he hadn’t noticed before slowed down in front of the entrance. It was a car he recognized from somewhere.

For a moment, he couldn’t place the ugly car, but as the camera angle shifted once more, Bart recognized the short afro of the woman driving away from the parking lot.

The 1978 Lincoln Continental stood in the driveway of a house in his neighborhood. Suddenly, the pieces fell together like dominos in a line. Her shiftiness and reluctance to talk with him. Her contemptuous expression the last time he showed up at her door to question her. There couldn’t have been many Continentals like that in the area, especially not that god awful tan color.

It belonged to Missouri Moseley.

She helped Jimmy run. And she was going to pay.

“I have to go,” he said, standing up suddenly. He pulled out a fifty and tossed it onto the tabletop.
He held out his hand for the disc holding Crowley’s lead. Crowley scowled, but popped it out of his laptop and slid it into a paper sleeve. Bart snatched it out of his hand with a nod.

“You’re welcome,” Crowley said.

“Send me a pic of that license plate.”

Crowley nodded, touching the tips of his fingers to his temple.

Bart left the diner so fast he nearly ran down an old man on the stoop. He apologized distractedly and jogged to his car. It was blisteringly hot outside; the sun beat down up on his shoulders as he pulled out of the diner’s parking lot.

It took him only forty minutes to reach his neighborhood. Missouri Moseley’s house was painted in a gaudy shade of blue, just three streets from Holland Road. Neatly parked in the driveway was a tan 1978 Lincoln Continental.

He pulled out his phone and checked his messages for the text Crowley had sent him of the car’s license plate.

A slow smile spread across his face. The numbers matched.

****

Seven hours later, after watching the house surreptitiously from down the street until the sun went down, Bart sat at his desk. The hustle and bustle of the office around him provided a nice backdrop to the nervous energy running through his veins. He hesitated for only moment before logging into his computer.

It took long enough for his computer to boot up to set his heart racing and his fingertips twitching. He could get into serious trouble if anyone caught him doing this, but he had to know. He had to.

Fueled by the sudden wave of fury that washed through him, Bart flipped open his notes to the page that held Missouri Moseley’s information.

She was involved. And she had stared him straight in the eye and lied. To him.

Out of habit, he checked his email while he waited for his missing persons database to boot up.

He popped the lid of his water bottle and took a long drink, the burn of the alcohol down his throat a balm to his nerves.

Bart had just one moment of doubt as the database blinked onto the screen. What if he got caught?

He stared at the screen, the familiar Missing Person Form 4 waiting to be filled out. As if by rote, he began filling it out. He typed in the date reported, but then paused. It had been months since his husband had gone missing. If he put the date reported as August, it would be a red flag in the system. But if he backdated the report and said that it never got filed…

He typed a new date into the box and moved on.

It was slow work, picking and choosing what he would reveal, what truths to include and what to leave out. He dithered for nearly ten minutes, trying to figure out who he should put down. He didn’t want to connect himself to the case as an investigator, and he damn sure didn’t want to alert his coworkers of Jimmy’s disappearance.
Finally, he decided to put his old partner Rebeca’s name down. She was no longer working with the department, but she was when Jimmy went missing. He put his own contact information on the page and sat back, admiring his work.

He glanced at his watch. He had a few hours yet until the shift change, and he didn't want to risk filing the report with someone on his shift. Better to wait until the next shift comes on. They wouldn’t know him and the pieces wouldn’t be put together as quickly.

He carefully saved the draft of the report in an encrypted folder on his computer and printed off two copies, one of which he put in a growing file he kept at home for his search. The other one would have to be entered into the system by a clerk at the 9-11 center, but he needed to be careful. Find one of the temp staff to do it or sweet talk his way into getting it filed on the down low.

He carefully date stamped the form and then crumpled it up into a ball. Carefully, he unfolded the form and put it in a manilla folder. He could just say that the form had gotten misplaced, that with Rebecca leaving, the form never got filed.

He quickly forged Rebecca’s signature and left the office, trying not to draw attention to himself as he went.

He drove back to Missouri’s house, parking a little way down the street. Carefully, Bart refilled his water bottle with vodka from the bottle hidden in his glove compartment. And he watched her. Missouri was in her garden, cutting back the peony bushes that lined a bed next to her house.

_Stupid bitch_, he thought, taking another long pull from his bottle. _Everyone knows peonies draw ants. Her house was probably infested with them. Dirty, lying, stupid bitch._

She finished watering the flowers and moved on to weeding. It was boring. The longer he watched the angrier Bart got. This woman, who was carefully tending her garden, had ruined his life. She helped Jimmy leave.

It was all her fault. She turned Jimmy against him. He knew it. They probably laughed at him behind his back. Jimmy probably made up stories about him to her. Bart clenched his bottle so hard it collapsed, spilling vodka over his hand and onto his suit pants.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed, reaching into his console for a napkin. He dabbed at his pants futilely for a minute, but then gave up for a bad job. At least it was clear. Missouri finished her gardening and cleaned up after herself, putting her tools away before shutting the garage door.

The lights came on in the living room and Bart glanced at the clock in surprise. He’d been watching her for several hours. The sun was going down. His shift ended an hour ago. He watched through the window as Missouri began to cook dinner, mixing a wooden spoon in an enormous pot on the stove. Bart watched for another couple minutes before leaving. He had to get back to the station to file the missing persons report.

He drove carefully through the streets as night fell. The station wasn’t far from home, but he took the long way. He needed to be absolutely sure that no one from his shift would be sticking around.

No one gave him a second glance as he walked into the station. It was still as busy as ever. A stream of uniformed officers was coming out of the conference room after parade, two detectives from the night shift waved at him from the pit but Bart ignored them, heading down the hall to the dispatch center.

Bart always thought of the dispatch center as a beehive. Rounded cubicles shaped like half moons
stood back to back, creating a honey comb effect. Not only that, but the sound was constant hum of ringing phones, voices, printers and fax machines. Men and women in khakis and matching polos with the departments seal over the chest sat at their desks answering phones with speed and precision.

He made his way over to a pretty woman in her mid thirties. She had a sad, desperate sort of look around her. Bart noticed a man’s wedding ring on a chain around her neck. Perfect.

He stepped up to her cube just as she finished a call. “Excuse me?” Bart asked, turning on the charm. He glanced at the name badge on the top of her cube. “Adina?”

She looked up. Her eyes widened briefly and she gave him a subtle once over. “Can I help you?”

“I have a MP-4 I need to file, but I’m a little turned around here.”

“I can help you with that.” She held out her hand for the file. He handed it over. She opened the folder and frowned. “Um, sir, this file is from four months ago.”

Bart ran a hand through his hair in a mock display of sheepishness. “Yeah well, when my partner went on maternity leave, it was…uh kinda sudden. She was on her way down to file the report when her water broke. I was clearing out her office for my new partner and I found it. You would really be doing me a solid by getting the paperwork filed. The trial is coming up and this guy is a material witness. We really need to find him.” The lies fell off his tongue like melted butter and he could see her soften. “Could you please file this for me?” he asked. “You’d really be doing me a solid.”

She glanced over the file once more. “You say he’s a witness?”

“Yeah, to a pretty bad murder, and if we don't get him back the case will fall apart. Can you help me?”

She smiled once more. “Yeah, sure detective.”

She put the form into her scanner and pulled up the file. “Do you need to make any changes before I send it up?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, I double checked it before I brought it down.”

She nodded and hit submit. “There you go. It should take a day or two to show up, but it’s in there now.”

Bart reached out and stroked a hand down her forearm. “You’re a lifesaver Adina, truly.”

She pulled her arm out of his grasp. It was a subtle gesture but he didn’t miss it. “Just doing my job, sir,” she said.

“You do it well. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go interview a suspect. You have a good night now,” he said.

“You too.”

He left quickly, careful not to draw anyone’s attention. He grabbed dim sum on the way home, and bought another bottle of vodka at the liquor store next door to the restaurant. Without thinking too much about it, Bart parked down the street from Missouri’s house. It was late, and none of the lights were on. Bart pulled part the chopsticks and began to pick at his pork buns.
There wasn’t any activity in the house. It was late and the lights were off save for one lamp in the upstairs right window. Thunder boomed overhead and he jumped. He hadn’t even noticed the storm clouds moving in. He finished his dim sum just as the rain began to fall.

Bart pulled out his phone, calling his boss. Suddenly he was feeling a bit under the weather, probably the flu. The flu hit even in the dead of summer, who knew? He’d be out the rest of the week.

He locked his phone and tossed it into the passenger seat.

It was no use. She wasn’t going anywhere tonight, and he wasn’t fool enough to break in while she was there. He’d have to wait her out. Surely she’d leave at some point.

And he’d be ready when she did.
They worked in silence for a while, and Castiel felt increasingly awkward next to Dean. He furrowed his brow, concentrating on a particularly dirty spoon. “I’m not fine,” he said, suddenly.

Dean looked up from the bowl he was washing. “What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

Castiel brought the mug to his lips and inhaled the rich scent of good coffee. Dean had added cream before handing it off to him that morning with a kiss. It was a rare luxury he didn’t often get to indulge himself with, but had gotten used to this past week spent at Dean’s. His refrigerator at the cottage was notorious for randomly shutting off in the middle of hot days and cream was too expensive to waste.

He took a sip, staring out the living room window at the grey sky up above the river. Dean was across the street, gassing up the car at the store. A piece of toast was held between his teeth. Dean pulled the nozzle out of the car and headed inside to pay Charlie, who had taken the opening shift so Dean and Castiel could go pick up Ben and Emma at Raleigh.

Dean came back out a few minutes later, with a six pack of bottled Pepsi and a bag of snacks. He tossed the bag into the front seat and opened the back door, putting the soda in the cooler. He shut the door with his toe, still munching on his toast.

Castiel went into the kitchen just as Dean entered through the back door. Dean leaned over and kissed him again. Cas smiled. Dean still had crumbs on his lips.

“You ready to hit the road?” Dean asked.

Cas nodded, wiping Dean’s lip with his thumb. “Lemme hit the head first,” he replied.

Dean quirked a smile. “Don’t take too long. It’s a three hour trip and the Braedens are expecting us at eleven.” He glanced out the window at the deepening clouds rolling in from the West. “Plus it looks like rain.”

Castiel snorted. “This coming from the man who spent an hour and a half in the bathroom yesterday because he ‘couldn’t get his hair right,’” Cas teased, using air quotes that never failed to make Dean roll his eyes.

“That’s not true. I also had to shave. And cut my hair. And yours, I might add.”
“I’ll just be a minute.”

By the time Castiel came back from the bathroom, Dean was waiting in the car. Cas grabbed his coffee from the counter, refilled it and headed out with him.

“I gotta stop by Sam’s,” Dean said. “Jess wants me to pick up MJ’s christening gown while I’m in Raleigh. I gotta get the receipt.”

“Are you going to be her godfather?” Castiel asked.

Dean nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “He and Jess are all gung-ho about it. They’re planning a huge party after.”

Castiel took a long swallow from his coffee mug as Dean pulled out onto the highway. “What about you?” he finally asked. “Are you religious?”

Dean shrugged. “Not really. I saw too much shit growin’ up.”

Castiel frowned. “Wouldn’t Sam have seen the same shit?”

“I did everything possible to shield him from most of it,” Dean admitted.

“You couldn't have shielded him from everything though.”

Dean shook his head. “No,” he conceded. “But I got him out of there at fourteen.” He paused. “Hopefully it was in time. Anyway, Sam started going to a church when we moved in with Bobby. He met Jess there.”

There was a stiff set to his shoulders, as if there was more to the story, but Cas didn't pry. “So when’s the party?”

“Not for a few weeks.” Dean glanced over at Cas, who was staring out the window. “Wanna be my date?”

Cas looked over in alarm. “You want me to be your date to the Catholic church where you are going to become a godfather?”

“Technically, it’s a Methodist church, but yeah. And then the party of course.”

“Wouldn’t the church, uh, frown on that?”

“It’s a pretty progressive church. Minister’s daughter and her wife live up in Asheville. They work for the Biltmore as character actors.”

“Oh.”

Cas looked out the windshield, quiet for a long moment.

“Is that a yes?” Dean asked, glancing over at Castiel.

Cas smiled, but it felt tight in the corners. “Church… really isn't my thing. Not anymore anyway. But I’d be happy to go to the party with you.”

Dean took the soft no graciously. “I’ll pick you up after the service then,” he said, then let the matter drop. Castiel felt a rush of gratitude for Dean’s easy acceptance of his rejection. He reached over, grabbing the hand resting on Dean’s thigh. Dean threaded their fingers together and brought Cas’
knuckles to his lips. Castiel scooted across the bench seat, resting his head on Dean’s shoulder.

“You alright?” Dean asked. “You seem pretty quiet this morning.”

“I… I can’t shake this feeling that something is wrong.”

“With us?” Dean asked, concerned.

Cas sat up. “No,” he said. “No, just something feels off and I don’t know what it is. Like something’s coming.”

Dean pulled up to Sam and Jess’ house, putting the car in park and turning to face Castiel.

“Nothing is going to happen Cas,” he said emphatically. “Not on my watch.”

“I know,” he replied. “But that doesn’t change the fact that my husband is out there, getting angrier and angrier. And I know he’s looking for me.”

“You can’t—”

“—I do know that!” he suddenly yelled. Dean flinched and Castiel instantly felt guilty. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Dean said. “I’ll be right back.” He leaned over, kissing him briefly.

“You sure you’re not mad?” Cas asked.

“Yeah.” Dean exited the car, leaving Cas feeling cold.

I fucked up, he thought. He finished off his coffee and carefully put the thermos in a canvas Dean had brought along.

Dean didn’t take long inside the house, but it felt like an eternity. He finally got into the car.

Traffic was heavy, weekend beachgoers all heading back to the city for another long week of work. They rode in silence while Dean merged onto the main road out of town. The radio was on low, but Castiel heard the first notes of an old Police song over the speakers. Immediately, Cas reached out to change the station.

Almost as if it was instinctual, Dean slapped Castiel’s hand away. Cas jerked back, surprised.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Nah, babe. It’s an old habit. Sam was always trying to change the station when we were kids.”

“This was our wedding song,” Castiel admitted, his voice small in the cab of the car.

Dean waved at the radio. “Change it,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Suddenly feeling like they were even again, Cas waved him off. “Old habits die hard. No harm, no foul.”

Dean threaded their hands together. “I hate that song anyway.”

Cas tried to fight back a smile. “Me too. Bart wanted to play it for our first dance and I gave in. ‘Every move you make, I’ll be watching you?’ Oddly appropriate.”

Dean laughed. “I love you,” he said, trying to reign in his laughter.

Warmth spread through Castiel at the endearment. The way Dean threw those three words out there
— as if it were the easiest thing in the world to say— brought a lump to his throat. He coughed to clear it. Castiel reached out and turned the dial. G&R came over the speakers and he smiled, increasing the volume. Dean tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat.

Castiel settled back into the seat. The sun, when it was able to peek out from the heavy clouds steadily filling the sky, was warm on his arm as they drove through the quiet streets of Southport. Dean reached into the glove compartment at a red light, pulling out a pack of Jolly Ranchers. He offered the bag to Cas, who pulled out a green apple and carefully unwrapped it.

Dean took a red one for himself, watching out of the corner of his eye as Castiel folded the plastic wrapper into halves, and then quarters, placing it in the pocket of a button down shirt he’d borrowed from Dean. It was blue denim, the kind of blue that made Castiel’s eyes even more striking than usual, in the dreary half light of the overcast day.

Dean drove slower than normal, taking the back highways instead of the interstate. Castiel figured Dean wanted to prolong the time they had left alone together as much as he did. Of course, Cas knew that Dean missed his kids. He hadn't missed a single nightly phone call with Ben and Emma since they went to Raleigh, and it wasn’t difficult for him to steer nearly every conversation in the direction his children’s accomplishments: of Ben’s baseball team winning the local little league tournament, or Emma’s soccer goal from three weeks ago.

But Dean was a different person when he wasn’t around his kids. Not better, not worse, Cas thought. Just different.

Not as burdened? Cas shook his head. That wasn’t it. Not burdened, exactly, he thought. He isn’t as alert, as on guard for any and every little thing that could happen.

Castiel relaxed in his seat, letting his head fall back onto the bench.

Just as the first raindrops began to fall onto he windshield, an old familiar guitar strain began to play. Cas closed his eyes, letting the Seger song lull him into an easy sleep.

****

Dean turned the music down, as he merged onto the highway. He glanced over at the sleeping man next to him and smiled softly. Rain never failed to knock Cas out. Combine that with the gentle sway of the car as it maneuvered through the highway, and Castiel didn’t stand a chance.

Dean reached over and brushed a lock of Cas’ hair out of his face.

His hair had lightened over the summer, the fake black dye he’d used that spring washing out to reveal a sandy brown color that suited him. It's always windswept, Dean thought and he loved that. It looked like Cas had perpetually just gotten out of a convertible, even if he’d done nothing but wake up in the morning.

Cas shifted in his sleep, resting his head on Dean’s shoulder. Dean kissed the top of Castiel’s head and turned his attention back to the road.

The storm had moved in far more quickly than the meteorologists had predicted. Dean had thought he would be able to get to Raleigh before it started raining, but no such luck. He turned on the headlights, careful not to jostle Castiel in the process.

He loved it when Cas felt safe enough to sleep around him. He wasn’t sure why, but it always sent a fissure of pride through him to know that despite all that had Castiel been through, he still had the ability to trust Dean.
Castiel shifted, pressing his lips to the hollow at the base of Dean’s neck. Dean shivered at the intimate touch, given freely.

He reached down, clasping Castiel’s hand in his own. They passed a sign that read: Raleigh 100 Miles and smiled. Ben and Emma will be back in his arms soon, and then his entire little family will be back together.

The rest of the drive to Raleigh was uneventful.

Dean stopped by the store to pick up MJ’s christening gown first. Cas waited in the car, fiddling idly with the dial on the radio, trying to find a station that wasn’t fuzzy. Rain pounded down onto the windshield, running like rivulets over the glass. It reminded Cas of the afternoons he and Claire used to spend at the automatic carwash.

He remembered the games he would play to distract her from being afraid of the automated brushes. Suddenly, despite it being over a decade since he’d sung it, he remembered the silly song he used to sing when the tricolor foam covered the car from top to bottom—that one moment when anything seemed possible because they were safe and tucked away from the world under a beautiful swirling rainbow.

Castiel closed his eyes, listening to the patter of the rain on the hard metal roof.

He missed his daughter. He missed her so much he couldn’t stand it. But he couldn’t, no wouldn’t put her in danger. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Bart was watching Amelia and Claire. He was probably watching his entire family, especially Gabriel, who was the only member of this family left who was willing to even speak to him anymore.

But the thought persisted. He wanted to see Claire. To hold her in his arms and beg forgiveness for leaving her. But he didn't even know how to get into touch with her without triggering an alert to Bart. It isn’t safe to call her. Or visit. Or even write a goddamned letter, he thought with increasing bitterness.

He scoffed, glancing out the window toward the cute boutique Dean had ducked into. He was talking with the cashier, smiling easily as she wrapped the tiny christening gown. It was a small moment between a pretty girl and a handsome man, but it twisted something ugly at the pit of Castiel’s stomach. The girl pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, glancing up through her eyelashes at him. He was busy pulling cash out of his wallet to notice when she subtly adjusted her posture, surreptitiously pulling the hem of her t-shirt down.

Castiel rolled his eyes.

Dean took the package from her, and thanked her, then made his way out the door. He ducked down over the perfect wrapping of MJ’s gown, protecting it as best he could from the rain. Something small and ugly quietly built within Cas as he watched Dean cross the street to the car.

Dean opened the back door and carefully placed the bag on the back seat and climbed into the car. With a smile, he leaned over, into Castiel’s space. Dean brushed a thumb over the soft spot beneath Cas’ eye, tracing the circles he found there. “You miss me?” he asked, smiling. He kissed him and that ugly part of Cas that had flamed anew when he saw that girl flirting with Dean dissipated. Cas could still feel the warmth of his lips against his skin. He bit back a smile.

“You know it,” he said.

Dean headed north, towards a small, established neighborhood in the heart of the city. The Braeden
The house was a quaint little bungalow, with excellent yard work and a wrap around porch. Through the large picture window, Castiel could see a woman with graying hair playing with Emma.

He heard Ben’s raucous laughter as he opened up the Impala door. “I’ll wait here,” Cas said, and Dean raised his eyebrows.

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t want to…upset them. I am dating their late daughter’s husband after all.”

Dean burst out laughing. “Cas, I already told them about you. And besides, Mama Nell invited us to lunch.”

“If you’re sure…” Cas hedged, feeling a little taken aback that Dean felt comfortable enough about their relationship to tell his in-laws about it.

Dean touched Castiel’s hand gently. “Sweetheart, they are excited to meet you. They’ve been onto me to start dating again for a while now.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

Dean shrugged. “Lisa kinda pushed them while she was still alive. Wanted them to remain a part of our lives, and to make sure I found someone…uh after. Made them promise to be supportive, but I’m not supposed to know about that.”

On the side of the house, in a small screened in porch, Ben was sitting with a man with silver hair and a kind smile. They were playing some kind of card game that looked like a cross between War and Slapjack.

“Hey!” Dean called out, opening the door to the porch. “Where’s my welcome wagon?” he asked. Ben ran towards his father, his deck of cards scattering across the card table.

“Dad!” he yelled. “We missed you!”

Cas carefully stepped up into the porch. Ben looked up from his father’s shoulders and an enormous smile spread across his face. “Hey there, Ben,” Cas said.

“Hi Cas,” Ben replied. He jumped down from his father’s hip and bounded over to barrel Castiel down in a fierce hug.

The elderly man at the card table coughed pointedly. Cas looked up as Dean met the man’s gaze. Dean ran a hand through the back of his hair, turning the locks up untidily. “Uh, Grandpa Gene,” he began. “This is Castiel Moseley,” he paused. “He and I have been dating for a few months now.”

Gene stood up and walked over to Castiel. He held out his hand for Castiel to shake. He did, noticing the slight tremor in the other man’s grip, the way he favored his left leg. “It is good to meet you, Castiel.”

“Cas, please,” he replied. “It’s good to meet you as well.”

“Please, come in. Eleanor hollered for lunch a few minutes ago.”

Gene went inside. Dean and Cas stood outside with Ben between them. They met each other’s eye. “That went better than I thought it would,” Dean finally said.

“Me too.”
“Dad, come on! I’m starving,” Ben finally said.

Dean scooped Ben up and followed his father-in-law into the house. The house was beautifully decorated in a lived in kind of way. It had an open floorpan; kitchen, living room, and dining room all encompassing one large space. The great room faced a large easterly window with pale green curtains. There was nice solid furniture in the dining room, but the couch sagged slightly in the middle from use. The coffee table had a small ring from a carelessly placed hot mug. All things that Bart would notice and seethe over on their way home. Despite the wear and tear on the furniture, everything was meticulously clean.

Eleanor and Emma were standing at the kitchen island, stirring what appeared to be a large pot of soup. Castiel smiled. The weather had turned cool with the rainstorm, and the soup smelled delicious.

Gene got Eleanor’s attention with a light touch to her arm, then began an introduction in sign.

Dean translated in a quiet whisper next to him. “Darling,” he began. “This is Castiel Moseley, Dean’s new beau.” Dean’s lips quirked at the word ‘beau.’ Cas chuckled.

“Oh, we’re beaus now are we?”

Dean laughed. He moved over to pull Emma up into his arms. “Hello, Monster,” he said, kissing the top of her hair. “Were you good for Nana and Papa?”

She nodded, planting a kiss on her dad’s forehead. “I’m always good, Daddy,” she argued.

“Oh huh,” Dean replied disbelievingly. He kissed her gently again.

Eleanor moved toward Cas, a wide smile on her face. “Hello,” she said in an atonal voice. Cas reached out to grasp her hand. “It is very nice to meet you.”

“You as well,” Castiel replied.

“I hope you like hamburger soup,” she said, signing as she spoke.

“I love it. Can I help in any way?” he asked. Dean signed next to him, but she waved him off.

Dean went to the cabinets, pulling bowls down with the ease of someone who has been in this home more times than he could remember. He helped Emma fill her bowl with soup, pulled a piece of bread off of the baguette that was still steaming on the stove.

Gene handed Castiel a bowl and he took it. These people were strangers to him, but they welcomed him with the ease. He was—for all intents and purposes—their daughter’s replacement, that ugly part of himself whispered, but they didn’t even seem to hold it against him. They treated him with respect. They welcomed their son-in-law’s boyfriend into their home as if it were the most natural thing on this earth.

Still pondering the depth of kindness Lisa’s parents had shown him, Cas stood behind Dean in the line. He filled his bowl with the hearty soup, and pulled off a piece of bread off of the baguette that was still steaming on the stove.

Emma gave him a hug when he sat down, and he reached down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Hey there, honeybee,” he said. “Did you have a good week with your grandma and grandpa?”

She nodded around a piece of bread. “Yeah,” she said. “We went to a drive-in movie theater, and they were playing Sound of Music.” She looked up at Castiel. “It’s Papa’s favorite movie.”
“That does sound like fun.” Castiel took a bite of soup. It was delicious.

They all ate their lunch together, laughing and joking, and afterwards, Dean and Castiel shooed the rest of them out of the kitchen so that they could clean up the dishes.

“They are wonderful,” Cas said gently as he turned on the faucet.

“Yeah, they’re great.” Dean’s smile faltered slightly, but then he turned back to Cas. “So what do you wanna do?” he asked, glancing outside at the rain pouring down. “We still have a couple hours before we have to head back.”

Castiel shrugged, focused on the dishes. The foul mood he had woken up with hadn’t improved over the course of the day, and Cas felt a headache beginning behind his eyelids. He didn’t feel like traipsing all over Raleigh with two rambunctious children in tow. But Dean was looking at him with such earnestness that he didn’t want to let him down.

Even as he thought it, he pushed that feeling violently away. That was the kind of attitude that got him into trouble with Bart. He didn’t want to let Bart down, so he did whatever Bart wanted whether Cas felt like doing it or not.

With Dean, Cas didn't have to do anything, he knew that, but he didn't want to let them down, didn't want to disappoint them. He knew that Dean would understand, and that somehow made it worse. He pushed those feelings far down into that secret bitter place within him and forced himself to smile.

“The weather really isn't really cooperative,” he finally said.

“So we’ll find something inside to do.”

After a short pause, “To be honest,” Castiel admitted. “I’m kind of exhausted.”

Dean paused. “Well, we could just head back. The Braves are supposed to play later. I could do with an evening parked in front of the TV with a beer and someone to cuddle with.” Dean nudged Cas with his shoulder. “You in?”


Dean reached over, tracing a soapy thumb over Castiel’s cheek. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Cas said, too quickly.

Dean pursed his lips for a moment, but nodded. “Okay,” he said. He turned back to the dishes.

They worked in silence for a while, and Castiel felt increasingly awkward next to Dean. He furrowed his brow, concentrating on a particularly dirty spoon. “I’m not fine,” he said, suddenly.

Dean looked up from the bowl he was washing. “What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

“I was afraid just then,” Cas murmured back. “I was afraid you’d be upset that I didn't want to do anything. I was afraid that you’d be disappointed. And I… I almost went along with whatever you wanted, despite having the beginnings of a monster headache, and being in a foul mood.” Castiel met Dean’s gaze for the first time since he’d begun talking. “Because that way I wouldn’t rock the boat. I almost… acted same way I—I did with him.” Cas set the spoon in the drying rack. “And I didn't want to do that to you, but I didn’t know the right way to say it.”

Dean reached over, pressing his hand over Castiel’s and squeezing lightly. “I’m proud of you,” he
Cas smiled weakly. “I’m kind of proud of me too.”

“We’re okay?” Dean asked. Cas leaned over, brushing his lips over the bridge of Dean’s nose.

“I love you,” Castiel whispered.

Someone behind them coughed and Cas and Dean sprang apart to see Nellie standing in the doorway.

“Sorry,” Dean signed.

Nellie waved them off. “You’re fine,” she said. “Are you ready for dessert?” she signed, while Dean quietly translated for Castiel. Cas smiled, shaking his head.

“Hell yeah!” Dean replied, his hands moving fast as he spoke.

Castiel made a show of clutching his stomach. “How can you think of dessert after a meal like that?” he asked.

“Nellie made pie.”

Castiel barely resisted rolling his eyes. “Your love affair with pie never ceases to amaze me,” he said.

Dean smirked as he went over to the kitchen cabinet. He pulled down a stack of plates and opened the drawer for utensils.

“Get the ice cream out of the fridge would you?” Dean asked.

Cas nodded and pulled open the freezer drawer. There were no less than five types of ice cream in there. “Which one?” he called out.

“All of them,” Emma shouted.

Cas fumbled in the fridge, trying to balance the various flavors in his hands. He set them down next to an absolutely beautiful pie and reached out for the scoop Gene handed him. Cas managed to eat a small piece of pie, despite the slowly worsening migraine pounding at the base of his skull. He remained quiet as the little family around him bickered over which was the best ice cream flavor, focusing hard enough that the pecan pie blurred in front of him. Cas didn’t notice when Dean stood up from the table. A few minutes later Dean returned with a bottle of water. “Here,” he said. “This will help.”

Cas downed his water in one long gulp. Eleanor and Jean insisted on cleaning up the dessert dishes, while Cas and Dean rustled up the kids, helping them make sure that everything was packed up.

Twenty minutes later, the kids’ suitcases were waiting by the door, the kitchen was cleaned up and Eleanor had made them a doggie bag filled with the rest of the pie and a freezer bag full of soup.

Cas packed the kid’s luggage in the trunk of the car while the Winchesters said their goodbyes. Gene and Eleanor followed them to the vehicle, despite the rain, hugging them all one more time as they helped the kids into the back seat. Emma took her time, carefully buckling her booster seat up, while Ben pulled out an iPad and began playing a game called Bubble Crack.

Dean hugged Gene first, then Eleanor. Then he stepped back, carefully signing. “I’ll see you both at Emma’s birthday party right? We’re making Dad’s Kitchen Sink Chili and sheet cake.”
“Of course,” Gene said. “We wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Gene reached out a hand towards Cas. “It was very nice to meet you, Castiel,” he said.

Cas took his hand, shaking it. “It was good meeting you, too,” he replied. He turned to Eleanor. Carefully he signed the only thing he knew “Thank you,” he signed. “For everything.”

Eleanor smiled softly. “You’re welcome,” she said. She signed, “We’ll see you in a couple months, yeah?” Gene translated next to her.

Castiel hesitated for the briefest of moments. Where would he be in a few months? He couldn't promise he’d be there, celebrating Emma’s birthday with her. He couldn't promise anything, not with Bart out there, growing angrier and angrier, looking for him. But he smiled, covered his moment of hesitation, and nodded. “Of course,” he said.

“Alright, gotta get on the road. We’re having a movie night tonight, and we gotta get back before the video store closes.”

The all hugged once more, and Dean and Cas got into the car, its windows already fogged with the warm air of the heaters against the cool rain water.

The kids were full and content, and halfway out of Raleigh, both of them were fast asleep.

Cas watched them for a while. The way Emma rested her head in the crook of her brother’s shoulder reminded Castiel of the way he’d woken earlier that day, his head resting gently on a shoulder he knew was safe.

“They’re gonna be wired for two-twenty later,” Dean said.

“We’ll put a movie on, and they’ll quiet right down.”

“I am not watching Frozen again,” Dean said vehemently. “I started singing that asinine snowman song the other day, out of nowhere. I knew every word.”

Cas smiled. “Monster University then,” and Dean nodded. It had been an ongoing feud between Ben and Emma.

“I think I can deal with that,” Dean said. “But,” he added, “I get to put Reese’s in the popcorn. And we’re getting Twizzlers. And—”

“—Pizza with absolutely no vegetables,” Castiel finished for him.

Dean shrugged slightly. “I think I can compromise on the pizza. At least on half of it.”

Castiel laughed. “I appreciate your sacrifice on your sacred movie night traditions.” He reached out, placing his hand carefully on Dean’s knee. “I’ll make it up to you,” he said.

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Will you now?”

Cas merely nodded. “Can I make one request though?” he asked.

“Of course, sweetheart.”

“Can we record the Braves game and watch it after the kids go down? I am in some serious baseball withdrawal.”

“It’s already recording.”
“That’s why I love you,” Cas said.


Castiel nodded. “I probably should. You gonna be okay to drive all by yourself?”

“I’m good, babe. Get some sleep.”

Castiel leaned over, kissing Dean gently on the lips, then lay back. His eyes slipped shut.

***

Castiel slept hard enough that when Dean pulled into the Winchester home, the jolt of the transition from blacktop to driveway startled him awake. He sat up, cracking his neck. Behind him, Ben and Emma were gathering their backpacks.

“Okay kiddos,” Dean said. “We’re having a movie night. So here’s what I need you to do. Emma: make a list of what we need from the store. Ben, get the quilts and pillows from the spare room closet and start on the pillow pile. Cas gets to pick the movies tonight, but his first job is to go take some medicine and drink a big glass of water.”

“Are you sick?” Emma asked.

“My head hurts a little bit,” he replied.

“You’re probably dehydrated,” Ben said. “Mama always said we had to drink a big glass of water when our head hurt.” He brushed away the sleep from his eyes, and something within Castiel softened. Ben almost never talked about his mom, especially not in such a casual way.

He smiled softly. “I will make sure to get a really big glass of water.” He turned to Dean. “Where do you keep the Excedrine?”

“In the medicine cabinet in my bathroom, second shelf,” Dean replied.

“Thanks.”

“You need anything else?”

“Cup of tea?” Cas asked.

“I’ll pick some chamomile up when I go to the store.”

Dean unlocked the back door and the kids ran inside, flipping on lights and yelling as they went about their tasks.

Cas followed slowly. He went to the bathroom, and pulled out the bottle of migraine medicine from the cabinet. In the kitchen, a bottle of cold water was sitting on the island. Cas smiled, opened up the bottle and swallowed two pills.

By that time, Ben and Emma were squabbling over the movie choice in the living room as they set up the pillow fort. Dean was going over Emma’s list with the pantry door open, adding something to it with a worn down nub of a pencil.

Cas took a big drink of water and set the bottle on the counter. He slowly walked over to where Dean was peering into the pantry and wrapped his arms around him. His thumbnail scraped gently
over Dean’s collarbone and Castiel felt Dean take a shallow breath.

“I love you,” Castiel whispered.

Dean reached over, putting his hand on top of Cas’ “I know.”

“I don’t tell you that enough,” Cas said, his lips pressed to the shell of Dean’s ear.

“You tell me enough,” Dean said.

Castiel took a deep breath. “I don’t.”

Dean kissed Castiel, pressing his lips to his forehead, almost like a parent checking their child’s temperature. “You up for a trip to the store or do you wanna stay here?”

“I think I’ll stay here,” Cas replied “Maybe take a shower.”

“Okay,” Dean pressed his lips to Cas’ forehead again. “We’ll be back soon.” He brushed his thumb over the swell of Castiel’s bottom lip then stepped away.

Cas wandered down the hall after they left. He opened the linen closet and pulled out a clean towel, smiling at the general dishevelment in the closet. Extra body wash and washcloths dominated one shelf, with a bulk package of toilet paper, half empty on another. The towels were folded carefully, but none of them matched.

With everyone gone, the house felt impossibly large. The air conditioning was rattling in a vent near the spare bedroom, as if the air blowing through it was jarring something in the metal vent loose. Cas could hear the hum of the refrigerator, comforting in its steady rhythm.

Cas finished off his bottle of water and stripped down in the bathroom. There was good water pressure in this house, but it took a long time to warm up. He stepped into the shower carefully, cracking his neck as he reached for the shampoo.

Cas tried to relax into the hot water, to let it soothe his sore muscles and pounding head, but he couldn’t get there. He had let his headache progress too far. It had been a long time since he’d gotten a stress migraine this bad. Not since Bart had to testify at the Harrison trial, and Cas had had to watch every word he said, or suffer the consequences. He rinsed his hair and turned the water off.

But he was happy with Dean. Castiel grabbed the towel and wrapped it around his waist. He padded down the hall to Dean’s bedroom, where he had stashed his duffle bag. He changed into a pair of sweatpants and one of Dean’s soft t-shirts and went back into the living room.

It was still raining hard outside, but Castiel opened a window anyway. He took a deep breath of the cool air coming off the water and sat down on the couch, watching as the lightning flashed over the river.

The medicine had finally started to kick in. By the time Dean returned from the store with the kids, laden down with bags of movie night staples, Castiel’s headache was nearly gone.

He stood up to help unload the bags, but Dean shook his head. He tossed Cas the phone to order the pizza.

The kids were busy making up trays of food. Dean was futzing with the pillow fort. He picked up one of the blankets and wrapped it around Castiel’s shoulders as he passed by. “How long?” he asked.
“Harry said Ed was out on a run right now, so about thirty minutes.”

Dean shook his head. “For a pizza place that is five minutes down the road, you’d think their delivery times would be better.”

“It’ll give us a chance to eat our glorious appetizers,” Castiel said as the kids each brought over a tray laden down with candy, popcorn, soda and surprisingly, a plate of raw carrots, broccoli, and snap peas with ranch dip. He reached out and grabbed a carrot from the tray.

He popped it in his mouth just as Dean pressed play on the DVD player. He settled down into the couch with Castiel as the kids snuggled in the pillow fort. Twilight had settled in around them as the opening credits of Monster University flashed on the screen.

Dean reached over, pulling Castiel’s head onto a pillow in his lap and gently ran his fingers through his hair.

It was so soothing that Cas felt himself slipping into that dream world between sleep and wakefulness, where nothing and everything felt real. His focus blurred as the movie played, and the world reduced down to the haze of color on the screen and soft fingers tripping through his hair.

His headache was gone. Castiel reached over, brushing his fingers over Dean’s knuckles. The kids laughed on cue at the panned joke on screen, and Cas felt the rumble of a chuckle against his ear.

The pizza arrived, and they cleared a spot on the coffee table for it. They all ate voraciously—it had been a long time since lunch and the appetizers had only made them hungrier. By the time they had finished eating, Dean had groaned and surreptitiously unbuttoned his jeans. Cas reached over, pressing his fingers against Dean’s stomach beneath the blanket they shared. Dean jumped a little at the unexpected feel of Castiel’s cold fingers, but then relaxed into the touch.

As predicted, by the time the movie drew to an end, the kids were already half asleep, and in tandem, Cas and Dean stood up. As the credits rolled, Dean reached down and picked Emma up, hooking her legs around his waist. Castiel followed suit with Ben, hitching him up onto his shoulder. They walked carefully and quietly down the hallway into the children’s bedrooms. They split up at Emma’s door, Cas watched for just a moment, as Dean gently placed his daughter into her bed. He pulled up her covers, and grabbed Wubby, a tattered stuffed monkey, from the pile of stuffed animals in the armchair by her dresser. Dean placed Wubby in the crook of her elbow. He bent down, kissed her forehead. “I love you, little monster,” he whispered.

“I love you too Daddy,” she murmured back, tucking her head into her pillow.

Dean turned back around, smiling at the sight of Cas, still carrying Ben. He pressed a hand to the back of Ben’s head, threading his fingers through his curls.

“You got him?” Dean asked as he turned off Emma’s bedroom light.

“Yeah. I got him,” Cas replied. They crossed the hall to Ben’s bedroom. Carefully, Castiel put him to bed, and Dean pulled up the covers.

Ben curled up on his side. Dean pulled a tattered blanket up from the end of Ben’s bed and wrapped it gently around Ben’s shoulders. He kissed the little boy on the forehead and murmured “I love you.”

Then Dean reached out, grabbing Castiel’s hand, and they tiptoed down the hall to Dean’s room.
“How’s your headache?” Dean asked quietly.

“Much better. The medicine helped a lot.”

“Good.”

Dean pulled off his t-shirt, tossing it into the hamper. He kicked off his jeans, folding them and placing them on top of his dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of underwear. He changed absently, apparently unabashed as Castiel watched him.

Cas was already comfortable in a borrowed pair of sweats and one of Dean’s age softened t-shirts, so he grabbed the sham pillows from the perfectly made bed and set them on the bench at the end of the bed.

He brushed past Dean, heading to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

They were quiet, both tired after a long day on the road. Dean joined him at the sink, pulling his blue toothbrush from the cup between the double sinks. Cas dried his face with a hand towel and grabbed the red toothbrush just in time to catch a dollop of toothpaste from the tube Dean held in front of him.

It was so painfully domestic that past blurred with present for just a moment, and suddenly instead of rain pouring outside the small window above the toilet, it was snowing, and the man next to Castiel wasn’t Dean. The face staring back at him in the mirror was gaunt and pale and his long hair was tangled. Cas closed his eyes tightly against the vision, shaking his head slightly as he leaned down to spit into the sink.

*I’m safe here*, he thought. *I am safe and Dean is here with me. Not…him.*

“You alright?” Dean asked around his toothbrush, his voice muffled. Cas rinsed his mouth out with cold water and nodded.

“Yeah, just an aftershock of the migraine,” he replied.

Dean didn’t look convinced but he nodded anyway, his green eyes narrowed. “Are you due for more medicine?” He put his toothbrush in the cup.

“I’m fine,” Cas insisted, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “It’s already better.” Cas pulled Dean to him then, giving him a minty kiss on the lips. “I’m not sleepy enough for bed yet,” he murmured, leaning forward and slotting his knee between Dean’s leg.

“Do you wanna watch the Braves game?” Dean asked, a little breathlessly. “I have it recorded.”

“As much as I wanna watch that game,” Cas began, leaning down and capturing Dean’s jaw with his lips. “I can think of a much more entertaining way to spend our time.”

“Oh, can you?” Dean asked, finally getting the picture of where Cas was heading. “You sure you’re up to it old man?” he teased, reaching down and cupping Castiel’s ass with both hands.

“I want you to take me apart, piece by piece baby,” Cas said, thrusting his hips into Dean’s crotch, his cock already hardening beneath the thin fabric of his boxers. Cas hooked his fingers in his waistband. “I want you to hold me, all night long. I want to feel your heart beat against my ear, slow and strong.”

Dean kissed him then, and pressed him backwards until they both collapsed onto his bed. They made love slowly, reverently. And when they were finished, Dean pulled Cas into his arms, and they fell
asleep tangled together in the sheets of Dean’s bed.

The last thought that went through Castiel’s mind as he slipped deeper into sleep was how quickly all of this could go away.
Chapter Summary

The postcard had no return address, only the initials CM written in the from field. The image on the back depicted what appeared to be a cross between a motorcycle club and a beachside fish shack. The card said “Greetings from the Roadhouse!” with a view of water at sunrise behind the ramshackle restaurant. This was it, his breath coming in short bursts.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for HerRosesNeverFall for the encouragement in this chapter, especially for standing up for me on that one comment. Your support and help is invaluable to me and I don't know what I'd do without your friendship.

This chapter is unbeta'd because I was just too excited to get it out to you guys as quickly as possible. It might go through a couple edits later, but I am pretty happy with it as is.

Chapter 30: On the Edge Again

Chapter Track: Possession by Sarah McLachlan

August 28, 2014

Boston, Massachusetts

It had been nearly a month since Bart had discovered the link between Missouri Moseley and Jimmy, and he was still no closer to figuring out where his husband was.

Between catching up from the week he’d taken off with the “flu,” and a road rage homicide investigation, Bart hadn’t had time to stake out Missouri’s house for a few days, but he was sure he knew enough now. Missouri Moseley lived alone. She was a nurse at Mass General and was on a 3/12 shift, with one on call shift every weekend. The rest of the time, she gave bullshit psychic readings to sad, pathetic customers out of her front parlor.

He cracked his neck with a sigh.

Her granddaughter Patience had been staying with her for almost two weeks now. They cooked dinner together, and every night at seven sharp they sat down to pray over their meals. He knew what TV shows they watched in the evenings, when they went to bed, when Patience inevitably snuck out to meet a pretty girl in a maroon junker, because Missouri Moseley apparently didn’t believe in putting curtains up on her windows.

It made stalking her easy enough, but he still hadn’t found a good moment to break in.
He’d been carefully planning out the details. Missouri was lax at best about locking her doors, and on the back porch there was a hidden key beneath a frankly atrocious statue of a pair of frogs sitting on a bench.

He’d found it three days before, but he hadn’t dared break in yet. He was a good detective, and part of being a good detective meant knowing when to strike. Sooner or later, Missouri would leave her house long enough for him to take a good long look at the place, and Bart was counting on sooner. Her and Patience were planning a road trip, going back to Atlanta over the long weekend. It was the perfect opportunity.

Missouri had to know something. She had to.

Bart’s hands trembled as he opened the bottle of vodka between his knees. He didn’t even bother with the pretense of the water bottle most days. There was a pounding in his head that came from too many hours without food, and the sun was just about to sink down beneath the tree line of the quiet neighborhood Missouri’s house was situated in.

The homes here were smaller than on his street, but well maintained over the years. Missouri’s house was an early 20th century American Foursquare, painted a god awful shade of powder blue. There were only two entrances that were plausible, the back door, which led into a mud room off of the kitchen, or the spare bedroom window Patience had a habit of leaving open when she snuck out to rendezvous with the blonde girl who tried to sell him fiber optic cable a few weeks back.

Step by step, room by room, Bart concocted a plan. He imagined every scenario, every obstacle, every unforeseen event. He remembered the tactics course he was forced to take before his detective’s exam, and was glad he’d paid attention. He looked at all the angles, all the possible entrances and exits.

He took a sip of vodka, enjoying the burn as it went down.

As if on cue, the lights to the kitchen came on and Missouri came into view, opening up the refrigerator and grabbing a carton of eggs. He smiled, twisting the cap back onto his bottle. He shifted his car into drive and pulled out of the driveway he’d been using for reconnaissance.

He drove home carefully, aware of the buzz he’d been keeping up since lunch. It was a short drive, and he was a good driver.

Bart parked in the garage. He stopped by the freezer, swapping his lukewarm bottle out with a frozen one.

The house was still. Too quiet. He didn’t bother grabbing a glass, preferring instead the sting of the ice on the bottle against his chapped lips. He flipped the tv on, watching a mindless sitcom, taking a drink every time the live studio audience laughed on cue.

As the screen in front of him blurred, the bottle fell out of his hand, landing with a thump on the rug. The last thought that went through his mind before blacking out was that tomorrow, Missouri and her bratty granddaughter would be gone. And Bart was going to find out where his husband was.

****

Bart woke up the next morning with a crick in his neck from sleeping sideways on a sagging armchair, his mouth so dry that his tongue felt like sandpaper against his lips.

He glanced at the clock on the wall and groaned. He was two hours late to work.
He took a shower, which helped him feel somewhat more human. He pulled a water bottle out of the fridge in the garage and finished it in three long gulps, then pulled the vodka out of the freezer. He refilled the plastic bottle.

Bart’s phone rang again and he sighed, taking a pull from the vodka bottle before putting it away in the freezer. He glanced at the caller id and answered. “Bart Michelson,” he said.

“Bart- where the hell are you?” his partner, Miles Uriel, responded. “I covered for you with Zachariah, but we were supposed to canvas witnesses this morning.”

“I’m sorry man. I was out late last night tying up some loose ends on a missing persons case.” Fury simmered very close to the surface these days, and the slightest provocation was enough for him to blow up, Bart took a deep breath

“Yeah well, if Zach asks, Jamie caught your flu and you were taking him to the doctor.”

“Thanks. Where you at?”

“I’m at the crime scene.”

“I’ll see you there in twenty.”

“I’m in no hurry. The coffee’s hot and the barista’s hotter.” Uriel hung up.

Bart hooked his phone onto the vent clip Jimmy had gotten him for his birthday and backed out of the garage. Morning traffic had already cleared out. Bart couldn’t help but drive by Missouri’s house on his way out of the neighborhood, even though it was out of his way.

He slowed as he drove by her atrocious blue house. Patience was loading a gigantic suitcase in the back of an old station wagon. She glanced over at him and Bart sped off, his heart racing at being caught.

He pulled up into the parking lot of the Dunkin’ Donuts twenty minutes later, glancing at the yellow crime scene tape in one corner of the deserted lot. Inside, Uriel was leaning over the counter, chatting up a young girl with short brown hair behind the counter. Uriel turned at the girl’s relieved glance at the door, then he smiled.

“Next time you feel like sleeping in, brother, just let me know so I can cover for you better, yeah?” Uriel reached out, grasping his hand. “Coffee?”

Bart held up his water bottle. “I’m good.”

Uriel shrugged and poured himself a refill. “Where do you wanna canvas?”

“I was thinking the laundromat first, then the grocery store. Witnesses say they saw the perp head that way.”

Uriel shook his head. “Vic just wanted a cup of coffee, and the bastard killed her for cutting him off at the corner.”

“The world is a shocking and terrible place,” Bart replied sardonically. “I got the laundromat. Meet you at the grocery in twenty?”

“Sure thing.”

Bart was glad to be rid of Uriel’s company. He liked the guy, but working with him was tiring. He
took a sip of his vodka, and stepped inside the laundromat, where he was greeted with the pungent smell of detergent and mold singular to cheap laundromats. He could feel his lungs tickle in agitation with each inhale of the noxious moldy air.

Behind the front counter was an obese man with sparse goatee was reading a battered paperback and popping gum. Bart held his breath and reached for the badge tucked in his jacket pocket.

****

Six hours later, after getting his ass chewed by Zachariah for not calling in, Bart’s shift finally ended. He dropped off the APB for their road rage suspect and made his way to the parking garage.

He had emptied his water bottle before lunch, and was dying for a drink, but Bart grabbed a bag of tacos on his way home instead. Missouri’s house stood empty, and he wanted to keep a clear head. The tacos were extra greasy, which helped with the throbbing headache behind his left eye. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to force the headache to go away.

Bart parked in his usual spot, the driveway of a foreclosed upon bungalow just down the street from Missouri’s house.

The streetlights had just started to come on one by one down the road, spilling harsh orange light over the cracked blacktop. There wasn’t a lot of traffic on this street, but Bart waited for one more hour just to be sure he wasn’t seen.

It was dark enough that no one noticed when he cut through the backyard of the house behind Missouri’s. He pulled a pair of forensic gloves from his back pocket as he approached the back patio. The ground was damp from the rain they’d gotten earlier in the day, and Bart was careful to step through the thickest grass so as not to leave muddy footprints.

The wooden deck was nearly rotted through in some places, and Bart shook his head. It should have been redone years ago, but Missouri obviously didn’t care enough about her home to take proper care of it.

What Jimmy saw in this bitch, Bart didn’t understand. He reached down and picked up a frankly atrocious statue of two frogs from the bench they were sitting on. There was a cavity in the bottom of one of the frogs and he fished around for the key he’d seen Patience replace one night two weeks before. The key was rusted, but it still worked. He put the key in his pocket and slowly opened the door.

The kitchen was small and outdated, but at least it was clean. There was a tray of mail on the kitchen table. He picked the small pile up, rifling through unopened credit offers and grocery store coupons. What looked like an AARP renewal for a Clarence Moseley with ‘Return to sender: deceased’ written carefully across the top. He put the mail back and made his way through the butler’s pantry into the dining room.

Built-in china hutches flanked a fireplace in desperate need of a new coat of paint. He pulled open the drawers to find several sets of brightly colored napkins, neatly pressed and folded. What appeared to be wedding china sat in the glass cabinets, carefully polished. He opened the cabinet drawers beneath, only to find more serving dishes.

Frustrated, he moved on, finding an office tucked away behind the living room. In it, he found a shelf of family photos. Missouri stood next to a tall man with dark hair and blue eyes. He assumed it was her late husband. It was a candid, clear to Bart that neither of them knew they were being photographed. Missouri was looking up at Clarence, smirking at him. He was sticking his tongue out
at her, a gaudy hat for New Year’s Eve 2000 sitting crookedly on his head.

He studied the man in the picture for a long moment before turning toward the oak desk sitting by the window.

A file drawer was built into it, and Bart pulled it, sighing when it didn’t give way. He pulled the middle drawer open, and sure enough there was the key. Missouri really didn’t have any sense of personal security at all.

Inside the file drawer, Bart found a marriage certificate, a clipped obituary for Clarence Moseley, an old driver’s license, along with tax information, insurance papers detailing the frankly absurd cost of the cancer treatments that had ultimately failed for Clarence. There was a copy of a birth certificate, but it wasn’t an original. He shut the drawer, and sat back in the cheap office chair, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

He wasn’t sure what he expected really, but he was sure that Missouri knew where his husband went. His gaze fell upon a stack of letters in a basket on the edge of the desk. He rifled through cheap greeting cards from various friends and family celebrating Missouri’s birthday. There was a long winded letter from someone named Dede which he threw aside in disgust after the third mention of Missouri’s Aura being “tinted orange with fear.”

He took a deep breath, and plowed through the pile. His hand stilled over a bent postcard at the bottom of the pile. He picked it up, his heart rate spiking. There was something familiar about the shape of those words.

The postcard had no return address, only the initials CM written in the from field. The image on the back depicted what appeared to be a cross between a motorcycle club and a beachside fish shack. The card said “Greetings from the Roadhouse!” with a view of water at sunrise behind the ramshackle restaurant. This was it, his breath coming in short bursts.

He turned the card back over to read the words he already knew his husband had written.

Missouri-

I know this is long overdue, but I promised to let you know when I’ve ended up somewhere safe. I found the paperwork you gave me. Words can’t describe the gratitude I feel. I want you to know it wasn’t wasted. I have a job and a home. I met someone wonderful. I’m happy. I’m safe. Thank you.

Your friend- J.

Anger, white hot and bitter, welled up from the pit of his stomach, and for a moment Bart thought he was going to vomit.

He met someone. He met someone. He’s happy. Without me.

Jimmy cheated on him. Jimmy broke their vows in every way. He never loved Bart. He never honored him or cherished him. And now this betrayal?

The postcard crumpled into a ball in his fist and he resisted the urge to upend the entire desk. Instead he smoothed the postcard in his hands back out, searching for more clues. The Roadhouse wasn’t much of a clue. There could be a thousand such restaurants up and down the entire eastern seaboard.

Then his eye caught on the postmark. There stamped in red ink, was a smudged town name. It started with an S, but he couldn’t make out the rest of the letters. One thing was clear however, the NC curved up the bottom of the circle on the stamp.
S-something, North Carolina. Idly, he wondered how many seaside towns started with S in North Carolina. _Needle, meet haystack_, he thought. _But at least I’m looking in the right haystack this time._

He stared down at the crumpled picture of the Roadhouse; its faded wood deck was a mockery of how close he had gotten to finding Jimmy and yet how far away he still was. All the information he needed to figure out where Jimmy was here. He knew it. But something eluded him.

He turned the postcard back over, smoothing it over his knee. He studied the words, wishing that the thunderous headache in his temples would abate to allow him to focus.

Absently, his thumb stroked the indentation left behind by the hard press of pen against the card stock paper. Jimmy’s handwriting was blunt, distinct, and so familiar that it made him ache for his husband. He sat there for a long time, his thoughts a jumble. He wished he had thought to bring a drink with him.

Outside, a car drove by, its headlights illuminating the room in eerie yellow light. Bart’s eyes fell on the photocopied birth certificate and suddenly it all clicked.

_Paperwork_. Missouri had given Jimmy paperwork. Bart glanced back up at the photo on the wall of Missouri and her husband, Clarence. If you squinted, he looked an awful lot like the photo Crowley had given him of Jimmy at the bus station.

He sat up, thumbing back through the file cabinet to a folder labeled “Clarence.” He meticulously went through every piece of paper, every bill, every credit card offer. There wasn’t an original birth certificate anywhere to be found.

Scrawled on top of a life insurance notice was a social security number labeled “Clarence,” along with a hastily written phone number and other identifying information, as if someone had been on hold with the company and needed the information at hand.

Bart scrawled down Clarence’s social, and carefully folded the birth certificate. He cleaned up his mess, ensuring that the room was how he left it. After a moment’s hesitation, he took the postcard, slipping it in his pocket.

It was easier to sneak out of the house than it was to sneak in. He locked the door behind him, putting the key exactly where he found it beneath those hideous sitting frogs. No one noticed him walk back to his car, his heart racing with anticipation. He pulled his phone out of the glovebox and scrolled through his contacts until he came across Crowley’s name.

“What?” the man answered crossly on the fourth ring. Bart glanced at the clock, realizing with a shock that it was nearly two in the morning. How long had he sat inside Missouri’s house?

“Sorry to call so late.”

“It’s alright darling. I always have time for you. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to run a check for me. Do you still have all that spook software on your PC?”

“Give me a mo, dearest,” Bart heard Crowley say, along with the shuffling sounds associated with what Bart assumed was Crowley getting out of bed. “Alright,” he said with a sigh. “Who are we looking for?”

Bart lifted up the birth certificate. “Clarence J. Moseley,. Most likely issued for North Carolina.” Bart heard the clicking of keys in the background.
“You’re in luck,” Crowley said, and the breath Bart hadn’t realized he was holding released in a huff. “A one Clarence James Moseley, date of birth 12-5-74 registered for a driver’s license two weeks ago in Southport, North Carolina.”

Bart wrote the address down, repeating it carefully back to Crowley with thanks. He hung up the phone, clutching it in his trembling hands.

He found him. He finally found him. He typed out the address into the navigation system of his phone and clipped it to the dashboard.

Bart put the car in reverse, pulling out of the parking spot. He made a short stop at the house, sloppily packing a bag with a few mismatched changes of clothes, carefully adding his non service weapon and enough ammunition to arm a battalion, duct tape, and his extra set of handcuffs.

He backed out of his garage, flipping on his wipers as the rain began to fall.

*I found you Jimmy. I’m coming.*
“Running isn’t the answer Cas.”

“How do you know that? You can’t guarantee that. No one can.”

Ellie was silent. “They don’t deserve to be abandoned by you.”

“They don’t deserve to be hurt because of me either!”

Chapter Notes

Take heed of the dates in these next few chapters. Things will be moving fast from here on out and the timelines are starting to converge... dun dun dun. This is about 1 week before the events of Chapter 30.

We’re coming to the home stretch now, only a few chapters left!

Chapter 31: It’s Alright, Take It Out On Me

Chapter track: Done Runnin’ by Chaley Rose

August 23, 2014

Southport, North Carolina

Castiel ran into Ellie on his way to the store. His paycheck had included an unexpected bonus from Ellen, and for the first time, Cas felt flush enough to splurge.

The wicker loveseat he’d gotten from Chuck along with his leather chairs was definitely the worse for wear. Earlier that week when Cas watched the kids while Dean was at work, one of the supports had given way when Ben and Emma were playing ‘The Floor is Lava.’ He’d been afraid to sit on it ever since.

He knew that there were some pretty good antique stores downtown, and there were some gift shops he had been wanting to try out. Emma’s birthday was coming up in October, and he wanted to get her something special. A small fissure of fear had gone through him at the thought that he felt safe enough to make plans for the future. He was headed to Dean’s house to borrow the Jeep, just in case he found something he liked.

He had gotten to the edge of the plantation when he bumped into Ellie.

“Well hello there neighbor,” she said. “Long time, no see.”

Cas said, pulling her into a hug. “How’ve you been?”
“Good. I’m sorry I cancelled lunch. Something came up that couldn’t be avoided.”

Cas waved her off. “It’s alright, Ellie.” He glanced at his watch. “We could eat now,” he suggested. “It’s only one.”

“I am starving,” she replied. “What are you up to today?”

“Well, my couch has reached the end of its life, and I was hoping to be able to find a replacement for it today.”

“Oh, I love furniture shopping!”

“Good, because I need a second opinion, and I trust you. But I’ve got to stop by Dean’s place first to pick up the Jeep.”

“No problem. It’d be nice to drive for once.”

Cas smiled. “You’re not wrong.”

They walked down the wooded lane, catching up. Ellie talked about the cottage, how her renovations were coming along. Cas showed off his new driver’s license, which he’d gotten earlier that week. He still felt strange, seeing his face on an identification with a different name than his own, and yet feeling like it was more his name than any other.

It was easy between them, as it always was. They made it to Dean’s store in record time. Cas went inside to get the keys from Dean, but Ellie waved him on, making her way through examining the herbs growing in the garden next to the store. “You go on, I’m fine here.”

The store was nearly empty save for two teenage boys paying for gas and beer at the counter. Dean had waved when the bell overhead rang, and Cas waved back. He headed to the back office, where he knew Dean kept the Jeeps keys. He listened as Dean finished up with the customers and timed it just right, leaning against the edge of the desk just as Dean opened the door and stepped through.

Dean didn’t waste even a moment, he stepped forward, pulling Cas to him and kissing him fiercely. Cas pulled away, brushing his fingers over the circles under Dean’s eyes. “Hello to you too,” he whispered. “How’s your day going?”

“Well, Charlie’s on vacation, Benny’s kids have pink eye, and Bobby is up in Wilmington for a doctor’s appointment. So it’s just me until we close tonight, and I’ve already been here since six. To top it all off, the kids’ sitter can only stay until five.”

“Well that isn’t very good,” Cas replied.

Dean brushed a hand through his hair. “Understatement.”

“Well how about this, I am going out with a friend right now, but I’ll be done with my shopping well before five. I’ll take the kids to my place for supper.”

The relief on Dean’s face when he heard Cas say this was palpable. He let out a deep breath. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” he said.

Cas smiled and kissed Dean gently. “I think you have that backwards.” Behind them, in the main room of the store, the bell to the entrance rang out. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He left, pulling the keys off the hook by the door with a wink. “Drive safe!” Dean said to Cas’
Ellie was sitting on one of the picnic tables, staring out at the water when Castiel approached. She turned her head and smiled when she heard him step onto the gravel. “You ready to go?” she asked.

Cas held up the keys. “Sorry that took so long. Dean’s had a bad day.”

Concern flashed across her face, and then was gone before Cas knew how to process it. “Is everything okay?”

“A few people called out, so he’s short handed and the sitter is only available until five. I told him I would watch the kids tonight.”

The crease between Ellie’s eyes smoothed out. “Oh,” she said. “So we gotta get shopping if we wanna be done in time for you to pick them up.”

“There’s a really good taco truck downtown by the furniture stores, wanna eat on the go?”

“Tacos are my absolute favorite food.”

Castiel smiled. They got into the Jeep and he pulled out of its parking space. Ellie was quiet on the short trip downtown.

Her hair was down today, curls waving down her back. She stared out the window as he turned into downtown Southport. By the pier, several food trucks were parked in a colorful row. Cas paid the meter. “Order a couple tacos for me would ya?” Ellie asked and Cas nodded. “I’ll find a table.”

Like the front of Dean’s store, there were several picnic tables laid out. He watched her take a seat in the shade and got in line for the taco truck. He ordered fish tacos and water for the both of them.

By the time he’d received his food, the smell of the tacos had his mouth watering. He took a drink, and grabbed a couple of napkins before making his way over to the empty table. They ate quickly, both enjoying their tacos. He was stuffed full by the time he pushed his paper plate away from him. “These make me very happy,” he sighed, taking a drink of water.

“So what are we looking for?” she asked, balling the napkin up and tossing it onto her empty plate.

“A couch. And a new mattress if I can find one cheap enough.”

“There’s a nice consignment store one block over,” Ellie said. “Some of the stuff can be pricey, but every now and then you can find a gem.”

They threw away their trash and walked one block down the street, taking a corner. Next to a beautiful bookstore was a secondhand furniture store that looked promising. He walked inside, and took a deep breath. There was nothing like the musty scent of an antique store, he thought as he pulled the door shut behind Ellie.

The store was a hodge-podge of mismatched furniture, old books, cups and glasses and junk everywhere. It was the kind of place Bart hated: full of other people’s used stuff, filthy and disorganized.

It was Cas’ happy place.

“Any particular style you’re looking for?” Ellie asked him as she picked up a 1957 copy of Reader’s
“Something that will fit along the wall that separates my bedroom and the living room, so it can’t be too big.”

“A loveseat maybe?” Ellie asked, point out a truly hideous plaid loveseat from the 70s. “We could get a slip cover for it,” she suggested, taking a seat. “It’s actually pretty comfortable.”

Cas flipped the price tag over. He shrugged. It was only 30 bucks. “Maybe.” He plopped down next to her, then grimaced. He stood back up, gently rubbing his backside “There’s a spring out on this side.”

Ellie laughed. “Guess that’s why its so cheap.”

“If I were looking to hurt any guests who come over, this would be perfect, but I’m kind of hoping for a sofa-bed.”

They moved on. In the back there was a Victorian fainting that had Ellie in fits, but no other sofas. Cas did find, however a nice set of brand new sheets near the front of the antique store, and a beautiful quilt, which he’d bought.

They walked to the consignment store next door, which had a nice mission style two seater sofa that had a hidden mattress for a steal. It matched the leather chairs he’d gotten from Chuck perfectly, and best of all: it fit in the Jeep.

They took it as a sign and bought it. Cas paid while Ellie set put the Jeep’s seats down to load the sofa. He and a surly man from behind the counter loaded the sofa, leaving the back glass window open.

It took a little bit of finagling, but he and Ellie were able to move the old sofa out of the cottage, and replace it with the new one. Cas put the old sofa in the Jeep, since Dean thought he could fix it, and asked if he could buy it off of Cas to give to his friend Krissy. Cas had steadfastly refused to take money for it.

He and Ellie made up the sofa bed with the sheets he’d found at the antique store and the quilt that was currently on his bed, then they headed back out. Southport had an America’s Mattress, and they were running a pre Labor Day sale all weekend long.

He wasn’t picky with his mattress, like Dean who needed a mattress that “remembered him.” He wanted something comfortable and inexpensive, and after lying on several mattresses, Cas found one. He also bought new pillows for his bedroom and for the sofa bed.

He needed help getting it tied up onto the top of the Jeep, but in no time they were on their way back. The box spring on his old bed set was fine, so Cas just replaced the mattress, remaking the bed with his new quilt. He tied the old mattress to the top of the Jeep.

They sat down on the new sofa together, each of them opening a bottled water. “Thank you for your help today,” Cas said. Ellie waved her hand.

“It got me out of whitewashing the walls. And I will do anything to get out of whitewashing.”

Cas smiled, glancing around his cottage. He had hated whitewashing the walls. It had taken two backbreaking days to complete, and he empathized completely.

“So,” Ellie said, after finishing of her bottle of water. “How’d your week with Dean go?” she asked
with a sly smile.

Cas felt himself flush slightly. “It was… wonderful.”

Ellie smiled widely. “Oh good,” she said. “I hoped it had gone well.” She glanced at Cas, suddenly reaching over and placing a hand on top of his. “Why do I get the sense that something’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong, exactly.” Cas hedged. “I just… I don’t feel like I can completely be myself with him until I am completely honest with him.”

“What do you mean? I thought he knew about your husband?”

“He knows… almost everything,” he said.

“Almost?”

Cas took a deep breath. “My husband is a detective. He has so many resources to find me.” he paused. “I know he’s going to.”

“But just because he’ll never stop doesn’t mean he will find you.”

“He will find me. I can’t put those kids in danger. I can’t put Dean in danger. I won’t.”

“Running isn’t the answer Cas.”

“How do you know that? You can’t guarantee that. No one can.”

Ellie was silent. “They don’t deserve to be abandoned by you.”

“They don’t deserve to be hurt because of me either!”

“Do you really think for a second that Dean would allow anyone to hurt you? To hurt his family? He would die first.”

“Then those kids will be orphans, and I’ll be dead. Because I will die before I go back with Bart, Ellie.”

She pursed her lips. “You should tell Dean about Bart. You should warn him what could happen.”

“I know I should, but I don’t know how.”

Ellie squeezed his hand. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” She glanced at her watch. “When do you have to pick up the kids?”

“In about an hour.”

“I should get going, so you have time to take the mattress to Goodwill.” She leaned down, kissing him gently on the cheek, her lips cool against his skin. “I’m sure everything will work out exactly how its supposed to Cas,” she whispered. “You deserve to be happy. And so do they.”

He pressed his hand to her cool cheek. “Thank you Ellie,” he replied.

She shut the door behind her. Cas sat for a few minutes, watching through the window until Ellie disappeared around the corner of the road. He stood up, straightening the living room, cleaning the dishes he’d left from breakfast that morning.
He fixed the corners of his new quilt, doing anything he could to dispel the nervous energy rushing through his veins. By the time he pulled the hot dogs from his freezer, he only had a few minutes to spare.

He drove carefully, hyperaware of the mattress tied to the roof of the Jeep. He dropped it off at the Habitat for Humanity restore and made his way to Dean’s house. The kids were playing chess on the porch stairs, and a young man Cas had briefly met at MJ’s christening was finishing up a pb&j while quietly offering tips to Emma, who was closest to him.

“Heya Castiel,” he said thickly though a bite of sandwich.

“Hi Kevin,” he replied. “I'm here to relieve you.”

Kevin checked his watch. “Awesome! I have study group tonight.”

Cas knit his brow. “It’s still summer,” he said. “How can you have study group already?”

Kevin smiled. “I’m doing dual enrollment this summer. If I wanna get to the Ivy league level, I gotta put in the work.”

“You’re not wrong.” Castiel replied. He pulled out his wallet, but Kevin held up his hand.

“No need. Dean already paid me,” he said. Kevin ruffled Ben’s curls and whispered the next move in Emma’s ear before hopping onto his bike.

The children barely looked up as Cas took Kevin’s place on the porch swing. Emma was too focused on her next move while Ben smirked across the board at her. Cas studied the board as well and shook his head. Ben had her in two moves.

Emma sighed and demurely knocked her king over. “Good game,” she said.

“I’m kinda surprised you let me win,” Ben replied, shaking her hand.

Emma smiled. “Yeah, well if I don’t let you win every now and again you won’t play with me.”

Cas watched this exchange with an amused smile. Emma looked up at him. “Hey Cas,” she said.

“How are you?” he asked.

“We’re good. Daddy came by earlier and said you were gonna watch us tonight.”

“I am indeed. What do you say we go to my house for a little while?” he said.

Benny glanced up from putting the chess board back into its box and smiled. “Can we go to the beach for a night swim?” he asked excitedly.

“Of course, but you guys have to go get your stuff while I unload this couch for your dad. Make sure you grab your pjs too.”

Emma and Ben ran into the house to pack their overnight bag. He mentally planned their dinner while unloading the wicker sofa. He put it in the carport, covering it with a tarp, just as Ben and Emma emerged with their matching duffle blue duffle bags.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yeah!”
“Alright, I’m going to lock up, you guys get into the car.” Castiel went into the house, locking it up and grabbing a bag of frozen chili from the freezer and a package of hotdog buns. He had cheese, hotdogs and Fritos at home, and chili dogs sounded amazing.

Castiel drove carefully on the way home. Ben and Emma were arguing over whether or not Fritos belonged on a chili dog. Ben was ardently pro-Frito, while Emma was on the fence. She preferred onions. Cas mentally checked his pantry, trying to remember if he’d picked up onions at the grocery store last week. He thought there was one in there.

Ben and Emma barreled into the cottage, excited to see Castiel’s new couch. He showed them how it turned into a sofa before putting the groceries on the small island in his kitchen. He checked the hotdogs, which had thawed while he was gone, and put a pot of water on to boil.

He cooked absently while Ben and Emma played 21 on the sofa bed. It was an easy meal to put together, and he found he really enjoyed having kids in his home, bringing them into his safe place and seeing how safe they felt in his space.

The chili only took a couple minutes to thaw in the small microwave he’d picked up at a Goodwill a month ago. Bart had hated microwaved food, always preferring his meals to be fresh made, and he never ate leftovers.

But Cas had to admit, having a freezer bag of chili on hand made this meal move along a lot faster. He remembered the rainy Sunday he and Dean had spent making a gigantic pot of chili, taco meat, and spaghetti sauce. By the end of the day, Cas didn’t even want to look at a beef based meal for weeks, but all that meal prep came in handy today.

He chopped the onion and put it into a small serving bowl, along with the cheese, chili and Fritos, to make a chili dog buffet. The buns were slightly stale, so he popped them into the microwave for a few seconds while he pulled the hot dogs out and put them on a plate.

“Dinner’s ready,” he called into the living room, pulling down three plates for them.

Emma went first, followed by Ben and Cas.

They all sat down at the formica table and ate their dinner. Cas watched as the sun began to set in the woods behind his house. They played Would You Rather as they ate, their answers getting increasingly sillier as the meal went on. ‘Would you rather be chased in a desert by a horde of desserts or be in a giant dessert outrunning a sand storm?’ ‘Would you rather eat chocolate covered habanero peppers or caviar topped yogurt?’ ‘Would you rather jump off a cliff into the ocean or be stuck in a cave while it slowly filled with water?’

By the time they finished eating, it was decided that while all three of them would rather jump off a cliff, only Ben would be brave enough to try chocolate covered habanero peppers, and Emma preferred outrunning a sandstorm.

After supper, the kids told Cas that they would clean up, and Cas put the dishes away as they washed and dried them. It looked like rain, so instead of a night swim on the beach, they all sat down to play poker, using an extra large bag of M&Ms as betting chips.

“When does school start for you two?” Cas asked, dealing out the cards.

“After Labor Day weekend,” Ben replied, putting some of his winnings in his mouth. “Are you going to the carnival with us next weekend?” he asked.

“You have to come!” Emma said. “I am in the parade!”
“You are?” Cas asked, even though he knew that. He’d been helping Dean make her Daisy costume for a week now. It was Emma’s first year in Girl Scouts, and she was so excited about dressing up as a Daisy for the Labor Day Parade. Her troop leader, a woman named Donna, was a recent transplant from a small town in Minnesota. She was a regular at the Roadhouse, and Castiel knew she worked with Dean’s brother Sam at the station. Emma absolutely adored her. “Of course I’m coming to the parade. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Emma smiled, popping a couple pieces of candy in her mouth. “Good.”

After Ben completely wiped out both Castiel and Emma’s stock of M&Ms, it was well after nine.

They changed into the pajamas Cas tucked them in, then changed into his own pajamas. Dean didn’t get off work for another hour, so Cas pulled a book off of the floating shelves he’d put up a month ago, and turned on the porch light.

It was a cool night, with the hint of rain in the air. Castiel took a seat on the porch swing, wrapping a throw blanket over his shoulders.

The wind was picking up, the small wind chime on his porch singing quietly in the breeze. An hour later, the sound of gravel up the driveway caught his attention. A few minutes later he saw Dean’s car pull up the drive. Castiel set his book aside and met Dean on the stairs leading up to his porch.

Dean looked exhausted, and after a sixteen hour shift, Castiel couldn’t blame him. He pulled Dean into a hug, kissing his forehead “Hello, Dean,” he said.

Dean sighed into the embrace, resting his forehead against Cas’ shoulder. “Hey,” he said.

“How was your day?” Cas asked as they moved to the porch.

“Very long.”

“Double shifts suck,” Cas replied. “Are you hungry?”

“Ellen brought me supper.”

Cas nodded. They sat down on the swing. “Good.”

“What did you and the monsters do tonight?”

“Ben hustled us into playing poker.”

Dean laughed. “I swear, one day that kid’s gonna win a million dollars playing poker. He’s better than I ever was,” he said. “and poker games used to be one of my sole sources of income.”

Cas smiled. “Emma cleaned me out before Ben beat her. You have a couple card sharks on your hands.”

“I’m so proud of them.” Dean cracked his neck and sighed. “Where are they?”

“Sleeping on the couch.”

“Oh yeah? You found something?”

“I found a pretty nice hide a bed at the consignment store.”

“Awesome.”
“You wanna stay here tonight? That way you don’t have to get them up?” Castiel asked. He put his hands over Dean’s shoulders, and squeezed gently. “Plus we can try out my new mattress.”

“Oh thank God you got rid of the death trap.”

Castiel laughed. “I thought you’d appreciate that.”

“Can we go to sleep like right now?” he asked. “And not move for eight hours?”

“The kids are going to be one wall over.”

“Okay six hours then?”

Cas turned Dean to face. “We will most likely get five.”

“Deal.” They kissed, sealing the deal. Dean stopped by the couch, kissing both Ben and Emma on the head and pulling the blanket up over their shoulders. The kids were sleeping with their hands clasped and he smiled gently. Cas had remembered to bring Emma’s stuffed animal and Ben’s security blanket.

They held hands as they walked into the bedroom. Cas flicked off the main room’s lights and they went into the bedroom. Cas pulled pair of pajama bottoms out of the bottom dresser drawer and threw them over to Dean along with one of Dean’s t-shirts he’d somehow ended up with. “I was looking for this,” Dean said and Cas smiled.

“It’s soft,” Cas replied. “I was always a sucker for soft things.” He reached out, brushing his fingers across the smooth skin of Dean’s stomach, laughing when Dean jerked away in surprise.

They tiptoed into the bathroom where both of them brushed their teeth.

Dean put his phone on the charger in the kitchen and they went to bed. They lay down together, and Dean sighed into the mattress. “This is a wonderful mattress.”

“It isn’t as good as yours,” Cas admitted, as he stretched out, “but its a damn sight better than the one I had.”

“You can say that again.”

“It’s a damn sight better than the one I had.” Cas deadpanned and Dean laughed.

Dean sighed and reached over, resting his head on Cas’ chest. “I missed you today,” he said.

“I missed you too.”

Dean snuggled up closer, tracing the lines on the collar of Cas’ t-shirt. “I wanna come home to you every night,” he pressed a kiss to the hollow at the base of Cas’ neck. “I wanna wake up to you every morning.” He smoothed his hand over Castiel’s scruffy chin. “I want you with me all the time.”

Dean didn’t notice the way Cas had stiffened beneath his touch. His heart began to race, and abruptly, Cas pulled away from Dean’s embrace. Dean looked up at Cas, who had sat back as far as he could on the bed.

“What’s wrong?” Dean asked.

“What do you mean ‘all the time?’”
“Well,” Dean sat up and ran hand through his hair. “This isn’t exactly how I wanted to ask you this, but I was kind of hoping you would be open to the idea of moving in with me.”

Castiel nodded. “To be there for you all the time.” Dean’s brow furrowed. It wasn’t the reaction he was hoping for obviously, and that small ugly part of Castiel, that always seemed to be able to voice those doubts he tried so hard to push away, felt vindicated. “To be home, waiting for you when you get back from a long day at work. To be your kept boy?”

“What? No. That isn’t what I meant at all.”

“Sure it isn’t,” Cas replied snidely.

“Cas, I just meant… that I love you. And I want to spend all my time with you.”

“Yeah, well what if I don’t want to move in with you? What if this is moving too fast for me?”

“I don’t know I just—Cas,” Dean shook his head.

“I want you to answer me, Dean,” Cas said, aware that his voice was creeping up in volume. He didn’t care. “What if I don’t want to do that?”

“Cas, sweetheart,” Dean said, and his voice sounded more tired than ever. “I want you. I want you to be happy.”

“So if I told you that I want to stay here, that I want to keep taking this slow, and not just hop into your home, your bed without really getting to know you, what would you say?”

“I’d say I wish that you felt safe enough to want to stay with me.”

“Why can’t you just be happy with the way things are? Why do you have to push so hard for me to be the person you want me to be rather than the person that I am?”

“I love the person you are,” Dean replied, his voice small.

“But it’s conditional!”

“It’s not!” Dean replied, his voice creeping up in volume as he glanced at the bedroom door.

“But it is!” Castiel insisted. “You have this idea of what you want in life and you’re trying to make me fit into it!”

“I don’t,” Dean protested. “I simply asked you a question.”

“But you wanted a specific answer! You wanted the right answer, and if you didn’t get it, you were going to try to convince me otherwise. That I should do what you want! That I should do everything you want!”

For the first time ever, Dean narrowed his eyes at. “Don’t do this,” he said.


Dean recoiled as if Castiel had punched him. He sat back, running his fingers down his mouth. Dean took a deep breath before he spoke. “I’ve had a really long day, and I’m sorry if I offended you.”

Dean lay back down, turning to face the opposite direction. “I love you, goodnight,” he said.

Cas, still angry, was taken aback at Dean’s abrupt departure from their conversation. He wasn’t done
fighting yet, but the space between them now felt like a gulf.

Almost immediately, the fight went out of him. Cas laid down, mirroring Dean’s posture. He didn’t even know why he reacted the way he had, and guilt welled up in the pit of his stomach, sitting heavy like a stone. He lay awake for a long time, trying to figure out what had made him say that.

He wanted to close the divide between them, but anger still coursed through his veins. It wasn’t directed at Dan anymore, but rather toward himself. Castiel knew Dean would never hit him. Never. So what made him say that? What did he expect Dean to say back? What had he expected him to do?

He turned onto his back, staring up at his ceiling. The storm that had been brewing all day had finally started. He listened carefully as raindrops began to fall. Next to him, Dean lay stiff as a board, obviously awake.

Carefully, afraid to touch Dean, Cas turned onto his side, facing the other man’s back. He reached out, placing a tentative hand on the nape of Dean’s neck. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I was wrong to say that.”

Dean stiffened at the touch and Cas immediately pulled his hand back. “I appreciate your apology,” he finally said.

Cas listened as Dean slowly fell asleep, his body gradually relaxing into the mattress.

It took him a long time to fall asleep.

****

The following morning, Castiel woke up to the sound of Dean singing. He smiled for half a second before he remembered the fight he and Dean had the previous night.

Cas got out of bed slowly, the long, sleepless night catching up to him. He found Dean and Emma in the bathroom, Dean braiding Emma’s hair. He was singing a Beatles song, careful not to pull too hard.

Cas leaned against the door frame of the bathroom unsure whether or not to smile. Dean glanced up at him then pointedly looked back in the mirror. Cas nodded once, and turned to face the living room. Ben was still sound asleep on the hide-a-bed, so Castiel walked into the kitchen.

Dean had made coffee. Castiel pulled a mug out of the cabinet and poured himself a cup. He opened the ancient fridge, only to be greeted by a puff of warm air and food that had gone bad. Castiel sighed in frustration, and began pulling out the few refrigerated items he kept in the cottage for this very reason.

Every other week this thing was crapping out on him. “God damn piece of shit,” he muttered as he pulled the milk out and set it on the small island separating the kitchen from the living room. He only had two eggs left out of the carton and though the tub of margarine had gone soft, it still smelled fine. He poured the milk down the drain and tossed out the eggs. The mustard was fine, and he put it back in the fridge.

Cas added sugar to his mug and leaned against the island. For one brief, hot moment, Castiel hated his cottage. He hated that it had no AC, that the fridge was constantly on the fritz, that every other day something else was wrong.

Castiel wanted to live somewhere safe, and dry, somewhere that didn’t constantly waste his hard
The image of Dean’s clean kitchen came to mind, and Cas briefly flashed back to the fight from the night before. Castiel loved his freedom. He loved living on his own. But what had scared him so much about what Dean had proposed last night was how much Cas wanted it.

He shook his head, trying to drown out the sound of Dean’s gentle singing in the bathroom.

Cas finished off his coffee and rinsed out the mug in the sink. He pulled open the pantry to find a box of pancake mix.

He had just gone to the farmer’s market, so he had plenty of fruit sitting in a bowl on the table. Cas set to work making breakfast. Dean and Emma finally emerged from the bathroom. Emma took a seat on one of the armchairs pulling open the Shel Silverstein book she’d brought with her. Dean gently work Ben up, who made a beeline to the bathroom without so much as a good morning.

Dean leaned over the back of the armchair. “Emmabear?” he asked and she looked up at him.

“Yeah, Daddy?” she asked, just as Ben emerged, dressed and sleepy, from the bathroom.

“Can you and your brother go outside for a minute? Castiel and I need to have a conversation.”

Castiel felt his stomach drop as Emma and Ben nodded. “Come on, sissy,” Ben said. “I’ll read the book to you.”

“You have to use the funny voices,” Emma’s response faded out as the cottage door shut behind them.

Castiel set the butcher knife he was using to cut the watermelon on the table and looked up at Dean, who was leaning with his arms crossed against the back of Castiel’s favorite leather armchair.

“Good morning,” Cas said, his voice small.

“Morning,” Dean uncrossed his arms. He approached the table and took the knife, expertly cutting the watermelon off its rind.

Cas picked up the whisk and began to stir the pancake mix.

Neither of them spoke. Cas could feel Dean’s disappointment, palpable as he cubed the watermelon with Cas’ dull knife.

He started two pancakes in his cast iron stove. His back was turned from Dean, almost too ashamed to face him.

He flipped the first batch of pancakes and took a deep breath. “My fridge is out again,” he said, and instantly wanted to take the words back. That isn’t what they needed to be talking about, but he had to break the silence somehow.

There was a pause, then “How many times has it broken down now?” Dean asked as he crossed over to the apron sink to rinse the knife and cutting board.

“I’ve lost count,” Cas replied. He put the finished pancakes on the platter next to the stove and started two more. “I hate this cottage,” he said, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dean pause in putting the cutting board back on its hook. “I hate that it is always a thousand degrees in here. I hate that the fridge shits the bed every other week and the roof leaks. I hate that no matter what
candles I light, it smells musty.” He paused for breath and Dean began to speak.

“Cas—” he said.

“—Dean, please let me get this out,” Castiel requested.

Dean nodded, pursing his lips. “Okay.”

“I hate this cottage,” Cas repeated. “But it’s mine. It belongs to me and as much as I hate it, as much as I—,” Cas huffed out a breath, but began to speak again. “As much as I would like to wake up every morning next to you, and go to bed every night with you. As much as I want those things, I will not lead him to you. I won’t do it.”

“Cas—c’mon.”

“No, Dean. I won’t do it,” Cas said vehemently. He flipped the last two pancakes and set the skillet aside, slamming it rather harder than he meant. “He will find me. And he will kill me this time.”

“I won’t let him do that.”

“Whether or not you will let it happen doesn’t matter Dean. All that’s going to do is get you killed right along with me.”

“I think you may have forgotten one very important thing, Cas,” Dean said. He moved forward “There is nothing he can do to me that hasn’t already been done. I can and will fight him if it means you are safe and happy where you belong,” He looked around. “And not in this shitty cottage.”

Cas shook his head. “You don’t know him Dean. And I pray to God you never will.”

Dean hesitated. “Have you ever thought about involving the police?” he asked.

Castiel scoffed. “I did that once. Didn’t do any good.”

“You know… we could go talk to my brother.”

“No cops, Dean. That will only lead to questions like ‘why I am breaking the law by using someone else’s identity?’”

“Sam can be discreet.”

“No.”

Dean pressed his hands to Cas’ cheeks, his thumbs gently swiping over Cas’ lips. He kissed him gently. “Okay, so how about we compromise?”

Cas almost smiled. “How?”

“Stay with us on the weekends? Maybe on your nights off?” Cas began to shake his head, but Dean leaned closer. “On the nights you work, stay here. Leave it in your name, pay your bills. Do whatever you need to feel like you still have your safe haven…” Dean kissed him once more. “But come home to me.”

Cas felt tears well up in his eyes and he sniffed harshly. “I will only be a burden to you,” he said.

“You will never be a burden to me, Cas.” Dean scoffed like the idea was ridiculous. “You are my saving grace.”
Cas rolled his eyes. “Right,” he replied.

“You are,” he wiped the tears from Cas’ eyes. “I need you, more than you know.”

“You don’t need me,” Castiel said.

“Before you, Cas, I was just keeping my head down, trying to get through every day.” Dean sighed. “I was afraid of living the rest of my life alone. I need you, Cas. And I love you.”

Cas pursed his lips together. “I love you too.”

“Come home with me,” Dean whispered. “You’re safe with me.”

It clicked into place then, and Castiel knew he would never refuse Dean anything he wanted. And as much as that thought had the ability to terrify him, Castiel wasn’t afraid. “Let’s go home,” he finally said.
Chapter Summary

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry” Dean read, his voice suddenly hoarse. “Person of interest in first degree murder investigation.”

He cleared his throat, then cleared it again. Dean shook his head. “It can’t be him.” He glanced over the sheet again, his eyes catching on the physical description of a 5 inch scar on his forearm and then— his breath caught in his throat. Bartholomew Michaelson-Husband.

Chapter Notes

Chapter track: Love Someone, by Brett Eldredge
This chapter fought me tooth and nail. It is not beta'ed for this reason. Please excuse any mistakes.

August 29, 2014

Southport, NC

It was the start of a rare three day weekend for Castiel; plus, Benny took Dean’s shift at the store as a thank you for the double Dean had taken last week, which gave them an unexpected extra day for their weekend plans.

Castiel slept in, reveling in the peculiar sensation of being able to do so without feeling guilty or selfish. He limped out of bed, still footsore from the long walk home the night before. He had definitely grown spoiled, getting rides from Dean or taking his bike to work more often than not, and he hadn’t had time to work out all week.

His bike was still at the Roadhouse, the front tire flat. Castiel had worked a double shift on one of the busiest nights of the year. Even for all his customers, tips weren’t great, and by the time he got home at midnight the night before, he was ready to collapse into his bed and not move for a solid ten hours.

He took a long shower, taking the time to shave properly for the first time in nearly a week. Afterward, Cas threw on an old t-shirt and a pair of swim trunks, and set about packing up a box. In the few months he had been in Southport, Castiel had spread out in his little cottage. Whereas before, he could fit all of his belongings in a single duffle bag, he found he now needed several boxes to pack up just one room.

Most of the furniture was staying. Chuck had offered him fair compensation for the sofa and new mattress. He had waived the rent for September, even though Cas wasn’t technically moving out until after Labor Day, and doubled the deposit as thanks for the hard work Cas had done to spruce up the cottage.
Chuck already had a new tenant lined up to move in after the holiday weekend. Cas had met her briefly when Anna brought her by for a showing. Katie was a hesitant young woman, and she wouldn’t his eyes when they shook hands.

Cas stayed at the cottage all week, packing and getting used to the idea of giving up his solitude for a life with a family he had grown to love like his own. While initially, he had been uneasy with the idea of moving in with the Winchesters, he had grown more and more excited as the week went on, as he packed more of his life in preparation of a new one.

He glanced around the old cottage. It felt lonelier now with all his things packed away, much less like the home it had once been. Castiel realized with a sad smile that this cottage was the first place in nearly a decade he had felt safe, but that didn't necessarily mean that it was a home.

Home was the sound of the children running through the house singing "Let it Go" after inhaling the helium from balloons meant for Emma's birthday party. It was the quiet mornings on the porch listening to the world come alive as Dean's tuneless voice drifted to him from the kitchen. Home was the smell of Reese's covered popcorn, and pancakes. It was the pile of laundry waiting to be washed in the hall, and the truly horrific smell of Emma's soccer cleats after practice.

Looking around, Castiel realized that this was never truly his home. It was merely a placeholder for the home he had found with the Winchesters. He put tape on the box he was finishing up and set it in the living room with the others, cursing as he tripped over a pair of discarded tennis shoes in his path.

He left all the non-perishable food in the pantry, along with the simple set of dishes he had picked up at the Dollar Store, and all of the kitchen utensils. He cleaned out the fridge, but left the freezer fully stocked for the next tenant. Katie had the look of someone who needed the same sort of help he had gotten, if the way she was hiding the bruises on her upper arms was any indication. Castiel carefully pulled half of his emergency fund out of the box it was hiding in and put it underneath the coffee can in the pantry. Just in case.

Castiel put on a pot of coffee, and made several slices of french toast and bacon sandwiches, one of the kids' favorite breakfasts. As soon as he poured his first cup of coffee, emptying the last of the creamer and adding a teaspoon of sugar, Castiel heard the familiar rumble of the Jeep on his driveway. A minute later, he heard the kids jumping out onto the gravel, followed, peculiarly, by the sound of a dog barking.

Curious, Castiel glanced out the front window where he saw an enormous German Shepherd bounding toward the porch, pulling Dean along by a heavy duty leash. Castiel raised his eyebrows, leaning against the porch railing.

"Heel!" Dean yelled, and the dog stopped immediately, sitting down on his haunches and looking up at Dean as if he were exasperated it took Dean so long to give him the correct command. Dean stumbled forward slightly, and looked off into the distance; he took a deep breath, and smiled sheepishly at Castiel.

"Who’s this?" Cas asked, smiling slightly. He stepped forward to allow the dog to sniff the back of his hand.

"This is The Colonel," Dean replied, giving the dog an absentminded scratch behind the ears.

Cas pet the dog's soft mane. “Oh, and how did The Colonel end up in familia Winchester?” he asked. He bent down, giving The Colonel more attention around the unbelievably soft fur around his neck. The Colonel huffed out a sigh, leaning his head into Castiel's gentle touch, his tail wagging in loud thumps against the worn wood of the porch floor.
"Well," Dean replied, "he kinda adopted us."

"Oh?" Cas asked.

"Yeah. Emma wanted to donate her birthday money to the animal shelter for a Girl Scout patch, and there he was. Sammy's unit found him on a wellness check at work. His owner died. I dunno man, he looked so sad I couldn't leave without him."

"I gather," Cas replied. "But-- you aren't much of a dog guy if memory serves," Cas said, recalling the Australian Shepherd named Riot that Sam brought over for a bbq a few weeks back.

"I'm not really, but there's something different about this one." Dean said. He unhooked The Colonel's leash and producing a tennis ball from his pocket and tossing it over to where the kids were waiting. The Colonel bounded after it, barking loudly. He picked up the ball carefully and set it at Ben's feet. Ben picked up the ball and gave it a pretty good toss, and The Colonel ran after it again. "Plus, Emma gave me these big 'ole sad eyes, and the rest was history."

Castiel took Dean's hand and kissed it. "Big sad eyes win over sappy Dad any day," he said. He leaned forward and kissed Dean gently.

Dean smiled into the kiss. "You're not wrong."

"When did you get him?"

"A few days ago," Dean replied. "It's been a steep learning curve, let me tell you." Then Dean's eyes opened wide momentarily in shock. "Oh my god," he said. "I didn't talk it over with you, to see if it it was okay!" he stepped back, running a hand roughly through his hair. "I'm sorry, Cas!"

Castiel held up his hand. "I love dogs," he replied. "And I am happy that The Colonel has joined the family."

Dean exhaled shakily. "I'm sorry, Cas. I've been making all the decisions for so long-- not needing to consult anyone else-- it just slipped my mind."

"Dean," Cas reasoned. "It's your house, your family. If you want a dog, that is your choice to make." But Dean was already shaking his head.

"It's your home now too. We're your family now too. I was thoughtless, and I should have talked with you before I made that decision." Cas waved him off.

"I promise," he said. "It's okay."

Dean's face relaxed and he turned to watch the kids as they played with The Colonel in Castiel's patchy front yard. He glanced at the steaming mug of coffee in Cas' hand longingly. "You got one of those for me?" he asked. Castiel nodded, and led him inside, where the carafe waited. Dean reached up into the cabinet and pulled down a slightly chipped mug. He held it out as Castiel poured, then brought it to his lips.

"Oh, I love you," he said, after taking a long sip. Cas smirked.

"You love the coffee more," he replied.

After a moment, Dean said "At this exact moment, you might be right."

Castiel laughed. "Oh really?" he asked.
"Most of the time you edge out the competition, but I don't think I have had a decent night's sleep since The Colonel came home. He doesn't like the kennel."

"Does he cry?"

"Pretty much all night. And you wouldn't believe the dog hair."

"That comes with the breed, unfortunately."

"It's only been a couple days and he has already worn out my vacuum." Dean paused.

"Granted, that vacuum is probably older than you are, but still. Now I need to get a new one."

"Hey!" Cas said. "I'm not that much older than you."

"Yeah, whatever you say, old man." Dean replied. He set his coffee mug down on the small kitchen table and sidled up behind. He wrapped his arms around Castiel's waist, resting his fingertips on his hips. "Wanna go with me?" he asked, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of Cas' neck.

"Where?" Cas asked, his breath hitching slightly at the touch. They hadn't been overly demonstrative with one another since their fight. He leaned his head further to the side, allowing Dean to kiss the spot behind his ear that always made his knees go weak. "Vacuum shopping?"

"Yeah," Dean replied.

"That sounds like a thrilling date." Castiel leaned back, pressing his ass into Dean's hips. Cas turned his face, meeting Dean's eyes.

Dean's face scrunched up into a mischievous grin. "You've never been vacuum shopping with me." Dean trailed his fingers up Cas' side. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Oh, alright" Cas relented, with a soft smile. "You talked me into it."

"Awesome," Dean finally kissed Castiel gently on the lips.

"But first," Cas said when the kiss broke, "We need to get the rest of my stuff packed up and finish cleaning, so we can go swimming."

“Right,” Dean said. He pulled the leash out of his pocket. “Do you have a mixing bowl or something?” he asked. Cas nodded and pulled a plastic white bowl from beneath the sink. Dean took it, filled it up, and walked outside carefully. Castiel watched as Dean carefully tied The Colonel up on the porch, making sure that the water was close at hand. He ran to the Jeep and pulled a bone from a plastic bag in the back seat. He unwrapped it and gave it to the dog. The Colonel practically launched at the treat, holding it between his paws, pulling the excess meat off the top of the bone with his teeth.

They filled up their plates and sat down at the small table in the kitchen to enjoy their breakfast. Cas had ran out of maple syrup, so they made due with the chocolate sauce he kept for the rainy day he craved ice cream, and powdered sugar. Dean put peanut butter and jelly on his french toast, much to the disgust of Ben and Emma. By the time they finished eating, the sun had risen over the trees, bearing down upon the metal roof of the little cottage and heating up its interior.

Ben and Emma washed the dishes, while Dean and Cas finished up the little bit of packing that remained in Castiel’s bedroom. Then each of them took a room to clean: Emma swept the floor in the living room and dusted. Ben wiped down the kitchen sink and helped his sister sweep the floor.
Castiel deep cleaned the bathroom, while Dean packed up the new quilts Castiel had purchased, and remade the bed with the old comforter Castiel had picked up shortly after moving to Southport.

Castiel also left a set of sheets, towels, and dishrags. He didn’t need them, and Katie might. Once the small cottage was spotless, they all took the last load of boxes out to the Jeeps trunk.

Once the car was packed up, they decided to take a walk to the secret beach on the plantation’s property. Emma and Ben took the leash and lead The Colonel down the plantation’s trail. Ben wanted to see if he could find sand glass after the previous night’s storm, and Emma wanted to make a sand castle with her dad.

Dean and Castiel walked the path slowly as the kids ran on ahead. Dean reached out, clasping Cas’ hand. Cas’ fingers twitched, but he squeezed Dean’s hand. They hadn’t been too terribly demonstrative since their fight.

He glanced through the overhanging live oaks at the weak sunlight filtering through. “I love days like today,” Dean said. “When I don’t know whether or not it’s going to rain and it doesn’t matter either way.”

“Do you know what the rest of the weekend looks like?”

Dean shrugged. “Hot. Tomorrow is supposed to be the hottest day of the year.”

“Great. That’s going to make the carnival interesting.”

“We’re going to have to rethink the fabric for Emma’s costume.”

Cas nodded. “I changed out the cotton t-shirt for a dri-fit one yesterday.”

Dean smiled over at Cas. “What would I do without you?”

They lapsed into silence as the beach came into view.

Dean and Emma started on the sand castle right away, while Ben searched the tiny stretch of sand for sand glass with Cas’ help. The Colonel wanted nothing to do with the water, sitting on the edge of the trail.

Castiel pulled the plastic bowl out of the bag he packed and poured a half gallon of water into it for the Colonel. He then walked along the edge of the beach with Ben, but they weren’t able to find any glass.

“Maybe next time,” Cas said as they turned back to the others. Ben took a tennis ball out of the bag and threw it down the beach, watching as The Colonel chased after it.

By the time the sun began to sink behind the trees again, they were hungry and cranky. It wasn’t a long walk, but when they made it back to Cas’ house, they were all worn out. It was swelteringly hot out, and the gallon of water they had brought with them hadn’t lasted very long.

Cas went inside while Dean packed the kids up in the car. He packed a change of clothes and his toothbrush, then grabbed them all waters from his fridge. Castiel handed them out and jumped into the front seat of the car. Dean reached over before putting the car in drive, brushing his hand down Castiel’s thigh. They had spent most of the day treading carefully around one another, aside from Dean’s flirtatious invitation to go vacuum shopping, they hadn’t been too terribly demonstrative with one another, still a little tender from their fight, but Castiel felt the familiar warmth of anticipation spread through him, settling in the pit of his belly.
Dean they stopped by Walmart for the kids’ new school supplies on their way home. Dean took Emma’s list and Cas took Ben’s and together they divided and conquered, getting in and out of there in under thirty minutes with only one meltdown over whether or not Emma got to get the Elsa lunchbox that cost twice as much as the practical purple one Dean had picked out.

It was one of those busy kind of Sundays that still felt easy. The little family got a lot of things done, while none of them felt overburdened by them. When they got back to Dean’s house, Castiel helped the kids pack their backpacks and Dean made tuna sandwiches for supper.

He served them with carrot sticks and potato chips. But when he put the plates down on the table, Emma wrinkled her nose. “I hate tuna,” she said, pushing her plate away.

“Yeah?” Dean asked. “You loved tuna last week?”

“I hate it this week!” she yelled. She pushed the paper plate onto the floor. A few of the carrot sticks went flying, but the sandwich stayed upright on the plate. Then she stood up and stomped to her bedroom.

Ben, sensing the tension in the room, picked up his sandwich and took an exaggerated bite. “I like tuna, Dad,” he said.

Dean pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “That’s good. Eat up.” He bent down and picked up the mess on the floor before The Colonel could get to it.

Cas sat frozen to his seat. He had never seen Emma get upset like that. Dean stood up, put the plate on the counter and walked down the hall to Emma’s bedroom. He heard them talking quietly as he and Ben ate their dinner.

“Emma’s like that sometimes,” Ben said.

“Oh?”

“She’s like Dad,” was all he said by way of explanation. “It isn’t the tuna she’s mad about.”

Castiel nodded, almost understanding. “It was something else, right?”

“She had her first Daisy meeting this week.”

The realization struck. “Ah,” he said. “And Dean was the only dad there.”

Ben nodded as he took another bite. “One of the moms there looks like Mama, except her eyes are blue.”

Cas reached out, putting his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Ben shrugged. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

Ben bit his lip and put his sandwich down. “Sometimes I get sad about Mama,” he finally said. “But I get to remember her,” he said. “Emmie was just a little baby when Mama died.”

Cas nodded. He could hear Emma speaking louder now. “What do you say we finish eating and then you can beat me at Monopoly?”

Ben smiled. “Sounds good.”
A little while later, Dean and Emma emerged from her bedroom. They saw Cas and Ben setting up the board on the coffee table. Emma grabbed her uneaten plate of food and brought it to the living room with her.

She ate while Dean passed out the money and they all began to play. It had long since gotten dark. During a stint in Jail, rather than pay his way out, Cas stood up to clean kitchen. He listened as Emma, whose eyes were red and swollen when she emerged from her room, laughed when Dean landed on one of her properties, which she had just put two houses on.

Cas rinsed the dishes, put the extra carrots in a ziploc bag and tossed them in the vegetable drawer. By then, it was his turn again. They played Monopoly for another hour. Ben won, of course. Dean cleaned up the Monopoly mess while Cas helped the kids to bed.

Ben abruptly hugged him in front of his bedroom door. Cas shifted Emma, who was laying in his arms, and hugged him back.

“Thanks,” Ben whispered against Castiel’s stomach. Cas patted Ben once on the shoulder with his free hand.

“You’re welcome,” he replied and Ben released him.

He carried Emma to her room, where her bed was already turned down. Castiel tucked her in, and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Cas,” Emma said.

“Yeah, Emma?” he replied.

“D’you love my dad?”

Castiel was taken aback. He had forgotten how inquisitive five year olds could be. “Why, yes I do,” he finally replied. “I love him very much.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

“Well, um,” he said. “I think that that is something that might happen, but not for a very long time,” he finally replied.

“So, would you be my mom?”

Cas coughed. “No. I would not be your mom. I would be Cas. I would never, ever try to replace your mom. No matter what.”

She bit her lip. “Do you love me and Ben?”

“Oh sweetheart,” Cas said, his voice breaking. “I love you both very much.”

Emma’s lip trembled. She reached her hands out, putting them on either side of Cas’ face. “I love you,” she said with a maturity that exceeded her age. She sat up, and pressed a gentle kiss to Castiel’s forehead.

Cas smiled tightly, trying not to let her see him cry. Sometimes she reminded him so much of Claire it broke his heart. He kissed the top of her head and left the room, turning out the light and cracking the door.
Dean was leaning against the wall opposite Emma’s room. His smile was sad. “She missed her mom today,” he said when Cas reached him. He held out his hand and Dean took it, their fingers interlacing effortlessly. “You’re good with her.”

Castiel shrugged. “She reminds me of Claire,” he admitted. “Sometimes so much that it hurts.” A cloud passed over Cas’ face, and Dean reached up and brushed his thumb over Cas’ cheek.

“He’s fine,” he said, pulling Cas into an embrace. “What’s wrong?”

He rested his head against the soft flannel of Dean’s shirt. “I just miss her.”

Dean hesitated, his thumb tracing circles over Castiel’s shoulder blade. “Have you given any thought about trying to find her?”

Cas chuckled sardonically. “Only every day.”

They walked hand in hand down the hall towards Dean’s bedroom. Our bedroom, Castiel corrected himself. That’s going to take some getting used to, he thought.

“What are you thinking about so seriously right now?” Dean asked as they crossed the threshold into the bedroom.

“Nothing,” Cas murmured, and Dean shrugged.

“Okay.”

He walked over to the dresser and pulled out a t-shirt and a clean pair of boxers. He tossed them over to Castiel, as most of his clothes were still packed up in boxes.

Castiel, suddenly feeling shy, hopped into the bathroom. At least he had remembered to keep is toiletries unpacked. He washed his hands and popped open the medicine cabinet, searching for some Excedrin, but he stopped abruptly. Half of the cabinet was empty, all of Deans things pushed carefully to the side.

He pulled two pills out of the bottle and dry swallowed them.

Castiel checked the small linen closet, where he found a woven basket that matched Dean’s, filled with bulk quantities of the shampoo and body soap he preferred. The gesture was small, sure, but it meant volumes. Dean had made space for him. He had not only welcomed hime into his house, but made sure Cas felt like it was his home too.

Castiel spent a few minutes emptying out his leather toiletry bag, then pulled his new soap and shampoo out of the linen closet. He started the shower and undressed. Castiel cracked his neck, trying to relieve the pressure of the tension headache that had threatened to break free all afternoon.

A pair of warm hands met his bare skin and he leaned into the touch. Dean massaged his shoulders, thumbs pressing into the blades. Castiel let out a soft moan at this, and Dean’s hands jerked in surprise, before doubling down and pressing harder.

“You okay, sweetheart?” Dean asked.

“As long as you keep doing that, I will be,” Castiel replied.

“What’s the matter?” Dean leaned down, pressing his lips to the space between Castiel’s shoulders, right above where his thumbs continued their massage.
“Tension headache,” Cas replied. “But it’s going away now.”

“Good.” Dean whispered, trailing his lips to the side of his neck. “I hate to see you in pain.”

“I’m okay, baby,” Castiel replied, turning around and wrapping his arms around Dean’s neck. “I took some medicine, and the hot water will do me good.” He hesitated for just a moment. “Would you like to join me?” he asked.

Dean smiled. “I thought you’d never ask.” He pulled back to allow Cas to remove his shirt.

Castiel brushed the sand off Dean’s shoulders. “How is it, every time you go to the beach, you get covered in sand?”

Dean shrugged. “Sand is a good exfoliant.” Castiel rolled his eyes. He opened the shower door, and stepped inside, and Dean followed him. They brushed the remaining sand off of each other and lathered up with soap, taking turns under the water.

After shampooing one another’s hair, Castiel, suddenly feeling bold, reached out. He trailed his fingers against the silky wet skin of Dean’s stomach, brushing against the base of his cock, half hard between them. Dean shivered underneath his touch, despite the hot water flowing over their bodies.

Castiel wrapped his long fingers around Dean’s cock, flicking his thumb under the sensitive head. Dean gasped and thrust forward, capturing Cas’ lips between his. Cas jacked him slowly, pressing the soft ridge of his thumbnail over the silky smooth veins. Dean was shaking as he reached down cupping Castiel’s balls for a moment, before sinking to his knees. Cas released him, trailing his hands up Dean’s body as he fell before him.

Dean pressed his lips to the head of Cas’ cock. Cas bit back a moan, leaning his head back against the cool tile wall. The water sprayed over his chest and Deans hot mouth enveloped him, and heat began to rise within him, pushing him closer. He bucked his hips close, and Dean pulled back slightly, kissing Cas’ quivering thigh.

He stood, and Castiel pulled Dean to him, crushing their mouths together. “I want you,” he moaned into Dean’s lips.

“You have me,” Dean replied, in what had become a pattern with them.

“I need you,” Cas whispered, pressing his hips into Dean’s. Dean groaned and pressed back.

“I need you more.”

“Debatable.” Cas reached toward the tap, turning the shower off. He slowed down, their previous passion abated somewhat, even if the underlying desire was still there, waiting.

He grabbed the fluffy towel waiting on the hook by the shower door, and slowly dried Dean’s body, spending extra time on Dean’s crotch. Dean, hard and ready, was practically trembling with desire by the time he was completely dry. He took the towel from Castiel, and did the same.

Neither of them were were in a hurry, despite their straining erections. Castiel brushed his teeth. His medicine had finally kicked in, and the kick of caffeine sent a buzz of anticipation through him.

They hadn’t made love since their fight, and Castiel had missed this level of intimacy with Dean. Dean pulled Castiel to him. Castiel pushed Dean back until he was seated on the edge of the bed, and then straddled him. Their cocks brushed together, and Dean inhaled deeply.
“You’re killing me, sweetheart.”

Castiel pressed his lips down Dean’s neck, over his collarbone, on top of his freckle dusted shoulder. “Can we try something new tonight?” he asked, almost hesitantly.

Dean pulled back, his eyes dark with lust, and his skin flushed. “Anything, baby.”

Cas stood up and opened one of the boxes by the dresser. He pulled out a file from the doctor’s visit he had taken earlier that week.

He handed the file over to Dean, who read it quickly and glanced up at Cas, wide eyed. “What is this?” he asked.

“I want to fuck you bare,” Castiel whispered, almost ashamed of the longing in this voice.

Dean pushed his hair back, exhaling. A slow smile spread over his face and he stood up, pulling very similar folder out of the bottom drawer. He handed it over to Cas.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said.

“Great minds think alike, I guess.” Castiel smiled widely, setting the forms aside on the bedside table, and grabbing a bottle of lube while he was at it. He hurried around the edge of the bed, and captured Dean in a fervent kiss.

He pressed him down onto the bed, sliding their cocks together with tempered thrusts, pulling soft moans from Dean. He opened the bottle of lube and coated his hand, then reached down to grasp Dean’s cock. Dean jumped at the suddenly cold touch, but the slippery slide of Castiel’s hand around his cock quickly warmed him back up. He thrust hard into Castiel’s hands, spreading his hips in invitation. Cas sat back, adding more lube to his fingers, and began to prep Dean slowly.

Dean pressed his arm over his mouth to keep from crying out, as they still had kids right down the hall to think about. Cas moved so slowly that eventually Dean hurried him along, grabbing his hand and pushing harder.

“More,” he whispered, hoarsely. “I need more, sweetheart.”

Cas reached out with is other hand, grasping Dean’s cock. “Okay, baby. I got you.”

He jacked him in time with the movement of his fingers, ignoring his own throbbing erection. He pressed two fingers against Dean’s perineum scissoring his balls between them. Dean groaned, overwhelmed by the overload of sensations. Abruptly, Dean pulled back, and Cas’s fingers withdrew with a lewd pop.

Dean turned over, presenting his ass, his cock swaying. “I’m ready,” he gasped. “Please, fuck me before I come.”

Castiel didn’t need to be told twice. He lubed up, gasping slightly at the cold gel against his straining cock. He’d largely ignored his own erection during Dean’s preparation, which was now desperate for attention.

Cas reached out, brushing his thumb over Dean’s tight hole; it gave way easily, ready for his cock.

This was new territory. He still went slow, wanting to savor this moment of trust between himself and Dean. Cas pressed the head of his cock inside Dean’s ass. Without the barrier of the condom, the heat surrounding him was nearly overwhelming, and he had to pause for a moment, biting back his
own groan as he slipped deeper.

Dean gripped the sheets and pressed back, and Cas’ cock twitched inside him.

“Oh god, Dean,” he panted, beginning to thrust. He pressed his hands against Dean’s ass, spreading the cheeks as he watched himself fuck into Dean. “You feel so good.”

Dean offered a low whimper in response, reaching down to stroke his own cock in time with Castiel’s thrusts. “I missed you,” he responded. “I need this.”

“Me too, me too.” Cas draped himself over Dean’s back, pressing them down into the mattress. He pulled out, gently turning Dean until they were facing one another. “I’m sorry I was such a dick about moving in.”

“I know, baby. I’m not mad about it, but please don’t stop.” Dean scooted up the mattress. Cas kissed Dean hard. He grabbed Dean’s hips, pulling him closer. He lined his cock up with Dean’s ass, and pressed hard, Dean’s hole enveloping him in one swift thrust.

Both of them groaned. Dean stared up at Cas as he fucked into him, slow at first but then faster and faster, until both of them were panting, desperate for release. Cas took Dean’s cock in hand, stroking faster and faster, enraptured as he watched Dean’s balls tensed up. Dean came, silently, his mouth open. He clenched around Cas’ cock through wave after wave of his orgasm, and he felt his own release building.

Cas pressed his lips to Dean’s and abandoned caution, letting his body chase the pleasure until the world went white, and he came, releasing deep within Dean. He all but collapsed onto Dean’s chest when his orgasm ended, unwilling to move away from the other man. “I love you,” he whispered against Dean’s chest.

“Love you too,” Dean mumbled beneath him. He traced circles over Castiel’s back. Scrapping his blunt fingernails over the soft skin of his shoulder blades. “I’m glad you got an extra day off.”

“Me too,” Cas said. “Today was fun.”

“Yeah,” Dean replied. “So what’s on the agenda for tomorrow?”

Cas shifted slightly. “Well, we have the parade in the afternoon, and you need to meet up with Sam before the cookout to finalize the fireworks, right?”

“Shit,” Dean groaned. “I forgot about the fireworks.”

“What time did you say you’d meet up with Sammy?”

“Ass o’clock, because my brother gets up stupid early.”

Cas wrinkled his nose. “Ew,” he replied. “Don’t wake me up when you go.”

Dean wagged his eyebrows. “You sure? I have been known to give excellent wake up calls.”

Castiel yawned. “I’m sure,” he said. He reached over, smoothing Dean’s hair down. “Emma and I have some last minute additions to her costume to finish, so how about we all meet up for lunch at the Roadhouse? I need to pick up my paycheck anyway.”

Dean nodded. “Sounds good. Love you.”

“You too,” Cas replied, but Dean was already asleep.
Dean awoke at dawn. He dressed as quietly as he could, careful not to wake Castiel, who was sprawled out on his side of the bed. After getting dressed, Dean made coffee. He grabbed a banana on the way out the door.

A fine mist had settled over the ground that morning, as if the clouds were too lazy to rise just yet. He could relate, yawning as he pulled out of his driveway. It wasn’t far to Sam’s house, but they would be picking up their order of fireworks this morning, and needed both vehicles to transport them out to the pier, where they had set them off every Labor Day since they moved to Southport.

Sam was on the front porch of the Painted Whore, holding MJ in his arms as he gently pushed the swing back and forth. Sam glanced up from his daughter as Dean pulled into the driveway. MJ was staring up at her father, her big blue eyes wide as she took in the dawn around her. Dean smoothed his fingers over the soft skin of her head.

“Hey, peanut,” he said. He smiled down at his niece. “Are you gonna be an early bird like your daddy?”

Sam smiled. “She’s worse than me,” Sam yawned. Ben up since three in the morning. And there was no calming her. Three diaper changes, half a bottle, and a very long car ride along the pier, and she finally passed out around three.” Sam yawned again. “Only to wake up again at six.”

“Ouch. Does she have colic?” Dean asked. He reached out and Sam handed him the tiny baby, still underweight for her age. He held her in the crook of his arm. “Hello, little one.” Dean cooed. He never could resist a new baby. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, rocking her back and forth in his arms. MJ scrunched up her eyes, her mouth opening in a toothless yawn, then she drew her legs up to her chest and wailed. Dean pressed her belly gently, just beneath the sternum and she relaxed slightly as the gas moved.

“Emma was colicky, wasn’t she?” Sam asked.

Dean nodded. “It gets better though.” His brother scrubbed his face with his hands, sighing. He rocked the little girl steadily in his arms. “You want some coffee?” he asked, and Sam looked up at him like Dean had just offered him the holy grail.

“Yes, but not that swill you peddle. Let’s go to the Flying Pig,” he suggested. “I’d literally murder for a latte.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “You and your froo-froo coffee. Give me a good dark roast any day.”

“Yeah, well they have your precious Death Wish coffee there too,” Sam retorted.

“I’m sold.” MJ was sound asleep in his arms, her mouth wide open. He wrapped the receiving blanked she was swaddled in a bit tighter. “Is Jess asleep?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. I’m on baby duty today, lemme grab my shoes and the diaper bag and I’ll meet you in a few.”

Dean sat down on the porch swing, gently swaying MJ in his arms. She stared up at him with her wide blue eyes, her tiny fingers gripping his thumb. Sam returned with a bulging diaper bag and a baby sling.

“So, little brother, what’s on the agenda?” Dean asked, clicking MJ into her carseat while Sam stowed the diaper bag in the other passenger seat. He grabbed a pacifier from one of the backpack’s
pockets and popped it into her mouth before climbing into the driver’s seat.

“Coffee first, then we gotta meet Garth at the pier to finalize the fire order. Oh, and I gotta drop by the station real quick.”

Dean nodded, he pulled out carefully, conscious of the gigantic pot hole right in front of the Painted Whore’s driveway. It didn’t matter, he still hit it.

“You’ve got to call someone about that thing.” he said, wincing as the front tires hit the hole.

“I have. The city won’t be able to get to it until January.”

Dean shook his head. “Let me guess, Maggie Stark and her douchebag husband would rather appropriate city funds for that stupid downtown boutique thing?”

“Yep.”

“How many times has that been voted down now? Five?”

“Six,” Sam replied. “You know how it goes though. The good Mayor Don Stark fucks one of his secretaries, and Maggie goes scorched earth. Then Don tries to fix things by requesting city funds for the shopping center so Maggie can open her tourist trap tchotchke shop.”

“Meanwhile, the Painted Whore’s got a pot hole the size of Rhode Island in front of her drive, and no one’s doing anything about it?” Dean said. “Something’s wrong with that picture.”

“You’re telling me. The other night, I drove around town for four straight outs to get Little Miss asleep. Four hours. Finally she conks out, and what happens?”

“The pothole woke her up?”

“Yes. Next morning, I was so tired I assigned myself desk duty rather than get back in the car for patrol.”

They were driving down the main drag, towards the Flying Pig. It was a small building, with violent teal brick and pink accents. It was early enough that the fisherman were still getting their breakfasts as Dean parked. He waited in the vehicle while Sam went inside to order.

A few minutes later, Sam returned holding two cups of coffee and a paper bag, already spotted with grease. Dean’s stomach rumbled as Sam hopped into the passenger seat, handing him his coffee.

He took a long sip, savoring the deep rich flavor of the coffee as Sam opened a bacon, egg and cheese burrito, added picante and handed it over. Dean waited until Sam got his own burrito situated, digging into his breakfast, before pulling out of the lot towards the pier. They parked some distance away. Even though it was butt o’clock in the morning, the beaches were already busy. They had to park half a mile down the road to the boardwalk before they found a space. Dean didn’t mind though. The walk helped to loosen up some of the soreness from last night.

Garth greeted them from his pontoon, a steaming travel mug of coffee in one hand and several life vests in the other. He handed each of them a life vest as they stepped onto his boat. Dean fastened his own life vest before taking hold of MJ, so Sam could put his own on. It was a hard and fast rule. No one rode in this boat without a life vest, ever again. No exceptions.

Dean felt a fissure of fear run through him again, even though the danger had long since passed.
When Ben was nearly three, the Winchesters, and Sam’s ex-girlfriend Ruby had all gone on a floating trip with Garth and his wife Bess. All was going well, until Ruby got wasted.

In a moment, one that still sends paralyzing terror through his bones, Ruby stumbled over the cooler, and knocked Ben into the river. In that exact moment, the anchor, which had been lowered so they could fish, had snagged onto a floating tree limb. The boat had shot away from Ben.

By the time they realized Ben was no longer in the boat, seconds later, the pontoon was already nearly half a mile away from Ben, who was happily floating in the river, his life vest keeping him relatively safe.

Without hesitation, Dean and Sam had dived into the river after Ben. Neither one of them were wearing a life vest. Because they were working against the current, it took them nearly twenty minutes to swim to Ben. They were exhausted, and barely able to keep their own heads above water as Garth frantically cut the anchor and sped the pontoon back to where they were treading water.

Ben had thought it was a game. But ever since then, no one in their group of friends was allowed onto a boat without a life vest.

Sam secured MJ back into her carrier and sat down carefully in the center of the boat, just in front of the steering wheel.

Garth finished off his coffee, and sat down opposite from Sam. They chewed the fat for a while, in the way only old friends can, all of them talking at once and somehow understanding everything that was said. Garth showed them the fireworks that had just arrived the day before, and they attempted to set a fire order up, even though all of them knew that was bull shit. They would end up lining them all up and firing them, just like they did every year. No strategy whatsoever aside from saving their biggest charge for last.

It was an easy sort of morning, with nothing pressing to do but spend time with friends and family. Even still, they didn’t stay long. MJ woke up fussy, and wouldn’t take her bottle, plus they still needed to stop by the station.

Garth gave Dean another box of homemade soap for the shop, this time with autumn scents like pumpkin and salted caramel.

Sam decided to sit in the back with the baby, trying to soothe the little girl.

The station was manned by Donna, whom Dean knew from Emma’s Girl Scout troop. She greeted him warmly, perking up. Donna was pour[ing over a police file, absentmindedly eating a donut; powdered sugar was dusted across the front of her deputy uniform. Sam pulled Donna aside, speaking with her in a low voice. He took the file from Donna and read over it quickly, and nodded once.

In that moment, MJ let out a blood curdling shriek. Sam sniffed her bottom, winced, and ducked into the bathroom. Donna put the file down and approached Dean.

“How are you, Dean?” she asked, holding out a pink box of donuts. Dean took one.

“Thank you, I’m good. And you?”

“Never better,” she replied. “Jodes and I are so excited for the parade.”

“So is Emma,” Dean replied, “Cas and I have been workin’ on her costume all week.”
Donna smiled. “I can’t wait to see it. Speaking of Cas, he signed up to bring snacks for the kiddos tomorrow, but I forgot to tell him that Salina has an allergy to peanuts.”

“Duly noted. I think he was planning on rice crispies and apple juice, but I will let him know.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey guys!” Sam called from his office. “Can you come here for a minute?”

Dean gestured towards the office door. “After you,” he said. They walked into the office, were Sam had MJ draped across one of his forearms, swaying gently back and forth as he stared up at a board of one sheets, including Missing Persons sheets, APBs and national BOLOs. “You rang?” he asked as Sam turned to face them. He stopped dead at the expression on his brother’s face. A unique mix of foreboding and irresistible curiosity pushed him closer to the bulletin board.

“Take a look at this guy,” Sam said slowly. He pointed at a Missing Persons form behind two ABPs and one coffee stained BOLO for a man who had robbed three gas stations down Highway 87 “Is it just me or does he look like… Cas?”

Dean reached up and pulled the wrinkled piece of paper off the wall, ignoring the way his hands began to shake.

“James…Novak” he read, his voice suddenly hoarse. “Person of interest in first degree murder investigation.”

He cleared his throat, then cleared it again. Dean shook his head. “It can’t be him.” He glanced over the sheet again, his eyes catching on the physical description of a 5 inch scar on his forearm and then — his breath caught in his throat. Bartholomew Michaelson-Husband.

Bart.

“Let me um,” he began, still processing. First degree murder? “Let me deal with this, would you? Before you call anything in?”

Sam merely nodded. “Sure thing, Dean.” he said. “Call me if you need any help, okay?”

Dean nodded twice. “I’ll call tonight. I promise. Just let me get ahead of this before the fallout.”

Dean turned around, leaving Sam and Donna behind.

The Roadhouse was only a couple minutes down the road, but Dean decided to walk. Cas had texted him two hours before, letting him know that Ellen needed some help with unloading alcohol shipment and that it wouldn’t take long. Jo had taken the kids to a matinee.

The restaurant was still closed, when he pulled into the parking lot. The distribution truck had just pulled out of lot. Dean watched for a moment as Cas hugged Ellen and pulled off his work apron. He watched Cas punch out on the ancient machine behind the bar top, and head to the lot, where his bike was parked locked to a bike rack. Dean read over the form again, the sick feeling of betrayal still making his fingers tremble.

All this time, he’d thought Cas— no Jimmy— was running away from his husband, when in reality he could have been sleeping with a murderer for all he knew. He took a deep breath, trying to quell the anger that had replaced his confusion and disbelief in the few short minutes since he’d learned the truth.

Cas’ hadn’t seen him yet, as he bent over the bike lock, his long graceful fingers twirling the dial of
the lock with ease. Dean got out of the car.

“James?,” he called out, and watched as Castiel’s back stiffened, and his fingers fumbled the lock. His heart sank. Castiel looked up, his eyes wide and terrified. “That’s your name,” Dean continued. “James Novak?”

“How d’you know that?” Castiel asked.

Dean held up the special bulletin. “James Novak—wanted in connection to first degree murder. Who did you kill?”

Cas took a step forward, but Dean jerked back. “N-no one.” he stuttered. “I didn’t kill anyone, Dean. I swear.”

“How can I believe that, Cas?” Dean responded, his voice rising. “How could I have been so stupid?” he asked. “How could I have let you into my children’s lives? We trusted you!”

Cas took several steps forward. “I didn’t kill anyone. Please believe me.”

“Then how do you explain this?” Dean thrust the paper into Castiel’s hands. Cas read over it quickly, his brow furrowing deeper and deeper as understanding dawned.

“Bart did this,” he responded.

“Did what? File a missing person’s report? I probably would too if my husband was wanted in connection to a murder.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” Cas shook his head. “My husband is a cop in Boston.”

Dean blinked. A cop? Suddenly, all the pieces started to fall together. Cas’ reluctance around Sam, his fear when he found out Dean had worked for the military police, his insistence that Bart would find him.

Cas held out the form. “I swear on my daughter’s life Dean,” he said. “I didn’t kill anyone. This is just a tactic that Bart used to find me. It’s not true.” Castiel shrugged. “You can either believe me or not, but that isn’t going to change the fact that I’m telling you the truth. I understand if you want nothing more to do with me, and I won’t be bothering you or your family again.”

With that, Cas tossed the bike lock into the basket on the handlebars, and left.

Dean was left in the parking lot, holding the missing persons report. All the anger he’d been holding back for the past twenty minutes dissipated. He pulled his phone from his pocket, and called Sam.

“Sammy, can you check something for me?”

“Is everything okay, Dean?” Sam asked, worry in his tone evident.

“I… I’m not sure. Can you do me a favor? Can you call the detective in charge of the investigation? See what kind of intel you can find? I’m on my way back to the station now.”

“Sure thing, see you in a few.”
Dare I stay Forever?

Chapter Summary

“I have to get out of here,” Cas replied tersely, not stopping to look at her. “It’s only a matter of time before Bart finds me, and I’ve stayed too long already.”

Chapter 33: Dare I Stay Forever?

Chapter Track: Feel the Tide Turning- mumford and sons

August 29, 2014

Cas was finding it difficult to breathe as he navigated over the choppy gravel road leading to his cottage. Tears streamed down his face, and the road blurred in front of him as an onslaught of memories flooded his thoughts. How cool Bart’s eyes were the night he hit him for the first time, how he always grabbed his chin, pinching the skin of his neck when he kissed him possessively. The fear and terror he had lived with on a daily basis for ten years.

He was so wrapped up in the memories, that he nearly missed crashing into Ellie as he blindly took the last curve to his house. Cas lost his balance, skidding out on the bike and landing hard on the gravel. He cried out as his knee twisted, scraping against the rough gravel.

“Cas!” Ellie yelled, rushing forward to help him up. “Are you okay?” she asked, nearly as breathless as he was.

Cas brushed her off, standing up and wiping the blood on his hands against his tattered jeans. “I’m fine, Ellie. I’m sorry I ran into you.”

“You didn’t,” she replied. “Just a close call.” She followed Cas as he picked up his bike and quickly headed in the direction of his front porch. “Where’s the fire?” she asked jokingly.

Cas didn’t answer her. Instead, he hopped up onto the porch, digging around for his key. He opened the door to the cottage, ignoring the pang of sadness that hit him like a ton of bricks as he stepped through the doorway into what he still thought of as his home.

He pulled open the last box he meant to take with him to Dean’s house. Inside, he found his emergency stash of cash, a bundle of non-perishable snacks, his duffel bag with a few changes of clothes, and a small toiletry set— just enough to escape. He hadn’t been able to unpack his go-bag yet, something in the back of his mind kept him from fully surrendering to the idea that Bart would never find him in Southport.

He checked the cheap clock on the wall. If he hurried, he’d be able to make the midday bus and get out of here before Dean’s brother called Boston PD and alerted Bart his location. By the time Bart got here, Cas would be long gone, starting another life, somewhere else. An ache began to swell in the pit of his stomach at the thought.

Briefly, Cas worried about what he would do for paperwork. If Sam called BPD, then his new identity would surely be blown. He’d have to get by on the cash he’d saved up until he could get
some false documents. Regretfully, Castiel pulled the amount he’d set aside for Katie from its hiding place and added it to his stash.

He heard Ellie walk up the stairs to his porch, and knock tentatively against the frame of his storm door.

“Cas,” she said slowly. “What’s going on?” Ellie opened the storm door and tentatively walked inside, watching as he frantically packed his belongings.

“I have to get out of here,” Cas replied tersely, not stopping to look at her. “It’s only a matter of time before Bart finds me, and I’ve stayed too long already.”

“Cas- whatever’s going on, we can figure it out. Why don’t you stay? I’ll make us some coffee and we can talk.”

“I can’t, Ellie. The bus leaves in an hour.”

Ellie reached out, placing a hand softly on his forearm. Castiel jerked at her cool fingers. “Weren’t you listening?” he suddenly exploded. “I have to get out of here!”

“What about Dean?” she asked, a hint of desperation in her voice. “You can’t just leave!”

Cas felt the pit of acid in his stomach turn to fire, and he steeled his glance at the young woman in his way. “Who do you think was the one who told me to go?”

“What about the kids?” she asked. “You promised me you’d look after them. That you wouldn’t break their heart, and leave them wondering who they can trust to stick around.”

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. “If I don’t leave now, I will be putting them in more danger than any pain they’d feel at my absence.”

“Cas…”

“Kids are resilient. They will bounce back. And soon I will be just a memory for them. A summer well spent in their happy safe lives.”

“You’re more to them than that, and you know it.” Ellie said, her voice suddenly fierce. “You’re being selfish.”

“Selfish?” Cas said, “Selfish!” he suddenly yelled. “I am giving up everything I want so they can be safe. Everything!” He took a deep breath, trying to regain his composure. “Frankly, Ellie, it’s none of your business.” His voice was cold. Dismissive. “Goodbye, Ellie.”

With that, Cas slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and walked out the door, leaving Ellie behind in the sweltering cabin, which suddenly seemed much colder as he walked out the door.

***

Dean was almost to the police station, when the call from Sam came through. “Dean,” Sam said over the speaker phone, his voice patchy with low reception.

“Whatcha got?” Dean asked

“I got ahold BPD- but get this. The APB put out only showed up in the system a month ago, even though it was dated from April. The detective put on the form quit the department after she had her baby. There is no way she filed this paperwork.” He paused. “In fact- she didn’t even know Cas or
Jamie or James or whatever his name is was missing. Her old partner has been saying for months that his husband was taking care of a family friend who had cancer.”

“What was her partner’s name?” Dean asked, dread building in the pit of his stomach.

“Bart something. The guy who was on the missing person’s report as the contact.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Dean said. “So, what? He forged a MPR, to find Cas?”

“Looks like it,” Sam said. “She said she wouldn’t contact Bart. Apparently, he’s a mean son of a bitch.”

Dean pulled a U-turn, “Alright, thanks. Can you do me a favor? Can you pick up the kids after this afternoon? They’re with Jo at the movies right now Cas and I need to have a talk, and it is probably better the kids aren’t around just yet.”

“Sure thing,” his brother replied. “You heading over to his place?”

“Yeah, I just hope he’s still there.”

The road to Cas’ cottage was deserted as Dean pulled down the drive. Anxiety, fluttering like a hummingbird in the pit of his stomach, fueled him faster. But the house was just as deserted as his road. The bike was gone.

Panic threatened to overtake him. He’d lost him. He’d lost Cas and he’d never see him again. He let the lies Bart had spewed over thousands of miles get the better of him, and had broken the first true, honest relationship he’d had since Lisa died.

Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes. He pressed the heels of his hand hard against his eyes, and tried to think through the heartache that threatened to break him. Dean tried to turn back to his law enforcement training, feeling sick to his stomach as he did so. Is this what Bart did too?

If he were Cas, he’d want to get out of town as quickly as possible, in the most inconspicuous way possible. He didn’t have a car. And the closest airport was hours away. That left a bus. Dean glanced at his watch. The bus left in half an hour. If he hurried, he’d get there in time.

Dean ran to his car, putting it in drive almost before he got the door shut, and sped down the gravel toward town. The store was on the way to the bus station, and as he passed by the building, he felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

The bike was locked to the porch railing.

He sped up. Frantically, he called the bus station. Along with working one of the best print shops around, Frank Devereaux worked at the bus station on weekends. “Frank,’ he said, “I need a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Can you stall the bus for me? I am on my way to the station now, and I have a feeling a friend of mine might be trying to leave town. I need to talk to him.”

“Stall the bus?” Frank asked, and Dean could hear the smile in his words. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment. Plus, Naomi is driving. I can hit her with a bus inspection.”

“Great, see you in a few,” Dean replied. “I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one, but who’s counting?” Frank replied.
Dean hung up. “Come on, come on,” he muttered to the 80-year-old woman in a Buick in front of him. “Get out of the way.” Finally, Dean passed her. He knew he was speeding. He didn’t care. As long as she made it to the station before Cas left him forever.

He barely remembered to signal his turn into the station. Dean parked, his heart hammering in his ears. He waved at Frank, who was in a fierce argument with Naomi outside a large bus. He glanced around. Cas was no where to be found.

He brushed past Frank and Naomi, stepping onto the bus. It was mostly empty, save for a woman sitting in the front, a large knitted scarf halfway finished in her lap, and two teenagers, clearly in love, draped over one another halfway down.

But relief flooded through him at the sight of Castiel’s messy black hair, all the way in the back of the bus.

“Cas!” he yelled,

“Cas!” he yelled, and the other man looked up, startled. Dean pushed down the aisle of the bus. Naomi got onto the bus, noticing Dean.

“You can’t be here, Dean,” she said. “You don’t have a ticket.”

Dean waved her off. “I’m not staying. I just need to talk to someone.”

“Well, hurry up, after this damn inspection, I’m already going to be behind.” She pulled her speaker off of the holder. “Folks, I’m going to have to ask you to disembark while we complete a safety inspection. We should be ready to go soon.”

“What are you doing here?” Castiel asked, grabbing his duffel and following Dean into the parking lot.

“I’m sorry,” Dean replied. “I was wrong not to trust you. I had Sam look into it. Apparently, Bart filed the report a month ago using his old partner’s name.”

“Rebecca?” Castiel asked, all the blood draining from his face. “Sam called BPD?”

“No, he was forwarded to Rebecca. I guess she doesn’t work there anymore. She had a lot to say about her old partner though.”

“If Rebecca knows where I am, so does Bart.”

Dean shook his head. “She promised not to tell anyone. In fact, no one at the department even knew you were gone. They thought you were taking care of some old family friend with cancer.”

“That sounds like Bart. He can never admit the truth, that I ran. Otherwise it would reflect poorly on him.” Castiel sighed. “It doesn’t matter. He probably bugged her phone. And if he knows where I am, he’s going to come for me. I need to get out of town as quickly and anonymously as possible.”

Dean reached out, “Don’t go,” he said, his voice a broken whisper. “I was wrong. Stay here. I will protect you.”

“How can you protect me?” Cas replied sharply. “Sooner or later he’s going to figure it out. He’s going to find me and when that happens, he won’t stop until I’m dead, and he won’t stop until anyone I love is dead as punishment for the betrayal.”
“Over my dead body,” Dean said, his voice suddenly serious.

“And then what? Leave your kids behind to grow up without either parent?” Cas shook his head. “It’s better for everyone if I get on that bus and never come back.”


Dean reached out, cupping Cas’ face in his own. “I love you all too much to let anything happen to you,” Cas replied, his voice small and broken.

“Leaving would break our little family apart.” Dean replied. “Please, Cas,” he repeated. “I love you.”

As much as Cas wanted to fight him, to pull away and say this was for the better. To get on that bus and never look back, Dean’s small broken voice tore through him, jagged as glass against his heart. He returned Dean’s embrace. “I love you, too,” he finally whispered.

Dean pulled him into a kiss. “Please, stay.”

“I’ll stay.”

By the time they got back to the house, Sam had left two messages on Dean’s phone. Cas went upstairs to dress his wound, and Dean picked up the landline and called Sam back.

“Hey,” he said, careful to keep his voice down. “I talked to Cas.”

“Everything alright?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, he came back with me at the house, but I’mma need some help making sure Bart isn’t tipped off. Can you get in touch with some of your old Stanford buddies- see if they can get us some Intel on Bart for me? Keep it on the DL though, I don’t want any of this going through official channels. We’re already on thin ice contacting Rebecca.”

“Yeah, Ash knows a guy who can get us anything we need. An old buddy from his MIT days.”

“Good. Get that to me as soon as possible.”

“Well do.”

“See you later, jerk.”

“Bye, bitch.” Dean hung up the phone as Cas came down the stairs, limping slightly.

Dean grabbed two beers from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. “You hungry?” Cas asked.

Dean shrugged as he opened his beer. “I could eat.”

“Tuna salad okay? I think there is still some leftover in the fridge.”

“That’s fine.”

Cas stood up, opening the fridge. “You want bread or a bagel?”

“Toast,” Dean replied. Suddenly Cas laughed.
“Our whole lives have turned upside down in the space of a few hours, and we’re talking about toast or bagels for lunch.”

Dean shrugged. “What do you want to talk about?”

Cas paused in his preparation of the sandwiches. “I didn’t kill anyone,” he said.

“I know that,” Dean finally replied. “I do, but you can’t blame me for being cautious.”

Castiel nodded. “I just wish you would have believed me the first time,” he replied, in a small voice. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“But you did lie,” Dean replied. He took a drink of his beer. “Every time you could have said ‘oh by the way, my husband is a cop,’ and didn’t, you lied.”

Castiel nodded. “You never asked either,” he finally reasoned. All the while, he prepared their lunch.

“You’re right, I never asked, and I should have. I should have gotten all the facts, so I could have been better prepared for the lengths Bart would go to get you back.”

Cas sat down, with both plates, setting the bag of plain Lays between them.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Dean reached out, placing a hand on top of Castiel’s. “So where do we go from here?”

“I’m not sure.”

Dean thought for a moment. “Do you know how to shoot a gun?” he asked. Cas shook his head.

“I never saw much need for firearms.”

“Well– how about Sunday we go to the firing range? I’ve got a nice Beretta you can use, and we’ll work on getting your conceal and carry.”

Cas dithered on the idea. He didn’t want to have to carry a gun around to feel safe. “Maybe next weekend,” he hedged.

Dean took that well enough, and dug into his sandwich. “Humph,” he moaned. “This is good.”

Cas nodded and ate his sandwich, even though it tasted like cardboard.

“What time do we need to be at the parade site tomorrow?”

“Eight,” I was supposed to tell you that one of the girls has a peanut allergy.”

Cas nodded. “Salina, I know. I bought Krispie Treats the other day.”

Dean smiled, then his face turned serious. “I’m sorry,” he said, deciding to face the elephant in the room. “I should have believed you. I should have kept my word.”

Cas covered Dean’s hand with his own. “I should have given you the whole story. Instead, I expected you to blindly trust me. For all you know, I could have killed someone, because I didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

Dean laughed. “This is what a therapist would call ‘effective communication,’” he said.
Cas hesitated before he asked. “Have you ever gone to a therapist?” He knew the answer. Ellie has treated their family, but part of him wanted to see if Dean would talk about it.

Thinking of Ellie sent a pang of regret through him. He should find her and apologize for his behavior this morning.

In any event, Dean shrugged. “We went for a few months after we lost Lisa. I think the kids benefited, but it wasn’t really for me.” He glanced over. “Too much baggage to unpack in a few grief sessions, you know?”

Cas nodded. “A friend of mine is a grief counselor. She’s been trying to help me come to terms with everything, but I keep pushing her away.” Dean squeezed his hand. “I was so cruel to her this morning,” he said.

“I’m sure you two will work it out,” Dean said.

“Yeah, I think she is supposed to be at the parade tomorrow. I’ll talk with her then.”

Dean picked up his empty plate. “You finished?” he asked, pointing at Cas’ half finished sandwich, forgotten on his plate.

“Save it for later, I may be hungrier then.” Dean picked his plate up and put the sandwich in a baggy. He tossed it into the fridge and rinsed their plates.

“Well- we got the afternoon off,” Dean said. “Netflix?” Dean had recently signed up for the service, at Castiel’s request, and was now addicted. Cas had Netflix when he lived in Boston.

“As long as it isn’t anywhere in the realm of kids movies, sure.”

Dean laughed. “You mean for once we get to choose the movie? You and me? The grown-ups?”

“Whatever shall we do with ourselves?”

Cas grinned. “Put something on we’ve seen a hundred times,” he replied, winking.

***

At 10 AM, after being at a standstill for an hour and a half north of Philadelphia because a motorcycle decided to race a semi-truck, Bart stopped. He’d made it through half a bottle of vodka since Trenton. His head was starting to pound and his eyes burned. He blinked, trying to remember the last time he’d slept. Bart pressed hard against his eyes with the heels of his hands. He hadn’t slept in nearly 36 hours.

If he was going to find Jimmy, and bring him home, he needed to have a clear head. He needed to rest. As much as he hated to lose the precious time, Bart checked into a Holiday Inn.

The room smelled damp, and the sheets were wrinkled, but he didn’t care. He finished off the bottle, sitting on the bed as the morning shows played on the TV in front of him.

Bart called his boss, citing the death of the family friend Jimmy was taking care of as his excuse, and requested off the next week. Surprisingly, Zachariah acquiesced fairly quickly. Something pricked in the back of Bart’s mind, as if sensing the other shoe about to drop, but he was too tired to process his suspicions. He set an alarm for noon and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!