Coming to Terms

by Unforth

Summary

Naomi Novak has laid out her son's entire life. Castiel Novak-Shurley must get a great
education, focus on business, ignore frivolous things, attend Harvard Business School, become an investment banker at International Angel Deposit Bank, maintain his virtue, marry a proper beta or omega, and make lots of alpha babies. Even when fitting her expectations was difficult for him, Castiel has done his best to comply.

Until now.

His mother is arranging a marriage for him - he doesn't know to whom, but he knows it's happening, and soon - and before he ties the knot (figuratively and literally) Castiel wants to have an experience all his own: he wants to bottom for an alpha.

Nervous, terrified, Castiel goes to Palmeton's red light district and hires Jensen, a gorgeous young alpha prostitute who smells like fresh-cut grass and sunshine and lemonade. With Jensen, Castiel finds the courage to ask for what he wants.

Being knotted is amazing. Castiel's not an omega, but...but being with Jensen - who's real name turns out to be Dean - is everything Castiel has dreamed of.

And now he has to figure out: how is he supposed to go the rest of his life without experiencing that again?

Notes

Oh my God it's DCBB day and I'm terrified...

So my regulars have surely noticed I haven't been posting much of late, and this is why. My longest finished Destiel fic, 167,000 words give or take, has been a huge project that consumed basically my entire summer, and most of my fall so far too. When I first got this idea it was basically for 50k of PWP but somehow it sprouted all this plot and next thing I knew...well, what else is new, right? :)

My artist for this DCBB is diminuel, aka SillyBlue. You can see all her fabulous art in this master post (link pending)! They're also inserted in the text as appropriate (if you see this RIGHT after it posts they may not be in place yet but I'll do my best to have everything ready before I "hit the button"). I honestly couldn't love these images more, and if you enjoy them too, make sure you leave her some love!!

My beta is dr-dean, and her help was invaluable, especially her cheerleading - this story was a bit of a slog for me. Considering she originally said she wouldn't beta anything over 70k, and then agreed to beta for me when I thought this story would be 100k...she deserves all the kudos. All of them.

I know that some of the tags on this story are a little weird, so if you're concerned or worried, feel free to contact me on Tumblr at unforth-ninawaters or comment here. To address a few specific things I think might be issues...

Warning: Spoilers
1. Age difference: When the story begins, Castiel is 31 and Dean is 20.

2. Castiel and Dean are really bad at communicating with each other but the emotional manipulation and gaslighting are basically all Naomi on Castiel.

3. Castiel's arranged marriage is to April Kelly. There are no explicit sexual scenes between them (...because they don't have sex...) but it's not for lack of trying on April's part, so there is some intimacy. The attempted rape/non-con tag applies to April assaulting Castiel.

4. Dean is a sex worker, so there is ample implied Dean/other(s), and discussion of same, but it's not on screen. In his work, Dean more-or-less exclusively bottoms. With Castiel, Dean exclusively tops.

5. Castiel has no idea that being trans-presenting is a thing. A lot of this story is him figuring that out and, ya know, coming to terms with it.

6. Dean only goes by Jensen/Jen for the first chapter. It's his work name.

7. Dean/Benny is mentioned more than once but is not on-screen. Dean/Cas/Benny is on screen and Explicit. It's just sex between the three of them. If that's not your jam I have flagged the chapter in question; skipping it won't really influence your understanding of the story.

8. Mpreg exists but neither Dean nor Cas gets pregnant nor is pregnancy really a topic in this fic.

...okay, I think those are the big ones? Again, let me know if you have any questions, I'm here to help. :)

I hope you enjoy this story!
Shifting in the seat of his car, a tingle of pleasure trailed up Castiel’s spine as the butt plug loosening him and keeping him wet rubbed against his hole.

The trickle of bliss heated him, followed by cold dread that dampened his arousal.

Am I really going to do this?

Yes. Yes, I am. I need to stop acting like some kind of wishy-washy omega! I’m an alpha. I made a decision, and I will follow it through.

Besides, what’s the alternative? Go home and deal with my arousal alone? Again?

I’m committed now. I can do this. I want to do this.

After a lifetime, Castiel was through denying the truth to himself, through denying himself what he wanted. Taking a deep breath, he flicked his turn signal on and waited for the light to turn green. The
intersection of White Oak and Raleigh was empty, and Castiel tapped his foot impatiently, causing the plug to shift again. The neighborhood was dilapidated and most of the multi-story buildings, erected cheek-by-jowl, appeared abandoned. Local business, closed for the night, were silent and grim in the pools of golden light shed intermittently by street lights. Entire blocks were obscured by darkness; Palmeton’s municipal maintenance workers hadn’t come around to replace the dead bulbs in years. Spray-painted store shutters, boarded up windows, and crumbling stonework completed the image of urban blight.

If Castiel hadn’t been to the area before, he might have believed the projected dereliction was all the neighborhood had to offer, but it presented a false narrative. By day, the streets were vibrant and lively, the shops bustling, the people friendly. As the traffic light finally turned green, luridly highlighting the cracks in the city streets, Castiel made the turn on to Raleigh Avenue. Within blocks the buildings grew shabbier, the streets dirtier, and some storefronts were actually abandoned, boarded up with plywood. Taillights glowed red in the distance, see dark shapes moving on the dark streets. To the uninformed eye, the neighborhoods were similar though this one appeared poorer, but Palmeton’s red light district was infamous and wasn’t abandoned by night, not like White Oak.

_I’ll never get what I want by waiting and asking whatever partner my mother selects for me. Coming here…doing this…this is the only way._

There were things alphas simply _didn’t_ do.

Like wearing a butt plug.

Like wearing a butt plug in preparation for...something more.

Castiel shivered with fear and anticipation. There was no way he could ask a partner for what he wanted. Such things were _not done_, by alphas, by _anyone_. If he were found out, his life would be ruined, and likely so would his family’s reputation. Heck, if Castiel were _severely_ unlucky, he might damage their business prospects in the city, domestically, and even internationally. He hated that things were the way they were, hated that the world was so structured, so ensnaring, and he hated himself for not being brave enough to buck that trend.

Castiel was a coward.

But he had the money to _buy_ what he wanted, and buy silence from whatever obliging alpha he found to provide it for him.

_I’ve wanted this for so long...waited for so long...what’s the harm in indulging, just once?_

_What’s the harm, huh? I’ve got a list a mile long, where should I start?_

_No one will find out...and having tried once, I’ll get the urge out of my system. Celibacy hasn’t worked, hasn’t stopped me from wanting, so why not try seeking satisfaction?_

_Gabriel would approve, at least...but imagine how Michael and Luke would react if they knew..._

...no, no one, not even Gabriel, can ever find out...

A stop sign at the corner of Raleigh and an unknown alley – the street sign was missing, or perhaps there’d never been one – marked the unofficial but universally acknowledged border that divided the respectable, god-fearing alphas, betas and omegas of Palmeton from the seedy underbelly of society. Outside of the red light district, appearance was everything. Alphas topped for omegas. Betas coupled betas. Society followed strict rules, and woe-betide the alpha, beta, or omega who tried to step outside the castes created by presentation types. Castiel marveled that past the intersection the
streets looked so normal. There was no warning, no indicator, that beyond that point, every taboo could be broken for a price. Sex, drugs, and probably worse that Castiel couldn’t guess at, everything was obtainable, most of it legally, so long as the prudent seeker of the illicit didn’t get caught. Scent bonding a prostitute? Having sex before marriage? Adultery? All cause for condemnation, for ruination, for despair.

Don’t get caught…can’t get caught…

Why am I doing this? God, what if I scent bond with whoever I hire? Will my family be able to smell the changes when I go to work tomorrow? This is a terrible idea. I should turn around, go home, forget about my foolish desire. I’m an alpha. I know my role. I know my place. I should…

…but I want…

...just once...I can do this...I may do this...let me have this, once…

Castiel’s car came to a full stop at the intersection.

He didn’t drive on.

A sharp rap on his window startled Castiel; he started and the plug shifted unpleasantly against his rim. Glancing that way, he steeled himself for a confrontation – I’ve been here two minutes and I’ve already been caught! – but instead of an authority figure, a policeman or someone who knew him or some bogeyman from his worst nightmares, there was only a young woman who smiled at him through the glass. She was…pleasant. Normal looking. She had all her teeth, gleaming white in the moonlight. Her hair was washed and styled. Her clothing wouldn’t have excited comment at any high-class establishment.

A lot of stereotypes that lurked in the back of Castiel’s mind crumbled.

She knocked again.

Castiel stared.

If Castiel’s preconceptions were true, she’d proposition him if he spoke to her. She didn’t interest him – scenting her was unnecessary, Castiel had no interest in women regardless of their presentation – but it seemed rude to drive away without acknowledging her greeting, and Castiel’s preconceptions were clearly bunk, so he hesitantly rolled down the window.

“Are you okay?” she asked, sultry voice tinged with concern.

“Yes, I’m fine,” lied Castiel. He grew less fine by the moment. His heartbeat accelerated, his palms were sweaty against the steering wheel, and his ass clenched and unclenched against the plug, sparking heat that felt less and less pleasurable and more and more dirty and inappropriate. “Why would you think I wasn’t alright?”

“Hun, you’ve been sitting at this stop sign for over a minute.” The woman – the prostitute? – clucked her tongue. “You poor thing. I can smell the terror from here. First time?”

“Is it that obvious?” Castiel asked sheepishly.

“You’re a deer in headlights,” she agreed. “May I get in the car?”

“I don’t want to pay you for sex,” said Castiel in a rush, hoping to avoid further awkwardness. What if he let her in the car and she demanded recompense? What if she touched him when he didn’t want
her to? Her scent was musky and insidious, leaking into the car’s interior, setting his teeth on edge and causing the skin of his arms to prickle.

She leaned forward, resting her arms on the edge of his window, framing her exposed cleavage, collar barely high enough to conceal her nipples. “What makes you think I want you to pay me for sex? I get a choice in this too, you know. And my dear, you smell rank. So don’t worry, sex between you and me? Completely off the table. Consider me your unofficial welcoming committee. I can introduce you around – show you the ropes – and you won’t owe me a penny. It’s a public service we poor prostitutes like to offer newbies to get them acclimated. Think of me like…like that greeter at Walmart who asks if you know where the grocery section is even though there’s an enormous sign ten feet away that says ‘groceries.’”

“I do not see any enormous signs on Raleigh pointing me toward which aisle I need,” Castiel deadpanned. The woman laughed and gestured to the car door again, and Castiel steeled his will. He’d prepped himself. He’d gotten in the car wearing a plug – gone out in public slicked up like an omega and smelling of who-knew-what. He’d driven to the red light district. He wasn’t going to back out now. He was committed. Or at least, he should be committed.

_Yep, straight to the insane asylum. Isn’t that what mother said about alphas who lowered themselves to the stature of omegas, and about omegas who dared presume they could pretend to be alphas? They should be locked up and given corrective therapy, the harsher the better, and—_  

_And the less Naomi learns of my sex life, the better. Time to man up, Castiel._  

‘Man up?’ Terrible choice of—

Shaking his thoughts away, Castiel reached across the front seat and pulled up the lock for the passenger door. There was a click, and the woman opened the door and dropped into the seat.

“So, sugar, my name is Meg and I’ll be your tour guide today.”

“I thought the term was pimp?”

“Only if I get a cut of the money from whoever you eventually hire,” she corrected. “I don’t, by the way. I truly am merely providing a public service, free of charge, out of the goodness of my heart. We’re all independent contractors ‘round these parts, though don’t take that to mean we’re unprotected. We look after our own. And besides, I might find a John or Jane for myself while I’m shopping you around. Lonely nights are boring. So, John, what’s your fancy?”

“Emmanuel,” corrected Castiel. He’d decided to use his middle name months ago, when it had first occurred to him that he could buy what he craved. While he’d struggled to work up the nerve to come and make the purchase, he’d spent hours turning the name over in his head, practiced saying it in the mirror, internalizing it until it felt like him and he thought – he hoped – he’d answer to the name if called upon to do so.

“I’d like to hire the company of a male alpha for the evening,” Castiel explained, nervously eying his companion.

“Aisle 6,” Meg said, pointing down the street. If the request seemed odd to her, she didn’t show it – didn’t flinch, didn’t express skepticism, didn’t wink, didn’t judge. “Where those headlights have been parked since you got here, by the fire escape strung Christmas lights.” Squinting, Castiel could make out the faint glow of color several streets down. “Between Van Aiken and Lima.”

“There really are aisles?” asked Castiel.
“If we sort the merchandise, it’s easier for prospective customers to shop our full selection and 
choose a model that suits their fancy,” she explained. Despite her dehumanizing word selection, there 
was a sparkle in her eye and her lips quirked in a smile. Castiel hesitantly smiled back then returned 
his attention to the road.

The streets of the neighborhood were lit by car headlights, street lamps, and the occasional bright-lit 
window. Men and women milled about or lounged against stoops, eying his car. A mélange of 
smells drifted sickeningly through the unrolled car window, stale slick and musky cologne made to 
mimic an alpha in rut, trash rotting down the alleys and worse Castiel didn’t want to identify.

*I should leave now, while I can. This is disgusting and beneath me.*

‘While I can.’ No one is forcing me to be here, and any prostitute who tried to make a client stay 
against their will wouldn’t be successful at their job. It’s a customer service profession, which means 
they have to…service the customers…professionally.

And it’s not like we’ll be having sex in one of the alleys.

Nor will anyone be beneath me.

Shuddering, forcing his intrusive thoughts away, Castiel reached the block she’d indicated, stopped 
and put the car in park. The hum of the engine reassured him that he could still leave if he chickened 
out, vibrated the plug in him tantalizingly.

“So, are you a browser? A window shopper? Or would you rather more personalized service?” 
asked Meg, ticking off options on her fingers.

Castiel frowned. “I’m unclear on the distinctions between these options.”

“Browser: park your car, get out there and inspect the merchandise first hand,” Meg explained, all 
business now that they were actually there. The “merchandise” was about a dozen men who stood 
talking amongst themselves on the sidewalk. Aside from their gender and the powerful scent of alpha 
hormones that wafted around them, there were few commonalities between them: young and old, 
thin and heavy, pale-skinned and dark-skinned, short hair and long…there weren’t enough men for 
every permutation that might exist to be offered but they represented a fine range of potential 
preferences – a good selection.

*God, I’ve been here minutes and I’m already commoditizing these people. What’s wrong with me?*

They are a commodity. I’m buying a service, yes, but I’m also buying an appearance and a scent. 
Typically when selecting a service provider, I focus on the quality of the work that’s done: I don’t 
care how my plumber looks as long as he snakes my pipes correctly. This situation is different, as it 
should be given the nature of the service provided. I cannot assess how well these men perform 
sexually until I share companionship with them, but if I don’t find them visually and nasally 
appealing, I will have no desire to commune with them. Taking their appearance into account, and 
consider the variety of appearances on offer, is a reasonable approach to hiring one of them, from a 
business standpoint.

*But how on earth am I supposed to know which one I’d like to have sex with?*

Castiel was so keyed in thinking about what he wanted, he’d hardly spared a thought to who he 
wanted it *from.* The person he hired had to be a man, had to be an alpha – those were his absolute 
preferences, based on his limited experiences with arousal, the occasional scent that triggered his 
libido, and the fantasies that warmed him at night – but beyond that? He’d not considered broad or
lithe, Caucasian or African American, tall or short. He’d thought he’d planned extensively and effectively for this evening, but since his arrival he’d been confronted repeatedly by how singularly, depressingly unprepared he truly was.

The men glanced his way, offering open, inviting smiles, and Castiel resisted the urge to shrink into the seat of his car.

Doing so would only nudge the plug and remind him why he was there.

“Thinkin’ might-y hard over there, Emmanuel,” said Meg, grimacing. “Ugh, what kind of name is that?”

“It means ‘God is with us,’” explained Castiel absently, eying his choices.

“Oh-ho, does it now? Isn’t much Godly about what we’re up to…you a religious sort? We get a lot of those…” She waited, but Castiel didn’t answer. Who he was, who he really was, was none of her business.

The men approached Castiel’s car, tapping their fellows and encouraging them to come along. None stirred that special something in Castiel’s gut, and his nose itched from their combined scents. There was no sorting through the hodgepodge of smells to determine if any individual might appeal to him.

*They should make a mail-order catalog. Scratch-and-sniff. I wonder if anyone has tried that as a model for an escort service?*

“How does the window shopping option work?” said Castiel, resigned, and hoping that she’d stop talking about religion. She chuckled, a sinful sound, and shook her head.

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“You’re doing that right now – sit here, stare creepily, and scent the air,” Meg replied. “Any minute now they’ll start coming over one by one to see what your fancy is. You don’t need to get out of your car if you don’t want to. Or, if you’d prefer, you can give me some idea what you want and I can – for a nominal finder’s commission – suggest an appropriate escort.”

_Didn’t she say her aid in navigating the nuances of hiring a prostitute would be free?*

_Everyone has an angle. How can I be surprised that self-employed prostitutes also have an angle?*

A breeze stirred the air and mercifully dissipated the distasteful miasma of mixed scents, replacing it with a pleasant aroma of fresh-mown grass that suffused the cabin of his car. Surprised, Castiel looked around. The neighborhood was mixed residential and commercial, tall buildings housing multiple apartments and businesses on the first floor. Castiel doubted there was a home within a mile that had a lawn. None of the individuals he could smell seemed to be the source, either.

A young man emerged from the side street that Meg had called Van Aiken, hair disheveled, cheeks flushed a rich color even with only the washed-out glow of the multi-colored fairy lights for illumination, and the smell of grass intensified.

_It’s him. He smells like grass…green…fields in summer…sun-baked wheat…freedom…he smells…he smells amazing…_
“Ah, like the new arrival?” Meg asked. Startled, Castiel tore his eyes from the man and glanced at her. She pursed her lips and smirked. “Hey, Jensen!” she shouted. The young man kept walking. “Jen!” Freezing mid-step, Jensen swiveled around, searching for Meg. His eyes were dark pools in the night, his lips plush and spread in a smile. A t-shirt hung loose over his lean frame; tight jeans clung to his legs, tucked into the tops of his unlaced boots.

“Jerk! Over here!”

Meg awkwardly leaned out of her bucket chair, invaded Castiel’s personal space, and reached between Castiel and the steering wheel to wave out the window. Spotting them, Jensen ambled over, steps wide and bow-legged. The closer he came, the stronger the earthy scent became and the more complexity Castiel was able to pick out. Jensen smelled like new-sheared grass on a hot summer day, moisture in the air promising rain later, a faint citrus undertone suggesting lemonade to cool Castiel’s brow, and—

“You free?” asked Meg.

Dazed, Castiel had no idea what Meg meant. He opened his mouth to speak and clamped it shut again. Jensen stood by the driver’s side window, and at Meg’s question he broke into a toothy smile. His lips looked kissably soft, his teeth surprisingly straight and white…

No. Not surprisingly. Forget what I think I know. These are people, doing a job, nothing more, nothing less, and as such are as diverse as any other group people. They have good features and bad, strength and weaknesses, specialties and preferences. And as to their teeth, well, a prostitute has a vested interested in maintaining their personal charms, right? Good teeth, nice smell, clean clothes, it’s all part of the package they’re marketing…

…and he’s beautiful, and smells like I’ve tumbled into my own personal heaven.

“I am.” Jensen nodded and leaned through the window. Castiel would’ve swooned if he wasn’t already seated cradled by the driver’s seat “I mean, I’m not free, but I’m available.” He winked. Freckles painted the bridge of Jensen’s nose and scattered over his cheeks. Sweat left tracks down his forehead. The lingering aroma of another alpha clung to Jensen’s skin despite the subtle smell of dryer sheets that suggested that Jensen had recently donned a fresh shirt. Their gazes met and Jensen’s nostrils flared as he scented Castiel. His eyes darkened with lust, pupils large and black, whatever color surrounding them impossible to distinguish.

“How much?” asked Castiel hoarsely, his throat dry. He was profoundly aware of the plug stretching him.

Soon…soon, this gorgeous, delicious-smelling man is going to…

“Depends how long you want,” Jensen replied with a shrug.

…oh God, I can’t wait…

“The rest of the night?” Castiel suggested in a rush. Jensen raised an eyebrow at him and Meg chuckled knowingly again.

However long it takes his knot to go down after he’s tied us together…

Desire threatened to choke Castiel, thrumming beneath his skin, heating him like an inferno had nestled in his gut.

“Three hundred bucks,” said Jensen. Castiel blinked. The amount was significantly less than he’d
expected, and Jensen spoke hesitantly, as if prepared to be negotiated lower.

Castiel had a thousand dollars cash hidden beneath the driver’s seat.

“Two hundred and fifty,” Castiel countered. If Jensen thought he was worth so little…maybe he was an inept lover, maybe he had a small dick or a small knot, maybe he had a health issue…a lifetime of work as a business executive had taught Castiel the value of underbidding.

*I can’t believe I’m low-balling a prostitute...I had no idea I was this cheap...but he knows the going rate on his services, and I don’t, and since I’m dealing in merchandise whose worth I don’t know, I have to follow his lead...*

Jensen frowned. “What did you have in mind?”

“Sex?” asked Castiel, incredulous. What else would he have in mind?

“Fair enough.” Jensen grinned. “Knotting or no knotting?”

“Knotting,” Castiel confirmed, a shiver running down his spine. He’d imagined what it would feel like to be stretched around a knot more times than he could count, had even bought a toy so that he could experience a facsimile of the real thing, and finally, finally…

“No kinky shit?” asked Jensen.

*Nothing kinkier than an alpha being knotted by another alpha, but that doesn’t appear to ping as unusual to him...*

“No, no ‘kinky shit,’ replied Castiel.

“Two-fifty works, then. Sold!”

*And if he is good, and I want to do this again, that thousand dollars could cover three more nights, instead of buying me a mere one as I expected.*

*No! No, this is a one-time event, never to be repeated! Don’t even think about…*

*...but he smells so good…*

*...and I want him so much…*

*...only because I’ve never done this! Once I’ve been knotted, I’ll know what it’s like, and that will set my curiosity and desire to rest. It probably won’t even be very good. I’m not designed for this – it’s not like I’m an omega – alphas don’t have the same nerve endings or glands or anything. I’ll have fulfilled my desire, learned that – as always – reality doesn’t live up to expectation, and I can finally move on from this deviant obsession and focus on the important matters in my life.*

“My work here is done,” said Meg with a self-satisfied grin. She popped the door open and stepped out as Jensen circled to the passenger side. “Pleasure doing business with you, Emmanuel. Don’t forget to have fun while you’re exercising that big vocabulary of yours!”

“Thank you, Meg,” Castiel replied solemnly as Jensen dropped into the vacated seat heavily enough to cause the car’s axles to creak. Meg closed the door behind him and strutted back toward the intersection where Castiel had met her.

“Emmanuel?” Jensen echoed.
“Yes, that’s my name,” Castiel lied. “Emmanuel.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” said Jensen with a suggestive smirk. “Gotta know what to scream when I come. Kinda a mouthful, though. Manny?”

I’d rather you say Castiel...

Quashing the thought, Castiel started the car again. “If you prefer. Seat belt?”

“Right, right.” Jensen strapped himself in. “Lead on, MacDuff!”

Castiel glanced out the passenger side window, confirmed there was no oncoming traffic, and pulled into the road. Raleigh Avenue was the place to go to buy sex, and to accommodate that bustling trade, the western end of the street was home to a plethora of pay-by-the-hour motels at which a customer could enjoy their purchase. Usually Castiel was assiduous about researching a new destination, but he hadn’t bothered to do his homework on the hourly dives. His mother might check his search history and suspect his intentions, and besides, surely all the motels would be about the same: dank, ill-kept, sub-standard, but adequate.

If mother found out where I was, and what I’m doing...

Bile rose in Castiel’s throat, the plug shifted and pleasure roiled him uncomfortably, and Castiel swallowed. “Did you know the original Shakespearean quote was actually ‘lay on MacDuff?’” Castiel asked, desperate to fill the silence.

“I did,” said Jensen. “Act V, scene VIII. And it has nothing to do with leading anyone anywhere. MacBeth is ordering his troops to commence attacking MacDuff’s army.” Stunned, Castiel glanced at the young man. “What?” Jensen said with an ingenuous smile and a wink. “I read…”

“Are you a student?” said Castiel. “Doing…this…to pay for school?”

“Personal questions will cost you extra,” Jensen replied, tone quashing, expression closed. “But no. Believe it or not, I do this ‘cause I enjoy it. That gonna be a problem? Only want a miserable whore?”

“No, of course not,” Castiel stammered. “I’m glad you’re happy…I mean…that’s preferable to…it’s none of my business. I’m sorry.”

“Naw, it’s cool.” Jensen waved a hand dismissively but Castiel didn’t believe the meager attempt to play off the effrontery caused by Castiel’s question. Too many assumptions, Castiel. “Just remember: this ain’t Pretty Woman, you’re not Richard Gere, and I’m way hotter than Julia Roberts.”

Ahead, the scuzzy motels lined the streets. Brightly lit signs competed for attention and business, announcing what amenities each place claimed they had and their hourly rates.

“I don’t understand that reference,” Castiel admitted.

“Wow, really? Dude, I thought everyone had seen that movie. It’s about a prostitute omega – that’s Julia Roberts – and Gere is the rich alpha guy who sweeps her off her feet, ‘saves’ her from her lifestyle and profession – it doesn’t matter – turn here.” Jensen interrupted his own train of thought to gesture at one of the motels. The sign named it “Cajun Delights,” which sounded more like a restaurant to Castiel, but there was no sign of a place to eat, just a low building with a long line of identical windows and doors at regular intervals. “Benny’s joint is the best on the block – clean, reasonably priced, and Benny’s got his head and his dick in the right place.” There was something to how Jensen said the last that seemed off. As Castiel pulled into a parking spot near the main
entrance, he glanced at Jensen but his expression was unreadable, cast golden by the light from the large lobby windows.

I’ve got stop thinking I have any idea what to expect, any idea of what’s going on, any expertise that substitutes for never having done this before. I can only do my best and hope I don’t mess up so badly that he walks out on me.

That would be a new low...so socially inept that I can’t even succeed at purchasing sex from someone who earns their living by selling sex...

“Get us a room – I’ll pay, of course – and I’ll be there in a moment,” said Castiel. Jensen gave him a funny look…or a normal one, for all Castiel knew…and did as Castiel suggested. The car door squeaked as Jensen slammed it behind him. Castiel’s car was an ancient Lincoln Continental that his brother Gabriel scoffed at and mocked as a “pimp mobile.” Castiel could afford a nicer vehicle, but he didn’t see the point. A new car would be an unnecessary expense; as much as maintenance cost for the Continental, it was still less expensive than a replacement that would meet Naomi and Chuck’s expectations. They hated the car, an added perk, and because it was technically theirs, they couldn’t tell him not to drive it. A tiny act of rebellion, but that plus the fact that Castiel liked the Lincoln justified his continuing to use it.

I like my ‘pimp mobile’ …though apparently there are no pimps on Raleigh Avenue, just independent contractors, so how does Gabriel know what kind of car a hypothetical pimp would drive?

Digging under his seat, Castiel pulled out the crisp bank envelope containing the bills he’d gotten from the bank and counted out three hundred in twenties and tens – Jensen’s payment plus the rate stated on the motel’s marquee. He pocketed the money, exited and locked his car, and went to join Jensen.

When Castiel stepped into the lobby, Jensen was leaning against the counter, smiling impishly at the man working the reception desk, who scowled at Castiel.

“First timer?” the receptionist said sourly.

“I suppose so,” sighed Castiel. Was there a neon sign over his head proclaiming him a virgin? Was it that obvious that he was the new guy in town? “How much do I owe you?”

“Jenny tells me you’ll be here for several hours so we’ll call it an even five-oh.” The man stood up straighter and put his hands on his hips, drawing attention to his broad shoulders and beefy biceps. “And just so you know, I got spare keys to every room and I keep a baseball bat behind the front desk. You try anything…” He trailed off ominously.

“Aw, come on Benny, don’t be like that.” Jensen tone was jocular but the edge Castiel didn’t understand was back. “Manny and I are here to have a good time, right?” Jensen nudged Castiel. Benny’s scowl deepened and he cracked his knuckles.

“I’m not planning to ‘cause any trouble.” The expression was unnatural on Castiel’s lips. In a lifetime, no one had looked at Castiel and thought him the sort to instigate a fight. The worst accusation Castiel had been subjected to was that he was a corporate stooge one percenter who didn’t understand how “regular Joe’s” lived.

That was 100% true. Even at 31, the most apt description Castiel had of himself was spoiled, entitled rich boy.
With a sour grunt, Benny took Castiel’s money and slapped a key down on the counter.

“See? Nice guy,” said Jensen, snatching the key and grabbing Castiel’s wrist. “Come on, let’s get this show on the road.”

By the fluorescent glow of the hallway lights, the flush to Jensen’s cheeks was obvious and Castiel’s conviction grew that he wasn’t Jensen’s first…client…of the night. The smell of a beautiful summer’s day yet suffused Castiel’s nose, despite the competing lesser scents that saturated their surroundings, and to his surprise he felt a flare of jealousy. He quashed it, recognizing the ludicrousness of the feeling, and the jealousy morphed into a burst of nerves. Conventional wisdom stated that even one sexual encounter was enough to spark a scent bond between compatible people. If Castiel accidentally ended up connected with Jensen, his own scent would change and everyone who encountered him, everyone he worked with, everyone he worked for, would know that he’d been unchaste, that he’d been with someone, might even know that someone was an alpha, depending on how strong the connection between him and Jensen was. He’d thought up several potential lies to cover himself should the worst happen, and had bought the strongest scent suppressing soap available at CVS for use post-coitus, but standing before a door painted crimson at the end of a long hallway with sounds of passion leaking from the surrounding rooms, his pre-conceived excuses and flimsy preparations seemed hollow.

There was an emergency exit beside their motel room door.

It wasn’t too late for Castiel to leave.

“Oh, awesome, he gave us the room with the Jacuzzi! See what I mean about Benny? Top notch guy.” Jensen unlocked the door and pushed it open. Stepping within, he gestured for Castiel to join him. “Not having second thoughts, are you?” He grinned, eyes catching the light, breathtakingly beautiful.

If Castiel didn’t do this now, he’d never get the chance. His mother had vowed to arrange a suitable marriage for him. Once Naomi set herself a goal with a deadline, she was unstoppable. Castiel would be married within the year, locked into matrimony and fidelity and the societally-mandated appearance of propriety, and he’d have to maintain appearances for the rest of his life. Castiel was a good son, obedient to Naomi’s wishes, but he’d spent a decade saving his true desires for quiet nights spent alone with an inflatable knot, and he’d spend his future years doting on whatever strong-willed omega Naomi picked out as a suitable mate for him. Tonight was his, a memory to cling to when he unhappily forced his knot into his spouse, a comfort for every unwanted sexual conference and lonely masturbatory fantasy.

I am doing this for myself. I will do this for myself.


If I can get away with making one decision for myself in an eternity of conforming and contorting to meet Naomi’s expectations, let it be this decision.

I deserve this.

Jensen clucked an indecipherable noise as he pushed the door shut. The interior of the room was surprisingly restrained. The muted hallway suffused with pornographic noises and a riot of smells had Castiel dreading what lurid nonsense awaited him, but the decor was understated in shades of gray and tan, the carpet was clean, and the furniture was tasteful and appeared well-made. A bed dominated the room, with an armchair and small table nearby and what Castiel thought was a
luggage holder in one corner, though that made little sense. No one who stayed in a motel like Cajun Delights brought luggage.

More assumptions, Castiel...what did Gabriel say about people who make assumptions? They make an ass out of you and me?

Castiel glanced back at Jensen. Jensen watched him expectantly, lamplight gleaming off his eyes.

Green, like the fresh-cut lawn his scent conjures to mind.

Beautiful.

“Well?” said Jensen with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

Castiel swallowed. His muscles clenched, the edges of the plug’s flared base dug into his butt cheeks, and an oppressive sense of dread choked at his throat.

If his family caught him...

If they formed a scent bond...

If he got sick, if Jensen deceived him, if Benny decided Castiel crossed a line, if this was a scam, if...

Castiel swallowed again. “Give me a moment,” he said. His throat was parched.

Maybe there’s a cup in the bathroom...maybe it’s even clean...I can get some water...get some air...get time to think and collect myself...not that time alone will change anything...

“Hey, you’re the boss,” said Jensen. “Do your thing.”

Nodding caused a wave of vertigo to wash over Castiel. He turned to the only door in the room, beside him, hoping it was the bathroom rather than a closet. Sure enough, he found a light switch within the doorway, flipped it on, and revealed a modestly appointed bathroom. There was a pokey shower, a porcelain sink with a tracery of dark cracked lines, a mirror, and a toilet that hissed as the water in the basin ran continuously. Closing the door behind him, Castiel flipped on the faucet and splashed his face with water that went from chill to over-hot more quickly than the top-of-the-line water heater at his house could manage.

His reflection in the mirror was pitiful.

It had been a rough week. Castiel had been bombarded by calls and e-mails from investors demanding to know why the value of their portfolios had dropped. That the overall market had plunged almost 10% in the space of days, while IADB’s investor accounts had dropped only an average of 2%, did little to assuage the anger of those who insisted that they should be earning money even during a bear market. The calls had been a constant distraction from his actual job, trying to stay on top of the trends and latest news well enough that he could ensure that investors didn’t lose more. He’d made more trades in the past few days than he could remember, over a ludicrous number of hours spent staring at computer screens late into the night, monitoring international markets as they opened and closed. His face was haggard, his eyes sunken and tired, his hair unstyled. His suit was rumpled, his tie askew, and the water dripping from his face made dark stains down the front of his trench coat.

No wonder Jensen thought he might need Benny to protect him.
Grabbing a bleached white hand towel – *stop. assuming. everything. is. dirty* – Castiel sponged his face off, made a token attempt to fix his hair, shrugged off his coat, and straightened his tie.

*Great, now I’m trying to improve my appearance so as to impress the prostitute I’ve already hired.*

Ashamed, Castiel leaned against the counter and took a deep breath, and another, and another. When he felt steady, he took a step toward the door. The plug tickled him and his equilibrium nearly shattered, but he held onto his steadiness, held onto himself, by a fingernail. Whooshing out a loud exhale, Castiel opened the door and stepped into the room.

“I’m ready, Jens—”

Words choked in Castiel’s throat. Naked, Jensen straddled the contraption that Castiel had thought was a luggage stand, a padded platform supporting his stomach, his arms stretched before him as he faced the wall, his legs resting on two boards on the sides, spread wide, exposing his hole like a target aimed directly at Castiel.

“Yo, Manny.” Jensen twisted around, winked and a half-waved. “I’m ready, too!”

“No,” managed Castiel in strangled tones. God, Jensen was gorgeous: slim, toned, muscular. His skin was pale save where it was dotted with brown freckles that scattered over his shoulders and down his arm. There wasn’t a strand of hair growing from his ass, perineum, or balls. Liquid – artificial slick, most likely – shimmereed on the velvety skin, and what Castiel could see of Jensen’s cock was…impressive: large, even as it dangled flaccid between his legs. Castiel swallowed and locked his knees to keep from twirling to face the other direction.

*I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be seeing another man, another alpha, naked. I shouldn’t be hiring a prostitute. I shouldn’t be having sex before marriage. I shouldn’t be losing my virginity.*

The moment stretched out painfully tense and awkward, and Jensen frowned. “Foreplay?” he asked uncertainly. “I know you’re new at this – but most newbies – heck, nearly everyone who hires me – prefers to cut right to the main event. I’m game for a warm up if you are.”

“No, I…” Castiel closed his eyes slowly, deliberately. His legs trembled and his voice was so reedy he scarce recognized it. “That’s…what you’re offering…that’s not what I hired you for.” Jensen’s eyes narrowed and Castiel had never before felt like he had to individually force words out of his mouth, out of his brain. “I don’t want…” Castiel made a gesture devoid of meaning. He knew it was ambiguous but he couldn’t make himself say what he meant. “I want…I want…”

“You want my knot,” Jensen breathed. For the first time since they’d met, Jensen looked rattled, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushed. “Emmanuel, you want me to fuck you?”

A jolt of pleasure stabbed through Castiel at the filthy language and the images it conjured. His cheeks heated and his cock stirred against the soft, expensive wool of his slacks. Jensen’s eyes widened farther. He shifted on the stand, sat up and settled onto his ass on the step that he’d previously rested his leg on. From this angle, Jensen’s cock was even more impressive: fat, uncut, thickening and resting chubby in the juncture of his thighs.

“Yes,” Castiel croaked. A faint smile brightened Jensen’s face; he quirked an eyebrow at Castiel.

*I’ve faced down CEOs. I’ve faced down FBI investigators. I’ve faced down Charles Shurley and Naomi Novak, though only when I had to and God I hope I never need to again. I didn’t flinch. I didn’t grow hoarse. I wasn’t fazed. But this…this is my limit?*

“Yes,” Castiel tried again, and was ineffably relieved that he was intelligible.
“I can do that.” Jensen’s moment of imbalance had passed. Once more, he was confident, flirty, and cocky.

And what a lovely cocky...

Castiel’s cheeks flushed darker. Chuckling, Jensen rose, crossed to Castiel and tugged his tie loose.

“Always been such a proper alpha, haven’t you, Manny?” The low, gruff words were incongruous with Jensen’s youthful features and sent a shiver down Castiel’s spine. In an effort to repress his quaking, Castiel stiffened parade-ground proper as he nodded. “Spent a lifetime waiting for your family to choose a mate for you, spent a lifetime saving that body for ‘the one,’ spent a lifetime looking for that perfect person you’re supposed to knot – when secretly you’ve been craving a knot of your own, right?” As Jensen spoke, he brushed Castiel’s jacket off his tense shoulders and sensually, one by one, undid the buttons on Castiel’s shirt. Leaning forward, he breathed into Castiel’s ear, “What would your friends say if they knew you wanted to be my bitch?”

A shocked sound caught in Castiel’s throat; his eyes rolled shut, his head tipped back, and desire and anticipation boiled under his skin.

He’d waited so. damn. long.

Jensen nipped Castiel’s ear, confident, experienced hands unclasping Castiel’s belt. “First time?”

“You know it is,” Castiel breathed. “First time for everything.”

“I figured,” Jensen conceded, licking down Castiel’s neck and over his scent point. “Dirty talk okay?”

Not trusting himself to speak, Castiel nodded frantic approval. The aroma that Castiel always exuded, usually subtle and so familiar he scarce noticed it, intensified and his nostrils were overwhelmed by the embarrassingly strong smell of newly-minted money. A strange sound – a growl, he’s growling – hummed through Jensen. Slipping the arms of Castiel’s shirt down his shoulders, calloused fingers touched bare skin for the first time and Jensen sucked at the gland at the base of Castiel’s neck, sucked in Castiel’s scent. Castiel’s knees quavered. The feelings were more intense than he’d expected, more intense than he’d imagined, more intense than anything he’d ever induced by touching himself with tentative, exploratory fingers.

With a rattle of metal on metal and a rustle of fabric, Castiel’s pants hit the floor.

“So hard for me already,” whispered Jensen huskily, fondling Castiel’s erection. Helpless whimpers accented every breath Castiel took. “How long have you wanted this, little bitch?”

“Always,” Castiel confessed. “I’ve always…but I never…please, Jensen…”

“Call me Jen…and don’t worry.” There was a promise in Jensen’s voice as he slipped a hand beneath Castiel’s undershirt and kneaded roughly over the muscles of Castiel’s belly. “I’ll take care of you.”

Arousal dizzied Castiel, spun his head, set his heart racing, sped his breathes. Sensations assaulted him. Jensen was everywhere – mouthing at Castiel’s scent gland; scraping fingernails over Castiel’s ribs; working Castiel’s feet out of his shoes and socks. Castiel was stripped bare. Body and soul, he was naked, exposed, vulnerable, hot and shaking and beyond desperate. Jensen’s breath was hot against his flesh, Jensen’s skin by turns soft and rough, Jensen’s cock a hard line pressing into Castiel’s thigh.
“What do you want?” asked Jensen.

Castiel’s heartbeat was so loud in his ears he could scarce hear, his breaths so quick he couldn’t find air for speech.

“You...”

Jensen’s fingers cupped Castiel’s ass and toyed with the edges of the plug. An approving noise rattled from Jensen’s throat, rattled through Castiel’s body and mind, and Jensen twisted the plug, pulsed it slightly in and out of Castiel’s ass. Pleasure cascaded outwards and Castiel’s cock twitched, spitting dabs of pre-come that smeared on Jensen’s skin and caught in the coarse hairs on his legs.

“You know,” Castiel whined.

“Tell me,” Jensen insisted.

The hot presence before him vanished and Castiel nearly collapsed; he sobbed when Jensen pressed against his back, slotted his cock against Castiel’s behind. A hand between them stroked Jensen’s cock, rubbed Castiel’s ass, and Castiel swooned back against Jensen with a relieved moan.

“Use your words, Manny.”

“Please,” breathed Castiel.

Jensen nudged Castiel forward one step, then another. Castiel’s legs were pathetically weak. If he’d hadn’t been so hot, so hard, so desperate, he’d have been ashamed of his submission, ashamed of his need. As it was, he had barely enough rationality to know he should be ashamed, but he wasn’t. He’d obeyed his mother, obeyed his father, obeyed his older brothers, without question for thirty years. He’d asked nothing for himself, taken nothing he wasn’t entitled to. He’d reaped many benefits for his obedience but this...taking this for himself hurt no one, would never reflect on the family, was not being done on their hours. This was for Castiel.

Unless I’m caught...

Jensen’s supportive presence vanished again and, with a cry, Castiel’s knees went out and he tumbled forward. He braced for impact on the floor and was shocked when he landed on something soft instead, something giving, something that smelled of softener sheets and bounced under his weight.

Same brand of softener as Jensen’s shirt...

...bigger things to worry about right now!

The bed. He was bent over the bed. His hands clenched into fists, gathered the blankets, and he shoved his ass out behind him in invitation.

“Wow,” Jensen breathed. He was so far away. Why was he so far away? Castiel was drunk on the smell of money and grass, completely bare, completely lost. “Are you presenting for me, little alpha?”

“I’m not a—” Castiel bit the fabric before him to keep from speaking his lunacy aloud. Of course he was an alpha. He had a knot. He had a large cock. He didn’t make slick. He couldn’t have children. He wasn’t an omega. Wanting a knot didn’t make him an omega. Wanting to be an omega didn’t make him an omega.
He was a broken, sick alpha, and he needed this.

“Please, alpha!”

A sharp slap on Castiel’s ass forced a grunt from him. His hard cock brushed against the blankets and pleasure and pain combined and drove Castiel even higher. They’d hardly even touched and he was already gone, so damn gone.

“Tell me what you want,” snarled Jensen. The command, the snarling possessiveness of a demand spoken by an alpha, his alpha, snapped something in Castiel’s mind.

“Fuck me, alpha!” Castiel begged.

The plug was out of his ass.

Jensen’s hard, fat cock rubbed at him, sliding on slick, far too much slick, far more slick than Castiel had used. Jensen must have lubricated himself, there must be supplies in the room, and—

The thick nub of the head of Jensen’s cock pressed against Castiel’s rim. A sob hitched in Castiel’s throat. Jensen had looked impressive but against Castiel’s ass he felt enormous. Castiel’s body wasn’t designed to take something so large. There was no way. It was impossible. A soothing hand skimmed down Castiel’s spine, slid through the sweat Castiel hadn’t noticed forming.

“Relax,” whispered Jensen. A pained noise escaped Castiel and he tried, he tried, but God, he wanted to feel that cock inside him so badly, and at the same time…

...what if I don’t like it?

...what if I’m wrong?

...what if it hurts?

...what if I want Jensen to stop and he won’t?

...what if...

“I’ve got you,” Jensen murmured, leaning down to hover close over Castiel’s back. Jensen’s warm summer smell suffused the humid air between them and Castiel’s anxiety ebbed.

“You smell so good,” mumbled Castiel into the bedding.

“You’re gonna be my good bitch, right?” Jensen asked.

A flicker of panic clenched through Castiel’s body, tightened him from shoulder to ass to ankle – I’m not a bitch, I’m an alpha. I shouldn’t be turned on when he calls me that. I shouldn’t be turned on when an alpha puts me in place, but I am, God I am, what’s wrong with me? – and then Jensen’s lips closed over Castiel’s scent point and he sucked hard and the tension winding Castiel tight shattered. Jensen’s free hand caressed down Castiel’s side and over his ass, a thumb pressed into him and withdrew, and then the pressure of Jensen’s dick was back.

“Breathe for me, Manny.”

“Jen…” Castiel whispered. Jensen took an exaggerated breath, his chest pressing into Castiel’s back, and then exhaled with a whoosh. At his next inhale, Castiel mimicked him, breathing in deeply, letting it go with a sigh. Jensen kissed and sucked and tongued at Castiel’s scent point, marked him with bruises, claimed him if only for the night, and incrementally Castiel’s terror ebbed away. He
couldn’t have said how long passed, couldn’t have repeated what Jensen promised against his skin nor how Castiel replied, but the moment that Jensen’s thick cockhead finally, finally breached Castiel’s rim etched into Castiel’s brain with crystal clarity, every detail seared into Castiel’s existence.

The grunt that Jensen huffed against Castiel’s neck.

The burning stretch as Jensen pushed in an inch, another inch, another inch, another inch, another inch, God, his dick was never-ending.

The sweat that dripped from Jensen’s brow, splashed on Castiel’s skin, trailed down his cheek to rest beneath his nose and drown Castiel in the smell of new-mown grass and fresh lemonade.

The weird, so-wrong-yet-so-right feeling of Jensen filling him.

“How’re you doin’, Manny?” Jensen sounded surprisingly affected. As he sank deeper into Castiel, pulling out slightly and pushing back in farther, he brought shaking hands to rest on either side of Castiel’s body.

“It’s weird,” Castiel breathed. “It feels…it feels strange. Like I have to…” It was too embarrassing to admit that being filled triggered the part of his mind that usually only activated when he had to defecate. With a groan, Castiel tensed to keep himself from acting on the incongruous instinct. Freezing, Jensen echoed Castiel’s groan.

“Like you gotta take a dump?” Jensen managed, chuckling hot against Castiel’s neck.

“Yes,” Castiel admitted.

“You’ll get used to it ‘fore ya know it. I’ll stop any time you want me to,” vowed Jensen. Shifting, Castiel took a steadying breath and, one by one, eased his muscles. As soon as the pressure on his cock decreased, Jensen slid forward once more, and the pleasurable sensation slowly, slowly began to overwhelm the feelings of dirty-wrong-bad, must-use-the-toilet, and over-fullness that had accompanied the initial penetration.

“Don’t stop,” grunted Castiel. Jensen’s hips came to rest against Castiel’s ass and a dizzying moment stretched out – he’s in me, he’s truly in me, and it’s…it’s amazing.

And it’s going to feel so much better when...

Jensen didn’t move.

...when...

“Don’t stop,” Castiel repeated.

...why isn’t he having sex me? I told him to...I said...I actually said...

“Give it a moment, Manny,” said Jensen reassuringly.

Fuck me, alpha!!

Castiel was done with reassurance. He was there, he was with an alpha, he had a hard cock up his ass, and need burned incandescent beneath his skin. Jensen was a heavy weight over him, but Castiel could still move. Bucking his hips up, he rolled back against Jensen’s cock. Pleasure incinerated him, exploded over his senses, suffused him so completely that he wasn’t sure if he moaned or
Jensen moaned or they both did and he didn’t care.

“What part of fuck me, alpha wasn’t clear?” demanded Castiel.

There was a moment’s stunned silence and then Jensen moved, drew his hips back, slammed forward, stuffed Castiel full, and Castiel cried out in bliss.

“My little bitch has some spunk after all,” Jensen said as he drew out and thrust back in hard, repeated the movement again, again, not a pause as he did it again, again, again. “I’ll fuck that outta ya. Gonna make you beg for my knot.”

At least Jensen sounded enthusiastic, breathless and eager and strained. Sure, Castiel had hired Jensen, but Jensen clearly enjoyed his work. Knowing this wasn’t just job to Jensen pushed Castiel higher, intensified his pleasure.

An extra tug stretched at Castiel’s rim as Jensen drew back and thrust in once more. The knot at the base of Jensen’s cock was thickening.

*He’s really going to do it. I’m really going to…really going to be…*

All reason fled.

“Yes,” Castiel crowed, fucking back into every thrust.

*I need this.*

“Knot me, alpha! Please, please, please, please, please knot me!”

*I need this.*

“Gonna come in your ass, pretty omega,” Jensen promised. Castiel moaned and let Jensen ride him, did his damnedest to ride Jensen in return.

*I need this.*

“Gonna fill you so full,” continued Jensen.

*I need this.*

“Knot you so that we don’t waste a drop.”

*I need this.*

“Soak you in my come.”

*I need this.*

“Breed you like the little bitch you are.”

*I need this, oh God, I need this, Jen!”

“I know you do, Manny.” Skin slapped loud on skin with every thrust; Jensen no longer drew back far. His knot was swollen, stretching Castiel’s ass as the inflatable one had never been able to. With a final hard thrust, Jensen’s thick knot locked them together and Jensen humped his ass hard, harder.

“Aw, fuck, this feels…I had no idea…gonna breed you up—”
“Yes!”

“—gonna fuck you so good, gonna ruin you for any other alpha—”

“Please, Jen,” Castiel cried into the blankets. His mouth was gummy, his eyelids flashing brilliant white with every thrust, and he was lost, so lost.

Need this always, need this forever...

“Tell me, Manny!”

...don’t stop, don’t stop, say my name, say Cas, please, please, please, “please, please, please – fuck me, knot me, fill me, breed me, please, alpha, please—”

With a strangled exclamation, Jensen thrust into Castiel so hard that the bed slammed against the wall. Jensen strained to pull out but he couldn’t; pain and pleasure left Castiel reeling as Jensen’s large knot stretched Castiel’s insides, strained against his rim, pressed so hard, so so hard, against Castiel’s prostate. The pressure inside Castiel increased, and increased again – he’s coming, oh my God, I can feel it, I can smell it, it’s incredible – and then a hand closed around Castiel’s cock and fingers pressed against Castiel’s sensitive knot. Jensen’s ruined voice whispered in his ear, “Come for me, you fuckin’ gorgeous cocksut,” and Castiel shattered.

Wave upon wave of pleasure – peak after peak of bliss – stole consciousness, stole sense, stole Castiel from himself. Minutes passed, they must have, but all Castiel was aware of was the ever-greater swell within his ass, the strain of Jensen’s enormous cock inside his body, and the thumb digging into Castiel’s knot and massaging orgasm after orgasm from Castiel as he shook with helpless bliss. Sobbing against the blankets, Castiel tried to ride the rapture, but only Jensen’s continued presence, continued heat, continued knot, kept Castiel from flying apart.

When he finally came back to himself, it was to the sound of Jensen’s whispered reassurance, “You’re okay – I’ve got you – that was incredible – you’re going to be fine – breathe, Manny—”

Hearing the wrong name grounded Castiel, helped him regain control, helped stop him from continuing to whisper, “so good, so good, so good,” into the linty bedspread. With a shuddering gasp, Castiel went limp and Jensen finally, mercifully left off milking him.

Castiel could still feel Jensen filling him, swelling him more and more.

Terror brought him crashing down to earth.

“Are you tested?” Castiel wheezed out frantically. “Are you safe? Oh God, I—”

“Hey, hey, relax, I’m wearing a condom,” said Jensen. Limp with relief and bliss, Castiel collapsed back against the bed once more. “I need you to keep breathing, okay? Trust me, I know exactly how overwhelming this can be, especially when you’re not used to it.”

“I wish…” Castiel trailed off as Jensen gently rearranged their bodies. It was a multi-step process, and Castiel was scarce able to help, but when Jensen was done Castiel lay on the bed and Jensen lay alongside him, his cock yet lodged in Castiel’s ass, one arm draped awkwardly over Castiel’s chest, the other trapped between them.

“What do you wish?” Jensen asked.

Grasping the thought was hard, but Castiel found the trail, remembered what he’d been about to say, and grimaced as he admitted, “I wish you’d stop reminding me that I paid you for this.”
“I’m sorry I’m a whore,” said Jensen unsympathetically. There was a pained pause. “If it helps…” Jensen huffed out a breath, shimmied closer to Castiel’s back, and relaxed. “If it helps, this was a first for me, too.” Startled, Castiel twisted in Jensen’s arms and forced his eyes open. Jensen was flushed, his hair a mussed mess, white tracks of sweat obscuring the freckles dotted over his cheeks. Brilliant green eyes met Castiel’s gaze, and Jensen smiled at him gently, genuinely, much different than the smug confident smirk that had accompanied Jensen’s earlier flirting.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve always been the fuck-ee,” Jensen admitted. He sounded young, and happy, and Castiel’s heart lurched. The urge to strangle closer to Jensen was powerful, the desire to bury his nose in Jensen’s neck and soak every sense in Jensen’s scent overwhelming. “I’ve never been the fuck-er before. It was…it was fricken awesome.”

“Really?”

“Well, really,” confirmed Jensen, nodding. “I’m an alpha, sure, but looking like this?” He made a gesture that took in his slim arms, his narrow hips, his slim build and boyish features. Surely, Jensen couldn’t be older than 20. Castiel should feel guilty about the youth of his paramour, but he didn’t – another item for the list of things that, in his deviance, Castiel couldn’t be troubled to worry about and that he should be condemned for, damned for. “Alphas who want to bottom hire big tough guys who can dominate the fuck out of them – force them to submit – and omegas who hire alphas go for the nice guys, the ones who are perfectly proportioned and smell like roses and vanilla and shit – and fuck, I’m talking about my job again and I’m sorry but seriously, you don’t know what this means to me. I’m not just saying that. Thanks, Manny.”

“Cas,” Castiel croaked.

Oh, Castiel, you idiot…

Jensen looked a question at him.

…don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it…

“My name is Cas,” said Castiel.

This will end in disaster.

Jensen broke into a gorgeous, broad smile that revealed a row of perfect white teeth, and nuzzled Castiel’s neck, licking gentle kisses against the bruises he’d made over the sensitive skin of Castiel’s scent point.

“Thank you so much, Cas,” Jensen whispered. “This was great – really great. I hope…I hope you’ll want to do it again sometime. And…and when we do…if we do…maybe, uh, maybe call me Dean? That’s my name – you real name.”

“Dean…” Castiel sampled the name. Something clicked right in his head. He deliberately didn’t examine the feeling. “Next time…next time I’ll call you Dean.”

He meant every word.

God, I’m really screwed.

Yes, Jensen…Dean did really screw me, and it felt fantastic.

With a sad sigh, Castiel gave up. He’d fought himself and fought himself. Coming to Dean was a profound surrender, and now that the deed was done – now that a knot stretched his ass – now that
Dean knew Castiel’s preferred nickname…his thoughts were rich with self-reprimand but when he searched his heart he felt no actual regret. He felt a sense of responsibility, heard the whisper of his mother’s voices telling him how proper alphas behaved, and knew that he should feel guilty beyond expression.

But he didn’t feel guilty.

He felt good. Replete and pleased, with echoes of bliss yet rippling through his body and his mind. Strangest of all, he felt cared for. As if to emphasize the thought, Dean snuggled against Castiel’s back, wrapped an arm around Castiel’s chest, and brushed a line down Castiel’s abdomen and over his navel. Dean’s hand came to rest on Castiel’s belly, his palm kneading gently at the skin. Absurdly, Castiel could swear he felt the full condom shifting and sloshing within his sated body, triggering pinpricks of heat and bliss.

“I’ll definitely be back,” Castiel promised.

Dean sighed contentedly and, with a pleased sound, went limp against Castiel’s back. Castiel echoed the sigh, delighted in the clench of his muscles against the knot stretching him, and let the week’s exhaustion pull him under.

He’d never been happier in his life.

Tomorrow, he’d have to figure out what that meant.

Chapter End Notes

diminuel and I were a little torn on how to do the cover image...we went with "no flowers," but here's a version with flowers, it makes my little shoujo loving heart happy...
Chapter 2

An insistent beep startled Castiel to consciousness. Confusion swamped him; he couldn’t remember where he was, couldn’t figure out where the alarm was coming from, couldn’t understand why he felt strange and achy.

Castiel was alone, yet he didn’t think he should be.

Castiel had woken up alone every single day of his life. Of course he was alone.

He really wished the beeping would stop.

“Crap, sorry ’bout that,” said an alluring male voice, muffled as if the person was speaking around a mouthful of food. “Forgot to turn it off.”

Castiel forced his eyes open. Plain white blankets enfolded him, beige curtains glowed with obstructed sunshine. Rolling over, Castiel was greeted by a gorgeous vision of Dean, shirtless, his hair tousled, his legs enclosed in skin-tight jeans that drew the eye instantly to the sizeable bulge at his crotch, and a toothbrush sticking out from between his foamy lips.

_I had sex with him._

Giggling, Castiel watched Dean fiddle with his cell phone until the alarm stopped. The stunning alpha turned to him and quirked an eyebrow.

_He had sex with me._

Castiel curled in on himself and laughed harder.

“Oh-kay then,” said Dean, pulling the toothbrush out of his mouth. “How you doin’ this morning, Cas?”

“I’m very well.” Castiel was shocked by the gravel in his voice, rough and deep. “Thank you for asking, Dean. And you?”

“Didn’t want to wake you – we’ve technically got the room ’til eleven, but I can’t stay that long,” Dean explained, pocketing his phone. “I wasn’t sure if you had someplace to be – no need for you to be up, if you can sleep in.” Contrasted with the small raised square the cell made in his pocket, the bulge in Dean’s pants was even more prominent. “Wrote you a note,” he added, gesturing toward the night stand.

The urge to surge forward and mouth at Dean’s concealed cock was powerful.

_Maybe he’ll knot my mouth next time._

…next time?

“What time is it?” said Castiel, struggling to get his arms under him.

Dean held up a restraining hand and ducked into the bathroom; there was the sound of spitting, the rush of running water, and then he was back, wiping white foam from his lips with a hand towel.

_That could be my come dripping from his mouth._
“7,” Dean replied. “I gotta vamoose.”

“I’ve used up the hours I paid for?” asked Castiel.

Dean gave him a strange look. “Naw, dude,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, yeah, you did, you bought out the night and it’s distinctly not night. But normally I’d be game for more if you were. No dice today, though. I gotta get to my other job.”

“You have a day time position as well? That sounds exhausting.”

“It’s not so bad,” Dean said with a shrug. He leaned down and when he rose he was holding his shirt; he tugged it over his head, concealing his muscled abdomen. “Student on the weekdays, sex worker by night, and weekends on a stripper pole pretending to be Jenny from the block. It’s fun and it pays the bills!”

Troubled, Castiel watched Dean for any sign that he was unhappy with the scenario he described, and Castiel was surprised to see none. Dean grinned and kicked impressively high in the air considering how tight his pants were. The fabric strained obscenely over the thick cylinder of Dean’s dick and Castiel swallowed. Erotic dancing had never appealed to him, but when Castiel imagined Dean winding himself around a pole, sinking down low, shimmying up high, butt sticking out, cock straining against the thin, practically sheer fabric of a g-string…

“I’m glad you set an alarm.” The need to distance himself from the fantasy made Castiel’s voice harsh. Rolling out of bed, he got to his feet and hastily circled to where his clothing was heaped on the floor. “I need to go to work as well.” He pulled his pants on.

They were damp.

The carpet beneath his feet was damp.

The blankets nearest him were heavy and dark with liquid, clumps still clinging gooey in places.

*My come.*

...*Dean, pushing into my ass...Dean’s fingers kneading my knot...pleasure cresting over and over...*  

*Oh God, that’s disgusting.*

Nausea swirled Castiel’s stomach, spun his head. He wasn’t supposed to have sex outside of marriage. He wasn’t supposed to bottom – *no omega boys in this family!* His father’s voice bragged in his memories – and he wasn’t supposed to get off and he wasn’t supposed to have a knot, wasn’t supposed to have his knot touched.

Wait.

Yes, of course he was supposed to have a knot. What else *could* he have?

He was supposed to have knotted Dean, not the other way around.

*But I don’t want to knot Dean. I don’t want to knot anyone! I want...*  

Stumbling, Castiel fled to the bathroom. The urge to relieve himself was overwhelming, and he slammed the door, jerked his pants down and slumped onto the toilet. He remained seated long after he was finished, holding his head in his hands.

His butt hurt, his insides stretched and achy.
What had he been thinking, hiring a prostitute, asking Dean to have sex with him?

But it felt so good.

Or it had felt good. Now it felt wretched.

*Just because something feels good doesn’t mean that I should do it! Touching my knot feels good and yet…ugh, that’s a terrible example. Of course I should touch my knot. But being with Dean? No, no, no, no, no…*

Castiel was an adult. He was allowed to make his own choices, allowed to gate-keep his sexuality, allowed to pursue his life without reference to his parents’ expectations.

*Right, of course, I’m totally independent. That’s why I live at their house, and work at their company, and drive their least favorite car, and obey their every command.*

*Congratulations, Cas, I’ve finally found a streak of teenage rebellion. It only took me 31 years.*

A knock on the door pulled Castiel from his circling thoughts.

“You sure you’re okay?” asked Dean. Even with the door muffling his voice, his concern was obvious.

“Thank you, Dean, yes,” Castiel lied. “Have a good day.”

“See ya ‘round, Cas!”

*No, you won’t. I can never do this again. I should never have done this once. There won’t be a next time.*

The elevator doors dinged and Castiel looked up from his desk to see Gabriel emerge. Unusually, Castiel’s older brother looked furtively in both directions then walked with assumed casualness down the hallway toward Castiel’s office. He slid his hands into his pockets, threw his shoulders back, and pursed his lips as if whistling Dixie. Gabriel entered without knocking and nudged the door shut behind him.

He was whistling Dixie.

The moment they had a semblance of privacy, Gabriel’s face twisted into a smile as wide as that of the cat that caught the proverbial canary.

“Tell me *everything,*” Gabriel gushed, dropping into the chair facing Castiel’s desk, generally reserved for visiting clients.

Quirking an eyebrow, Castiel looked at Gabriel. “I never observed before how much like a teenage girl you behave at times.”

“Bull, I don’t act anything like Anna,” scoffed Gabriel.

“She’s 26,” Castiel pointed out.

“Whatsoever. I know you’re holding out on me, Cassie – but you weren’t holding out on *someone else,* and I want to know the dish. It’s about time you drop that prim-and-proper thing, anyway, that act was getting old – and *I’m* the teenage girl?”
Gabriel trailed off and leered at Castiel, his expression growing increasingly avid as Castiel made his best attempt at a quelling stare. He’d showered twice at the motel, which came with complimentary pheromone dispersing shampoo and body wash. He’d showered again during a brief stop at home, using the products he’d purchased before meeting Dean. He’d changed into a fresh suit and headed into the office to catch up on the e-mails and regular tasks he’d neglected during the previous week’s market shenanigans, optimistic that he’d concealed the evidence of his indiscretions.

While he’d been home, in the bright light of the spotless bathroom of the in-law apartment he facetiously called his own at his parent’s house, Castiel’s skin revealed a map of the events of the previous night. His neck and clavicle were dotted with red, black, and blue bruises concentrated around his scent glands. His eyes were bloodshot with fatigue. The skin of his belly and hips and thighs were marred with red crescents where Dean’s finger nails had dug into Castiel’s flesh. The pleasant, loose feeling that had suffused him and eased him the previous night had given way to aches in places he’d not realized could ache. He’d anticipated some post-sex pain but he hurt so much worse than he’d expected, especially around his anus. Now that he was at work, every time he shifted in his plush office chair, his behind twinged and reminded him of how large Dean’s cock was, how much larger it had grown when Dean’s knot had filled out, and how it had felt to be stretched and stuffed.

The memory did not turn Castiel on.

He did not want to repeat the experience.

Gabriel’s Cheshire cat smile stretched wider. “Oh ho ho, I knew it. Lemme see!”

“What are you talking about, Gabriel?” Castiel asked, donning offended sensibilities like a mask.

“It’s 60 degrees out and you’re wearing a turtleneck,” said Gabriel, rolling his eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear a turtleneck – and good call on that, never wear one again, burn the one you have on, it makes you look like a Grade A Class 1 douchebag – and yet here you are, wearing one to work, the morning after you stay out all night for the first time ever, and the same day that you smell so neutral it’s you’re entering witness protection or some shit. Either you fucked your brains out or you’ve turned whistleblower, and either way, I want to know about it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Castiel rebuked with what dignity he could muster. Gabriel was supremely unphased. Castiel wondered why he bothered to fight back; Gabriel was positive he knew the truth, he wasn’t wrong, and he was stubborn as a mule. The whistleblower line was a shallow joke; say what they might about Naomi, but she was ethical in her business dealings – ruthlessly, unscrupulously ethical. Gabriel knew that as well as Castiel did. Like the dog that got the bone, he’d nag at Castiel and nip at his ankles until Castiel confessed how he’d spent the previous evening.

“Then it’d be no biggie if I came over there and pulled that turtleneck down?” asked Gabriel. He set his hands on the armrests of the chair with a threatening smile. Scowling discouragement, Castiel stared Gabriel down and produced zero alteration in Gabriel’s behavior. His brother rose, circled the desk, and chortled as he lay a finger on Castiel’s neck. Castiel had plenty of time to dodge, but why bother? He might win the battle but the war was already lost. With a resigned sigh, he let Gabriel roll the collar down and reveal the purpling bruises Dean had sucked into his neck. At least his brother stood between Castiel and the camera watching his office. If word of Castiel’s exploits got back to their parents…

“Happy now?” said Castiel flatly.

“Not near as happy as you were, I bet!” crowed Gabriel. “How’d it feel to finally tie the knot? I
cannot believe you waited this long, what, ‘cause Shurley and Novak want your perfectly unslicked alpha dick pristine for their plotting? One dip in the hole and you’re not suitable arranged marriage material? As if neither of them got their kicks before getting married – I call bullshit. You know Novak sampled more than a few channels before settling in to her current network.”

“You shouldn’t talk about mother and father that way,” Castiel replied, but there was no heart behind his reprimand. He was sick of being their parents’ pawn, and was certain his older brothers hadn’t been chaste, but he also understood as Gabriel never seemed to how supremely ungrateful his elders were in their disobedience. Castiel’s life – all their lives – had been a cakewalk; he’d been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, surrounded by every luxury money could buy. He’d never had to worry about food to put on the table, never had to worry about a roof over his head, never had to despair over how he’d pay his bills. He had enough money for himself, more than he could spend in a lifetime, enough extra that he gave amply to charity to assuage the guilt he felt over the mischance that he’d been lucky enough to be born the son of the founders of the International Angel Deposit Bank.

Not like Dean, forced to sell his body to pay for school...

...even if I never hire him again, I could help him: give him money, pay for his education...

...and I could have done that yesterday. But instead of acting like a decent human being, I negotiated his price down as if I couldn’t afford the fifty dollar difference.

Sometimes I’m so much like Charles and Naomi it makes me sick.

Gabriel spun Castiel’s office chair around and met his eyes skeptically.

“What?” asked Castiel, trying and failing to avoid his brother’s piercing gaze. Gabriel’s eyebrow quirked even farther up. “What, Gabriel?”

“Did it make you happy, Cassie?” Gabriel asked, and despite all his needling, all his sass, all his brashness, there was a sincere edge to Gabriel’s voice that cut Castiel to the core. Lowering his eyes, catching the ends of his tweed jacket in his hands, Castiel nodded and murmured assent. “Good. I’m glad. All those fancy-ass boarding schools, that ludicrously expensive degree, and none of it taught you how to smile.” Castiel’s heart stirred and he gave a grateful half-shrug. “I swear, it hurts to look at you sometimes, you’re so damn hide-bound.”

The brotherly moment shattered.

“Satisfied? Good,” said Castiel. “Now leave me alone. I have work to do.” He jerked himself from Gabriel’s loose grip and spinning his chair around. The plush back support slammed into Gabriel hard enough to draw a pained oof. “As, I believe, do you?”

“All work and no play make Castiel an exceedingly dull boy,” Gabriel said trippingly, walking around the desk and rubbing his side with a show of affronted dignity. “Live a little – a little more than however much you lived yesterday.”

“Someone has to pick up your slack,” grumbled Castiel, glancing up to catch the twinkle in Gabriel’s eye.

“Oh, and Cassie?” said Gabriel, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. “I know you, so I’m gonna say this now, and as many more times as I need to until the message gets through your thick skull. Whatever you did, whoever you did it with, if it made you happy, you keep doing it, and fuck what our parents think. Charles Shurley and Naomi Novak haven’t spent five minutes in their whole lives
thinking of anyone other than themselves, and I’ll be dead before I grow up to see you like them and Mikey and Lucifer.”


“Doesn’t he *just*?” Gabriel shot Castiel a cockeyed grin and left the office. With a sigh, Castiel returned to answering irate e-mails, detailing for every complaining client how he’d invested their money and why.

*Gabriel’s right, you know.*

Castiel was so damn lucky to have Gabriel as a brother.

“Cassie, it’s *midnight*. For the love of God, get out of here and get your beaux to give you some fresh hickeys. The others are fading, you wore a collared shirt yesterday!”

“You’ve seemed down the past few days, Cassie. Not taking my advice?”

“Get thee to a knottery, my boy. Get thee to a knottery!”

“You. That cock. Some lovely beta or omega ass. Tonight, one night only.”

“Do the thing, Cassie. Just…just do the damn thing, will you?”

“Maybe I’ve not being clear enough. Cassie: *get the fuck out of here and get laid.*”

Most of the time, Castiel found it easy to push his sexual encounter with Dean to the recesses of his mind. He worked such long hours, day in and day out, week in and week out, and the work was so engrossing, if not engaging, that he scarce had attention to spare for his memories, no matter how enticing.

*…the smell of crushed green grass and sunshine and lemons and sugar…*

Every few days, Gabriel, Yenta that he was, stuck his head into Castiel’s office and reminded him. If not for those reminders, Castiel was *positive* that he’d have moved on and wouldn’t think of Dean at all.

*…a thick knot swelling, swelling, and catching at his rim…*

It had been an experience, a once-in-a-lifetime, wonderful, never-to-be-repeated experience, and Castiel was fine with that. He didn’t think about it anymore. It didn’t haunt his days. It didn’t tantalize his memories as he drifted toward sleep. It didn’t creep into his dreams.

*…artificial slick leaking out of Castiel’s spread hole…*

Castiel had moved on.

*…moans and grunts and the slap of skin on skin…*

At 6 AM when his alarm went off every morning.

*…hard cock pressing against the most sensitive places in Castiel’s body over and over and over and over and over…*

At 7 AM when he got to work, took a seat at his desk, and reviewed his news feeds for the latest on
the international markets that had opened hours earlier.

...hands gripping his hips, pulling him back in to every thrust...

At 9 AM when his first client arrived for their scheduled meetings.

...fingers kneading against his knot...

At 12:15 PM when Singer, by turns janitor and errand man, delivered his lunch to his desk.

...a sultry voice whispering delicious filth against his ear...

At 5 PM when the regular staff said their goodbyes for the day.

...plush lips sucking against his scent gland...

At 9 PM when Singer returned and cleaned his office, asking with an inarticulate grunt for Castiel to lift his feet so that he could vacuum the carpet beneath the desk.

...sweat squelching between them, mixing their scents, commingling to create something new and uniquely theirs...

At 11 PM when Gabriel inevitably visited to mock Castiel’s dedication to his work, indifferent to the irony that he was also still at work.

...pleasure, unspeakable in its perfect ecstasy, rapturous, bombarding him from every direction...

At 12 AM, when Castiel stumbled home, unlocked the side door that accessed his apartment, mounted the stairs, dropped his briefcase on the table by the entryway, kicked off his shoes, and tottered through his evening routine.

...a feeling of rightness, of completeness, of belonging, unlike anything he’d imagined...

At 1 AM, when he finally, mercifully sank onto his bed, asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, so Castiel could get what rest he might before waking up the next morning and going through the motions once again.

...I miss Dean...

“Cassie, how long do you think you can keep going like this?”

Tired, Castiel looked from his computer monitor; he’d been staring at it for so long that the glowing stock figures ghosted over his vision bright white. Gabriel sounded so unlike himself that for a moment Castiel was confused who had addressed him.

But if not Gabriel, who else? No one outside the family would speak to me so...familiarly...and no one within the family would say something like that …they’d ask why I’m not working even harder, allude to all the tasks on which I’ve fallen behind...

“Don’t you have work to do? I’m busy. That’s why I’m still here.”

“The world will keep spinning if you stop for five minutes, or even an hour,” said Gabriel, sinking into the chair opposite Castiel. He looked tired, his features slack, his brown hair limp about his ears. “IADB will continue to make money hand over fist regardless of how you spend your evening. I don’t want you to wake up one day and realize you’ve gained weight, you’re lonely, your 40th is around the corner, and you sold your soul for profit.”
“You’re describing Michael.”

“Exactly! I don’t want you to be a little Mikey clone!”

A chill ran down Castiel’s spine and he sighed, his shoulders slumping, and collapsed back in his chair.

“That would be…inideal.”

“Pretty sure that’s not a word,” said Gabriel.

“Unideal?”

“Nope.”

“I know it’s not ‘abideal’ or…or…” Castiel shook his head, trying to clear the fog, but the computer screen dazzled his sight and his office flashed a shade of off-white that crinkled black around the edges like old film.

*I’m so tired.*

“When was the last time you had a good night sleep?”

*The only time I can remember getting a good night’s sleep in…in years…maybe ever…*

*…was when I fell asleep in Dean’s arms, his knot still in me.*

The feelings evoked were so immediate, so intense, so intimate, that Castiel stared into space ahead of himself, stunned.

“I don’t…I don’t know,” he lied.

“Bullshit,” Gabriel snorted. “I was looking right at you. You thought of *something*. It was that night, right? The one before you came in with the hiccys. Haven’t seen that horrid turtleneck since then. What’s stopping you? Your SO dump you or something?”

“No!” Castiel exclaimed, sitting upright sharply. His back gave an unpleasant spasm and he settled into his chair with a sigh, wrapping a hand around his forehead and massaging his temples with his thumb and forefinger. “No, they didn’t ‘dump me.’ It wasn’t like that.”

“What *was* it like?” asked Gabriel.

Castiel shifted his hand aside and stared acid at his brother. “Is this a heart-to-heart? I thought you didn’t ‘do’ feelings.”

“Pshh, I only said that to Kali to get her to stop demanding a commitment,” said Gabriel with a flippant wave of his hand. “But for you, baby bro…I will play armchair psychologist ‘til the cows shit on the green grass on the other side, or something.” Gabriel’s grin fell away and his eyes lowered. “I’m worried. It’s like I’m losing you.”

“That would imply there was a time when you had ‘had me.’” Castiel took his fingers from the computer to make air quotes and Gabriel looked at him, aghast.

“*Never* do that again,” Gabriel declared. “I don’t even know you! Who are you and what did you do with my kid brother?”
“What do you want, Gabriel?” asked Castiel. Gabriel started to reply but Castiel added harshly, “Other than to waste my time and ensure I’m here until past midnight? Again? And risk our parents checking the cameras, noticing that we’re talking about something unrelated to work, and getting curious?”

“Ugh, fuck, no, I do not want that, none of that, why would you even think—?” Gabriel sighed, dropped his head back, blinked at the ceiling, and slouched in the chair. “Is it so hard to believe that I thought whoever you were boning made you happy, and that seeing you happy made me happy?”

Guilt spiked through Castiel’s gut, intensified by a hard edge of fatigue that he’d been ignoring for so long that he’d not realized it was there. With his attention drawn to how tired he was, the full, crushing weight of exhaustion and loneliness threatened to tear him apart. His shoulders slumped. Gabriel didn’t deserve Castiel’s reprobation. Over the years, when Naomi Novak, God of the boardroom, and Charles Shurley, her second in command, had been too busy to play ‘big happy family’ with the children they’d conceived but couldn’t be bothered to raise, Gabriel had been Castiel’s father, his mother, his big brother, his best friend, and his tutor, wrapped into one.

...don’t fool yourself, Castiel – Gabriel is still my main confidant...my only confidant...and I always make him come to me, and never offer to support him in return...one of these days he’ll stop coming, he’ll stop needling me, and I’ll regret my selfishness.

I won’t let that happen.

“It’s not hard to believe that,” admitted Castiel quietly. “I suppose I didn’t…” He shook his head, not sure where he was going with the thought, and a fatigue headache throbbed spontaneously behind his eyes. “I didn’t ‘bone’ anyone.”

“Air quotes, Cassie!”

“Nor did I knot anyone,” he continued as if Gabriel hadn’t interrupted. “I did…” He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue. No matter how guilty he felt, Castiel reminded himself that he’d not actually don’t anything wrong. Hiring a prostitute was frowned upon by polite society but it was neither illegal nor unethical. He’d courted his parents’ disapproval, but Gabriel would never share Castiel’s secret with anyone, least of all with Charles and Naomi. There was no reason for Castiel to keep his actions a secret. If anyone would understand and accept what Castiel had done...

“I hired a prostitute, Gabriel. An alpha. And I…I paid him to…” Shame colored his cheeks. A lifetime of his mother’s praise, her pride to be raising three alphas, the strength of her alpha genes combined with Shurley’s beta ones, whispered insidiously in his memory. She’d celebrated her triumph so many times the words were etched in his mind, and he heard them in her voice, with her inflection. “Castiel, this is why I didn’t marry an omega. The Novak name must be continued, and the only way to assure that is to have alpha children. You’ll do very well, Castiel, very well indeed…”

“He knotted you,” breathed Gabriel, correctly interpreting the silence.

Gabriel knew Castiel too well.

Shoving his chair away from his desk, Castiel rose and walked to the ceiling-height glass windows that overlooked Palmeton’s downtown business district. IADB’s headquarters was the tallest building in the city. Since the founding of IADB, Palmeton had blossomed into a metropolis. His parents took pride in the view of the surrounding office buildings, all deferentially built a few stories shorter and a few panes of glass less magnificent, over streets aglimmer with traffic lights, headlights and taillights forever in motion even so late at night, over residential districts darkened for the
witching hour. The dark pane reflected Castiel’s face by the light of the computer monitor, highlighted the curve of his nose, the harsh lines of his cheek bones, the stubble clouding his chin, while leaving his eyes in deep shadow. The carpet muffled Gabriel’s approach, his reflection gradually resolving from a blur into the diaphanous phantom of Gabriel’s familiar features. In contrast to Castiel’s bright planes and dark depths, Gabriel’s face caught the light so well it seemed to shine, angelic, and his pale eyes shimmered.

“Castiel…”

“Do you ever feel like…” Castiel trailed off, searching for the right words. He’d scarce let himself think what he now shied away from, much less attempted to express himself. His forehead hit the glass with a *thunk* and he closed his eyes to shut out the vision of the city, so vibrant and alive and infinitely distant. “This is all wrong.”

“Often,” Gabriel chuckled. The reply seemed so disconnected from Castiel’s thoughts that for a moment he didn’t realize what Gabriel meant.

“Oh – *he thinks I was completing my thought, “do you ever feel like this is all wrong”* – when Castiel had truly meant the second to stand alone, complete, encompassing Castiel’s life and everything his parents had planned for him since the day he was born with the flap of skin on his penis indicating that, at maturity, he’d be an alpha.

“You know you don’t *have* to follow the path our parents laid out for you.” An apparition caught Castiel’s eye, a shape that resolved into the reflection of Gabriel’s hand as he lifted it hesitantly to above Castiel’s shoulder. Castiel flinched and Gabriel let it drop with a sigh. “I’ll vamoose, if you want.”

“I don’t know what I want,” Castiel confessed. Anguish twinged his voice. It was the truest thing he’d ever said, and he had no idea what to do with the realization. When he peeked beneath the mask of his parents’ expectations, there was nothing. Without the structure they’d given his life, Castiel had nothing. Castiel was no one. Gabriel turned, the light of the computer screen catching in his hair to form a golden halo. “Don’t go.” Gabriel froze. “What should I do, Gabriel?” Slowly, Gabriel turned back to Castiel, his brow knit, his eyes aglow. Castiel forced himself off the cold glass, forced himself to support his full weight, to turn and actually *look* at his brother. Backlit by the screen, Gabriel’s features went from gilded to black. “Tell me what to do.”

“Never,” Gabriel breathed. “I’ll stay as long as you want, listen to anything you share, but I’ve played surrogate parent for you enough for one lifetime. If you need a drinking buddy or someone to talk all night with or a hug or some shit, I’m here for you, Cassie, but I will never *command* you. Did being with the sex worker make you happy?” Tears in his eyes – *when was the last time I cried? Have I ever cried?* – Castiel nodded. “Let’s focus on that. Forget what Shurley and Novak have told you. Forget society’s celibacy bullshit. Forget what you’re *supposed* to want and *supposed* to do. All else being equal, what would you do?”

The moment when Dean first stretched him, first filled him, revived in Castiel’s memory in vivid detail.

“Whatsoever you’re thinking right now? Just my opinion but – I’d say do that,” Gabriel suggested. Castiel wondered how he must look and flushed. “No shame. Anything you want – as long as the only people who get hurt are consenting adults – you take it by the balls, Cassie.”

“I’d rather he take me by the balls,” Castiel deadpanned.

“There’s my kid bro!” Gabriel exclaimed. “You go find that ball grabber!”

“I…will.”
...I'd...I'd like to do that.

...I think I will.

In a daze, Castiel managed to say something that resembled goodbye. Gabriel grinned after him, eyes sparkling with mischief and delight.

In a daze, Castiel took the elevator down, down, down, to the basement parking lot. It was dark and empty so late. Even Naomi and Charles’ parking spots were empty. A vague memory suggested they were in Milan for a weekend getaway. The work ethic they’d instilled in their children didn’t apply to them; they’d paid their dues and done their part and could enjoy the fruits of what they’d built. Castiel and his brothers and sister had yet to earn anything of their own, and thus were entitled to nothing of their own.

Except for Dean. What I did with Dean – what I’ll hopefully do with Dean again – was all for me, is all for me, will always be entirely my own.

In a daze, Castiel unlocked the Lincoln, got in, and started the engine. It roared to life, humming beneath him, around him, and the vibration sent a shocking trickle of heat through Castiel. His cock shifted against his underwear.

In a daze, Castiel navigated from the lot and out into the city streets. The streets were deserted so late, and in scant minutes that seemed to drag forever then fly by in the blink of an eye, Castiel was on Raleigh.

In a daze, Castiel braked his car before the stop sign by the unknown alley.

A rap against the glass pulled him from his reverie. Glancing over, he caught Meg’s eyes, dark as night, as she smiled and waved. The glass barrier dulled her voice as she said, “Welcome back, Emmanuel!”

“It’s good to be back,” said Castiel, surprising himself with the utter truth of the words. Why did I fight this so hard? He reached across the passenger seat and rolled the window down. “You remembered my name.”

“Face as pretty as yours? I’d be prepared to remember way more than a name.” Leaning forward, Meg slid her head through the open window, rested her arms on the window lip. Her breasts settled over her arms, cleavage overflowing into the car’s cockpit. Dark ringlets bounced about her lovely face, her cheeks swelling with a smile. She licked her lips suggestively.

Didn’t she say last time she wasn’t interested in sleeping with me?

“I’ll…keep it in mind.”

What changed?

I suppose it doesn’t matter. I still wouldn’t have sex with her, and as I’m the customer…

“Hesitating mighty long at this stop sign again,” she continued, her pose and her phrasing giving Castiel flashbacks to his first night there. Anticipation tingled down his spine. “Need a hand again? I’m always happy to help.” She made a suggestive gesture, suggestively licked her lips, suggestively eye-waggled, and suggestively wiggled, setting her breasts to bouncing.

“No,” Castiel said, his confidence growing. “I know exactly what I want.”
“Oh ho, is that how things are.” Meg’s laugh was beautiful, and she dropped her sultry act to give him a pleased grin. “Last I saw, Jenny was hanging with Vic and Ash on the corner of Raleigh and Lima. Have at!” With a wave of gracious invitation, she stepped back from the car.

A shiver trailed down Castiel’s spine as he reached over, rolled the window up, and started down Raleigh. His hands shook on the steering wheel. Eagerness. Castiel didn’t feel a trace of nerves. A litany of self-recrimination continued to play on infinite repeat in the back of his mind, but the sense of peace he’d felt after his first encounter with Dean, the sense of peace that had evaporated as soon as he’d returned to work, was back. Castiel felt guilty for defying his parents’ wishes and ashamed of bucking societal expectations, but he had no regrets.

Castiel wanted Dean.

And whether Dean wants me or not, he’ll have sex with me if I pay him.

A leaden weight seemed to sink into Castiel’s belly and stuff his throat. Surely, Dean would say no if he didn’t want to be with Castiel, regardless of how much money Castiel offered?

Either way, it’s none of my business. Dean provides a service and presumably can refuse to deliver that service when he wishes. If he’s still at the corner when I get there – if no one else has hired him since Meg last saw him…

Jealousy flared hot. As he pulled up to the corner of Lima, Castiel berated himself. He had no claim to Dean. They weren’t dating. They’d had sex once.

Yeah, and how many people has he been with since then? How many people have knotted him? So many…he’s going to smell like all of them, and maybe he enjoyed their company more than mine, maybe he scent-bonded with someone…he’s probably forgotten about me.

No.

How many people has he knotted?

Just one. He’s knotted no one but me.

He won’t have forgotten me. The interest he showed – the arousal evident in every caress – that can’t be feigned.

Castiel glowed with pride. There was no reason to think Dean had told the truth when he’d claimed Castiel was his first and yet Castiel didn’t feel a glimmer of doubt. There had been such sincerity in Dean’s voice when he’d admitted that he’d never knotted someone, such undeniable gratefulness giving a warm lilt to every word when he’d thanked Castiel.

He was telling the truth...or I want to believe him so desperately that I’m prepared to delude myself into thinking he told the truth...either way…

Castiel stopped the Lincoln before the group of talking men – a dark-skinned man whose shaved head gleamed multi-colored reflecting the fairy lights strung from the fire escape above, a lean man with tanned skin and a strange haircut, and Dean. They turned toward his car. Dean broke into a wide grin of recognition and approached as Castiel rolled the window down. The scent of green grass and sun-baked heat enveloped Castiel; it was all he could do not to close his eyes and bask.

“Evening, C…Manny!” Dean said. If he was a fraction as affected by Castiel’s scent as Castiel was by his, there was no sign of it.
What, after dodging the bullet of a scent bond the first time, now I’m hoping we’re scent-compatible? Ridiculous. If we’d been compatible we’d have a bond already. He’s obviously not attracted to my scent. And that’s fine.

“Good evening, Jensen,” said Castiel, forcing himself to solemnity lest he embarrass himself in his enthusiasm.

This isn’t a relationship.

It’s a business deal.

I need to be ready to embrace…to knot…whatever mate my parents select for me.

“What’s your pleasure?” Dean’s smile faded somewhat, and Castiel’s racing heart slowed. Business transaction. Not a relationship. No matter what Gabriel supposed about my getting dumped by a significant other. “Might I recommend Vic? His cock is…phew…you gotta experience it to believe it, seriously.”

“You,” said Castiel. Dean’s grin returned, and Castiel’s heart fluttered. Fool. “My pleasure is you. Five hundred dollars for the night.”

“Uh oh, you’re going big on me – what, you want something weird this time?” Dean laughed and the litany of guilt whispering in Naomi’s voice in the back of Castiel’s mind grew louder.

How dare my darling alpha boy sully himself with this whore’s knot? He’ll despoil you, ruin you for a respectable marriage, destroy your station in life…you should be ashamed of yourself, Castiel…

“I want the same as last time,” Castiel replied. His voice sounded strange, toneless and flat and emotionless. “You’re worth more than you asked for, worth more than I paid you.”

With a puzzled frown, Dean nodded slowly. “Okay, sure. It’s a deal.”

By the time Dean had circled the car and gotten in the passenger side, his smiles were back. They looked fake to Castiel now, a mask that Dean had assumed for the promise of a sizeable payday.

What else do you expect from a slut who lets others knot him for money? That’s not how a proper alpha acts. No child of mine will behave that way!

Between the imagined words of condemnation from his mother and Dean’s false interest, Castiel couldn’t bring himself to shift his foot to the gas, couldn’t bring himself to continue their transaction as if everything was copacetic.

“Is something the matter?” Castiel asked.


“You seem…off,” Castiel said. “If you’d prefer to await other clients, I understand.”

“Dude, no, we’re cool.” Dean shook his head. He’s saying that because I offered him so much money. I should have offered the same amount as last time. If he thinks he’s worth two hundred and fifty dollars for the night, who am I to contest that? “Sorry if I went weird for a sec, but you seemed off.” Quirking his head to the side, Castiel looked his confusion at Dean. “Like, not into it…at all? Ya know you’re not obliged to hire me again just ’cause you did the first time, right? Sure, some clients pick favorites but others sample the wares – play the field – before they settle into a regular arrangement. Like I said, Vic is a damn good lay – I’d recommend him anytime.” The longer Dean
spoke, the more his words caused the tension clenched in Castiel’s chest to tighten.

“I’m not interesting in anybody else,” Castiel replied. “I want you, Dean.”

“Spiff, awesome, good, ‘cause you got me, and I definitely don’t want to share.” There was an air of relief to how Dean sighed and something sharp in his scent that Castiel had thought normal dissipated. Despite his reticence, he shifted the car into gear and motored down Raleigh.

Even his scent lied to me. The tang of lemon is gone.

“Of course not,” said Castiel bitterly. “You’d want to keep that $500 for yourself, right?”

I liked the tang of lemon.

“Hey, not gonna lie, that’s damn good money,” Dean agreed with a shrug. “That’ll pay for half a credit of school – can’t pass up that kinda change. But don’t sell yourself short. Last time was…good. Really good. And trust me, I have a lot to compare it to.”

“Do you? I must have misunderstood.”

Maybe this is exactly what I need. Flagrant, constant reminders that he’s a slut and a whore, not a wholesome member of society, not available, not a paramour. His scent was deceptive, and he lied to me about knotting others. He’s no one – just a good time, an indulgence I can have for the right price, like a night at the theater or a vacation excursion.

“Huh?”

No amount of castigating himself could convince Castiel that was true. Castiel wanted to like Dean, wanted to scent him, wanted to have sex with him. Castiel wanted their liaison to mean something to both of them.

“You claimed that you’d never knotted anyone before.”

“Geeze, quick to suggest I’m some stupid alpha knothead, aren’t you?” Castiel glanced over to see Dean rolling his eyes and shaking his head. “Never knotted anyone but you, Cas, and you seemed damn happy about it at the time. Given how you’re behaving now, I got no clue why you came back, though.”

Because it felt incredible. Because...

“I…I was…it was good…but would you please stop reminding me that you’re experienced? That you’re a…a prostitute?” Castiel implored.

“No,” said Dean.

“What?” Affronted, Castiel braked harder than he needed to as he took the turn into the Cajun Delights parking lot. Inertia knocked Dean into the passenger side door and he grunted. “I’m the customer,” Castiel spluttered. “And I’ve asked you not to—”

“And I said no,” Dean interrupted. “Look, Manny or Cas or whatever the fuck your name is, I suspected you were one of those but I’d hoped…like, fuck, I figured any alpha willing to pay to have someone ream them up the ass couldn’t be all bad.” Castiel pulled the Continental into a parking space, too stunned by Dean’s coarse language and denial to formulate a reply beyond a petulant how dare you that sounded way too much like something his mother would say. “I got too much self-respect to waste time on someone who won’t respect me.”
“I’m paying you five hundred dollars,” Castiel managed.

...because that doesn’t sound like my mother, ranting about money and payment and employment as if she can buy the world. Damn, when did I turn into her? Gabriel would weep to hear me...

“Ain’t payin’ me a penny without my consent, asshole,” snarled Dean. He smacked his seatbelt open with a clatter, jerked the door open, and burst from the car, vibrating with energy. Taking two jittery steps away, he whirled around, slapped his palms on the hood, and snapped, “Consider this revocation of my consent.” Slamming the car door shut, he stalked away, up the street toward where they’d met.

*He’s right. I’m being an asshole. Why am I being an asshole?*

“Wait…” Castiel called weakly.

_Because I’m scared of how much I want this. I’m scared of how my family will react – everyone other than Gabriel. I’m scared of the consequences should this relationship be discovered._

_I’m scared of Dean._

_I’m scared of myself._

“Dean, wait…” he shouted more confidently, getting out of the car.

“Don’t make me get Benny,” Dean bellowed back, flipping his middle finger over his shoulder as he strode away.

“You’re right!”

“Oh, _now_ the bitch has a change of heart.” Skipping around, Dean turned, walking backward, and aimed a sneer at Castiel. “Sorry, gonna have to find someone else to get your rocks off with. Pro-tip? Whore and prostitute are damn Victorian terms, we prefer sex worker these days. And it’s a profession, not…whatever the fuck you think it is. I’m still not Julia fucking Roberts.”

Sprinting around the car, Castiel chased Dean, whose eyes widened and whose posture shifted defensively. Castiel’s insides lurched, wondering what Dean had been through that he’d find Castiel’s behavior threatening, and he dropped to his knees with enough momentum that they scraped painfully on the blacktop despite the protective barrier of his slacks. Raising his hands in supplication, Castiel bowed his head to Dean.

“I’m sorry.” Castiel paused a moment but Dean said nothing. “You’re absolutely right, and I’m wrong.”

“Get up,” said Dean, disgusted. A shadow blocked the yellow light of the street lamp and Castiel glanced up to see Dean’s scuffed sneakers feet away. _He came back. Why would he come back?_ Hesitantly, Castiel looked up. Dean towered over him, scent overwhelming, noxious with lemon, and Castiel’s instincts screamed for him to bare his neck in submission. “I’m not gonna fuck you, Cas…or…”

“Cas,” Castiel confirmed. “That’s really my name. Or, it’s really my nickname. I can’t…I shouldn’t…and you don’t have to. I treated you like an object instead of like a person – worse, I treated you like an object that I could possess by offering you money. My parents…my family…I’ve been treated like that my whole life and I know better, and yet…you don’t have to stay, but maybe…maybe we could talk?”
“Guy’s gotta make a buck,” Dean scowled. “What part of this is my job ain’t getting through to you? If you’re not hiring me – and, spoilers, you’re not hiring me – I ain’t got time to sit and talk because poor prissy boy got visited by the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future, and has finally seen the light. It’s not my job to educate you. Sort your shit out, not-my-real-name Cas, and then maybe – maybe – we can talk. You know where to find me.”

Dean turned and walked away, shoes making a rhythmic brush-brush against the concrete, scent dissipating in the wind.

A tear splashed onto Castiel’s arm and made a dark spot on his trench coat. A second tear followed, a third, streams dampening his cheeks and dripping from his chin.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’ve been all over the place today…exhaustion, and too much work, and too much repression…like some omega, about to go into heat…

God, Castiel had needed this break, needed Dean so damn badly, and he’d destroyed his opportunity with his prejudices. Sure, he could go hire someone else but there was an itch under his skin, a burr in his throat, and he knew no one but Dean would be able to scratch that itch. He had a connection with Dean – surely, surely that wasn’t his imagination, surely Dean had felt that connection as well – and the thought of letting anyone else penetrate his body was nauseating. Sniffling, Castiel swallowed mucus and his stomach roiled.

“Please…” he whispered.

There was no one to hear.

Wow, struck out with a hooker, way to go Cassie-my-bro, Gabriel’s voice mocked him.

Can you really be so naïve as to be taken by surprise by how someone like that acts? He could perfectly picture his mother’s condescending sneer, the upturn of her nose, the delicate lift of her hand in a disdainful gesture.

You’re letting inconsequential things distract you from your higher purpose, scoffed Michael. Never knew I had a deviant for a brother.

The tears spilled faster, hot, spattering on his sleeves and on the flaps of the trench coat where the fabric fanned about his legs.

Little alpha Cassie, hiding in a tree, F-U-C-K-E-D… Luke mocked him, had always mocked him. Damn it, why was Castiel broken? Why had he always been broken? He wasn’t a good alpha, wasn’t a good brother, wasn’t a good son…the only damn thing he was any good at was investing, and he hated it. And the only thing he’d ever wanted for himself…

“Damn,” he muttered. He scrubbed a sleeve over his face; salt stung his eyes and snot made a disgusting trail over the fabric. “Damn!” Suddenly furious – with his brothers and his parents and everyone – he slammed his fists into the ground. Pebbles dug into his flesh, a shard of glass cut into his pinky, and the pain felt good, gave him something to focus on, created a tangible outlet for the emotions roiling him. Hunching over, he punched the blacktop again, again, his knuckles cracking, tears disappearing under his fists.

This was my fault. Dean has been straightforward with me from the get-go. My behavior, my unwillingness to accept the nature of our financial and sexual relationship, are why he left. It’s not because of the kind of person he is. It’s because of the kind of person I am.

I hate the kind of person I am.
“Shit, dude.”

Dean’s voice cut through the chorus in his head

*Wow, now I’m even imaging Dean castigating me. Fabulous.*

Castiel couldn’t smell summer. There was no reason for the alpha to come back. Choking on a sob, Castiel collapsed forward, pressing his forehead to the ground.

“Why do I always attract the bat-shit crazy ones?” muttered Dean. Confident, powerful arms hooked beneath each of Castiel’s armpits and hauled him up. Stunned, Castiel looked up and through blurred vision he took in Dean, his appearance made sickly by the streetlights and the film of tears. “Don’t answer that.”

“You…” The word came out garbled beyond recognition. Coughing, Castiel swallowed the gunk coating his throat and tried again. “You came back.”

“Yeah.” Dean sighed.

“Why?” With effort, Castiel shook off Dean’s hold on him. His hands throbbed, his nose ached, his eyes were puffy and sore, but he could stand, and he didn’t need charity, not from anyone, and especially not from Dean.

“‘Cause I’m a sucker,” said Dean, exasperated. “Come on, let’s get a room and get you cleaned up.”

Dazed, puzzled, still crying, Castiel let Dean grab his arm and tug him toward the motel. Benny scarce glanced up when they stepped into the lobby; he quirked an eyebrow at Dean, got a nod in return, and tossed them a room key. The homey smell of beta permeated the air and soothed Castiel. Dean led Castiel on, the space around them going in and out of focus as if Castiel wandered the corridors of a dreamscape.

*Maybe that’s what this is. The ghost of Christmas past…what is it Scrooge says? More of gravy than of grave to this motel…that must be what happened. I fell asleep at my desk and the arm of my chair is digging into my side and I’m going to wake up with the imprint of my keyboard on my face and Gabriel is going to take a picture and tweet it and I am never going to live it down.*

Even Castiel’s attempt to deny the reality of his situation ended in misery and humiliation.

If *that* wasn’t proof that this *wasn’t* a dream, Castiel wasn’t sure what would be.

“Alright, bucko, get your sexy ass in here.” Dean unlocked a door and gave Castiel a shove. Staggering, bedraggled, disgusting, baffled and lost, Castiel stepped into the room.

*What should I say? What should I do? What does he expect?*

*Well…I suppose I can start with…*

“I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time.” Dean blew out an irritated breath. “You said you wanted to talk but this isn’t the time. I ain’t got any fucking clue what I’m doing here but coming back seemed like the right thing to do so here I am. You remind me of my kid brother.”

“I must be at least a decade older than you,” said Castiel, frowning.

“Yep, and don’t it speak volumes that you remind me of a 16 year old?” Dean shook his head and
stepped into the doorway of the bathroom.

“What are you…?”

“If I’m taking a night off, I might as well take a shower.” Ducking into the bathroom, Dean grabbed one of the frustratingly small bath towels and threw it at Castiel. It hit him in the face before, bemused, he lifted a hand to catch it before it fell to the floor. “Clean yourself up.”

“But—”

The bathroom door closing in Castiel’s face interrupted him. Shaking off his disorientation, Castiel wiped his eyes and stepped farther into the room. There were two twin beds, neatly made with ugly floral bedspreads, that Castiel could barely make out by the light of the overhead in the entryway. Uncertain what was expected of him, Castiel sat uncomfortably on the edge of one of the beds as a rushing sound in the wall beside him indicated that the shower had been turned on.

A huge yawn stretched Castiel’s mouth. His eyes were gritty, his mouth tasted gross, and though his nose had cleared, there wasn’t a whiff of Dean to be had, only the sour-stale stink of Castiel’s money scent, the odor of dryer sheets, and the lingering miasma of every person who’d used the room recently.

There was no reason for Castiel to stay.

But Dean had come back.

Why?

Knuckling another yawn away, Castiel scrubbed his face with the towel again but it made no difference. He still felt gross. Splashing spoke to Dean enjoying his shower, and Castiel had to quell the frantic, inappropriate desire to rush into the room and present himself for Dean’s pleasure.

I should leave.

Castiel’s eyelids drooped.

But I want to know why he came back.

I’ll just wait here. He’ll be out soon.
“Heya, Cas,” murmured a voice in his ear. Castiel was warm, the air around him smelled like heaven, and his eyes felt so heavy. There was a hand wrapped around his shoulder. He didn’t want to move. He never wanted to move. Muttering incoherently, Castiel reached up, curled his fingers around the hand touching him, and rolled over. “Come on, none of that…Cas…”

Wait.

Panic burst adrenaline through Castiel’s system and he jerked upright, eyes flying open, so quickly that Dean fell back from him with a squawk. No sooner was he sitting than his back spasmed and he tumbled onto the bed once more.

“That’s what I was trying to prevent,” said Dean with a sigh. “I can’t believe you fell asleep fully dressed while sitting up. You need a break, dude.”

“You were supposed to be my break,” Castiel admitted, knuckling at his back as he tentatively tried to rise again. Stiffness lingered, but he managed to sit up. Dean was sprawled on the floor. Dressed in a loose shirt and tight pants and nothing else, smooth cheeked and bright eyed and red-skinned from heat and scrubbing, he looked incredibly young.

…and irresistibly beautiful. I want him so badly…

“Sorry – but not sorry.” Dean hopped to his feet. He was barefoot, and a silly flutter of hope set Castiel’s heart pattering. Maybe Dean meant to stay the night? That would be nice. Even if they didn’t have sex, Castiel thought he would sleep well enveloped by Dean’s heady scent, knowing that Dean had cared enough to come back to check on him, cared enough to take care of him, cared enough to stay.

That’s insane. We’ve met twice. The only conversation we’ve had was an argument. This fantasy? It’s the stuff of romantic comedies. Didn’t Dean specifically say he wasn’t Julia Roberts?

God, Dean was gorgeous. His eyes were deeply shadowed, the contours of his face picked out by the entry foyer light, his skin tanned, his hair a rumpled, damp mess falling about his ears.

Wait, is Pretty Woman a romantic comedy?

His teeth were so white, his lips so pink.

What if I’m Julia Roberts in this scenario? Would Dean be okay with that?

Dean’s perfect grassy scent burgeoned to fill every crevice of the room, drowned out the competing smells, and Castiel couldn’t help but smile.

I’d be really okay with that.

The rich sound of laughter sliced through Castiel’s reverie and he blinked. Dean’s head was thrown back, his teeth catching the light, his eyes squeezed shut, and Castiel bemusedly thought that, somehow, Dean was even more beautiful like that.

I have got to see that movie.

“Aw man,” Dean wheezed, “you are so gone.”
“I am?” Castiel looked around, confused. He started to rise, eyes on the door. “Oh… I’m sorry… I didn’t realize…”

“What? No, no, no,” Dean managed around laughter. “I didn’t mean you had to leave, just that you’re out of it. So, so out of it. Did you hear a word I said?”

“You were talking?” Castiel removed his trench coat and his suit jacket, tossed them aside, and sank back onto the edge of the bed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are one weird-ass dude?”

“I’m quite positive no one has ever called me an ‘ass dude’ before,” said Castiel, making air quotes. Dean stared at him as if he was out of his mind. “Though I suppose the slang is apt, as despite my alpha status you are well aware of my preferences in that regard.”

There was a moment of stunned silence and then Dean howled with laughter. Uncertain what the joke was, Castiel at least smiled to see Dean so amused. Each time Dean seemed about to finish, he’d wipe tears from his eyes, glance at Castiel, and start laughing again.

Castiel had no idea what was going on.

But he liked it.

A lot.

“Go to sleep.” The command in Dean’s voice was significantly weakened by the lingering high-pitched note of amusement and the tears rolling down his flushed cheeks. Every instinct screamed for Castiel to kiss Dean senseless, drown in the scent that rolled from him, curl up in Dean’s arms and beg that he never let go. “Still gone.”

Smiling, wiping tears from his face with the back of one hand, Dean rose and used his other hand to tug Castiel’s tie loose and draw it over Castiel’s head. A finger brushed Castiel’s cheek – could it have been an accident? – and Castiel’s breath caught, eyes widening at the intimate gesture. His gaze followed Dean’s gesture, skimmed up the line of Dean’s slim arm, and caught Dean staring at him, his tongue peeking out from between his lips.

“Sleep, Cas,” repeated Dean gently.

Laying back on the bed, Castiel obeyed.

...a good omega listens to his alpha...

...what’s happening to me?

Castiel’s hands were cold.

Fumbling, barely awake, he tucked them beneath his body. His back was nice and warm; that would be adequate to take care of his achy fingers.

His touch found firm flesh and cloth and a husky voice whispered something incoherent in his ear and Castiel registered that Dean was snuggled against his back…

…and that Dean shouldn’t be snuggled against his back…

…and that Castiel couldn’t be troubled to care.
Dean’s presence felt incredible. Aside from his previous encounter with Dean, Castiel had never shared a bed with anyone, but he hoped to share a bed with someone…with Dean…many more times. A hand clumsily took one of Castiel’s, threaded their fingers together, and wrapped both their arms around Castiel’s waist. With a murmured sigh, Dean eased back into deeper sleep, nose buried against Castiel’s scent point.

Feeling cared for, protected, important in a way that he never had before, Castiel followed Dean’s lead and let his worries drift away. Dean’s scent, by turns a euphoric aphrodisiac and a potent distraction, was now, inexplicably, the most calming, soothing, relaxing thing Castiel had ever scented.

Castiel could grow too used to this.

…I didn’t pay him for tonight…

…and he’s still here, still holding me…

It won’t last. He’s a…a sex worker and I’m…

Castiel fell asleep before the thought could formulate, before he could come up with anything to describe what he was.

Maybe he wasn’t anything at all.

The last thing Castiel expected was to wake up still in Dean’s arms with Dean nuzzling his scent point, Dean’s hand kneading gently against Castiel’s belly, Dean’s morning wood pressed against Castiel’s ass.

“Fuck, but you smell good,” whispered Dean hoarsely. Even the faint miasma of Dean’s morning breath smelled…not good, but familiar, appropriate, comfortable. “I’d knot your pert ass for free.” A shudder shook Castiel, shook the bed, shook Dean against him, and Castiel’s dick thickened between his legs. Dean’s arm, trapped between their bodies, kneaded awkwardly at one of Castiel’s ass cheeks. “What, you’d like that? Even from someone like me?”

The question demolished Castiel’s nascent horniness. With a shudder that had nothing to do with arousal, he rolled out of Dean’s arms, rolled onto his knees beside the narrow bed.

“If that’s how you feel, why did you get into bed with me?” asked Castiel. His voice was rough from disuse overnight; his bladder pointedly reminded him that he hadn’t urinated since the previous evening.

“Didn’t mean to,” Dean admitted, languidly stretching, adjusting his package to display his erection more prominently. Castiel’s heart thudded in his ears and a frantic voice in his head screamed protest. He’s offering, and I want him, so why am I fighting this? If Dean really did want to bend him over… “Got outta bed to take a piss in the middle of the night, was damn out of it…and dude…you smell fuckin’ amazeballs. You have no idea, do you? You smell like…like…like I’m swimming in a fucking pool of money, like Scrooge McDuck or some shit.”
“So was everything you said yesterday about not owing me anything and it not being your role to educate me a lie?” asked Castiel. Bitterness he couldn’t explain or justify tinged his words and he couldn’t meet Dean’s suggestive gaze.

“Not a lie,” Dean replied.

Sighing, Dean raked a hand through his hair and sat up cross-legged on the bed. Castiel thought the change in position was meant to signal that he’d given up his ludicrous suggestion that they have sex, but the way Dean’s cock made a tent of his boxers through the opened fly of his pants was even more obscene than when he’d been lying down. Castiel was mesmerized, and he struggled to track what Dean said.

“Look, sometimes I got a bit of a temper, and once I had a min to cool my head I got to thinking that only one other person had ever apologized to me like you did. I’ve had plenty of fuckers treat me like their favorite Fleshlight and I’ve even kicked a few to the curb for it, but…” Trailing off, Dean shook his head. “…there’s something different ‘bout you, Cas. And it’s not just that you smell like cash-money-dollar-dollar-bill, yo.” Dean grimaced and muttered, “I can’t believe I fucking said that.”

“You said I reminded you of your brother,” Castiel broached tentatively.

Dean scowled. “Shouldn’t a’ done that. My personal life and my professional life ain’t got a damn thing to do with each other.”
“You told me your name, too...” Castiel added. Dean’s scowl deepened into a grimace. “Don’t tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“It’s my fault for bringing it up,” Dean replied with a sigh. “But yeah, you do. Sammy’s the other person that apologized to me after he was a judgmental prick ‘bout my profession. When he first found out how I was makin’ bucks he went on this whole ‘holier than thou’ rant about how prostitution a sin and I shouldn’t have to sell myself and on and on as if this lifestyle had been forced on me. I like my job. It took a damn long time to convince him of that, kept thinkin’ I was just sayin’ it so he wouldn’t worry, but it’s the plain and simple truth. Even if I wasn’t earnin’ for two, even if I wasn’t workin’ my way through school – even when I’m done payin’ for two, even when I’m done payin’ for school – I’m gonna keep doin’ this for as long as I can, as long as people want me, cause it’s fun as fuck to get paid for gettin’ laid. I’m my own boss. I set my own hours. I can make a tidy bundle and enjoy myself doin’ it. Yeah, sometimes there are problems, and the licensure procedures were a bitch, but there are problems with every job. I can take care of myself.”

“And when you can’t take care of yourself, you’ve got Benny?” asked Castiel, trying to make clear with a smile that the reply was his weak attempt at humor.

“Exactly!” Dean answered with a wide grin and something warm unfurled in Castiel’s chest.

It took a moment of introspection for Castiel to realize why Dean’s reply prompted happiness; other than Gabriel, no one laughed at Castiel’s jokes. Luke had once called Castiel ‘catastrophically unfunny’ and when they were children Michael would respond to any attempt at a joke with a cold, flat stare that said that not only was Michael unamused, but he was unamusable – nothing Castiel had ever said had prompted so much as a smile from Michael. By the time he was a teenager Castiel had given up and accepted their assessment of him: that he was a cold fish, analytical, unamusing, the death of the party. No one wanted to hear him talk. No one wanted to listen to him. Castiel had nothing to say that anyone in his family other than Gabriel wanted to hear. But Dean listened to him. Dean heard him. Dean believed that Castiel meant his apology the previous night, and laughed at Castiel’s pathetic joke, and had even suggested, ludicrously, that he’d want to have sex with Castiel even if Castiel wasn’t paying for the “privilege.”

I want him so badly.

Am I allowed that?

Can I allow myself that?

Gabriel thought Castiel should allow himself this pleasure.

Am I capable of giving myself permission? Must every aspect of my life be sanctioned by another before I feel I may indulge?

“Somethin’ burning over there?” Dean’s words, laced with incomprehensible amusement, cut through Castiel’s thoughts. Alarmed, Castiel looked around. Dean laughed. “Dude, no, I meant that you’re thinkin’ hard, like real hard. It’s a joke – something burning – like smoke coming out of your ears?”

God, his voice...his amusement...how beautiful.

“I understand,” Castiel lied, nodding sagely. It was hard to think straight with Dean’s laughter filling his ears, Dean’s scent filling the room, filling Castiel’s nose, filling his lungs.

I want to kiss him.
Dean laughed harder.

*I want to be with him.*

“You don’t get it at all.”

Castiel wasn’t sure he’d understood Dean correctly, shortles breaking the sentence into disparate syllables. Desire flashed red before Castiel’s vision and obscured all his sense.

*I want Dean.*

Castiel launched himself toward Dean, knocked them both to the floor between the two beds, and brought their mouths crashing together. A possessive growl rumbled in Castiel’s chest and he didn’t care that Dean grunted as his back slammed on the carpet, didn’t care that their foreheads and noses bumped, didn’t care about morning breath or slobber or his own ineptitude as he aggressively tried to get his tongue between Dean’s lips. They hadn’t kissed the first time, hadn’t kissed ever, and Castiel had to taste, had to imbibe the flavor that matched Dean’s dizzying scent.

Dean wasn’t kissing him back.

*Castiel, what are you doing?* shrieked a voice in his that sounded suspiciously like his mother’s. *You didn’t ask permission! He’s an alpha! He’s a whore!* Gasping, Castiel tore himself away. Dean stared up at him, wide eyed, pupils black and liquid with desire, chest heaving. A wash of horror clenched tight at Castiel’s chest and he rolled back onto his knees in an effort to put distance between them. The effort failed. Instead, his ass ground down on Dean’s erection and Dean bared his canines in a leer.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel managed.

“That mean you want to stop?” growled Dean.

Dean’s hips nudged up from the floor, his cock nudged against Castiel’s ass, and Castiel groaned. Raw desire and need screamed through Castiel’s head, drowning out his self-recrimination.

“I…”

*No, I don’t want to stop. I want him to bend me over the bed and fuck me stupid, want him to—*

“I…”

—*no, I need him to dominate me, put me in his place, make me his good little bitch, knot me, come in me—*

“Dean, I…”

—*stop.*

With a titanic effort Castiel fell back from Dean, sprawling on the floor. His head hit the chest of drawers behind him with a thunk and he squeezed his eyes shut. Dean was too enticing to look upon, his cock tenting his boxers, pushing the fabric through the fly of his jeans, plaid contrasting with the dark blue denim. If only Castiel could block his ears so he couldn’t hear Dean’s guttural panting, block his nose so he couldn’t smell carefree dreams of warm days in the park…

“I don’t get you, man,” said Dean. An image of Dean shaking his head accompanied the words, painted across Castiel’s eyelids as if he yet looked upon the gorgeous alpha, and Castiel shuddered.
“First time, you act like it’s all you can do not to hump me through the mattress, sleep soundly, wake up purring like a cat that’s found the perfect spot of sunshine.”

Yes, that’s apt…you’re my sunshine, Dean, and I want to curl up next to you and…

…no. That’s not our relationship. That can’t be our relationship. I barely know him! My attraction is nothing but scent compatibility and repression and a lifetime of being told I’m not allowed to have what I want, all spilling out at once.

…I’d like something to be spilling out all at once…

…no! Behave! I’m not some…some mindless horn-dog! I’m not some panting, dripping omega!

“Then last night, you act like a cock bite – in the worst possible way – and this morning before you wake up you snuggle the fuck out of me and shimmy that fuckin’ perfect ass against my dick and make the sweetest little sounds, and then you wake up and…” Dean paused. “Seriously, dude – Cas – what gives?”

…though maybe life would be easier if I was an omega...

…no, it wouldn’t be, but it’s nice to think about it...

I’m an alpha, and Dean’s an alpha, and a sex worker, and someone I cannot have. End of story.

Shoulders slumped in defeat, Castiel dropped his head into his hands. They smelled like Dean. They smelled fantastic.

“Dean.” Castiel took another deep breath and wished he hadn’t. Vertigo made the world spin and he resisted the urge to open his eyes and prove to his disoriented senses that the room hadn’t inverted. “I find your scent extremely distracting.”

That’s not what he wanted to say. It was so damn hard to hold onto anything around Dean.

“Ditto…” admitted Dean into the awkward silence.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me.” Castiel forced the words out, dropping his hands to his sides in a vain attempt to distance himself from the distracting aroma. Folding his knees to his chest, he dropped his forehead to them and buried his nose in the fabric of his pants. They also smelled like Dean. Of course they did. When he continued to speak, his words were muffled. “I’m not supposed to want these things – with you, with anyone. My parents have plans for me. They’ve been interviewing omegas and betas to find me a spouse for months, and yet here I am, ruining what they’re striving to build for me.”

“Riiiiight…but what do you want?”

“You.” The answer came immediately, unbidden, and Castiel shuddered again. “But I understand how crazy that is. No matter how great you smell, you’re a stranger. Objectively, I appreciate that we have formed a scent bond and that that’s an exceptionally common occurrence not to be taken seriously. However…” Castiel trailed off, unable to put into words that on an emotional level he wanted Dean, craved Dean, and no amount of intellectualization could quell that animalistic desire.

“Who told you scent bonds form easily?” asked Dean. Soft sounds suggested that Dean was moving, and Castiel curled more tightly in on himself, scrunching his eyes shut tight to resist the urge to open them. “That’s bull, dude. I’ve slept with…fuck, I don’t even know, hundreds of people…I’ve been doing this two plus years and while I get a lot of repeat customers, I also get a lot of one-and-doners
and…” Jealousy seethed beneath Castiel’s skin and he clenched his teeth against an angry retort. “…sh*t, sorry, lost the thread, what I’m saying is, I’ve had a lot of sex and I’ve never scent bonded with anyone, you included. You’re hot and smell great but this ain’t no bond. That bullshit about ‘just one time and you’re ruined!’ is peddled by the celibacy Nazis to get people to keep their knots in their pants.”

“This is your job.” Castiel bit each word into his slacks, a reminder to himself that Dean was paid to be interested in him sexually, that Dean was a professional sex worker, that Dean did not equate physical intimacy with emotional intimacy. Castiel hadn’t been sure if he would associate the two, but now that he’d experienced physical intimacy, he had to acknowledge that, for him, their sexual encounter had created an emotional connection between them. But it’s not true. It’s not real. I have to… “I am keenly aware of how inappropriate it is for me to believe that our first time together ‘meant’ anything to you.”

“It meant something to me,” said Dean softly, his scent intensifying to such a degree that Castiel could swear he felt the warmth of sunshine glowing on his skin through his shirt. “And I don’t say that to everyone. Fuck, I ain’t never said that to anyone. It’s all the same to me if a client comes back or not, but I was damn glad to see your shitty-ass car pull up to Lima, and my hackles went up at the thought that you might hire someone else to knot you. I don’t know what that means, but…”

Castiel waited for Dean to finish his sentence, but no further words came, just a rush of air that Castiel thought must be Dean blowing out an uncertain breath. Silence stretched out. Dean felt infinitely far away, eternally out of reach, though Castiel could feel his presence heavy and close. Hesitant, inexplicably terrified, Castiel lifted his head and blinked his vision into focus. Dean hovered feet from him, a trembling hand out-stretched.

 “…I, uh, I wouldn’t mind finding out,” finished Dean shyly.

For the life of him Castiel couldn’t remember what Dean had been saying. Looking at Dean’s tanned skin, his smattering of freckles, his gorgeous dark eyes, it was impossible to think straight. Dean stared intently at Castiel’s face and whatever he saw gave him pause, for he dropped his hand to his side. Castiel felt the loss of the anticipated touch as keenly as a blow.

Well, I suppose it’s something, that he wouldn’t mind me hiring him again despite my appalling behavior.

“May I make an appointment to see you next week?” asked Castiel. His throat was dry, his fingers clenched in the fabric of his pants.

No, that’s not what I want. I want him. I want him to be mine, my alpha, I want to be his…

…his what, exactly?

“Yeah…” Dean broke eye contact, staring at the acres of carpet separating them.

“$1500 for all of Friday night into Saturday morning,” Castiel offered.

I can’t have what I want from him…whatever that is…but I can at least be the only person who touches him for that one evening.

“Yeah,” repeated Dean, raising his head with a false smile. “Yeah, that’d be awesome.”

Disappointment laced Dean’s voice. Castiel had no idea what Dean was disappointed about, and hadn’t the courage to ask.
“Would $2000 be more appropriate?” he tentatively suggested.

“No,” Dean said with a sigh. “Fifteen hundred is…is awesome. Beyond awesome. Let’s do that. Wanna meet here? Say, 8 o’clock?”

“That would be excellent. Thank you, Dean.”

“No problem, Cas.”

This is his job. What he sells me is how much of him I’m allowed to have. I’m not entitled to an iota more. This is enough. I am allowed to have this. I’m allowed to have Dean, for as long as I’m willing to pay for, for as long as he consents to offer his services in exchange for my remuneration.

Maybe, if Castiel repeated the thought enough times, he’d come to believe it.

Gabriel (10:05 AM): Dude!

Gabriel (10:05 AM): Bro!

Gabriel (10:05 AM): You look fricken exhausted!

Gabriel (10:06 AM): WTG!

Castiel (10:10 AM): I am unfamiliar with that abbreviation.

Gabriel (10:11 AM): Way to go and now that you mention it yeah it screams Geocities circa 1998 think it’s time to retire that one.

Castiel (10:12 AM): I have no idea what you’re talking about.

Castiel (10:13 AM): Please don’t tell me. I need to focus on reading the latest about orange futures.

Gabriel (10:13 AM): You’re kidding.

Gabriel (10:14 AM): You’re not kidding.

Gabriel (10:14 AM): You work too hard. You need to get out more.

Castiel (10:15 AM): I followed that suggestion yesterday and it was not nearly as successful as my appearance has led you to believe.

Gabriel (10:16 AM): Don’t tell me you struck out with a whore. With that pretty face?

Castiel (10:16 AM): He’s not a whore, he’s a sex worker.

Castiel (10:17 AM): And I wasn’t kidding about orange futures. I’m busy.

Gabriel (10:18 AM): But he did turn you down?

Gabriel (10:22 AM): Fine fine I’ll stop bugging you.

Gabriel (10:23 AM): But we’re talking about this later.

Gabriel (10:25 AM): It’s stupid that we’re texting anyway I’m literally 20 feet away from you.

Castiel (10:26 AM): I find your non-literal use of the word literal to be extremely frustrating.
Castiel (10:26 AM): We measured and confirmed that the door to your office is precisely 24 feet 4 inches from my door, and that desk to desk is 36 feet 9 inches.

Gabriel (10:27 AM): Aw shit I love you Cassie.

Gabriel (10:28 AM): Don’t worry he’s not the only sex worker in the sea.

Castiel (10:30 AM): I did not ‘strike out.’

Castiel (10:31 AM): I will be seeing him again next Friday.

Gabriel (10:33 AM): THAT’S MY BOY!
“Ah, Castiel,” Naomi said as soon as Castiel answered the phone. “I saw your out-of-office e-mail message indicating that you will be leaving at 7:30 this evening. I’m disappointed that Michael has spoiled the surprise, but relieved to see you so receptive to our evening festivities.”

*What? No, no, no, she’ll ruin everything, or she knows, or—*

Castiel took a measured breath. “I’m afraid I know nothing of this ‘surprise’ of which you speak, mother. Michael and I have not conversed since the Investors Symposium on Tuesday, at which time he didn’t mention any family commitments for tonight.” Castiel took another measured breath and steel his nerve before she could sweep him up into her machinations. “Unfortunately, I’m not available. I have plans.”

“Nonsense,” Naomi sniffed. “You never have plans.” There was a laden, brief pause. “I’m not angry that you know the truth.”

“I assure you I don’t know the truth,” reiterated Castiel, nerves cramping his fingers around the phone receiver. “And regardless of your belief that I have no existence outside of work, I have managed to forge a few acquaintances.”

*Follow her wishes, do as she wants, be available at her whim—*

*No! I’m an adult and I’m allowed to have a life outside of what Naomi and Charles want for me.*

*I’m allowed to have Dean.*

“Cancel your plans.” Naomi switched tactics and Castiel’s jaw clenched. For a wild moment he had the urge to yell at her, to tell her to stop badgering and give him room to be himself, but he quelled the desire before his juvenile irritation triggered disaster.

*Do as she wants.*

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Castiel replied. The self-control necessary to sound calm leech all emotion from his voice. “I’m sorry.”

“How many times have I told you, Castiel?” she said with an air of utter reasonableness. “Don’t be sorry. Make amends, make corrections, and do better. I never thought I’d have to remind you that family demands take precedence over your fleeting excuse for a social life. Perhaps I was wrong to give Gabriel an office on the same floor as you. He’s a bad influence.”

Anger sparked beneath Castiel’s skin, blurred the room as he forced himself to breathe evenly and maintain his composure. Her voice on the phone, her voice in the back of his head, repeated the same castigations and instructions, the same condemnations and reproofs.

*The same lies.*

“Gabriel had nothing to do with my decision to pursue relationships outside of the family, outside of IADB,” Castiel lied flatly. “Whatever your intentions for this evening, they will have to be deferred to another time.”

“Castiel—”
“I am not available.” Castiel emphasized each word as he forced them out. His heart sped up, fear and pique a heady combination. Castiel couldn’t remember the last time he’d defied his mother’s will. Castiel was an alpha, but she was the head of the family, the owner of the business, his matriarch, his mother and his pack alpha. Her word was absolute law among her children, among her nieces and nephews, even among her siblings and cousins and uncles and aunts.

“I don’t want to be a banker, mother!”

“Then it’s a good thing that you are going to be a stock analyst instead.”

“I don’t want to work with money! Or maybe I do! I don’t know yet. Give me time!”

“Life is short, Castiel, and you are too young and foolish to make optimal choices. By the time you decide, finally, to behave as you ought, your peers will have far outstripped you. I will not permit you to waste the advantages that have devolved onto your shoulders, not allow you to forsake your heritage. I have informed Harvard of your desire to attend their business school. I suggest you begin packing.”

“I desire no such thing!”

“Yes, you do.”

Castiel shuddered out of the memory. Naomi was speaking to him now in the same no-nonsense, condescending, lecturing tone she’d used during that conversation half a lifetime ago. Recalling how she’d convinced him to follow her wishes was too painful; Castiel could scarce remember the course of events now. There had been so much badgering, so much pressure, so much manipulation, from her, from Charles, even from his eldest brothers. He’d never confirmed that Michael and Luke’s behavior toward him had been at Naomi’s instigation, but it must have been. By the time that summer had ended, Castiel would have gone anywhere to get away from his brothers.

In the end, there’d never been a choice.

He went to Harvard.

He earned his MBA.

He took a job at IADB as a stock analyst.

Exactly as Naomi had wanted.

And he’d been successful.

She was right about me then. She knows what’s best for me. I should do as she wishes.

“I am not available,” Castiel snarled through gritted teeth. His blood pounded as loud as a bass drum in his ears. Fearing her reply, he slammed the phone down.

She was certainly in the building.

The elevators were fast and reliable. She could be in his office in under a minute and then there’d be hell to pay for his refusal. Every sense on hyper-alert, flesh tingling, Castiel rose, adjusted his jacket, and took steady steps toward the elevator. A lifetime under Naomi’s roof had taught Castiel to hide his emotions, hide his fear and his temper and his desires. He arrived at the staircase door the same moment the elevator door pinged to announce someone arriving. As soon as he was out of sight – there were no cameras on the staircase, as Gabriel had gleefully reported to Castiel on more than one
occasion – he sprinted downstairs. At least he hadn’t put up his Away message until it was nearly time for him to depart. He’d debated whether to leave one at all. For any normal person, leaving at 7:30 on a Friday night wouldn’t be unusual enough to warrant a special message announcing it.

Everyone who worked with Castiel knew he was a workaholic, knew that he was generally at IADB headquarters from 7 AM until midnight. His having plans was beyond unusual. It was unprecedented.

His cell phone chimed. Resisting the insane urge to throw it aside, Castiel burst into the parking lot and sprinted for his car, tie and jacket flapping in the wind. A startled employee jumped out of his way and Castiel snapped an apology over his shoulder.

His car was in sight—
—his phone chimed again—
—the keys were in his hand—
—the elevator light showed the elevator rapidly descending—
—the car door was unlocked—
—his phone rang—
—Castiel was in the driver’s seat—
—the elevator doors opened and Naomi stepped out, composed, calm, a Goddess of Wrath come to force her recalcitrant son to heel.

Castiel’s heart was in his throat, every instinct screaming to obey his mother. From his earliest memories he’d learned the consequences of defying her and he dreaded them more than he could describe or justify.

But I’m not doing what she wants, not this time, not tonight – I am an adult and I have plans and I have to escape before she catches me, oh God!

Castiel put the car in gear and drove away.

Naomi stood by the elevator, and Castiel watched her watch him impassively until he rounded a corner in the indoor lot and she disappeared from view.

Emotion surged in his head, more emotion than he could process. Earlier in the day, excitement had thrummed dull arousal through his blood at the prospect of seeing Dean again; now, anticipation crashed headlong into the thrill of finally, finally defying his mother’s wishes and his terror of the consequences of doing so. He wasn’t a child any more. He couldn’t be chastised and punished and cowed. Naomi’s leadership of her family was firm and unequivocal. Her punishments never left a mark and the lessons always, always took.

Really? She can’t browbeat me? Want to bet? If I believed that, I wouldn’t be fleeing in terror from her displeasure.

Castiel hadn’t found out what she’d expected him to do that evening.

He didn’t care.

He was going to see Dean.
His phone rang again; Castiel rolled down the window and threw it outside. The Doppler effect attenuated the sound to nothing as he sped on and Castiel giggled.

There would be hell to pay for Castiel’s behavior.

*Let her do her worst!*

For once – maybe for the first time in his life – he couldn’t hear Naomi’s voice. She wasn’t standing before him, wasn’t chastising him on the phone, wasn’t the whisper of doubt and self-loathing in his head railing against every decision he dared venture on independently.

For once – for a brief, shining moment – Castiel was *free*.

*No. Not the first time. I was free of her, free of everything, when I spent my first night with Dean.*

Castiel couldn’t remember the streets he passed, the stop lights he must have paused at, the other cars he’d driven alongside. The sign announcing Cajun Delights came into view as if he’d teleported to cover the distance. He was early, but not ridiculously so, and the adrenaline coursing through him dizzied him with euphoria. He felt like he was floating, like he was outside of his body, like he was grounded as he’d never been before. He felt *real* and utterly disconnected and God, he wanted Dean to hold him, to scent him, to touch him. He wanted Dean to *fuck him senseless*. Chortling, he slammed the car door shut, made it to the lobby before he realized he’d forgotten to lock the door, traipsed back, locked it, and returned. His face was stretched into a grin so broad that his jaw hurt, and as he stepped into the reception area, Benny glanced at him, looked back at his computer screen, and did a double take.

“You okay?” asked Benny warily.

“Yes.” The word felt *wrong* on his lips. “Yeah. Yup.” Nope, still felt wrong. “I’m *great*.”

“Drunk?” Benny’s skepticism deepened, and he shifted and rose.

“Not a drop,” vowed Castiel, “Scout’s honor.”

“High?” An ominous note entered Benny’s voice, and he lifted his arms in a dramatic stretch. His broad shoulders had an appeal that Castiel hadn’t appreciated the first time they’d met. His biceps bulged and his arms were corded with muscle.

“I *promise* I am in full control of my faculties,” Castiel replied. Exhilaration spun the room around and he put a hand on the back of a worn couch in the waiting area to steady himself. “I’m meeting Dean at 8.”

“Right…” Benny twined his fingers together, stretched again, and his knuckles cracked with a sequence of loud snaps that sounded painful and didn’t appear to phase him. “Remember – you hurt Dean, they’ll never find your body.”

“I won’t hurt Dean,” said Castiel solemnly. Something in his chest twinged, and he added, “Not intentionally, anyway.” He’d already hurt Dean, with his insensitivity, with his cluelessness. The inexplicable disappointment tinging Dean’s voice when Castiel bid for Dean’s Friday night returned powerfully, and with a thump he was surprised wasn’t audible Castiel settled back into himself, crash-landed into his body, aware of how flawed he was and how crazily he was behaving.

*Consequences. Whatever choices I make, there are always consequences.*

Benny stared at him.
“I’d like a room for the night,” Castiel ventured. His legs trembled but he forced himself upright and walked to the front desk. “I’m early but I expect that Dean will be here soon.”

“Yeah,” Benny replied sourly, reaching down to his counter, grabbing a key, and slamming it with a clang onto the desk. “Fifty bucks.”

Castiel’s hands trembled worse than his legs did, his fingers numb; he fumbled for his wallet, dropped it, and nearly slammed his face into the reception desk when he bent to retrieve it. It took him three tries to grasp the money and count it out, but finally, finally, he was paid up and he had the key. Escaping Benny’s judgmental stare was paramount. His eyes reminded Castiel of Naomi.

She can’t bind me. She can’t deprive me. She can’t isolate me. She can’t hurt me, not like she used to.  

Who am I kidding? Of course she can. Anytime she wants to, she can fire me from the company, kick me out of the house, block my access to my savings accounts. Naomi has the power to leave me destitute.  

The prospect of having nothing is terrifying.  

But…not so terrifying as it once was…

Dazed, Castiel took the key and shambled to the room that Dean had presumably arranged for them, since Benny seemed unsurprised by Castiel’s request. The interior was pleasant; a King sized bed dominated the room, bedspread in a lovely forest green, and Castiel had barely enough wits left to marvel that every room at Cajun Delights was different and not a single one seemed to have anything to do with Cajuns or Delights. The room smelled faintly floral and Castiel wrinkled his nose.

Soon, the room would smell like Dean.

He couldn’t wait.

Trying and failing to steady himself with a breath, Castiel closed the door behind him, walked to the bed, and sat on the edge, staring at the wall before him until it blurred to off-white abstraction.

I defied Naomi.

I hope Gabriel is alright.

I wonder what she wanted from me tonight?

I should have heard her out. It might have been a good thing. It might have been important.

No. She doesn’t control me. She doesn’t get to concoct a surprise, spring it on me, and demand that I drop everything to accommodate her. I am finally taking something for myself and that’s okay – that’s allowed – and what she asked of me wasn’t fair.

I’m being unreasonable. I cannot judge how fair or unfair her request might have been because I didn’t listen to her. Once again, Dean’s mere existence has prevented me from coolly assessing the situation, postulating a measured response, and implementing appropriate behaviors. I’ve angered my mother, likely for no reason, in pursuit of sex. Isn’t that precisely why my chastity was to be preserved? A single sexual congress and I am already prepared to throw a lifetime of diligence and toil to the wind.

No. That’s not what happened. I’m allowed to have this, because I want it, and she has no right to
control me, no right to demand that I give this up for her whim.

When I go home in the morning…

When I go into work tomorrow…

…I’ll deal with it then, whatever it proves to be.

…or I could use the room phone to call her and apologize. It’s not too late to mend fences. If I left now I could still attend whatever surprise she had in mind. I could appease her temper, bow to her will…

…like I’ve always bowed to her will…

…put what I want second…put what I want last…

…like I’ve always put what I want last…

…be a good son and a proper alpha…

…like—

“Cas?”

Dean’s lush voice pulled Castiel from his introspection. Blinking, Castiel’s vision came into focus. Dean stood before him, a concerned frown twisting his lips and scrunching his brow, making him appear older than he was.

“Hello, Dean.”

“Benny said…well, I guess it doesn’t matter. You good? Anything I should know?”

“Everything is…” Castiel swallowed the lie and froze, staring into Dean’s eyes. Dean’s concern appeared genuine, and memories of the previous week, of Dean thinking Castiel was off, of the reasons for that disconnect, the unpleasant thoughts that had plagued Castiel and how they prompted him to behave, came to Castiel vividly. Dean had said his personal life and professional life were separate; similarly Dean wasn’t entitled to Castiel’s personal life. They didn’t have a relationship.

And yet…

…yet he said the two were separate and then told me a little about his personal life anyway…told me his name, told me about his brother…what is our relationship?

“Don’t tell me anything you’re uncomfortable sharing,” said Dean softly, dropping into a squat before Castiel. Green eyes captured Castiel, captivated him, and he took a deep breath, inhaling Dean. The floral scent of the air freshener combined with Dean’s natural aroma and Castiel blinked, half-convinced he’d open his eyes and find himself standing in the middle of a field of wildflowers, bees and butterflies flitting about. His nerves, his euphoria, his tension, his fears, the sick, dizzy, drunken feeling that had driven him to his car, driven him to flee his mother, calmed instantly. Astounded, awed, Castiel reached out and brushed a finger over the curve of Dean’s jaw. The skin was smooth and hot beneath his fingers. A shiver trailed down Castiel’s spine.

“I’m…anxious…but my concerns aren’t related to you,” Castiel explained. Normally, he spoke only to Gabriel about his complex feelings as regarded their family; to discuss Novak-Shurley business with an outsider, to discuss IADB business with an outsider, was taboo. Michael and Luke, despite their personal rivalry, both whole-heartedly supported the family, and Anna was too young for
Castiel to trouble her with his misgivings. Yet, awash in Dean’s scent, drowning in Dean’s brilliantly green eyes, Castiel wanted to tell him.

I shouldn’t. I know I shouldn’t. I’m his client. He is a service provider whom I have hired. Nothing more. But I want…

…I want more than I have any right to request.

If I did confide in him, how would he react?

“Cas?” Dean sounded worried. What had Benny told him? What did Dean see when he looked at Castiel?

“My mother and I had an argument about this evening,” admitted Castiel. Each word came out slower than the one before. Naomi’s voice berated him in his head with all the appearance of reasonableness, yes, other people discuss their problems with their acquaintances but we are not other people. “Without telling me, she scheduled a family gathering for this evening, and was… upset…when I indicated I’d be unable to attend. She was…forceful…in her conviction that I should cancel my existing plans – our plans – and accede to her request that I go to dinner.”

“Dude, you’re, like, 40 or something—”

“I’m 31, Dean,” said Castiel, frowning.

“—and you gotta get permission from your mom to go out on a Friday night?” Dean laughed.

“Damn, that blows. Never been so glad to be an orphan in my damn life.”

See, I’m complaining about nothing – I’m complaining about having a family that cares about me and wants to spend time with me, that supports me and encourages me. From the day I was born, Naomi has given me everything. I’ve had an easy life thanks to her hard work. I’m no one without her. I’m nothing without her. Dean wouldn’t be speaking with me if not for Naomi; without my job at IADB I’d never have been able to afford his services. I am ungrateful, unfilial, impious…and then there’s Dean. He’s alone. He’s taking care of himself and his brother without any support, and I have the gall to lament my comfortable, privileged life to him.

Dean’s face fuzzed in and out of focus. The only reply Castiel had to his self-castigation was an inadequate, but this – being here, with Dean – is what I want. With a sigh, he dropped his head, dropped his hands, propped his elbows on his knees and slumped forward.

“If you need to go…” suggested Dean hesitantly.

“I don’t,” Castiel replied. “It’s…not that simple. I want to be here, but…”

Silence stretched out between them.

I’m deluding myself. I’m acting as if the two nights we’ve spent together mean something. I’m acting obsessed, damaging my family, risking so much, over a…a sex worker…whom I barely know. I should leave. I should go home. I should prostrate myself and apologize and attend to my duties and —

Gentle hands cupped Castiel’s face, drew him up, and then Dean’s lips were on his, soft and warm. A wounded sound escaped Castiel, heat trickling through him, emanating out from where Dean’s fingers gently massaged his skin, where Dean’s mouth caressed tenderly at his. The pressure eased, Dean’s mouth moved away, and Castiel whimpered
“This okay, Cas?” whispered Dean.

“Yes, Dean,” Castiel breathed. “Don’t stop…please don’t…” A plaintive note whined in his voice, but Dean either didn’t notice or ignored it. Dean made an attractive, throaty sound and kissed Castiel again, flicking his tongue against Castiel’s mouth. Castiel parted his lips to allow Dean entry and Dean growled possessively, sweeping his tongue against Castiel’s lips, his teeth, his tongue, his palate. The slowly spreading warmth exploded into ferocious heat; Castiel sat up straight, threw an arm around Dean’s shoulders and pulled the alpha closer, pulled Dean over him. Dean’s hand dug into Castiel’s flesh, his lips worked against Castiel’s aggressively, and the mattress bounced as Dean pushed Castiel down and straddled him.

“Taste so fucking good,” Dean snarled between kisses. Arousal burned beneath Castiel’s skin, his cock hardening. “And you don’t want me to stop?”

“No!” Never!

“Fuck, yeah.” Dean nipped the words into Castiel’s lips, seared them with sultry breath into Castiel’s skin. The dizzying scent of summer grass was so powerful that Castiel could taste it, so all-encompassing that he would swear he could feel summer and hear summer and see summer, as if Dean pinned Castiel in a field of ripe wheat or the new-mown lawn of his parent’s house instead of a bed. Dean licked and kissed a line down Castiel’s scruffy jaw bone, and Castiel leaned into the kisses, leaned into Dean, strained up from the bed in pursuit of greater contact between them.

He doesn’t think our intense mutual attraction is caused by a nascent scent bond?

No. Sex is just a job for him. Only my naïveté and inexperience that makes a mountain of what Dean considers a mole hill.

Stop thinking about it. Take whatever he’ll allow me to have, without question, without reservation. Relax and feel.

Dean froze; his lips left Castiel’s skin, his weight shifted up and off. Panting, bereft, Castiel stared up at him.

“Can you do something for me?” Dean breathed.

“Anything,” Castiel whispered.

God, Castiel meant that. That was terrifying.

“Stay with me.”

Castiel’s jaw dropped. Dean couldn’t mean…it sounded like…

“Wherever you keep going…whatever you keep thinking about…your mom or whatever the fuck else you got goin’ on…forget about it,” Dean importuned. There was a note of need in Dean’s voice, as if Castiel’s presence – mental and physical – mattered to Dean.

He’s damn good at his job.

Castiel had to believe that. The alternative interpretations of Dean’s behavior was self-centered and nonsensical. It wasn’t that Dean cared about Castiel – why would he? – it was that he was a consummate professional.

But he’d asked Castiel to stay present, and Castiel was drifting already.
“I’m here,” said Castiel breathlessly. “I’m here – with you – because this is where I want to be. I chose this, chose you, over…” over everything else.

I’m in so much trouble. I should never have hired him the first time. It’s too late now. After everything I was taught, after all the lessons of chastity and perseverance impressed on me by Charles and Naomi, after my certainty that it was all bunk and that surely one liaison wouldn’t be enough to make a lifelong bond...

…once was all it took for me to be lost.

If I’d chosen anyone other than Dean, would that have happened?

It’s irrelevant. I chose Dean. And I can’t escape the self-delusion that he chose me as well, despite all evidence to the contrary.

“Cas…” Dean sighed. Castiel flushed. Mere moments after saying he was present, that he’d stay in the moment, Castiel’s thoughts had carried him away again. What was happening to him? He’d never had so much trouble focusing. Leaning up and back, balancing impressively on his knees on the edge of the bed, Dean slid a hand under each of Castiel’s arm pits and tugged him up. Confused, Castiel followed Dean’s lead, shimmying up the mattress until his head hit the pillow and his feet barely hung over the edge.

“There we go,” murmured Dean. His hands slid over Castiel’s shoulders. Dean loosened Castiel’s tie, undid the button tight around Castiel’s throat, and the next button, and the next. Leaning in close to Castiel again, his heat like the ghost of a touch on Castiel’s tingling flesh, Dean whispered, “Need you comfortable, need you with me, if I’m gonna fuck your sweet little ass into the mattress.”

Eyes rolling shut, Castiel moaned at the raw desire in Dean’s voice, moaned at the sultry breath blowing over his flesh, moaned at the memory of how it had felt to have Dean inside him, moaned as Dean slotted his hips against Castiel’s and rolled their erections together. Dean caught Castiel’s earlobe between his teeth and nipped him. Castiel yelped and bucked off the bed, and Dean did it again, again, biting a line down the side of Castiel’s face, along the curve of his neck.

“No…no visible marks!” Castiel gasped. He’d never seen the appeal in pain before, but every bite hit him like a punch, stunned him, left him breathless, and he trembled as he anticipated the next dig of Dean’s teeth.

He could…he could bite harder…break skin…claim me...

…no he can’t. We’re both alphas. There’s a lot I don’t know, a lot I’m naïve about, but I’m positive that mating bonds don’t work that way.

Even if they did, it’s insane for me to think about such a thing at such a time!

With a lascivious chuckle that rumbled through Castiel’s flesh, Dean slid Castiel’s shirt from his shoulders and latched onto Castiel’s scent gland. Pain flared incandescent through Castiel’s shoulder, collided with pleasure as Dean rutted their cocks together, and Castiel groaned and arched off the bed, arched into Dean’s body, arched against Dean’s mouth. Hands slipped beneath Castiel’s dress shirt, tugged his undershirt free from where it was tucked into his pants, and slid roughly against the skin of his torso. The wind went out of Castiel and he collapsed back against the bed, but Dean was relentless, kneading at the muscles along Castiel’s sides, sucking and teething at Castiel’s scent gland as if he found Castiel’s weird inky, cottony flavor delicious. Castiel’s cock was so hard it hurt.

“Dean I…I…I want…”
Gasping, Dean tore himself away, pressed their chests close, rolled their hips together, and managed a breathy, “Tell me, angel.” *Angel… “Tell me…”*

*Does he say that to everyone, or only me?*

“…want you…please, Dean…”

*I don’t want him to call anyone else by a pet name. I don’t want him to touch anyone but me, not like this.*

“Don’t worry, you’ve got me.” Dean mouthed the words as a promise into Castiel’s flesh and Castiel nearly cried with how much he wished that what Dean said was true. “Shh, relax.” Gentle kisses replaced Dean’s frantic attentions, soothing touches skimmed over Castiel’s overwrought flesh. Their mouths came together again, parted and joined, parted and joined, and Dean’s fingers worked at Castiel’s belt, slid it aside, undid the button and zipper, and rubbed at Castiel’s erection through his underwear. A desperate sob of need choked the breath from Castiel, and Dean continued his gentle ministrations.

“Breathe, Cas. I know what you want. I’ve got what you need.”

“I know you do,” Castiel gasped. “Please…!”

Trailing kisses down Castiel’s chest, sparing a hot lick for one of Castiel’s taut nipples, Dean crawled down the bed, dragging Castiel’s pants down with him. His nose nuzzled at the hair that grew sparsely over Castiel’s belly and thickened around his cock. Castiel’s pants snagged at his ankles, Dean’s grip like a vise around Castiel’s flesh. Dean painted licks over Castiel’s trembling thighs as he tugged Castiel’s shoes free.

“Want me to blow you, Cas?” Dean paused to hover with his mouth inches from the tip of Castiel’s cock; Castiel’s erection twitched in anticipation, thin liquid making a sheen over the head. Hunger in his lust-dilated eyes, Dean licked his lips suggestively and Castiel groaned and pressed his head back against the blankets, squeezing his eyes shut against the raw desire that surged through him.

“No.” Castiel’s voice was guttural, hoarse, unrecognizable. Dean made an unintelligible, startled sound. “Dean.” Demand edged into Castiel’s voice and he opened his eyes. Dean looked up. Their gazes met. “Fuck me, Dean.”

Teeth dug into Castiel’s thigh as Dean made a noise that shot Castiel through with heat and desire. Instinct screamed for Castiel to close his eyes. Dean looked too beautiful, smelled too fantastic, tasted too delicious, sounded too incredible. Castiel was inundated with too much sensation to function. He wanted to see, though, and between frantic blinks he took in Dean’s movements, staggered and broken like the frames of an old movie.

Blink.

Dean’s hands were off Castiel’s flesh, reaching for Dean’s back pockets.

Blink.

Dean tore open a white packet and squeezed the contents onto his fingers.

Blink.

Dean’s face was flushed red, sweat beading on his brow, as his hand fumbled at the fly of his jeans.
Slick fingers were on Castiel, tracing a sticky line in the hair growing thick on Castiel’s perineum, pressing against the rim of Castiel’s hole. His eyes rolled back, his back arched, his leg muscles locked as he strained toward Dean’s touch. His lips worked but he didn’t know if he made a sound; the air tasted like Dean, smelled like Dean, sounded like Dean, looked like Dean. The world was Dean. The finger slid into him smooth and easy and Dean made quick work of spreading the lubricant around Castiel’s insides.

“Just hold on.”

Castiel wasn’t sure if he heard Dean speak or if Dean somehow spoke directly to his aching flesh. Some small, terrified part of him realized he was too gone. They barely knew each other, had no sentiment to intensify the feelings, yet Castiel felt like he was burning up, like he’d die – literally die – if Dean didn’t get a knot into him.

*Like an omega in heat. But I’m not an omega. I can’t go into heat, and I’m not in rut.*

“Holy shit, Cas – holy…fuck, you’re hot…”

There were two fingers in him. Castiel had missed when Dean pressed in a second. Every breath was a moan that filled his ears and drowned out every other sound in his ear except the constant stream of reassurance that Dean whispered. The words made no sense but they were comforting and Castiel clung to them, clung to the fragment of himself that had enough sense left to recognize that Dean spoke English. At least Dean was still cognizant of his actions. At least Dean was still prepping Castiel, moving carefully, stretching him, lubricating him. Castiel wasn’t an omega. He didn’t have slick.

God, he wished he had slick.

The world was painted black, punctuated by bursts of light as Dean tugged at Castiel’s rim, as Dean’s finger tips brushed against Castiel’s prostate. He tried to find the words to tell Dean how good he felt but, while he was sure there were sounds coming from his mouth, he had no idea what he said. If he could see…if he could control himself…he shouldn’t be, should not be this affected, but awareness of his over-reaction, of his over-sensitivity, couldn’t bring cognizance and restraint back.

Weight fell heavily on Castiel and he grunted, Dean’s chest pressing against him, Dean’s lips on his face, Dean’s bared cock pressing against him.

“Con…condom?” Castiel managed to gasp.

A damp hand carded through Castiel’s sweaty hair. “Got you – I got you – wearin’ rubber – course I – oh fuck,” Dean growled against Castiel’s neck, and as he eased his cock into Castiel’s tightness inch by agonizing inch, he whispered the exclamation again and again, “…fuck, fuck fuck fuck…” until his hips were flush with Castiel’s ass.

At some point Castiel had lifted his legs and wrapped them around Dean’s hips. Castiel had zero memory of doing so.

Dean was huge, so much larger than Castiel remembered. Something must have been wrong their first time, because this was better, infinitely, impossibly better. Every emotion was amplified. Dean’s cock was a heavy, solid lance of heat spreading Castiel gloriously wide, and Castiel wanted nothing more than to roll them over, get Dean under him, and thrust himself into oblivion.
“Gotta hold…fuck…gotta hold still you fucking bitch,” snarled Dean.

Castiel hips surged off the bed, dragged Dean’s length through him, dragged Dean’s hardness over every sensitive place in his body, and with a sob Castiel came, his cock spewing copiously between them.

“Jesus on a…”

Whatever self-restraint had kept Dean moving carefully shattered; his hips jerked back, snapped back, and Castiel howled as Dean stuffed him full and a second orgasm shuddered through him. Come coated Castiel’s chest, beaded off his skin to soak into the suit jacket and dress shirt that crumpled about his body, his arms yet covered. Arms…he had arms…more thrusts, and another climax, and Castiel grabbed Dean around the shoulders, snagged his fingers in the fabric of Dean’s t-shirt, held him close, sobbing utter bliss against Dean’s neck. Castiel’s nose ran messily over Dean’s scent gland as he inhaled every drop of grassy summertime. It seemed like every thrust of Dean’s cock into his body, every tug of Dean’s swelling knot against Castiel’s sensitive rim, every press and brush of Dean’s length over Castiel’s prostate, triggered another orgasm, another dribble of come, another staggering dose of rapture. Castiel tried to hold onto a thought, tried to grasp the sheer impossibility of the glory he was experiencing, but he couldn’t. It was all he could do to ride out his consecutive orgasms without blacking out, without collapsing, without forgetting to breathe, without losing his mind.

A burst of pain pierced Castiel’s euphoria – Dean’s knot pushing into his body, almost too large for Castiel to accommodate – and then Dean’s back arched up, his muscles went taut and with a groan that sounded like it tore his throat open, Dean came. It was all Castiel could do to cling to his alpha…

…and cry. Without Dean’s constant thrusts to stimulate him, without his near-continuous orgasm rolling him like waves threatening to drown him in the undertow, Castiel realized he was speaking, probably had been for some time, his voice a raw, scratchy croak, “Dean, Dean, Dean,” and he couldn’t stop, couldn’t make himself stop, as he mouthed the word into Dean’s sweaty, flushed skin. Another groan ripped guttural from Dean and he slammed his hips against Castiel’s ass, though he could scarce be wedged more firmly into Castiel’s body. The thrust pushed Castiel up the mattress, caused his rim to pull and catch on the thickening at the base of Dean’s cock, and Dean spasmed so powerfully as he climaxed again that Castiel could feel Dean twitching and shifting within him. Dean pushed into him again, again, until Castiel’s head hit the headboard, until another climax stole over Castiel so powerfully he lost existence for a moment. He opened his eyes to see Dean hunched over him, hips rolling weakly, tears and sweat and spit and mucus coating his cheeks and chin. Dean’s eyes were open but his pupils were dilated and unfocused, and Castiel doubted Dean could see a thing. With a hitched noise as if he was in agony, Dean finally stilled. Sweat dripped onto Castiel’s face, mingled with his own, soaked the tendrils of hair plastered to Castiel’s forehead.

“…that…” Dean coughed and swallowed, licked his lips, grimaced, and tried again. “That…was the most incredible…sex…ever…I’ve ever had…”

“Me too…” said Castiel, his muscles going liquid against the bed. He felt so good, so impossibly good, so incredibly, wonderfully good.

He’d done the right thing to meet with Dean. His mother didn’t get to take this experience away from him.

*I am never thinking of Naomi during sex ever again.*
Dean laughed and dropped his head limply to rest on Castiel’s shoulder. “You were a virgin until two weeks ago. I’m glad you liked it but I’m gonna hold off on the ‘I’ve got the best cock ever’ celebration.”

“You’re right; my opinion isn’t authoritative, but this time was better than last time,” he replied earnestly.

Shaking his head, Dean smeared Castiel’s shoulder with sweat, slid his forehead forward and buried his nose against Castiel’s scent gland, inhaling deeply.

“I can’t believe you’re paying me for this, you stupid son of a bitch,” Dean mumbled.

“It’s your job,” said Castiel, confused. Dean shook his head again, strands of his hair tickling Castiel’s chin and neck. Though he was loathe to ruin the afterglow by asking what Dean meant, he was on the verge of doing so when Dean shifted his hips, shuddered through another climax, and moaned muffled bliss against Castiel’s clavicle. Pleasure flitted like fireflies over Castiel’s vision and his thoughts scattered. He’d masturbated with a hand on his cock, with a dildo in his ass, with a ring vibrating around his knot, but none of Castiel’s previous sexual experiences held a candle to how amazing being with Dean felt. Nothing he’d heard described – nothing he’d read or seen outside of romance novels and pornography – compared either, not even the locker room bragging of other alphas he’d known in college.

“Is this normal?” he asked, at a loss.

“Wha’ normal?” Dean slurred, shimmying his hips forward again and sighing in relieved pleasure. The sweat and come trapped between them was starting to thicken and grow sticky; Castiel’s shirt stuck to his back, and the thin fabric of Dean’s shirt separating them was soaked. “Aw, fuck.” Dean rocked his hips, chasing sensation, and Castiel groaned and struggled to spread his legs wide enough to accommodate him. Dean’s slight movements were nearly more than Castiel could bear, and a frantic voice in his mind whispered that he might actually come again and he couldn’t, couldn’t stand it, couldn’t feel more than he already had.

“Is it always this fantasic?” managed Castiel in a rush, curling his hips up against Dean’s crotch. Groaning, a hand curling around Castiel’s shoulder, nails digging into Castiel’s flesh, Dean rutted against Castiel as if powerless to stop himself.

“No,” Dean snapped, and Castiel couldn’t connect the word with anything beyond the physical pleasure glowing hot through his body, intensifying, liquefying him. Moaning hoarsely, he tried to relax, tried to be open to whatever Dean would do next. Castiel wanted to be whatever his alpha wanted, needed to be whatever his alpha needed.

“No, Cas, sex is never this fucking amazing. Aw, Christ, I’m glad you came back, glad you—”

“Dean!” Castiel hissed. His ass clenched around Dean’s cock, his rim tight around the base of Dean’s knot; his body was swollen gloriously by Dean’s bulk, and every millimeter of him, inside and out, tingled with sensation. Growling harshly, chest vibrating against Castiel’s, Dean humped him harder.

“—so fucking glad you picked me, my omega, my fucktoy, my ass, like you’re fuckin’ made for my knot, listen to you moaning, such a slut for it, Cas, such a—”

“Oh God Dean, again, I’m going to come ag—"
“‘Course you are, you fuckin’ gorgeous fuckin’ whore.” Dean bit every word into Castiel’s neck, rolling his hips hard against Castiel’s ass, and Castiel shattered. His cock burned, his body seized, and he wasn’t sure if he was howling, or if Dean was, or if the sound was only blood rushing through his ears. When he came back to himself, Dean lay limply over him, making pained noises and shaking.

“Dean?” Castiel tried to ask, but all he managed was a vague ‘d’ sound and a croak. Licking his lips, swallowing what little moisture remained in his mouth, he tried again. “Dean, are you alright?”

Hands seized Castiel’s arms, powerfully rolled them over, Dean lying on his back, Castiel atop him, Dean’s knot still tying their bodies together. Cold burst through Castiel as his sweat-soaked shirt hit the air of the room and he gasped. Dean yet shook, yet huffed, and he realized Dean was laughing.

“What is it with you and dirty talk?” Dean managed. “Can’t believe I can get a dude like you to come by calling you a fucktoy, God, that’s fuckin’ amazing.” Every shake shifted Dean’s cock in Castiel’s channel and it occurred to Castiel that this night might yet kill him even if Naomi never got her hands on him.

“I can’t help it,” Castiel muttered. “When you say those things, I just…I like it.”

“Aww, don’t feel bad – I like it, too.” Dean’s laughter faded, his plush lips still spread in a broad grin. He reached up and brushed strands of hair off Castiel’s forehead, frowned at whatever he saw, and then slid his hands down and tugged at Castiel’s shirt. Confused, Castiel shifted but he couldn’t figure out what Dean was trying to accomplish. “Let’s get this off,” Dean explained.

With a few more pulls and an awkward twisting of Castiel’s arms, they removed his shirt and jacket. Dean threw the jacket aside and used the ruined dress shirt to mop Castiel’s brow, shimmied it between their bodies to sponge some of the mess of come coating Castiel’s chest. Castiel’s skin felt warm, warmer wherever Dean’s fingers brushed, and languid contentment spread through him. Dean tossed the shirt aside, reached over and pulled the huge blanket over both of them, carefully arranging it so that they weren’t covered by the part that was wet with sweat and come.

“Thank you, Dean.” Castiel wanted to tell Dean what he was thankful for but the words wouldn’t come, there were too many things – that Dean had given him another chance, that Dean had been willing to knot him at all, that Dean paid attention to Castiel’s reactions and continued behaviors that he saw gave Castiel pleasure, that Dean didn’t judge him for enjoying the dirty talk and didn’t judge him for being an alpha who wanted to be knotted, that Dean was Dean and beautiful and enthusiastic and honest and open and candid in his way and—

“Hey, no worries, just doing what you’re payin’ me for,” Dean said, kissing the side of Castiel’s face lightly.

Castiel’s sense of happy contentment fled as he plummeted down to earth.

*How could I forget again that this is his job? Damn, Castiel, stop being a deluded fool over an attractive alpha.*

This was Dean’s employment. Of course Dean took care of Castiel; Castiel had offered Dean six thousand dollars a month for that care. Dean would be a fool not to assess Castiel’s desires and do his best to ensure they were met, a fool not to be kind, a fool not to give Castiel a second chance.

Castiel was a fool to think that Dean’s apparent kindesses meant anything.

A soothing thumb pressed into the top of Castiel’s spine, another hand tapped at Castiel’s thighs,
encouraging him to position his legs more comfortably, to shimmy their knotted bodies closer, and a low sound hummed around them, emanated from Dean’s chest, filled the hot air beneath the blankets with the notes of a song that Castiel didn’t recognize but that, in Dean’s deep rumbling voice, resembled a lullaby. Bought and paid for or not, Dean was *good* at his job: caring, tender, sweet, thorough, efficient. Whether he actually cared about Castiel or merely pretended to care, the distinction became moot when Dean’s hands rubbed against him, Dean’s cock rubbed within him, Dean’s voice and scent clogged his senses.

With a sigh that drained all his tension, Castiel eased against Dean and eased into sleep.
Chapter 5

Castiel awoke with a start and shudder, a hand raised, flailing at the air. The blankets beneath him smelled divine. Castiel nuzzled at the coarse fabric, hand still reaching for...something...when he realized: Dean was gone. Castiel was cold and empty. Damn it, he’d been empty most of his life. It shouldn’t matter that he wasn’t knotted now, but he’d never felt so abandoned.

*Don’t lie to yourself, Castiel. How many nights did you leave a toy in after masturbating, leave a plug in while you slept? How many times did you look at inflatable knots for sale and consider buying one and wonder how riding one would feel only to decide no when the advertising promised they were perfect for the omega in your life or the ideal heat treatment.*

*Those toys are for omegas. I’m an alpha. I’m supposed to want to knot others. I’m not supposed to want a knot within me, not supposed to crave an alpha of my own, not supposed to feel incomplete without being stretched, without slick, without being claimed.*

*But I do feel incomplete.*

*And I did ultimately buy an inflatable knot.*

*What’s the matter with me?*

A rushing sound spoke to water flowing through pipes nearby and Castiel blinked to clear his eyes of gunk. The room was dark, the glowing numbers on the digital clock beneath the TV too blurry for Castiel to read, but paler shadows danced along the wall of the entry foyer: the bathroom light was on. An unjustifiable surge of relief eased Castiel back against the bed. Dean wasn’t gone; he’d probably needed to urinate. No sooner did Castiel have the thought than the toilet flushed with a distinctive *whoosh*, followed by the *snap* of a light switch being flicked. The room plunged into blackness. The door creaked as it opened, each sound attenuated and drawn out as Dean made an effort to be quiet.

“Dean?” Castiel’s throat was scratchy and, he suspected, unintelligible. Dean muttered a curse.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Cas,” murmured Dean. “Didn’t mean to wake you. I know you’re beat but I had to get that damn condom off and take a leak.”

“S’ok,” Castiel slurred. “Come back.”

Dean chuckled. “In a sec. Since you’re up, lemme grab you something to drink and clean you up.” Castiel wanted to object, wanted to tell Dean he was fine and that the only thing he desired was for Dean to come back, hold him close, maybe slip his cock back into Castiel’s loosened hole, but he couldn’t find the words to ask for that. His reticence was absurd; Dean was a sex worker and Castiel was paying for Dean to satisfy Castiel’s desires. Asking for what he wanted was part of the package, and Dean’s payment included the tacit assumption that he wouldn’t judge Castiel, wouldn’t deny him unless he requested something unreasonable.

*It’s extremely unreasonable for an alpha to ask another alpha to knot him, extremely unreasonable for me to ask for comfort. I’m an alpha. I’m strong. I’m dominant. I’m in control. Others look to me.*

*I don’t feel like any of those things.*

*I don’t want to be any of those things.*
Hesitant, gentle fingers brushed over Castiel’s back, and he realized how tense he’d grown. “You’re okay.” Dean’s voice sounded far away, disconnected, and something in Castiel’s chest twisted painfully. “I’ll be right back, alright?”

“Thank you, Dean,” Castiel croaked.

Dean’s touch left his back, Dean’s muffled steps indicated him returning to the bathroom, and the pipes rumbled as Dean turned the water on. Castiel wasn’t sure if his eyes were open or closed. His face was pressed too closely to the bedding. The room was too dark. He was too tired. Moments vanished in blank unawareness. The water was on – then it was off – then Dean’s footsteps neared – then something warm and damp brushed over Castiel’s back. A palm flat on Castiel’s chest urged him to turn over and Dean ran the terry cloth over Castiel’s stomach. An unpleasant smell assaulted Castiel’s nose – his own scent, drowning out Dean’s. God, Castiel hated the smell of money, representing everything he detested about his life. He wasn’t his parents. He wasn’t obsessed with his fortune. His scent suggested aggression, aloofness, indifference toward his fellow men, cutthroat fiscal practices, robber barons, a history of bankers cast as the villains of people’s lives. Nothing Castiel did could change the way people reacted based on his aroma. The defensiveness and suspicion on people’s faces when they first met him was awful, especially in the first moments when Castiel could see them transform from welcoming to wary as they caught a whiff of him.

If I could change myself...there are so many things I’d want to change, I’d want...I’d want...

...no, I’m not allowed...

...but if I have to be as I am, I could at least smell benign...that would be nice...

...but Dean likes how I taste, how I smell...

...at least, he says he does...

“You’re okay.” Dean whispered again. The washcloth slid down Castiel’s chest, gently swiped at Castiel’s soft cock, dampened Castiel’s pubic hair. “Relax, Cas, and lemme know if I do anything you don’t like – if I ever do anything you don’t like.”

“No...” mumbled Castiel. Dean froze and a pained noise burst from Castiel before he could stop himself. Dean’s hands went tense on the washcloth. His touch shifted away, the cloth left Castiel’s skin, and Castiel whimpered, bereft.

“Cas?”

How can I say...how can I ask for...no, please don’t go...

“I...please, Dean...”

“You gotta tell me.” Dean sounded sad. Castiel didn’t understand. What did Dean have to be sad about? “I can’t read your mind, Cas.”

Over the cacophony of voices in his head screaming about proper behavior and proper comportment and proper outlets for proper alpha desires, Castiel struggled to find the words he needed to express everything he craved from Dean, everything about himself that felt wrong and broken. No words came. Castiel’s desires were clear in his mind but he choked on every attempt to vocalize them. Dean’s touch didn’t return, and as the moment stretched out something whispered that things were better this way, that Castiel shouldn’t have come this night, shouldn’t have made a regular arrangement with Dean, shouldn’t have rebuked his mother, should leave now. He’d acted insane earlier – when he’d refused Naomi’s request, when he’d discarded his phone, when he’d climaxed as
soon as he was breached like an omega in heat – but it wasn’t too late to act like an alpha. All he had
to do was deny himself what he wanted. He had a lifetime of experience – it should be easy. His
parents’ plans for him had always subsumed what he desired for himself.

_Until now._

With a monumental effort of will, Castiel forced aching muscles to engage, flopped over onto his
belly and spread his legs. Cold air ghosted over his exposed hole, still wet from earlier, and shame
pooled tears in his eyes.

_Please understand...please, Dean...I can’t...but I have to..._

“Cas...” said Dean, still sad, still uncertain.

No touch came.

_I was strong enough last time I saw Dean to reach for what I desired. I escaped from my family’s
stereotypes, their expectations, their shadow, enough to hire Dean. It’s to his credit that he needs
explicit consent, explicit requests, and I’m so lucky to have chosen Dean of all the alphas I might
have selected that night._

“The washcloth feels nice,“ Castiel mouthed into the bedspread. Cloth caught on his lips, the words
muffled and indistinct, but he’d spoken, and relief surged blindingly through Castiel’s darkened
vision. “Please, Dean...”

“You want me to continue cleaning you up?” Dean prompted.

“Yes,” Castiel breathed.

The warm cloth returned as abruptly as it had departed, sponging the dried sweat from the small of
Castiel’s back, slowly moving toward Castiel’s crack. Castiel suspected Dean was waiting for
permission, but words still eluded Castiel. Instead, he spread his legs wider, and Dean drew the
balled up washcloth over Castiel’s stretched hole, forcing a bead of lubricant out. A trickle of
pleasure edged into Castiel’s anxiety and he sighed, easing against the bed.

“Good?” asked Dean.

“Good,” Castiel confirmed.

Dean attended to his work in silence, making no effort to initiate sex, but despite the relatively
platonic nature of Dean’s touches, Castiel’s cock thickened with anticipation. Any touch to Castiel’s
ass could be a prelude to insertion, and though Castiel’s thoughts were conflicted, his desires were
clear and unmistakable. Castiel wanted Dean inside him – a finger, or a cock, or a fist, or a knot,
anything, so long as it was Dean. Continuing to work at Castiel’s filthy hole with his washcloth,
Dean pressed a thumb against Castiel’s perineum and kneaded down toward Castiel’s taut balls and
thickening erection.

“You want more, Cas?” asked Dean, humor lacing his voice with warmth. Dean’s hesitancy was
gone; he was confident again, in control again, an alpha again, taking what he wanted from his...

...his what? His lover? His omega? His bitch?

Yes, please...

Castiel shuddered, heat and fatigue making him feel like he was floating over the bed, driving away
his dark thoughts.

“I do.”

There was a pleading note in Castiel’s voice but even shame couldn’t drag him back to earth. Humiliation was part of the turn on of being with Dean. The dirty talk reminded Castiel of who he was, who he was supposed to be. Rebellion felt fantastic. If his parents knew what he was doing, if Michael and Luke found out, they’d be furious and disgusted and they’d probably disown him and Castiel could finally, finally stop living this lie, could instead pursue what he wanted. He had no idea what he wanted from life now or in the future, but he wanted Dean now, and he clung to that certainty as Dean worked the cloth against Castiel’s hole, used two fingers to work the washcloth within Castiel’s hole. Rough fabric tantalized Castiel’s sensitive rim as Dean and cleaned him out.

Is he going to...

The cloth vanished. The sudden loss of stimulation was devastating; Castiel gasped, his leaking cock pressing against the bedspread.

Oh, please...

Hands cupped Castiel’s ass cheeks, spread them, and weight settled on the bed between Castiel’s legs. Hot breath skimmed over Castiel’s flesh and his rim twitched and clenched at nothing.

“Spotless, Cas.” Dean’s face was so close to Castiel’s flesh that he could feel Dean’s heat. Every word Dean spoke rumbled through him, air playing over Castiel, within Castiel.

Is there anything more disgusting than an alpha mouthing at another alpha’s ass? There’s no slick, no biological protections, but he cleaned me, and...

“Do it,” Cas breathed. “Do it, do it, do it…”

Dean’s thumbs spread Castiel’s hole, something came to rest against his flesh – Castiel wasn’t sure what, it felt strange, like plastic – and then thick heat pressed into Castiel. There was a barrier between Dean’s tongue and Castiel’s ass, or perhaps his body was less sensitive than he’d presumed; there was no sense of moisture, only pressure as Dean stretched him open with his tongue.

Hands scrunching the fabric of the blanket, Castiel hitched his hips up encouragingly. A throaty noise purred through Dean’s chest, vibrated Dean’s lips where they rested against Castiel’s perineum, shook through Castiel’s body like a touch. Dean’s fingers worked gentle circles into the muscles of Castiel’s ass cheeks, massaging him, easing him. Castiel’s eyes slipped shut and he lost himself in sensation. He’d dreamed about experiencing what omegas called being eaten out, fantasized about how it might feel, but Castiel didn’t have slick and had assumed this was something he’d never get to experience. Even if he’d found the nerve to ask, even if he’d had a partner concede to do this for him, even if he’d experienced this, Castiel had assumed he wouldn’t enjoy it.

He wasn’t an omega, after all. Alphas were built differently.

Weren’t they?

Castiel was starting to suspect that everything he’d been told about the differences between alphas and omegas was a lie, because even through the thin barrier of whatever separated Dean’s tongue from Castiel’s flesh, this felt incredible.

Unable to keep his hips from rutting against the bedding, rolling up against Dean’s mouth, brushing his cock over the blanket, Castiel whimpered and moaned, sighed and shed helpless tears of pleasure.
Dean licked at him, sucked at him, stretched him open, worked his tongue in and out, in and out, all the while growling contentment as if he were eating something delicious. Castiel had never imagined that feeling like he was a steak dinner would make him feel so hot, so desperate, but it did. Dean’s mouth was incredible, Dean’s scent was incredible, Dean’s tongue was incredible, Dean’s hands were incredible, Dean’s cock and his voice and his body and his eyes and his attention was incredible.

Dean was incredible.

Being the focus of Dean’s skilled efforts to wrack Castiel with pleasure was beyond incredible; it was a glorious blessing. Castiel rode the waves of bliss that overtook him as Dean fucked into Castiel’s hole with his tongue, rode Dean’s face with every upward hitch of his hips. The stimulation went on and on, on and on and on, pleasure rising in a crescendo only to plateau off, intense and all-encompassing and amazing enough to drown out Castiel’s doubts. Nothing that felt this good could be wrong. Whatever Castiel was, whatever he might be, this experience – all of his experiences with Dean – were part of him now, etched indelibly into Castiel’s flesh, and they were fundamentally, inarguably, self-evidently right.

It wasn’t enough, though.

“In me,” Castiel mumbled, trying to put into words what was missing.

There was a beat pause; Dean’s tongue withdrew from him and Castiel’s back went tense, his hips strained upward, and he moaned. “What’s that, Cas?” Dean sounded breathless and hoarse, and Castiel wondered if, somehow, mouthing at Castiel’s ass was a turn on for him, too.

Please be hard...

“Your...your penis...in me?”

Please want me...

Dean groaned. The bed shook and heaved as Dean shifted, his hands leaving Castiel’s ass. Skin rubbed on skin – Dean’s chest on Castiel’s back, Dean’s thighs on Castiel’s ass – at some point Dean had shed his pants and they were both, finally, naked. A hand worked between them, Dean’s hips pressed against Castiel’s lower back, and a groan tore from Castiel’s aching throat. Not only was Dean hard, his knot was already partially swollen.

“Incredible,” Castiel whispered.

“What’s that?” There was an edge of urgency in Dean’s voice. His fingers fumbled lining his cock up with Castiel’s hole. A slick, soft squeal spoke to the condom Dean wore rubbing against Castiel’s skin – when did he put that on? – and then Dean was pressing in, filling him, and everything, everything, was right with the world.

That thought should scare Castiel.

He felt too good to care.

“You are...absolutely...incredible...” groaned Castiel.

Dean lay atop him, a heavy, reassuring, grounding weight covering Castiel with heat and safety. Dean’s arms lined up at Castiel’s sides, his fingers curled around Castiel’s shoulders, his face settled close to Castiel’s ears, his legs shimmied between Castiel’s, and his hips settled flush with Castiel’s ass. Dean’s cock was within him, fully within him, and Castiel was complete.
“I love this…I love…”

“Can’t fuckin’ believe how much you like my cock,” Dean chuckled breathlessly in Castiel’s ear. “And then you fricken think I’m incredible? You’ve got no fuckin’ clue.” An answer was on the tip of Castiel’s tongue but Dean hitched his hips and humped Castiel’s ass and Castiel’s reply broke into a pleased cry. “S’like I got a bitch of my very own.”

Dean didn’t bother to draw himself out or fuck his cock back in; he pushed himself against Castiel, skin slapping softly on skin every time. Castiel’s ass rose from the bed, pushed up against Dean’s downward thrusts, Castiel’s knees supporting him as the mattress bounced beneath them.

“You like that, Cas? Wanna be my good little cunt?”

Dean’s knot tugged at Castiel’s rim every time their bodies came together; Dean’s cock pressed steadily against Castiel’s prostate. Castiel’s cock no longer rubbed against the fabric of the blanket but it didn’t matter. He didn’t need a touch to his cock. All he needed was Dean, all of Dean, around him and within him, suffusing him, driving him higher. Dean’s desire was intoxicating. It had to be real.

“Whaddaya think, Cas?”

There was no way that Dean could fake how lost he sounded, how breathy and aroused and desperate he became when they made love.

“Oh God...”

Dean’s reactions had to be real, as real as Castiel’s feelings for him.

“You love how I fuck your pussy, don’t you?”

Bliss shone incandescent black against Castiel’s eyelids. “Dean...” He had no idea how something could be both incandescent and black, no idea how long they’d been joined, wasn’t entirely sure what his name was, but he was absolutely sure that he’d lose his mind if Dean stopped, if Dean didn’t keep whispering filth in his ear. “Dean!”

“Knew it,” Dean grunted, punctuating every word by slamming his hips against Castiel’s ass. “Knew you did – knew as soon as I...as I saw you...awake...that I was gonna get a second chance to...to...to fuck your brains out, knew you were such a cockslut you’d beg me for it...there’s no better feeling in the world than your slick hole tight around me, did you know that, Cas? Nothing like fuckin’ you, nothing like feelin’ you fall apart. I could...I wanna keep going like this forever, Cas, wanna fuck you forever, want to—” Dean cut off, snarling, digging his teeth into Castiel’s shoulder. His hand wrapped around Castiel’s cock, his thumb dug into Castiel’s swollen knot, and with a choked off gasp Castiel came, body tense and clenched around Dean’s cock as he soiled the sheets beneath him with come.

Dean bit a groan into Castiel’s flesh, his knot caught, and he shuddered through his climax. Semen splashed wet on the bed and splattered Castiel’s thighs.

“Benny...is gonna charge me...for a new blanket...” panted Dean, hips yet rolling against Castiel’s ass.

Boneless and beyond exhausted, Castiel collapsed. He could scarce breathe for Dean’s weight pressing down on him; he moaned to feel the condom swelling in his body, moaned at the growing pressure against his prostate, stuttered and whimpered and trembled through a second orgasm, a
third. It was a wonder that anything was left in Castiel’s body, yet the wet patch beneath him grew. With a slick smacking sound, Dean unlatched his mouth from Castiel’s shoulder; for a moment Castiel thought the moisture beading on his skin was blood, hoped…no, feared…that Dean had completed a mating bond…but there was no pain. The liquid must be merely sweat and saliva. Hands ran soothingly down Castiel’s sides; Dean shifted his weight, his knot tugging on Castiel’s rim, but froze when Castiel made a weak sound of protest.

“Cas?”

“Don’t…” Castiel’s body was so hot – so cold when Dean wasn’t over him – and his ass was so full and his cock burned painfully and his mind was a muddle of feelings and the broken remains of his doubts.

“Shh…breathe, Cas. Take your time. I’m not going anywhere,” Dean promised, mumbling the words wetly into Castiel’s shoulder. With a gasp, Castiel managed a deep breath, and Dean murmured inarticulate encouragement into Castiel’s skin.

Dean’s hips were still rocking against Castiel’s ass. The feeling of being swollen by Dean’s come intensified.

How would it feel if he weren’t wearing a condom?

...hot flesh against hot flesh, his foreskin bunched against my butt, his come coating me, driving deep into me, swelling my belly, trickling out around his knot...

Castiel shuddered and came again. Dean kissed reassuring words into his skin, trembling as the clench of Castiel around him triggered Dean to come again and again. The bed rocked beneath them in time to Dean’s thrusts, and to that gentle rhythm, Castiel’s awareness of his feelings, of Dean’s heat, of the room around them, faded into oblivion.

I never want this to end.

A knock on Castiel’s office door pulled his attention from his computer monitor. He’d never been more grateful for a distraction. The screen was over-bright, the day dreary and gray, dark though it wasn’t noon yet. Castiel had woken up warm and sated and happy, Dean’s knot in his ass, Dean’s arms around his waist, Dean’s scent everywhere on him and in him. In the faint light that crept around the curtains, it had been easy to lose himself in a fantasy of happy mornings and shared nights and hikes through the woods and dates at fine restaurants.

Sitting in his office, aching butt pressed uncomfortably against his underpadded office chair, wearing the same suit he’d worn the day before, rumpled and definitely the worse for a night spent heaped on the floor, with Dean off to his day job, which he’d pointedly, pointlessly reminded Castiel was as a stripper, the fantasy was gone. The words on the screen blurred no matter how hard Castiel tried to concentrate on the latest investment reports and stock figures. For the first time in years, he seriously considered going home early. There was nothing to be accomplished at work, not with his thoughts so fractured.

If he went home, he’d have to see his mother.

For no reason Castiel could guess – though he was convinced, unreasonably, that it had something to do with him – Naomi wasn’t at the bank headquarters that day.

There was another knock on his door. With a sigh, Castiel leaned back in his chair, ass aching, and wiped his gritty eyes.
“Come in!”

“Broooooooo,” Gabriel cooed as he threw the door open and slid into the room, stepping so smoothly he seemed to be gliding, a broad grin on his face, his eyes sparkling gleefully with light from who-knew-where. Castiel sighed again. Just what he needed. He should have pretended not to be in his office. “Why aren’t you answering my texts? You can’t think I’ll be pissed at you for getting your rocks off instead of attending our parents’ bullshit excuse for a family dinner.”

Frowning, Castiel felt at his pockets. He hadn’t heard his cell phone ring or buzz. He never put it on silent mode, in case something important happened in the fiscal world and Bloomberg and clients flooded him with notifications. His wallet was a familiar weight in his right pocket, significantly lighter after he paid Dean fifteen hundred dollars and massacred the last of the afterglow. His keys jingled in his left pocket. His phone…

…oh right.

“I need a new phone.”

Paying Dean had been the wake-up call Castiel needed. The reminder of his shame, his self-delusion that Dean might actually want him, had grounded him, forced the resumption of his self-control. Gabriel quirked an eyebrow at Castiel, lips twisting skeptically. Castiel continued flatly, emotions roiling beneath his placid surface but perfectly hidden, as Naomi had taught him.

“I threw it out the window of my car.”

Castiel’s steady tone did nothing to quell Gabriel’s skepticism; his eyebrow rose so high his brow scrunched up, his eyes wide, amusement twitching his cheeks.

“It made sense at the time.”

“I bet it did.” Gabriel waggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Soooooo.” Smooth, suave movements carried Gabriel across the room and saw him settled in the visitor’s chair across Castiel’s desk. He opened his mouth to talk, frowned, sniffed the air, and then broke into a broad grin. “Aw man, Cassie, you are debauched.” Castiel’s hands shook with the effort of repressing his embarrassment. “You and he smell good together,” Gabriel continued suggestively.

Castiel had no idea what the suggestion was, and he schooled his expression to impassivity. He didn’t want to talk about his sex life. He didn’t want to talk about his foolish—foolish? Try insane—behavior. He didn’t want to know what Gabriel considered a bullshit excuse for a family dinner. He wanted to rewind his life two weeks to the day when he went home late, stared at his collection of dildos and plugs, and decided that instead of pleasuring himself in the privacy of his apartment as he’d always, always done, he’d take a bottle of artificial slick, prep himself, and find a real knot to ride.

“Aw, Cassie, you’re blushing. That’s adorable.”

*Life isn’t about getting what we want. Life is about taking what we need.*

*God, I hate Naomi.*

*I…I do. I hate my mother. I already knew I was a terrible alpha, but it turns out I’m also a terrible person. Fantastic.*

Castiel shuddered and curled in on himself, elbows on the edge of his desk, head in his hands. His hair felt oily, even though he’d showered that morning, and apparently he smelled like sex and Dean,
even though he’d used a bottleful of the scent-repressing shampoo that Cajun Delights offered free of charge. Benny had smirked when Castiel had gone to the front desk in the room’s complimentary bathrobe to request more, given Castiel two more bottles of scent neutralizer “on the house,” and made a comment about Castiel’s scent so filthy that Castiel had pushed it from his memory.

*Are Dean and I scent bonded? Is everyone gonna know? God, I’m the butt of every joke about foolish omegas. “Did you hear about Cassie? He waited until he was 31 to have sex for the first time, and let the very first alpha who’d have him, knot him, and they ended up scent bonded, and Cassie – poor boy – let the alpha knot him during a heat, and of course what should happen then? He got pregnant and now that alpha is poof – gone – never to be seen again, so Cassie is left pining and pregnant, poor boy.”*

Such stories were common, shared between the bored biddies at the country club that Charles was partial to, always with the same air of mock sympathy barely masking vicious glee at the misfortune of others.

*Except I’m not an omega.*

An arm settled heavy over Castiel’s shoulders and he startled back into the moment to find Gabriel beside him.

“What’s going on, Cassie?”

All amusement and skepticism was gone from Gabriel’s voice. He sounded grown up, brotherly, supportive. Memories of their childhood returned to Castiel powerfully: Naomi arbitrarily determining some rubric for measuring Castiel’s success at a specific task, Castiel’s success as a human being; Michael and Luke, seemingly unable to agree on anything, finding common ground in ensuring that Castiel adhered to Naomi’s standards; Charles gently but firmly rebuking Castiel’s timid suggestion that what was being asked of him was unreasonable; Anna watching warily from the sidelines, surely realizing even in her youthful innocence that what she witnessed being done to Castiel was what awaited her in the future; and Gabriel, the only one there to buck their family rules, the only one to offer Castiel comfort and reassurance, to tell him that he was fine the way he was and he didn’t have to change to satisfy Naomi’s whims. The details changed continually – the goal point of appropriate behavior moved, the metric of success shifted – but Castiel’s inadequacy as a son and as an alpha were constants.

*Such a disappointment, Castiel. A proper alpha wouldn’t make friends with such a plebian individuals. A proper alpha wouldn’t get a poor grade on an exam. A proper alpha wouldn’t be caught looking at such inappropriate pornography. A proper alpha wears proper clothing, goes to proper establishments, eats proper foods, comports himself properly. Every time you stray outside the lines you shame us with your impropriety.*

Naomi had envisioned and built her ideal mold for an alpha son before Castiel was born: six feet tall, broad shouldered, slim-waisted, wearing a tailored suit, holding a framed diploma from Harvard. Castiel had to be shaped and tugged, added to and torn apart until he fit into that mold.

Castiel wished he knew how Gabriel had fit into that mold without losing himself.

“How did you do it?”

Castiel had no idea who he was outside of Naomi and Charles’ expectations for him.

“Do what?” asked Gabriel blankly, but his hand never stopped soothing over the curve of Castiel’s back and his presence never shifted from Castiel’s side. With a sad smile, Castiel sat up and met his
brother’s eyes.

“You’re so uniquely you, Gabriel,” Castiel explained. “Michael and Luke are content to be similar to our parents, and Anna managed to toe the line. I’ve done my best to emulate Naomi and our brothers, but I’m failing – I’ve failed – but you…somehow you’ve managed to do both. Though you work at the bank, though you’ve kept them satisfied with your behavior, you are still the same person you were when you snuck into Luke’s bedroom and used a sharpie to draw penis knots all over his face.”

Gabriel choked on a laugh. “I have pictures,” he said smugly.

“You should post them on his company profile page,” suggested Castiel with mock solemnity. Gabriel’s fingers tensed on Castiel’s shoulder and he snorted.

“I might just…” A guffaw escaped Gabriel and he gasped for breath. “I might just do that. You always were my favorite, Cassie.”

“Why?” asked Castiel blankly, the humor of the moment vanishing.

“It’s not like the others gave you much competition,” said Gabriel. “Mikey and Lucy’s only competition is which of them can be a bigger bag of dicks, and Anna is so complacent. But you…no matter how many times Naomi tried to beat you into shape, it never took. You always follow her instructions to the letter and yet never do quite what she wants. Honestly, I’m a little jealous. I’d have had a way easier row to hoe if I coulda done things your way.”


The answer was critical. Gabriel was wrong about Castiel; Castiel had implemented no planned resistance. Throughout his childhood he’d tried to find a way to preserve his own interests, his own desires, his own aspirations, but inevitably, Naomi would discover his ‘inappropriate behavior’ and grind it out of him until he could no longer look at an apiary, or study ancient languages, or hike, or do anything else that caught his fancy, without feeling physically ill. Through quiet, reasonable suggestions, Naomi ferreted out every weakness and uncertainty, ridiculed every peculiarity, until Castiel conformed because he no longer had the strength to do otherwise.

No wonder I hate her...

“I didn’t, Cassie,” replied Gabriel sadly. “I appreciate that you think I did something noble and forged my own path, but that’s bull. The only reason Naomi and Chuck let me mouth off is that I always say I’m gonna cut loose and then always actually do what they want. I’m a coward. I’ve always been a coward. If I weren’t…”

“This family,” sighed Castiel. “We—”

The phone rang, an aggressive, loud blare interrupting their quiet conversation. The screen on the phone named his caller NOVAK NAO. Wide-eyed, Castiel watched the light on the phone blink in time with the rings and couldn’t bring himself to answer.

“You should talk to her,” Gabriel suggested.

“But—”

“No. Really. I think she might surprise you. Besides, when has delaying the inevitable ever made life better?”
“She’s surprised me many times,” said Castiel bitterly, but he obeyed. His hand trembled as he reached for the receiver and he’d rarely been more glad for Gabriel’s reassuring, steady presence beside him. “Good morning, this is Castiel Novak-Shurley.”

“Ah, darling Cassie.” Even Naomi’s attempt at a soft conversation opener grated like nails on a chalkboard in Castiel’s ears. Naomi only sounded conciliatory and reasonable when she held all the cards. “We missed you last night. Luke tried to locate you but was…unsuccessful.”

They tried to track my phone.

Thank God I got rid of it.

Carefully, Castiel set the phone mouthpiece down and switched on the speakerphone, putting a finger over his lips to warn Gabriel to silence. With a grin, Gabriel mimicked zipping his lips, turning a key and discarding it. Castiel smiled. His brother was his strength, his anchor, and when they had a chance to talk privately once more Castiel would make it clear to Gabriel how truly brave Castiel thought he was.

“I’m sorry, mother.” Castiel tried to over-emphasize his contrition, to sound meek and docile, but the efforts were vain. His voice came out hard and flat and unapologetic. “It would have been profoundly rude to my acquaintance to cancel our plans at the last minute, and my phone subsequently malfunctioned.”

“I’m proud of you, Castiel.”

A startled noise burst from Gabriel and Castiel exchanged a shocked look with his brother.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” said Castiel, shaking off his surprise. He must have heard wrong. “There was a crackle in the line, could you repeat the last thing you said?”

“Don’t lie,” sniffed Naomi. “It’s unbecoming of a man of your presentation and stature. While it was...inconvenient...that you chose this moment to assert yourself, no permanent harm has been done. It troubles me how uncreative and robotic your behavior had become of late, and it is reassuring that you have enough independence remaining to have a social life. It suggests that you have been thinking about the future, which is excellent to hear. Your father and I are worried about you. We won’t be here forever, and when your brothers take over IADB, they’ll need you to be loyal and hard-working and diligent, yes, but they’ll also need you to speak the truth, even when it is not easy for them to hear.” Castiel chanced a glance at Gabriel, who rolled his eyes. The double talk left Castiel disoriented and guilty. “Our dinner guests were open to rescheduling; they appreciated the aggressiveness of your decision to stick with your existing plans. You will be home at 3 PM today. Understand?”

“Yes, mother,” Castiel said with resignation. A lifetime of reading between the lines of everything Naomi said to him made her subtext clear: Castiel’s behavior could be forgiven because she’d been able to explain it to her guests with a positive spin. It was a credit to Castiel’s alpha nature that he’d engaged in an act of rebellion – at least that was what those outside the family would be told. Privately, she was happy to remind him that he relied on her and the family for everything and he’d be wise not to take that for granted.

There was a click as Naomi hung up.

“Who’s the dinner guest, Gabriel?” asked Castiel. Gabriel grimaced and wouldn’t meet Castiel’s
eyes. “I’ll find out in...” He checked the time on the display of his phone. “...3 hours. You might as well tell me, if you know.”

“If you run again, Cassie, she’s not going to let it go with a slap on the wrist,” Gabriel warned.

“This isn’t like you,” Castiel said, troubled. “Usually you’re...effervescent...to disrupt her plans.”

“I’m...conflicted,” acknowledged Gabriel. “Because I don’t know how you’ll react, and because I don’t want to...I dunno...influence you. I know what I’d do, but you’re not me. And that’s a compliment.”

“Gabriel—”

“It’s an arranged marriage, Cas,” Gabriel said in a rush. “They’ve found an omega for you. Her name is April, and she and her family are here from Chicago. Don’t get me wrong – they’re pretending it’s a ‘meeting to get to know each other and see if you and she are compatible’ but her parents and Naomi and Chuck are already discussing business mergers and pre-nups. We had dinner with them last night and she acted nice enough but...”

Gabriel was still talking but Castiel zoned out. He’d known that if he didn’t find someone of his own – someone his parents found acceptable and respectable, not someone like Dean – not that Dean was an option, Castiel amended his thoughts hastily – however much he might want Dean to be an option – and...

“I should prepare myself,” Castiel said abruptly, interrupting Gabriel. “I don’t want to disappoint our parents. It’s important that I make a good impression. Thank you for telling me, Gabriel.”

“Cassie...” Gabriel’s voice was helpless, tinged with despair. An echoing voice in Castiel’s head protested that he didn’t want an omega. The thought of thrusting into a hot body, of feeling slick around his cock, of having his knot bound in a tight hole, made him feel sick. No matter how inappropriate Castiel’s desires were, he wanted what he had with Dean. Being knotted felt right, being thrust into felt perfect, being pressed into the bedspread and ridden was everything Castiel wanted, even better than he’d dreamed.

“I’ll be fine, Gabriel. I’m always fine.”

“Of course you will be – of course you are,” sighed Gabriel as if he didn’t believe a word of it. “Come on, we gotta defunkify you. Unless you want to meet your bride-to-be reeking of alpha? I’ve got this awesome scent blocker, you’ll be smelling like roses in no time. Ommies dig that kinda shit, it’s domestic and romantic or something.”

“Thank you,” said Castiel with a wan smile. He’d rather smell like roses than money any day. If he smelled of flowers, he’d match better with Dean’s summer days, and maybe Dean would want him more if...

...but Dean liked that Castiel smelled of money.

Better to smell like roses than sex when meeting the debutante of another corporate family. Better to smell like roses when Castiel dealt with an upright and proper omega, the perfect mate for the perfect alpha son, everything Castiel was supposed to want. Castiel had been perfect until he met Dean and discovered that the sexual desires he’d quietly indulged in the privacy of his bedroom were exactly what he craved, exactly what someone like him wasn’t supposed to have.

Someone like me?
What am I like?

I don’t know.

I wonder if Dean knows?

How could he? All he’s seen is that I spend big and am heavily prejudiced against those I see as beneath my station. Those are excellent selling points, it’s a wonder he and every other alpha, beta and omega aren’t not beating down the doors to get a piece of me.

He’s not Julia Roberts. He’s not going to fall for his client. I need to keep that in mind.

If he did grow to care for me, would I want him?

“You, me, executive bathroom, right now,” ordered Gabriel, his usual stability and aplomb returning as he grinned cockily and grabbed Castiel’s arm.

Castiel pushed Dean from his thoughts. Dean was a service provider, and Castiel was a buyer, and April was apparently the name of Castiel’s fiancée, and Castiel would be fine.

Castiel was always fine.
“Castiel, would you please pass the potatoes?” April’s voice was calm, light, and soothing.

Castiel’s shirt was buttoned to the neck, his tie tight over his throat and tucked into his jacket. His clothing constricted him so greatly that he felt like he couldn’t breathe or slouch or shift without tearing a seam. He took the roasted red potatoes from before him and passed them to Michael beside him, who passed them to Gabriel, who passed them across the table to Charles, who passed them to Mr. Kelly, who passed them to April.

The room felt as constricting as Castiel’s clothing. Even at their income bracket many families didn’t have a formal dining room, but the Novak-Shurleys used their formal dining room more often than not. A crystal chandelier cast silver and rainbow glimmers over the polished wainscoting, antique dark wood table, and matching throne-like chairs. Weeknights, Castiel worked late enough that he didn’t need an excuse to dodge the stuffy, over-formal room and the oppressive atmosphere that accompanied dinner, but Naomi pitched her version of a fit if he, Gabriel, Michael, and Luke didn’t attend family dinner on Sundays at minimum. Anna was only excused because she was away at school.

“These are excellent, don’t you think?” said April. Judging by the fluff of potatoes on her fork, she’d yet to actually take a bite.

Though everyone had taken their seats seemingly at random – except for Naomi, who always sat at the head of the table, and Charles, who sat at the foot, diligent beta father that he was – Castiel wasn’t fool enough to think it a coincidence that he’d ended up sitting opposite April at the center of the table. He felt like a spotlight was on the two of them; his siblings arrayed like apostles around him and the Kelly family seated as a family unit across the table.

It wasn’t a coincidence that the candlesticks that usually adorned the center of the table were absent. It wasn’t a coincidence that the meal, though delicious, was subtly flavored, subtly spiced, subtly scented. It wasn’t a coincidence that Michael sat on Castiel’s left and Luke sat on his right, a set of groomsmen to ensure that Castiel didn’t flee the proverbial alter. It wasn’t a coincidence that the most powerful scent in the room was April’s cloying lilac wafting in the air. It wasn’t a coincidence that April was dressed conservatively, that her neckline was high, that her thin throat was flattered by a string of faceted gemstones, nor was it a coincidence that she’d kicked off her heels beneath the table and was running her big toe over Castiel’s socked ankle.

Her touch made him nauseous.

“Castiel, Miss Kelly asked you a question,” Naomi reprimanded.

“Yes, the potatoes are delicious,” Castiel replied dutifully, mechanically spearing a small piece of carrot on his fork, taking it, chewing it, and swallowing. It tasted like nothing, though he didn’t blame the kitchen staff for that. “Alfie – sorry, Mr. Alfred – is an excellent cook.”

“Our current staff is adequate,” sniffed Naomi, shooting Mrs. Kelly a long-suffering look. To Mrs. Kelly’s credit, she looked like she was struggling to contain her distress at Naomi’s airs, but she said nothing.

*The Kellys know exactly how lucky they are to be sitting in our dining room, how lucky they are that their daughter has caught Naomi’s eyes. Naomi wouldn’t pick anyone who wasn’t important enough to be nearly equal to us in wealth and social merit, and just inferior enough to be constantly aware...*
of their own inferiority.

“It’s so hard to find good help,” Naomi added.

“This food is a credit to your hiring acuity,” April said with an easy smile, raising her steak-laden fork to Naomi in respect. Gabriel made an agonized sound. Castiel drew his feet beneath chair to place them out of April’s reach, and she shot him a smile that didn’t touch her eyes.

“Have you read the latest about Beta Blue?” asked Charles. Though his attention was directed at Mr. Kelly, he spoke loudly enough that there was no ignoring him. Castiel shot his father a glance, briefly daring to hope that he’d changed the topic intentionally, but there was no sense of sympathy or understanding in Charles’ avid look. As always, Charles was oblivious to the vicious subtext going on around him, intent only on the topics of interest to him and how best he could turn the conversation to a subject he was knowledgeable about.

Castiel wished he was as clueless. Castiel wished he hadn’t spent a lifetime learning how to read between the lines of what Naomi said, and thus by extension between the lines of what everyone said.

“Only that experts anticipate a stock split,” Mr. Kelly replied with a polite nod to the Novak-Shurley family patriarch. “Has something new happened?”

“Oh, yes! I…”

The meal passed in an agonizing, stultifying show of good breeding and manners. April was polite and proper. Her beta parents were respectful, skilled conversationalists who were well-informed about the current investing milieu and about their specific banking interests. Their names rang a bell but Castiel couldn’t place where he’d heard it. From the prevailing conversation, Mr. Kelly seemed an investor of some sort – something involving shortselling, but Castiel couldn’t figure out what exactly from the casual, in-the-know talk that flowed back and forth between the fathers.

“It’s not my thing either,” April admitted in a conspiratorial stage whisper, setting her spoon down in the empty ramekin that had held their creamy crème brûlée. Castiel was shocked Naomi’s ears didn’t twitch, she so obviously-yet-subtly turned her attention to their conversation.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you, Miss Kelly,” apologized Castiel.

“‘Miss Kelly,’” she echoed mockingly. “Good God, Mr. Novak, call me April! And I meant all this money talk. It’s my job during the day but I’m not an enthusiast like some people I might name…” She gave her father a pointed, fond look. “I’m sure the help would be happy to bring us our tea in the salon – I can see you’re as intent on escape as I am.” She shot an unobtrusive servant a condescending, suggestive look. Castiel was disgusted, with her and with himself. She was aloof and arrogant but Castiel hadn’t noticed the servant arriving; surely that meant he was no better. He’d been surrounded by his parents’ lifestyle, surrounded by his parents’ life, so long that he scarce noticed how privileged he was.

What would Dean say, were he here?

Castiel had no idea, but he had the wild urge to find out. Picturing Dean’s expression, his uncouth behavior, his scent, in this environment was enough to bring a smile to Castiel’s face.

“Oh, but are you sure two such young, eligible people as yourselves should be alone in the say-lon?” gasped Gabriel mockingly. A splutter of laughter burst from Castiel.

“Well I never,” April grinned with mock effrontery. “You’re right, of course, Mr. Novak. Perhaps
my mother would make an appropriate chaperone? Or yourself, the family beta? I daren’t *secrete* myself with my alpha suitor and his alpha elder brothers! Such a *virile* family.” She gave Michael, Luke and Castiel suggestive looks in turn and Castiel flushed and stared down at his dessert. A few spoonfuls of crème brulee yet lined one side of his ramekin but his stomach turned.

*She’s definitely not Dean.*

“April!” Mrs. Kelly exclaimed with a show of being shocked and offended by her coarse language.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Naomi piggy-backed onto Mrs. Kelly’s statement, shooting Gabriel a quelling look. “Just because *some* of my sons have no interest in settling down doesn’t mean that *none* of them do. Castiel isn’t like you, Gabriel. We must make allowances for differences in temperament. I’m sorry about my third son,” she continued, turning to the Kellys. “He hides his familial affection under a veneer of mischievousness but underneath that he’s a good boy. They’re all good boys.” She beamed proudly at her sons.

Castiel put his spoon down, insides roiling. Bile burned up his throat, and he swallowed to keep it from coating his mouth, prayed that he wouldn’t vomit up his dinner.

“Excuse me,” he said, rising and taking his napkin from his lap so abruptly that Luke started and across from him April sprang from her chair and betrayed her stockinged bare feet. “I’ll be right back.”

The confused, concerned talk that erupted as he bolted from the room sounded a million miles away, sounded like it was all around him, all encompassing, inescapable. The Novak-Shurley mansion was vast, and he fled down the hallway, initially toward the bathroom. However, he didn’t need to use the facilities, and leaving the miasma of the dining room settled his stomach. He just had to *escape.*

At the end of the hall was a door that led out into a small three-season room that some ancestor had, in a fit of dendrophilia, converted into a greenhouse. Naomi had been displeased when Castiel had attempted to revive that usage to accommodate a collection of succulents and mosses and ferns, and Castiel’s plans for the room had been quashed – supplanted, as it were. Luke’s interest in orchids was more appropriately upper class and eccentric. Stepping into the quiet, dark cool of the airy space, Castiel felt like he could breathe for the first time since he’d gotten Naomi’s phone call the previous night.

*That’s not true. I was able to breathe when I was in Dean’s arms.*

*Don’t think about it.*

*It’s not real.*

*It’s a scent bond, and physical attraction, and the inevitable euphoria of self-indulgence after a lifetime of denial and repression.*

*But—*

*It’s not real.*

*Don’t think about it.*

*Don’t think about Dean.*

Shelves lined the sides of the room. The ground was concrete elegantly stamped in a swirling pattern, the dips of each spiral ensuring that no matter where a plant was set, the root and base of the pot wouldn’t be in standing water. Antique leaded glass panes shimmered in the faint glow of the
floodlights that illuminated the manor grounds. Deep blue shadows scarce contrasted with the paler shades where the light struck, glimmering off glossy leaves and delicate petals. The room smelled of soil and fertilizer and the mixed floral aroma of the blooming orchids, only the palest of which were visible as ghostly white shapes contrasted against the night.

A click behind him spoke to the door opening and shutting and Castiel froze. Luke rarely came here, leaving the care of his flowers to the gardener – orchids were conversation starters, suitable for reading about and pretending to study, appropriate to buy to show off his wealth. Orchids were a perfect hobby for a dilettante, not something he needed to sully his hands by actually interacting with himself. No one came to the greenhouse save the help. Fear, the origin and cause of which Castiel couldn’t trace through the tangled maze of his thoughts, stirred in his breast. He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and turned.

April stood framed in the doorway, the golden light from the house’s hallway haloing her. At the dinner table she’d been so primped and polished as to be unremarkable, but in the deepest darks and brightest brights at the juncture between the house and the greenhouse, she was beautiful; her coiffed hair betrayed by loose tendrils wisping about her face, her eyes clear and pale, her makeup understated and demure. Her scent mingled pleasantly with the smell of orchids. She belonged in a greenhouse, another exotic flower, but just as Castiel could never truly feel at home surrounded by Luke’s orchids, Castiel could never feel at home with a woman like April, who could put on a face pleasing to his parents when on display in one setting, and in another setting could smile at him with every appearance of genuine concern. The problem wasn’t that she was an omega – at least, that wasn’t the entire problem. The problem was that, underneath all her polish and platitudes and flattery, Castiel had no idea who April was.

She reminded him of Naomi.

Castiel repressed a shudder.

“I’m sorry if something I said offended you.” April even sounded different, more human, less airy, more present. Castiel’s hackle rose. “You’re less like your parents that I expected. I’ll admit, I modulated my behavior to be pleasing to them, and in so doing thought I’d appeal to you as well. Things Mrs. Novak and Mr. Shurley said led me to think that would be the best approach. Now that I’ve met you, I see that I was mistaken.”

Castiel opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. April might be mistaken, but she might not be. He’d spent so much of his life trying to fit the mold that Naomi had cut for him that he wasn’t sure what about him was real. He wanted to get away from here, wanted to get away from April, wanted to get away from his life, from everyone, from everything.

You can’t escape from yourself, Castiel. This is who you are.

I don’t know what that means. Is there anything of me within this suit? Is there anything real beneath my Mr. Moneybags alphaness?

At least when Gabriel speaks with me I feel real. When Dean touches me I feel real. Under April’s gaze I feel like a ghost, a projection of Naomi’s expectations and ideals with no autonomy of my own.

“It’s alright if you’re not sure yet,” she continued gently, stepping forward. Her eyes sparkled in the dim glow. “You’re quiet. I like that. I can be quiet too.” Every word was soothing, every gesture gentle, every shift of her body language spoke to her lessening herself, deferring to him. She stepped so lightly that her shoes were silent on the stone ground. Wide eyed, Castiel stepped back, inexplicably frightened. “Having spent time with your brothers, dare I say I have some understanding
of men like you? Don’t worry. I understand.”

“What?” asked Castiel, throat dry.

“Castiel?” she paused uncertainly, an arm’s length from him. Though her heels made her nearly tall enough to look him in the eye, she somehow seemed petite, vulnerable, defenseless, as she gaze up at him through her eyelashes.

“What do you understand?” he specified, trying to swallow, but his mouth was as sere as a desert.

*Is this a seduction? Is she seducing me?*

Why? *She already has Naomi’s blessing. Is she actually foolish enough to believe that I have any say in our relationship? That I could sink her aspirations if I tell my parents I don’t accept her? Does she have that kind of power with her parents?*

*If so…God, she’s lucky.*

“Powerful men,” she purred. Castiel blinked, momentarily unable to connect her answer with their conversation. “Men like you – corporate men, millionaires, alphas – have certain needs. I understand.” She took another step forward, closing the space between them to inches, and Castiel’s heart raced with nerves, his pulse fluttering. Every instinct screamed for him to flee, but he couldn’t justify his extreme reaction and he couldn’t run. His feet were leaden; he couldn’t have been more fixed in place if the concrete floor had been poured around him.

*Does she know about Dean? Is she tacitly forgiving me for not saving myself for marriage? Or has she somehow guessed about my preference for being knotted? Or for men? No, that makes no sense, I—*

“We wouldn’t have to wait,” April breathed against his lips. Castiel gasped. She was close, invading his personal space, a hand on his chest, and before Castiel could escape she leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him. Her lips were dry, over-plush and strangely sticky. Castiel didn’t kiss her back. It was all he could do not to retch, gag reflex making his throat spasm. April broke away from him with a throaty laugh. “But again I see I have misjudged you. You truly are nothing like your brothers.”

“Thank you,” he replied hoarsely.

“It wasn’t a compliment, Castiel,” she said with a saucy wink. As Castiel stared at her, speechless and shocked, she tugged her heels off, hooked the thin straps over one finger, dangled the shoes over her shoulder and sashayed away, hips swinging an unspoken promise. She paused in the doorway, shot him a wink, blew him a kiss, and left. The door clattered shut behind her.

Shaking overtook Castiel and dropped him to his knees. His thoughts roiled. The things April had said to him had so many potential interpretations and he didn’t have information, didn’t know enough about her, to determine which meanings were most likely.

*Don’t think about it. Naomi picked her. In the end, whatever games April is playing aren’t my problem. My role is to accept the marriage my mother has arranged for me, to do as Naomi says and not question her judgment.*

*Except as regards Dean.*

*If Dean knew that April had kissed me, would he be upset? Will he scent her on me? If he did, would he be jealous?*
Castiel’s heart ached, but he knew the answers to those questions. He didn’t want to think about Dean, didn’t want to think about what Dean wanted or what Dean meant to him or what Castiel might mean to Dean. They’d only known each other two weeks. Whatever they were to each other – whatever they might have become to each other over time – was irrelevant. Their relationship would never grow beyond what it began as.

And Castiel and April’s relationship?

April was the omega that Naomi had chosen for Castiel. He was trapped. In his whole life he’d never once managed to avoid following the course that Naomi laid out for him. He might strain at his restraints, might rebel in little ways, but in every way that mattered, Castiel obeyed.

_Gabriel_ thought _Castiel_ was the brave one?

Tears blurred the room black, blurred the entry to the rest of the house into a blob of golden salvation. Another trap, another lie: no hope lay within the house. The greenhouse had a second door out into the grounds and for a wild moment Castiel considered fleeing through it.

_I could go to Dean…_

…_what, to find him in the arms of another client? No, thank you._

Castiel wiped his eyes, gathered his nerve, steeled his backbone to rigidity, and returned to the dining room. Castiel had so few choices in life. He could at least choose when he walked into the trap, how he walked into the trap. He smiled at April, who’d resumed the demure act before their parents, toasted to his brothers, and played the part that Naomi expected. Michael looked suspicious, Luke angry, and Gabriel worried, but Naomi wore a triumphant, satisfied smirk, so small that anyone who didn’t know her well wouldn’t have recognized the tilt of her lips or the scrunch of her eyes.

Naomi recognized that Castiel’s return was a victory for her, and she still celebrated when she won, as if she’d _ever_ failed to twist Castiel to her will.

Castiel winked at her and her eyes widened.

_That’ll give her something to think about._

He dropped back into his seat and took a forkful of crème brulee. It tasted like ash but he chewed and swallowed anyway. Perhaps, if he was very, very well behaved, prudent, cautious, he could contrive to continue to see Dean. His relationship with the sex worker, such as it was, was a small victory. It was enough that those experiences were his, enough that Dean was – for at least a few expensive hours a week – his. It was enough because it _had_ to be enough. Castiel would never have more.

Dinner continued in agonizing small talk and the clink of teacups against saucers, and Castiel mechanically went through the motions.

“I’ll see you again soon?” asked April breathlessly as they said their good-byes. Her parents were in the garage, warming their car and making small talk with Luke. Castiel’s family was conveniently absent, having said their goodnights and scattered to other sections of the house.

“Yes, or so I hope,” Castiel said, without sentiment, without hope. If she sensed his reticence, she showed no sign of it. She approached him again, put a hand on his chest again, kissed him again, and this time, Castiel kissed her back. He didn’t feel a trace of pleasure.

_That’s okay. When has anything about my family given me pleasure? Well, other than my_
relationship with Gabriel…

At least April isn’t worse than Naomi.

“Soon, Castiel.” April’s fingers flicked over his chin, a coy smile twisted her lips, and Castiel watched her leave, desolation numbing him.

At least I’m seeing Dean again next week.

The thought gave little comfort, but at least it gave some. Castiel didn’t need much solace to get through the day. He’d managed on less.

“Well, that was a disaster,” said Gabriel brightly behind him.

Too tired to reply, Castiel nodded his agreement, wiped fatigue from his eyes, and headed out the door, circling the exterior of the house until he reached the entrance to his in-law apartment. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed that Gabriel didn’t follow.

He’d get through this latest trial as he had gotten through every week, every month, every year of his life.

One day at a time.
“You can’t wear that,” Naomi said, examining Castiel’s suit. With a sniff, she reached out, grabbed his tie like it was a leash and tugged him out the door. Too stunned to struggle, Castiel let her pull him along, stumbling over his feet as he tried to match the clack-clack-clacking pace of her heels on the slate path that connected the front door of the house with his apartment.

“If you…” The tie caught at Castiel’s throat and stole his breath. Panting, he tried again. “If you tell me what you’d prefer, I’ll change.”

“No,” she snapped, stopping before his door. She dropped the tie, reached into her pocket, pulled out a jangling key chain, and unlocked his door. “Your father and I have worked tirelessly reviewing potential mates for you and selecting and vetting the Kellys. Though April is unfortunately an omega, their bank will make an excellent addition to IADB’s portfolio. They were not pleased when we suggested you as a potential mate rather than Michael or Luke. You will impress them, Castiel.” Castiel trailed in her wake, rubbing at his throat. Naomi was a force of nature at the best of times; when she behaved like this, Castiel’s best option – Castiel’s only option, honestly – was to conform himself to her wishes as meekly and quickly as possible.

Intimately familiar with the layout of the apartment, Naomi crossed the living room, strode down the hall, walked across his bedroom to the closet, threw open the door, and rooted through his clothing, expression growing sour. Trailing after her, watching her, Castiel obediently kept his eyes on the floor. His heart fluttered and he was able to keep his hands and feet still but couldn’t prevent his toes from scrunching against his socks. There was no knowing how Naomi would act when she grew angry, no guessing how she would lash out or what she’d find that displeased her.

“Did Gabriel tell you where he was going?” She tugged a suit out, looked it over, tsked, and shoved it back onto the rack.

“No,” said Castiel, apologetic, wondering if Gabriel’s decision not to attend church was what had set her temper off. “Only that he would not be joining us. I’m sorry.”

When Castiel had spoken to Gabriel’s that morning, Gabriel’s exact excuse for skipping church had been, I’m not going to sit on that shit wooden bench listening to Uriel spout sanctimonious garbage while that cow makes eyes at you and plays footsy with Luke. Sorry, Cassie, you’re on your own. Castiel had wanted to object, had wanted to ask what Gabriel meant about April playing footsy with Luke, had longed to beg Gabriel to stand by him, but Castiel couldn’t pretend he wanted to go to church either. April’s presence trapped him; Castiel’s entire life trapped him. If Gabriel could make a clean escape, Castiel would do his best to help.

“You should be sorry,” she said without a trace of irony.

Come now, Castiel, no self-delusion. Her ire now is the fall-out from Friday night, and possibly also from my refusal to sleep with April last night. The odds that she wasn’t involved in April’s attempt to instigate premarital sex are low. Don’t make Gabriel a scapegoat. My inability to be a good son isn’t his fault.

“I can’t believe you didn’t make the least effort to convince him to accompany us.” Naomi hadn’t been there. She had no way of knowing what Castiel had or hadn’t said in response to Gabriel’s intended recalcitrance.

Just like she has no way of knowing what April and I talked about? I should accept that she’s
omniscient. No. If she knew what excuse Gabriel had given she’d be acting differently.

Cruel assumptions could always substitute for ignorance, at least when Naomi was speaking with Castiel.

“And your wardrobe is terrible,” she added.

Picking a hanger seemingly at random she pulled out a dark suit, identical in every detail to three others in Castiel’s closet, identical in cut to every suit he owned. He had found one suit that fit and had it replicated ad infinitum. It made getting dressed much easier.

“This one will have to do, I suppose.” She stalked to stand before him and thrust the suit in his face. “Change.”

“Of course, mother,” Castiel demurred. “I’ll see you in a moment.”

“No. Change,” she snapped. “I need to pick out your tie. And what have you got on underneath? Boxers or briefs?”

Mortified, Castiel stripped down to his undershirt and plain white boxer-briefs. Naomi grimaced, ransacked his drawers, selected new underclothes for him, and supervised as he changed into crimson boxer shorts and an undershirt identical to the one he’d had on. After he’d donned the suit, she adjusted it, switched his tie, and produced a lint roller as if by magic to remove whatever blemishes she’d imagined on the dry-cleaned fabric.

“Acceptable,” she sniffed finally. “Let’s go. I don’t want you to make us any later than we already are.”

“Yes, mother.”

“...indeed, though both alphas started with the same resources, the alpha who wanted to assume the air of modesty – who did not build well, who engaged in ill-considered frugality – lost his home. Had he endeavored to build deeper, had he used his wealth more wisely, built his home as the Lord Almighty has built his church, upon the rock, he’d have been on solid ground. Yes, there are some who would call the first alpha’s home ostentatious, a show of wealth when a more discreet edifice would have served, but what the callow dismiss as arrogance, the wise recognize was prudence.
When the floods came, what happened? The alpha whose...

Only Uriel could turn a parable about craftsmanship and doing work well into proof that wealth should be used for opulence and displayed garishly.

Seeking an escape he knew didn’t exist, Castiel’s eyes flicked to the wall beside him, to the stunning panel of stained glass depicting St. Matthew the Evangelist, St. Matthew the Apostle, being visited by an angel. The angel’s facial features look suspiciously like Naomi’s – not a coincidence, since the window had been purchased with a gift from the Novak-Shurley family. St. Matthew was the patron of bankers and financial matters, and Naomi modestly credited her devotion to him with the family success. She didn’t credit him with her success, no, she said, had I not shown him beneficence, not heeded his words, had I not been such a paragon example of his teachings, we’d not have met with success. Her worshipfulness and heedfulness were the cause of success, not the Saint’s generosity. Castiel loathed the church where they worshiped, loathed the fake people who came every week to doze on their benches and gossip afterwards, loathed the church employees who fawned on the glitterati, loathed Uriel and his strained attempts to twist the gospel to justify the greed of his flock, loathed the necessity of being seen to be pious without any commensurate actual piety.

“Brilliant, isn’t he?” breathed April in his ear.

Every time Castiel shimmied closer to the wall, April crowded him more closely. Disgust simmered through him. He longed to bat her hand away, to itch his nose, to shrug his shoulder to knock her back into her seat, but despite Naomi’s intense focus forward, she was aware of everything that happened around her. Too many times, he’d gotten in trouble as a child and teenager for daring to page through the bible and read the actual word of God instead of listening assiduously to Uriel’s interpretative drivel. If he attempted to gain reprieve from April’s behavior, Naomi would know. Beside Naomi, Charles’ eyes were closed, his lips moving as in silent prayer. The Kellys appeared politely attentive, if bored. Michael looked enraptured, probably credit to Uriel’s bold proclamation that “It is not merely our right, but it is our duty, blessed by God himself, to use what means we have to build the best home, the best business, the best life possible. That we have these resources is recognition of our worthiness, and we honor the Lord our God by using them worthily.”

April caught Castiel’s eyes and nodded her agreement. A shiver of dread coursed down Castiel’s spine and his heart beat in dull fear.

No escape...there’s no way out...someone...someone save me...

Dean?

But of course the alpha didn’t come, would never come. It was pure absurdity for Castiel to even think of Dean at such a moment.

It felt a lifetime before the service finally, mercifully came to an end. The Novak-Shurleys drifted amidst the murmuring congregation, demanding hand-shakes and hellos. No one at First Episcopal was poor – steep minimum expected contributions from the worshippers kept the riffraff from their benches – but Castiel’s family moved as royalty among the lords and ladies of the realm. Wherever the Novak-Shurleys walked, attention followed, and words of greeting, small talk and platitudes were de rigueur.

I hate it here.

And ‘here’ means so much more than ‘at this church.’

April clung to Castiel’s side as they made the rounds, her arm looped through his, and though
ostensibly she leaned into him as for support, an omega dangling at the whim of her promised alpha, in truth she steered him through the room as surely as a rider forced a horse through dressage.

“Yes, this is my...my fiancée...April,” Castiel explained time and again. Each time, April simpered and fawned for the benefit of each new high-profile acquaintance. Each time, the wealthy of Palmeton bestowed their blessing and kind wishes on the new couple. Each time, Castiel felt the cage enclosing him grow smaller and tighter and more confined, the air thinner, his lungs harder to expand. Black spots dazzled about the edges of his vision.

There was no way out.

“Castiel, darling, that was exquisite!” April exclaimed as they stepped into the open air outside. The crisp freshness of fall offered Castiel only momentary respite, momentary revivification, before April swooped into his orbit once more, gathered him up, enveloped him in a whirlwind of lilac, and twirled them both to face a stern-looking Naomi. “Mrs. Novak, I cannot thank you enough for your kind invitation to accompany your family to church. I wish we had such a place of worship at home, I’d surely be a far more regular, devote attendee than I am at present! I hope that after we’re wed by that delightful pastor, this will be a weekly occurrence?”

“Priest,” Naomi corrected.

“My apologies,” April said. “But will Father Uriel be able to do the service here?”

“Reverend Uriel.”

“Will I have the honor of sweeping up these stairs in my wedding gown?” She made a show of gathering up her modest, ankle-length skirt and sashaying up the broad stone steps leading to the enormous church doors. If Castiel hadn’t been watching Naomi closely he’d not have noticed the flicker of distaste that soured her features.

“Yes, the wedding will be here,” said Naomi.

*She does recognize how gauche April’s behavior is, how fake she is behind her smiles and her deference. Surely, mother has recognized that from the first.*

*So why arrange the match?*

*Obvious. Because I am expendable, her youngest of three alpha sons, and the Kellys bank will, as she mentioned, make a fine acquisition. If a massive increase in wealth can be achieved at for the cost of one rebellious son and the sad necessity of linking her name to that of a family that she condescends to interact with...well, she’s willing to lend them the air of respectability that being associated with us will bring them, if doing so brings about a commensurate increase in her wealth.*

Castiel moved as through a dream, letting April lead him where she would: back to the car, back home, to the lunch that Mr. Alfred had prepared for them, to the front door when it was tragically time for her family to leave and return to Chicago for the week.

“I’ll miss you, my Castiel,” she breathed, sultry breath fetid. “But never fret, we’ll be back next weekend. Until then...” She leaned forward and smeared her lips over his cheek, hugged him, and followed her parents to their car, sending overdramatic, longing gazes over her shoulder.

Shuffling through the hazy unreality of the world, Castiel returned to his apartment, closed, locked, and bolted the door to gain a semblance of privacy, disconsolately climbed the stairs, stumbled to his bedroom and collapsed on his plush bed.
Something whacked him in the head.

Shuddering, he rolled over. A cell phone had been left on his pillow, a replacement for the one he’d discarded when he fled to Dean’s arms on Friday night. It appeared to be the same model as his old phone; Castiel flicked through the menus, then went to his phone book to send Gabriel a text and see if his brother was about. He’d forgive Gabriel for his callous abandonment if he could spend ten minutes listening to Gabriel lambast their departed guests, the soothing smell of caramel wafting through the air and dissipating the lilac that clung to Castiel nauseatingly.

Gabriel’s phone number wasn’t in the phone book.

There was only one entry in his contacts.

April Kelly.

Horrified, Castiel swallowed a useless protest. His bed felt as soiled by the mere presence of this planted phone as his clothing and his skin did by her pervasive fetor. Forcing himself up, he scarce spared a glance for his open closet – it was empty, Naomi moved fast in her disapproval – as he stumbled to the bathroom, phone still in hand.

He dropped it into the toilet.

He turned the hot water in his shower on as high as it would go.

He stepped beneath the flow fully clothed.

He was no less trapped in his apartment than he was elsewhere; the deadbolt kept unwanted visitors out, but when he wasn’t home it was by necessity not bolted, and anyone from the household could wander in if Naomi provided them with her spare key. When he was home, the bolt protected him, but it also held him within. If he stepped out onto the grounds, he was still bound.

Trapped. Trapped again.

The water scalded his skin, but Castiel didn’t care. As long as the flow washed April off him, as long as he didn’t have to smell her for the next few days, he’d accept the pain. It was a small price to pay to be clean, for once to feel untainted by his family, their plan for him, their connections, and their arrogance.

Oh? And what about your taint, Castiel? What about the disgusting ways you’ve let that alpha use you in the dark of the night?

Disgusting or not...I miss Dean.

The cell phone rang in the toilet.

Arm dripping, Castiel reached out of the shower and held down the flush until the flashing screen went dead.

Over dinner, Naomi would certainly ask if Castiel had received the phone, and Castiel intended to lie his face off.

Later, he’d apologize to the servant who would get the rough side of her tongue for not doing their errands correctly. Whoever had left him the phone didn’t deserve that treatment.

Castiel didn’t deserve this treatment either.
They were all of them trapped, all of them damned.

But at least I see Dean again on Friday.

Five days to go.

One day at a time.

“Someone’s got a surprise waiting for them!” Ruby, the woman who worked the front security desk early morning shift, gave Castiel a knowing smile as he arrived for work on Monday morning.

Castiel had no idea what Ruby thought she knew, but his stomach sank. Crossing the lobby, he boarded the elevator, punched the twenty-one button, and ascended toward his office. Claustrophobia gnawed at him. Tight spaces didn’t usually bother him, but the elevator felt confining. The IADB building felt confining. His appearance felt confining. His presentation felt confining. His name felt confining. His life was an enormous jail cell and Castiel was an ass for complaining about it when most people would kill to be in his position.

Alpha, rich, from a renowned family, engaged to a gorgeous, brilliant omega...but all of that isn’t good enough for arrogant, entitled, privileged Castiel Novak-Shurley.

The smell of roses greeted him as the elevator doors parted on the 21st floor. Castiel’s nose wrinkled and as he walked down the hallway, he lifted an arm and surreptitiously sniffed himself. Castiel hadn’t a clue what Naomi had done with his wardrobe, though she’d mentioned over breakfast that new things had been ordered for him. Until they arrived, he had only the suit he’d worn to church the previous day. It was still damp from his fully-clothed shower and he reeked of April’s lilac and his own inky money aroma. Wherever the attar smell emanated from, it wasn’t the lingering remnants of the rose scent blocker he’d used on Saturday morning. Nevertheless, the smell seemed to follow his footsteps, intensifying when Castiel stepped into his office.

Moving by rote, he got ready for his day.

He closed the door behind him.

He hung his trench coat on the rack by the door.

He checked the inbox he used for snail mail.

He belatedly realized the inbox was empty because he’d already retrieved Saturday’s mail and there’d been no mail delivery on Sunday.

He sighed at his own incompetence and abstraction.

He turned to his desk.

Between corporate events and the opulent social functions thrown by the Novak-Shurleys wealthy friends, Castiel had seen some impressive floral arrangements in his life, but the bouquet of blood-red roses dominating his desk was enormous even by his standards, fifty blossoms or more. The smell suffused the room, soaked into the carpet and the papers of his filing cabinet and probably into his damn skin.

I’m over-reacting. How long could they possibly have been here? It’s 6:30 in the morning! The smell hasn’t soaked into anything.
Yet.

A carved wooden dowel, stained a lustrous sheen, ended in a fork that supported an embossed card. Hands shaking, Castiel took the card.

“I miss you already,” it read in a loose, flowing script that screamed April’s personality in written form. “Let these serve in my stead until we meet again! Look at them and think of me, darling. P.S. My parents have granted me permission to linger in Palmeton. Hyatt, Room 5614. Dinner tomorrow night?”

Castiel looked at the flowers.

Castiel thought of April.

Castiel shuddered.

“Ah, Castiel!” Naomi’s voice shattered the stillness in the room and Castiel tensed from head to toe.

Did she see my reaction? Can she smell my disgust?

I can explain away the shudder as missing April. She won’t believe me but she’ll be pleased that I’m playing along.

And who could smell anything over this stink?

Singer and a janitor Castiel didn’t recognize came up behind Naomi, bearing a table.

“I didn’t expect you so early,” Naomi continued, pretending obliviousness to Castiel’s guilty start. “I had hoped to have everything in place before you arrived. Yes – right there,” she confirmed for Singer and the other janitor’s benefit as they set the table down. “Isn’t it perfect, Cassie? With her flowers the centerpiece of the room, it’ll almost be like April is still here with us. We tried to get lilacs, but they’re seasonal, you know – the florist has promised to inquire with local greenhouses. Hopefully, by next week...” Naomi sniffed dismissively and Castiel wondered what would happen to the florist if they failed to meet Naomi’s demands. Castiel knew too well what lengths his mother would go to in order to punish those who displeased her.

This poor florist is going to get driven out of business over lilacs...unless they can actually produce some in October...

Under Naomi’s watchful eye, Castiel plastered on a smile, took up the ornately beveled crystal vase and carried it to the table as Singer and his coworker quietly departed through the office door.

Castiel envied them.

“Just lovely,” Naomi said with a smile. She reached out and adjusted the positioning, placing the signed card so that it faced Castiel’s desk. “I thought the weekend went very well, don’t you? Oh, and your cell phone was found near the intersection of White Oak and Lilyhammer. What were you doing there?” Castiel wasn’t sure why Naomi bothered to maintain an air of nonchalance. They both knew how deliberate her inquiries were. Her disdain for the neighborhood was obvious in the condescending way she named the streets, tilting her head in the air as if she smelled something malodorous.

Either that, or she finds the flowers as noxious as I do.

“I don’t know,” Castiel lied. “I’ve never been there.”
“Of course you haven’t been,” Naomi laughed. “Pickpockets these days, so brazen!”

“Yes...yes, it must have been a pickpocket,” said Castiel faintly.

Reaching across the unbridgeable chasm of the scant feet that separated them, Naomi pressed the phone into Castiel’s hand and gave him a cold smile.

“Don’t let it happen again,” she said in a tone that could have frozen the water in the roses’ vase.

“Yes, mother. Of course not, mother.”

Her smile broadened, not a glimmer of pleasure warming her frosty eyes, and Naomi turned and left. Watching her go, Castiel kept his breathing calm only by concentrating. Whatever semblance of privacy he’d maintained the last few years, since he’d moved into the in-law apartment, was gone. Naomi was no longer pretending to respect his boundaries, though he’d always suspected that her pledge to give him space was lip service.

Once Naomi had leverage on someone she never let them go.

Naomi had had leverage on her children since the day they were born.

She probably didn’t yet know where he went or what he did on Friday’s nights, but her interest had been aroused by Castiel’s defiance, so much so that she’d sent an employee to follow whatever trail of crumbs he’d left and retrieve his phone. If Castiel knew his mother – and God, did he, though he wished he didn’t – she was probably having him followed.

He’d have to find some other way to meet Dean.

*Or I could cancel our meeting and not go meet him…*

He’d *have* to find some other way to meet Dean.

*One day at a time.*

---

His old cell phone was a paperweight. The screen was shattered, the battery was dead, it wouldn’t take a charge, and the SIM card was missing. Judging by the strange, fragmented patterns crystallized beneath the shards of glass, he or someone else had dumped it in a puddle.

A new cell phone was on Castiel’s dining room table on Tuesday morning. He didn’t bother destroying it. His mother would keep replacing them. He could neither out-stubborn her nor wear down her resistance. He knew that, and she knew that he knew that. All his continued defiance did was tell her that he was still feeling petulant.

If Castiel was to maintain even an iota of autonomy, he had to pretend to meet Naomi’s expectations.

**Castiel Novak (8:01 AM):** Good morning, April. It’s Castiel. Based on your expressed desire to see me prior to this weekend, I was wondering if you might be interested in getting dinner with me tomorrow (Wednesday, October 12th) at 7:30 PM?

**Castiel Novak (8:02 AM):** If you are amenable, I will procure us suitable reservations.

Castiel had planned to work late on Wednesday evening, as he worked late every evening, but he had to pick *some* night to see her, and if he got it out of the way, he could at least steal a few nights when he didn’t have to see or think about his fiancée.
If he wanted to maintain even an iota of autonomy, he had to play Naomi’s game.

April Kelly (8:06 AM): OMG Yes thats fantastic! I want La Vie en Palmeton. I read reviews and looked at their menu online it looks tres tres magnifique!

Of course April wanted to go the most expensive, most chic restaurant in the city. Of course she wanted him to demonstrate his social clout by demanding he get a reservation on short notice. Of course she knew enough French to think she was showing off effectively when instead she made it clear she had no idea what she was talking about.

*How can Naomi find her acceptable? It makes no sense. Ce n’est pas magnifique.*

Castiel Novak (8:07 AM): I will call them later and make the necessary arrangements.

Setting his phone aside, Castiel booted his computer and tried to ignore the tickling in his nose caused by the rose scent. Twenty four hours post-delivery, his office still reeked, and Castiel suspected that perfume had been used to augment the flower’s natural aroma. His phone vibrated and Castiel glanced over. The screen lit up and indicated he had another text from April. He ignored it, but it pinged again and again as he reviewed his e-mails, wrote replies, checked the morning news, and tackled his to-do list.

Lunch was a nicely seasoned autumn salad with sliced chicken, delivered to his office by an intern whose name he’d never caught. There were always interns floating around IADB. There were always young people desperate to get a foot in the door; who were the Novak-Shurleys to turn down unpaid labor? Appetite non-existence, Castiel ignored the salad and looked up the restaurant’s phone number and, resigned, made the call. As he’d feared, they were booked for the next month, but with negotiation and a sizeable advance deposit, he was able to reserve the chef’s table in the kitchen. Hanging up, using a hand to rub at his temples, Castiel grabbed his phone to let April know the plan. No sooner did he turn on the screen than a tinkle of message alerts cascaded into the quiet of the room.

April Kelly (8:08 AM): Thanks Castiel!!! You’re the bestest. ❤

April Kelly (8:09 AM): I don’t know what to do with my day.

April Kelly (8:09 AM): Obviously shopping. I need an outfit for dinner. Everything I brought was stuff I thought our parents would approve of boooooriiing I’m glad that we’ll have some time just the two of us.

April Kelly (8:10 AM): Does your family have any preferred shoppes?

April Kelly (8:11 AM): Albert Street is where the boutiques and designers have their ateliers right?

April Kelly (8:12 AM): La why am I asking you an alpha AND a man you wouldn’t know where to buy a dress. I’ll text Anna.

April Kelly (8:20 AM): Why didn’t you tell me there was a Balenciaga a Calvin Klein and a Dior? Oh howll I decide what to get?

April Kelly (8:26 AM): And not a single one opens until 10!

The inanities continued, April lamenting that she’d planned to go to the Palmeton Art Museum but now she simply had to change her plans, and asking his advice on things to do and places to eat in the city, as if Castiel ever left the office. There was a good amount of Naomi suggested and Luke loves followed by April soliciting his opinion. When she got to the clothiers, her messages grew even
more frequent, interspersed with selfies of her in different cocktail dresses as she mused on which she liked and speculated about which she believed he’d like. Since his phone had stopped counting after the first fifty texts, and his silence had been no deterrent, Castiel assumed he could disregard the majority of what she’d written.

_Castiel Novak (12:36 PM): I like the first dress._

He didn’t know which the first dress was, nor did he care what she wore, but hopefully stating an opinion would be adequate to get her to leave him alone.

_Castiel Novak (12:37 PM): Reservations are for 8 PM at La Vie en Palmeton._

_April Kelly (12:38 PM): The first dress oh no did you see the way it clung to my hips? Dreadful. I only sent you that picture to show you how bad I looked in it! Can you believe Michael Kors attached his name to anything that color? I’ve already bought the third one the eighth and ninth the last one and one more that’s a surprise. ♥_)

_April Kelly (12:39 PM): I’ll need your help to figure out which to wear tomorrow._

_April Kelly (12:39 PM): Tonight at my hotel private runway to help me pick?_

_Castiel (12:40 PM): I’m sorry, I’m unavailable this evening._

Castiel set the phone aside again, ignoring its continued text alerts, and googled “is there a way to block texts from a specific person without them knowing.”

_Ping!_

The answer was apparently blacklisting. The procedure looked easy enough.

_Ping!_

If Castiel blacklisted April, he’d get _none_ of her texts.

_Ping!_

That would…probably be an issue within a few weeks.

_Ping!_

That would probably be an issue within the hour. Surely _something_ amidst her babbling was important enough to require a reply.

_Ping!_

Sighing, Castiel took up his phone again, turned off the sound, and looked through the settings. An alert popped up, asking if he wanted to sync his contacts with his cloud backup, and within a few minutes his old settings, background and phonebook were restored. For a split second, he could pretend he had his old phone back, had returned to life before the Kellys joined them for dinner.

…_before I met Dean…_

April sent him three more messages in the time his backup restored.

She didn’t seem to care if Castiel replied.
Why should Castiel care if he replied?

Turning back to his desktop screen, Castiel went to click out of his Google search and get back to work when he noticed an article entitled, “Unwanted Texts? Get an Untraceable Phone! Find out how…”

The company firewall monitored all internet traffic. Castiel had taken enough of a risk with the first search; he’d not compound the danger of word getting back to his parents by clicking through on a link related to untraceable phones. Naomi would grow extraordinarily peeved if she thought Castiel was attempting to communicate in a way that she couldn’t spy on. It hadn’t even occurred to him to get a second phone. If he had one…his parents wouldn’t know who he contacted, he could have some semblance of privacy, and he’d be able to communicate with Dean during the week.

That would be nice.

If Dean wanted to communicate with him during the week.

Slumping back in his chair, taking another bite of salad, Castiel considered the challenges of meeting with Dean this coming Friday. Naomi had found his phone. That she was able to locate it – or, rather, that whoever she’d hired had been able to locate it – raised unpleasant questions.

Was Naomi having Castiel followed?

Was there a tracker in his car?

Did she have the GPS in his phone active?

What other means were there of tracking someone? Castiel didn’t know. If he didn’t know Naomi so well, he’d think he was being paranoid, but she’d had cameras installed in her sons’ offices so she could monitor their work output. She got reports from security about his internet usage. She reviewed the logs of when his keycard was used, and when his code was entered to open the gates to their mansion.

But she didn’t know about Dean, not yet.

She couldn’t know.

If she knew, she’d have said something.

Unless she’s saving the information, an ace in the hole reserved for when she needs to crush my opposition. Would she do that? Would my mother retain blackmail information on me?

Of course she would. Naomi will stop at nothing to make reality conform to her desires. In business and in family, she’s ruthless.

Part of why Castiel was attached to the old Lincoln Continental was his belief that it was unhackable. It didn’t have a computer, so how could a computer be used against it? Now, he wasn’t sure. Naomi had always been controlling; Castiel coped by accepting her control ninety nine percent of the time in the hopes that the one percent of the time he didn’t, she’d leave him his small rebellion, a bare bone thrown to an obedient dog.

So far the strategy hadn’t worked.

In a lifetime of Naomi choosing for Castiel, she must have steered his course 999 times, 9,999 times, 99,999 times, and Castiel had won exactly once. Citing his business ethics class, Castiel had insisted
that he’d not bank with IADB, not keep his own money in the same pot as his clients’. With his knowledge of investing and his stake in protecting his own fortune, the potential conflicts of interest were manifold. Naomi had been put out – her fortune was invested by the bank, as were his elder brothers’ – but she’d ultimately conceded when Castiel had said he’d decline his paycheck rather than risk being accused of malfeasance. Paying the children a sizeable wage was one of many ways that Naomi reduced her tax burden, and she’d been appalled that Castiel proposed working for free, but not so appalled that she’d cut him off over it.

With that small concession to his name, Castiel’s money was managed by a private wealth manager, their sometimes-competitor Richard Roman, and his accounts were with JP Morgan Chase. Because he lived at home, his expenses were minimal, and his paycheck was substantial, so he’d amassed a sizeable savings. Naomi reviewed his statements, pestered him about abnormalities in his spending, hounded him about his investments, and was authorized to deal with both Roman and the bank on his behalf, but at least Castiel had something to call his own. Some small, ever-optimistic part of Castiel dared to dream that, someday, when Naomi and Charles were dead, Castiel could escape from working under Luke and Michael and forge his own path.

When he and April were wed, Castiel’s money would become April’s money.

Every year, Castiel’s optimism faded more and his hope dimmed. The glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel of his life was mighty distant and moved farther away every day.

*One day at a time.*
Chapter 8

The time separating Castiel from his date with April grew shorter with every tick-tock of the clock. Anticipation and dread consumed him. His leg jittered. The computer screen went in and out of focus. Castiel was going to be alone with April for hours. What would he say? What would she say? How was he supposed to behave? What did she expect from him? Would she kiss him again? He could still feel the ghost of sticky chapped lips against his like slimy fingers trailing over his back, like a slug sliding up his leg. When he’d looked in the mirror after she’d left on Saturday night his lips had been cherry red with her lipstick, as much a mark of ownership as a prominent mating bite would have been, though less permanent.

Would April expect Castiel to knot her?

Shouldn’t Castiel want to knot her?

As a teenager, Castiel had watched pornography that Gabriel had provided him, watched thick cocks fat with alpha knots slide into slick, leaking omega holes as the moaning bottom was fucked. It was arousing, but in a way that was peculiarly disconnected from Castiel’s own cock, his own knot. When Gabriel procured Castiel a fleshlight, having sex with the realistic toy felt good but strange, left Castiel vaguely queasy with a sense of wrongness that he couldn’t pin down. Watching his dick push into the toy had been like having an out of body experience, and his knot hadn’t swollen enough to catch even though he came. Confused, alarmed, Castiel had watched the pornography again with a more clinical eye. Something about observing others have sex aroused him, and he studied the films as he would have a primary source for history class or a business report in the Wall Street Journal.

Hypothesis: the fleshlight was a toy, whereas the omega in the pornography was real.

Experiment: attempt alternative approaches to penile stimulation.

Castiel wasn’t going to lose his virginity. Naomi placed too much stock in it, and besides, the thought of replicating what he’d done to the fleshlight with a real person made him feel ill. He’d masturbated with his hands before, and found the touch of his fingers adequate. Castiel tried variations to see if he found them more arousing – high quality slick-mimicking lubricant, heating the fleshlight before use, that kind of thing – to no avail. Without an actual omega trembling around him, Castiel couldn’t test his hypothesis, and he had zero interest in having an actual omega with him.

That was, he’d thought at the time, a serious problem.

Fifteen years later, he still thought that was a serious problem.

Reviewing the footage again, Castiel watched the burly, grunting alpha, and felt nothing. He watched the moaning, leaking omega, and felt nothing. His eyes slipped shut. Groans and the slap of skin on skin filled the air and Castiel itched with the desire to touch himself, quivered as a fantasy formed unbidden in his mind’s eye: a stocky alpha, and a knot filling Castiel, and...

The ramifications of the fantasy were terrifying, but Castiel forced himself to acknowledge his new theory.

Hypothesis: Castiel wanted to be penetrated, rather than to be the penetrating partner.

Experiment: penetrate himself.

Materials needed: dildo or equivalent.
At sixteen, Castiel lacked the confidence to ask Gabriel for a dildo, and Gabriel hadn’t thought to offer his younger alpha brother an anal toy. There wasn’t an omega in the house from whom Castiel could borrow or steal; Naomi, Michael and Luke were alphas, Charles and Gabriel betas, and Anna was too young to have presented. This was as it should be, or so Naomi always said. Omegas were genetically predisposed to birth other omegas; to keep the family powerful, she’d chosen a beta to marry, and as she’d hoped, Charles had borne Naomi mostly alpha children.

Still, I’m the youngest son...I might end up with an omega...and I suppose that will be alright...if it’s a man, he’ll still have a penis even if he doesn’t have a knot...maybe he would...

That would be weird, wouldn’t it...

Then again, if I’m an alpha and I want to be penetrated...maybe that’s not abnormal? Maybe I’m not that weird? Maybe someone has a toy suitable for penetration...

Despite carefully sneaking into every bedroom, scanning for hiding places, Castiel found nothing.

Or maybe I am that weird...no, I’m probably normal, and if I actually manage to try this, I won’t like it.

At least this way I won’t be in the disgusting position of using someone else’s sex toy...

Castiel really wanted to try being filled, wanted to try ‘playing the omega.’ Fantasies of being thrust into invaded his musings as he stared out the window during boring classes, became nightly fodder for his wet dreams. Since he’d presented at fourteen, Castiel had found puberty unremarkable aside from the dreadful, insatiable lust of his ruts. Imagining being knotted changed everything. With this new distraction he was aroused embarrassingly often, at truly awkward times.

Treat it like science: find the necessary materials, enact the experiment, disprove the theory. That simple.

Studiously, teenaged Castiel searched for something that he could insert in himself. Lubricant wasn’t an issue, as he had the tube of bubblegum-flavored artificial slick that Gabriel had bought him and the high-quality synthetic slick that Castiel had obtained at the drugstore. Presumably anything long and thin would make an acceptable penis substitute. In a box in the basement Castiel found an ancient remote control that didn’t link to any electronic device still in the house. It was big, comparably sized to the cocks he’d seen in Gabriel’s films, and despite the remonstrance in his head that the point of this experiment was to prove that Castiel didn’t want to be on the receiving end of anal sex, he shivered with anticipation, erection forming as he wrapped his hands around the bulky remote and stroked it.

Castiel bolted to his room and had his pants around his ankles before the door was all the way closed.

Even considering his nights with Dean, fucking himself on the remote control remained one of the most satisfying sexual experiences of Castiel’s life. It was messy, uncomfortable, and he’d ached for days, but as he’d slid it into himself nothing had ever felt more right. Before that night, nothing Castiel had been told about sex computed in his head, nothing about society’s expectations matched what he’d experienced. The people his alpha friends and family found sexy didn’t interest him, the idea of lying with an omega distressed him, and the swelling of his knot discomfited him. But being filled, being knotted – that was perfect.

The implications of that discovery were more than 16-year-old Castiel could process, but he was absolutely, positively sure of one thing.
Other alphas were not like him.

He’d always known something was wrong with him.

In an abstract sense, Castiel had imagined penetrating someone. Sex, even sex he wasn’t partial too, felt good. Surely, when he found the right beta or omega, he’d want to be inside of them. Just because he’d yet to scent a beta or an omega that appealed to him, didn’t mean Castiel would never meet such a person. But...many times in his life Castiel had seen alphas, scented alphas, and grown aroused. Dean was only the most recent example, and the most extreme. Alpha-to-alpha attraction wasn’t unheard of; homosexuality could apply to either attraction to the same gender or to attraction to the same presentation type, though the later was less common, and Castiel was most definitely gay in every sense of the word.

And Naomi knows that…I think…and selected April anyway...

Castiel’s malfunction went deeper than desiring an alpha partner. When he’d been 16, never having felt attracted to an omega or a beta had been odd but he’d been young and sheltered. At 31, the same lack was more troubling. The more eagerly Castiel fucked his remote, fucked any pseudo-dick he could find, the less he liked touching his knot. Nothing ruined masturbation for him so quickly as massaging the sensitive tissue at the base of his dick, though from what he’d seen in Gabriel’s pornography, knot massages were supposedly pleasant. Ruts were the worst, his thirst unquenchable, his knot throbbing with need but his mind rebelling at the thought of using the fleshlight or even touching himself.

Castiel had been on rut suppressants since he was 16, when he’d gone to Naomi and explained that the shift in his hormones affected his productivity and he was worried that regular ruts were negatively impact his grades. She had, mercifully, listened and conceded. She’d have been a hypocrite not to, since she’d been on rut suppressants since Anna was born and she and Charles had decided five children was enough.

Castiel hadn’t had a rut in thirteen years.

Castiel hoped like mad that he’d never have a rut again.

Naomi would make him stop taking the suppressants once he was married. A proper alpha fucked a proper omega and produced proper pups.

Castiel was supposed to want to have sex, supposed to revel in his libido gone wild every month. Surely when he met the right person…

…April definitely wasn’t the right person…

Is Dean the right person?

No. He’s an alpha, which means by definition he is the wrong person for me.

Whatever it takes, I have to convince myself that April is the right person. There’s no other choice.

But Christ, she isn’t making it easier for me. God give me strength…

“Psst,” April hissed, side-eying Castiel while she pretended to study her menu. “How do I pronounce the name of the lamb dish?”

“You mean the navarin d’agneau?” asked Castiel.

Scanning the menu, Castiel suppressed a shudder as he realized what she’d been attempting to say with her abysmal pronunciation. “The gigot d’agneau pleureur?” he said, turning the menu and pointing so she’d see which dish he meant.

*Stop being a snob, Castiel. Yes, she’s uncultured, but I know many people who don’t speak French and I don’t judge them for it. It’s like I’m looking for reasons to detest her. As if I needed more…*

“Yes, that one,” said April with a sigh of relief. “The gigot d’agnow plu...actually, why don’t you order for me? And perhaps pick a wine for us?”

Resigned, Castiel nodded.

*At least once we’re finished ordering, we’ll be able to find something to talk about. Right?*

Planning the perfect meal was not his forte but Naomi had been appalled when he’d returned from college unable to tell the difference between a Merlot and a Cabernet. To satisfy her expectations, he’d studied pairings as assiduously as he’d studied the latest futures. He was no sommelier, but he managed. Fortunately, the wine menu had suggested pairings, and when the waitress came by, Castiel was able to confidently order the tasting menu, specifying a baked camembert for their appetizer, April’s lamb, the pot-au-feu for himself, and a bottle of Chateau Latour 1995.

“Excellent choice, sir,” said the waitress.

She might have even meant it.

The chef’s table was placed in a relatively quiet corner of the kitchen, near where an intent employee meticulous peeled potatoes and carrots by the sackful. The room was hot, loud, and chaotic. Despite the demands of the dinner rush the chef, Balthazar, introduced himself at the start of the meal and checked in on them periodically, offering suggestions, providing a complimentary amuse bouche, pouring the tasting sample of Castiel’s wine and complimenting Castiel on his selection, and playing diligent host. Castiel marveled at Balthazar’s ability to multitask and wondered how he leaned over so many steaming pots without mussing his hair or breaking into a sweat. A second appetizer was produced as from thin air, foie gras cooked perfectly, and with a quarter hour between the ample courses, the hour grew later and later.

They had nothing to talk about.

April, to her credit, tried.

“Do you like your surprise Versace? It’s couture!”

“Have you been to this restaurant before?”

“Is this traditional French food?”

“Have you been to France?”

“When we went to France, we ate...”

As her deluge of texts over the past two days should have warned Castiel, April had no difficulty filling the silence. Castiel’s replies were perfunctory, and as the meal dragged on, she switched
subjects frequently. It took Castiel over an hour to realize that she was trying to find a topic pleasing to him.

April had worn out her ability to be pleasing to Castiel five minutes after they’d met.

I’m being an asshole. Yes, she’s nouveaux riche, but I’ve never been one to put on airs around those less fortunate than I...have I?

Of course I have been. Always. Consider how I treated Dean, when his only offense was choosing to earn his living as a sex worker. He came by his profession more honestly than I came by mine, and he chose it, and he likes it, yet I act like he and his colleagues are trash.

It’s not fair to April that I took a dislike to her simply because my parents selected her.

Really? Is that the only reason? She smells rank! She kissed me against my will! She played footsie with me! She’s been throwing herself at me since the moment we shook hands. Hasn’t she?

And so what, if she has been? She’s allowed to pursue her own best interest, whatever she perceives that to be. I’ve been trying to correct my unfair, condescending assumptions about Dean, reassessing, amending, apologizing when I erred, and what I’ve found is that when I give him his due and don’t pre-judge, he’s brilliant, hard-working, gorgeous, dedicated, and caring.

No matter how poor a first impression she made, doesn’t April deserve the same opportunity to improve herself in my eyes?

“...and we’d only been in Paris a week but we’d already run out of things to do. I mean, there’s only so much shopping one can do without taking a break, it does get old after a while. So – just for a day – mom suggested we go to Versailles! Have you been there, Castiel? My fave room was the Hall of Mirrors,” she gushed, not even a pause to suggest she wanted or expected Castiel to reply to her interjected question. “When we got home, I showed the architects designing our house the pictures of the chandeliers and they promised to replicate them precisely for our dining room! Still, a day is too long at Versailles, don’t you think? I wish we’d been able to get an earlier train back to Paris. I almost missed the massage I had scheduled!”

She stopped to draw breath, bat her eyelashes in what Castiel thought was meant to be an alluring fashion. Chef Balthazar, perhaps sensing the break in their one-sided conversation, swept in with their entrees. In his debonair accent, he described their meals and wished them bon appétit. The bold scent of stewed tomato wafted around the Chef, oozing assertive alpha. Castiel watched him go, a jolt of longing piercing him through.

He is an attractive man. If someone like him was set to be wed to me...

...but why would he want that? Why would any alpha want to make love to another alpha, dry and tight and uncomfortable, when they could be with a wet, willing omega instead? This desire is my malfunction, not theirs.

But I do wish mother had chosen a male omega for me instead of a female...

“This looks delicious!” exclaimed April. “So does yours! May I try some?” April took up her fork and speared a piece of ox tail, taking a dainty bite. Balthazar shot Castiel a sympathetic look, an expression which Castiel chose to interpret as the Chef being horrified at April’s poor manners, and April blanched at the flavor of the meat. “Fantastic, Chef Balthazar.” She covered her lapse with a coy smile. “You are a God among men.”

“Of course I am,” said Balthazar with a suave smile and an inexplicably suggestive look Castiel’s
way. “I am the Chef, after all.”

April laughed as he swept back to work and cut into her lamb.

“I have been there,” Castiel said quietly, taking up his knife and cutting up one of the purple carrots floating whole in the stew.

Swallowing over-quick in her haste to reply, April said, “Where?”

“Versailles.”

“Oh! And wasn’t it marvelous? If I could build an entire home in the model of the...oh, bother, what was it called? The palace with the marble columns!” She sighed, pretending to swoon back into her chair. “Life goals, right, Castiel?” She gave him a knowing smile. A waft of lilac struck Castiel’s nose, florals overwhelming the rich herbed scent steaming off his stew, and he turned his head in a vain effort to escape the stench.

“I was partial to the Hameau de la Reine,” said Castiel. April looked at him blankly. “Near the Petit Trianon – the palace with the pink marble? The ‘hamlet of the queen’ – the faux-commoner village built for Marie Antoinette – that was my favorite place on the palace grounds.”

“Yes, yes, I remember!” said April, triumphant for no reason Castiel could guess. “Of course, that was my absolute favorite, so quaint!”

“I wish it had been more authentic,” Castiel continued pointedly. “Rather than a mockery of the lives lived by the peasants, a fantasy of the pastoral, I’d like someday to visit one the actual historical towns of France and see how people really lived – Colmar, or Bordeaux – that’s where this wine is from – or Cluny...” April’s expression fell, and Castiel trailed off, and then she brightened and her scent intensified.

“A wine tour of France, oh, darling, that’s brilliant! We should make the plans for winter. I’m sure IADB can spare you for two or three weeks, or maybe it could be our honeymoon!”

*She hears exactly what she wants to hear, not a word more or less.*

This is hopeless.

April babbled on, planning their hypothetical honeymoon in the south of France. At least the pot-au-feu was delicious. Listening to April was nigh impossible, but she neither expected nor needed input from him aside from the occasional nod or wordless sound of approval. Listening to her, Castiel developed a theory of why Naomi had chosen April. She was likely to inherit a fortune – a vote in her favor – but she was an omega, which Castiel would have thought a deal-breaker. Naomi had been able to see past her prejudices to judge the woman more fairly than Castiel had. April was clever, knowledgeable, and desperate to please. She was a blank slate, intelligent enough and skilled enough and determined enough to become whatever the Novak-Shurleys wanted her to be. There was nothing genuine about April: her scent was artificially enhanced, the chemicals burning at Castiel’s nose; her necklace glittered as only lab-made gemstones did; her preferences changed to match her preconceptions of Castiel and what she believed would best please him; and, in the harsh light and sticky heat of the kitchen, Castiel could see every place where makeup was used to augment or obfuscate her features.

Objectively, Castiel knew he was making mountains of mole hills – using scent enhancer, wearing makeup, buying the finest jewelry one could afford, all were standard ploys in the mating games of the rich and famous and there was nothing inherently bad about any of them – but Castiel and April
didn’t ‘click,’ had nothing in common, couldn’t even hold an actual conversation.

*This isn’t simply a matter of my being biased after observing her poor manners. This isn’t merely my aloofness and condescension making me oblivious to her charms. She’s...*

...well, she’s a bitch...

The confession came in a voice that sounded amusingly like Gabriel’s, and for the first time since he’d forced a mockery of pleasure onto his face when April greeted him at the maître d’s podium, Castiel broke into a smile.

“I know,” she said, shooting him a simpering grin in return. She placed a hand over his. Castiel had no idea what she had been talking about and didn’t care enough to ask. “This evening truly has been so, so nice. It’s like I told Chef: once we’re wed I’m positive we’ll be a regular fixture at his restaurant.”

“Yes,” said Castiel faintly. “I’m sure Chef Balthazar will reserve a table for the Novaks, if asked.”

*And hey, at least I’ll get to see him and enjoy his scent when he comes by...something tells me that in the months and years and decades to come I’m going to have little enough to look forward to. Time to start hoarding the small, private blessings.*

When the meal was finally over, Castiel took up the bill without letting April see their four figure tab. Nascent relief that he was almost free, that he’d be able to part ways with her at the restaurant’s door, withered when she waited with him while the valet retrieved his car.

“You drive this?” she exclaimed. “It’s so…um…” Watching her flail for a flattering way to describe the Continental would have been amusing if not for her hand clasping his and her scent filling his nose. “It’s so you!” she managed at last.

…and I sort of think she hates me too.

“Thank you.”

*Let’s pretend she meant that as a compliment.*

She climbed into the passenger seat without explanation or invitation, which Castiel supposed meant he was driving her back to her hotel. The best he could say for the drive was that her forced raptures for his ‘pimp mobile’ were easy to ignore.

When they finally arrived at the Hyatt, she leaned over and kissed him passionately. That he didn’t reciprocate the kiss seemed as irrelevant as his unwillingness to reciprocate her insipid attempts at conversation. April was determined that they were compatible, and she’d do all the work herself if she had to.

She didn’t have to do all the work herself.

She had help.

“I trust you found Miss Kelly’s company as pleasant as you did on Saturday?” said Naomi pointedly from Castiel’s living room as he made his exhausted way up the stairs to his apartment. He was used to late nights, but the stress of the week and especially of the evening was exhausting, and being greeted by his mother sapped the last of Castiel’s energy. He felt only a faint glimmer of surprise and an entire galaxy of resignation that she’d intruded and awaited him. He should have known something was afoot when he opened his front door and the light was on.
“She was charming,” Castiel lied. His voice sounded hollow. He felt hollow. Sometime in the past week he’d gone from being a flesh-and-blood human to existing as an empty suit that somehow walked and talked and pretended to live. He wasn’t this man. He wasn’t this alpha. He wasn’t this banker. He wasn’t this son, this parody of himself, this Novak. He’d give anything – everything he had – to be someone other than Castiel Novak-Shurley.

“Thank you for asking, mother.”

_Could I do that? Could I just...stop...being a Novak?_

“Are you pleased with your new wardrobe?”

_Of course I can’t stop. Naomi’s blood runs through my veins, her genes compose my cells. This is my birthright. This is my family. There’s no escape._

Castiel’s new clothing had arrived the previous day. The suits that filled his closet were nearly identical to those he’d had before, only subtle differences in color and cut to distinguish them. The subtext of Naomi’s actions was clear. She hadn’t minded what he’d worn previously, she’d only minded that he’d selected his accoutrements. The punishments for his recalcitrance the previous Friday kept coming. Castiel had dared to assert his personality. Naomi wouldn’t rest until she reminded him that Castiel had no personality beyond that which she’d sanctioned.

“It’s very suitable.” There was no enthusiasm in his reply. Naomi smiled coldly and confirmed Castiel’s suppositions of her purpose. She didn’t care if he was excited, so long as he didn’t resist her will. She chuckled. Castiel had no idea why, and he was too tired to care. All he wanted was for her to leave and so he could bask in the few hours he had to himself every day. “Thank you for stopping by,” he added.

_Never forget to be grateful for being suffered to exist. Is that enough obeisance for one night?_

“I’m proud of you, Castiel.” Naomi rose from his couch, dressed as immaculately at midnight as she’d been when she arrived at work first thing that morning. She walked up to him and patted him on the cheek. “You’re always such a good boy.”

Even Naomi’s hard-won praise couldn’t bring any life to him. At least she said nothing more and seemed satisfied with his nod of concession. After she left, he bolted the door behind her, but that wasn’t enough to restore the sanctuary that had been his home. She’d waited for him, disregarded his privacy, could do so anytime she wanted, felt no compunction not to. The sooner he accepted that what little control he’d had left was gone, the sooner he could work on the acceptance that would keep him sane.

Mechanically, he prepared to go to sleep.

Mechanically, he put his dirty clothing in the hamper, put on his pajamas, brushed his teeth, and took his rut suppressant.

Mechanically, he climbed into bed, pulled the neatly tucked blankets snug about himself, rested his head on the plush pillow. The room smelled antiseptic, empty, hollow, as vacant as Castiel.

_Of course the room mirrors me. It’s my room. If I have no personality, no autonomy, then why should it?_

He wished the room smelled like Dean.

_April was definitely not the ‘right’ person, definitely not that hypothetical someone who could_
awaken Castiel’s secret desires.

Dean might be the ‘right’ person.

Except I don’t want to knot him.

Which means, by definition, he’s not the ‘right’ person.

But that doesn’t change how much I want him, how much I miss him, how much I crave his touch and his presence and his scent mixed up with mine.

Arousal buzzed beneath Castiel’s skin, set his cock twitching against his legs.

If I were an omega, I’d be making slick right now.

I wish I was making slick right now.

It was a long time before Castiel fell asleep.

One day at a time.

Come Thursday night, Castiel couldn’t say how he’d spent the past day. He went through the motions of existing – he must have, since no one commented that he acted strangely nor was he inundated by irate e-mails from clients accusing him of negligence – but nothing felt deliberate or intentional. Castiel was an automaton, his directives issued by his mother, his actions obedient to her will.

She could control his behavior but she couldn’t control his thoughts.

All he could think about was how much he wanted it to be Friday.

All he could think about was how much he wanted to see Dean.

His job was familiar enough that he could get through a day on autopilot, but there was only one thought in his head, one thing left that was his and his alone.

One day at a time.

Available evidence suggested that despite Castiel’s extended reverie the day before, he’d done his job well. The e-mails he’d sent were coherent, the trades he’d done seemed appropriate based, and the notes he’d left for himself were relevant and cognizant.

Maybe he should stop fighting, stop resisting, stop trying to retain anything of himself. His desires and dreams got in the way of his being a good worker and a good son and a good husband-to-be. Naomi had raised him to be a worker bee, and so long as he conformed his desires to her wishes, conformed himself to Naomi’s mold, everything was fine. If he shut his brain off, he could work, he could go about life, and he could be an alpha to April’s omega.

What he wanted didn’t matter.

The only time the numbness faded was when he remembered that he’d be seeing Dean that night.
Chapter 9

Castiel’s phone pinged. Castiel ignored it. To his chagrin, it kept ringing until he realized it was the chirp of his alarm, not the bell that pinged when April texted him. Rubbing grit from his eyes, he reached over and turned the chime off.

7:02.

Castiel was so out of it that he’d let it ring for two minutes.

Dropping his head into his hands, Castiel rubbed at his temples. He was beyond exhausted, overwrought by stress and anxiety, and he felt the office security camera watching him as an itch between his shoulder blades. He had a plan for meeting Dean, a strategy he hoped would throw his mother off his scent, but now that the time had come for him to leave, he couldn’t escape the feeling he was overcomplicating his life.

There was an exceedingly simple solution to the apparently intractable issues encompassing him.

All Castiel had to do was stop seeing Dean.

All Castiel had to do was comply with Naomi’s expectations.

But I want…

God, he was whiny.

Aside from his petty desires, there was little justification for attending the meeting with Dean. However, if Castiel no-showed, that would be unfair. Friday nights were presumably lucrative in Dean’s line of work, and for Castiel to not keep his appointment…

Castiel knew he was grasping at straws in the name of self-justification, but Dean’s prospective profit was excuse enough. Dean was a person and he deserved better than for Castiel to cancel their liaison without warning. He listlessly rose. Making a show of packing his briefcase, he gathered his things, folded his tie and put it away, shuffled papers around, and ‘accidentally’ dropped his phone on the floor, nudging it beneath his desk with his foot. He closed the briefcase, set up an out-of-office auto-reply to cover him until the next morning, shut the system down, walked across the room, grabbed his trench coat, and headed out. As he walked by Gabriel’s glass-encased office, he caught his brother’s eye and managed a wan smile. Gabriel shot him a bawdy wink.

Castiel’s escape plan was simple.

There was a cocktail lounge his brothers frequented after work. They’d urged him to go, to blow off steam, meet people, network, and be seen. If Michael and Luke encouraged Castiel to a behavior, Castiel’s heeding their advice would appear wholesome in Naomi’s eyes, and if Castiel was seen at the club, however briefly, he’d have a plausible alibi for the remainder of the night.

Castiel retrieved his car from the garage, drove the short distance to the lounge, tossed his briefcase and trench coat in the backseat, passed the key to the valet, and went in. Even early on a Friday evening, it was busy, and it was easy for Castiel to lose himself amidst the hubbub of sound, the meandering socialites, and the swirl of competing scents. As Castiel had hoped, there were several people he was acquainted with there. They exchanged greetings and as little small talk as he could get away with. He had to be seen, remembered, remarked on, but he wanted no more than that. After he made the rounds, he settled in an elegant chair before the bar and told the bartender that he’d like
a finger of water in a tumble. Lest she worry, he laid ten dollars down to assure her she’d get tipped for her trouble. He sipped the drink slowly, as if nursing hard liquor, made eye-contact with strangers around the room, exchanged words with people he knew as they arrived, and made sure he was seen. As minutes ticked by, the bar grew crowded, loud music drowning out the buzz of conversation. Tables were cleared to reveal a small dance floor which was instantly packed with bodies made blurry by frenetic movement and dim light.

Placing another twenty dollars down on the bar, Castiel signaled the bartender that she could clear his spot and left through a backdoor that, based on the posted sign, featured an outdoor patio for smokers. He stepped out and was enveloped in curling cigarette smoke that burned his nose. Beyond the patio, a gate let out onto a back alley, and Castiel was free. The valet would watch his car overnight, because clearly he’d drunk too much to drive safely, and if he didn’t find his way home, well, Luke and Michael didn’t always come home on Friday nights, and Naomi didn’t pester them excessively over it.

*Neither of them is engaged to an eligible omega.*

*Be quiet, brain.*

*Now for the hard part of the plan...*

Castiel took the bus to Cajun Delights. He’d never taken public transit. It had been all he could do to find the bus map and figure out which line he’d need, but it turned out the trip was only ten minutes and each stop was announced. The bus let him off several blocks from the motel and he covered the distance briskly, looking over his shoulder from time to time. There were other pedestrians about and a constant string of cars driving the streets in the lowering darkness, and no one seemed to show peculiar interest in him.

*Yeah, because I know exactly what that would look like, right? Naomi would have hired a professional, and I’m...what's the level below novice?*

*Utterly incompetent.*

In case he was being followed, he continued past the motel without pausing, circled down a narrow, stinking back alley, continued to the next street, crossed a set of train tracks, crept through some hedges behind the back wall of Cajun Delights, and finally made his way to the motel’s front door. There was no one in the lobby, but at the sound of the door opening, Benny stuck his head out of his office.

“Oh, it’s you,” Benny grumbled, and turned to leave again.

Castiel heaved a sigh of relief, tears welling in his eyes.

God, he was tired, and it was Friday. He was at Cajun Delights, where he was just Cas. He wasn’t Castiel Novak-Shurley, wasn’t one of the elite of the city. He was no one but Dean’s regular Friday night gig. Benny saw no need to pretend to like him, and that was glorious.

“Woah, are you okay?” asked Benny, stopping with a hand on the doorframe, eying Castiel skeptically.

“Yes,” Castiel lied. Heaving a sigh that felt like it deflated him within his suit, he crossed to Benny’s desk, wiped fatigue from his eyes with one hand, and pulled out his wallet with the other. “Yes, I... yes.”

“Riiiiight,” Benny drawled, plopping onto his stool behind the reception desk. “So, meetin’ your boy
again?”

My boy? Dean is everyone’s boy, anyone’s boy, if they’ll pay the price...but he’s mine for the night. That’s enough.

“Dean should be here at 8 o’clock,” Castiel confirmed, counting out three twenty dollar bills.

That’ll have to be enough.

“He’s takin’ quite a shine to you,” observed Benny. He retrieved ten dollars and a room key with an air of nonchalance.

No, that’s what actual nonchalance looks like. Benny doesn’t have an ulterior motive. Benny doesn’t like me but is a nice enough person to be concerned by my obvious fatigue so is making small talk.

“And if I hurt him, you’ll kill me?” Castiel managed a wan smile.

“Obviously,” Benny shrugged. Castiel pocketed the cash. “But I don’t think you will. Truth to tell...more a’ you I see, the more I worry someone might hurt you.” Castiel quirked his head to the side, a silent expression of his puzzlement and curiosity. Benny shrugged again, wafting his spicy beta scent about the room. “Let’s just say, I seen a lotta folks bein’ hunted in my time, and you got the look.” Castiel quirked his head farther and Benny chuckled. “Exhausted, tense, nervous, always lookin’ over your shoulder, dressed non-descript – classy, expensive threads, but nothin’ memorable – you know what I mean?”

“No,” said Castiel. Benny laughed harder. “Do you mean to tell me that there are patrons who come here with sex workers who don’t look furtive?”

“Loads of ‘um,” confirmed Benny. “If you got hang ups ‘bout sex that’s on you, it ain’t inherent to the exchange of services. Yeah, we get some nervous folks, some folks with pale lines on their fingers, if you get my drift, but most a’ the clientele are pretty chill. Nothin’ illegal ‘bout gettin’ your kicks for the night, so it’s all down to if someone’s a prude or what.”

“Yes – and I’m quite the prude,” Castiel murmured. Awkward silence reigned. Castiel longed to ask Benny what ‘the drift’ was, because whatever subtlety the owner had meant to communicate had been lost on Castiel. Their conversation already had him at sixes and sevens, though, and rather than embarrassing himself further by asking, he leapt to the first alternative topic that sprang to mind.

“Why ‘Cajun Delights?’”

“Why not?” When Benny laughed, his face lit up, cheeks flushing, eyes twinkling. Warmth seemed to radiate out from Benny, glowing against Castiel’s skin. “I’m Cajun, and ain’t I a delight?”

“Charming,” Castiel deadpanned. Benny slapped his knee, whooping, and Castiel waited until he calmed to continue. “It’s a fine name for this fine establishment—” Benny snorted. “—but it sounds like an appellation for a restaurant.”

“‘tis,” Benny confirmed to Castiel’s surprise. “Leastways, I hope it will be. I’m not cut out for this motel management bullshit. Plan is to sell this place, open a café, and work as a chef.”

A fantasy of Benny dicing produce alongside the urbane Balthazar struck Castiel, and he smiled. Maybe that’s not so outlandish...they’d smell good together...I could introduce them...

“Why didn’t you start out doing that? Why open a motel at all?” asked Castiel.
“Investors are close-minded douchebags,” Benny replied with a scowl. “No market for southern food in hoity toity Palmeton. Some bastard at Angel Bank gave me a whole bullshit spiel about ‘no one ‘round here eats okra and grits when they could have gnocchi and caviar’ or whatever.” Probably Luke, he handles most of our business investment loans. He’s wrong, I’d be up for grits instead of caviar any day. “Your loss.” Castiel nodded agreement. “But this shithole they’d fund. So, here we are. Sex sells, the rooms let, and I’ve raked in the bucks. The bank’s paid off and now I’m savin’ up and dreamin’ of the day I can raze this place. Got an architect to draw me up plans ‘n everything. I know my slop’s good. I’ll get butts in the chairs, ‘less everyone’s as snooty as the Royal Novaks.”

_I wish I wasn’t a Novak._

_He doesn’t know who I am._

_If he knew…_

“I’d like to try your food sometime,” said Castiel, offering Benny a genuine smile, and he was pleased to get one in return.

...maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he knew. He’s had a chance to get to know me...maybe, even if he knew my name, he’d still see me as Cas, no more, no less. And still mildly dislike me and threaten me in defense of Dean.

There was no reason for Castiel to cultivate a friendship with the burly motel owner, yet he wanted to.

_Not every friendship has to be forged in the name of advantage and profit. And in this case...Benny does see me._

_Or at least I think he does._

_I have no idea what “I” look like, what he or Dean see or smell when they encounter me._

_And if they learned my name? Can something so small alter perception that completely?_

_When it’s finding out I’m one of the Novak-Shurleys of International Angel Deposit Bank? Probably._

_I hope they never find out._

“This is a big plot for a restaurant,” Castiel continued tentatively.

_This is how people have conversations, right? Asking questions? God, after all my years at family events you’d think I’d be better at this…_

“God, yes. Enormous. Might sell it,” agreed Benny with a nod. “Might sell the whole place, build new somewhere else. Or might split the lot, if the city’ll let me. They probably will. But I don’t gotta make those decisions now.”

“Selling it is likely your best bet,” advised Castiel. “You…”

Benny’s expression went shrewd, though Castiel hadn’t the foggiest idea why, and he was considering the merits of asking when a hand fell on his shoulder and Dean’s scent washed over him like life-giving oxygen after years of deprivation.

“Yo, Cas!” said Dean brightly. “You ready?”

“God, am I,” Castiel murmured before he could stop himself. Dean chuckled sultry in Castiel’s ear.
Desire thrummed under Castiel’s skin as Dean snatched the key from the counter and used his firm hold to steer Castiel down the hallway.

“I’ve waited so long,” Castiel breathed, daring to look over his shoulder. Dean was gorgeous, smiling, green eyes alight, and Castiel’s doubts vanished. Had he seriously entertained the possibility of not seeing Dean tonight? The idea was unfathomable. Castiel needed this.

*Isn’t that exactly the problem?*

“I know you have, babe,” said Dean. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

*Please, take care of me, Dean. Please, alpha, make all the world fade away…*

Castiel’s eyes slipped shut. He was worried about many things in his life but Dean was safe, trustworthy, protective. Before and after these assignations Castiel’s concerns multiplied, but while he was with Dean, he had scarce a care in the world.

*I’m in your hands, alpha. I’m yours.*

*Take care of me?*

*No.*

*Use me.*

“I’ve got you, Cas.”

*I made it to Friday.*

*Thank God.*

*One day at a time…*

Gentle fingers carded through Castiel’s hair.

“You wanna talk ‘bout it?” Dean murmured in his ear. Their bodies were bound close, hot and sweaty from making love. Dean’s knot was swollen in Castiel’s ass, always bigger and *better* than Castiel remembered.

*What’s there to talk about? Robots don’t have feelings. Robots don’t have desires.*

*Except I’m here, and it feels good, and I want this. I don’t want to stop feeling this way. I don’t want to stop being with Dean.*

“Still so tense,” Dean continued, shifting his other hand and rubbing it tenderly down Castiel’s belly. Warmth and contentment buzzed beneath Castiel’s skin, fighting against his anxiety and uncertainty.

*If I surrendered…*

*…to what? To April? To Naomi and her plans for me? To Dean and my desires?*

“Look, I dunno what the rest of your life is like – it’s none of my business and you don’t owe me jackshit except, ya know, my fee – but...I’m worried about you.” There was an earnest note in Dean’s voice, and a hint of command, alpha authority demanding Castiel’s submission, demanding he explain himself.
...or he’s talking normally, and my desire to surrender tingles my interpretation. I want to tell him about my life, want to receive emotional support from him as well as sexual succor...want to see him more, be with him, pretend that he cares about me...

*I could tell him I feel that way...*

...*why would I do that?*

...because he asked? Because he offered to listen? Because maybe having someone outside of the family hear me out would help?

*Why, so he can tell me how silly I’m being and suggest that I leave IADB?*

*Why do I assume that’s what he’d say? He’d probably tell me I’m being spoiled and entitled, that I should count my blessings and stop complaining.*

Castiel shuddered as the last of his happiness trickled away. Even Dean’s skilled hands on his flesh, Dean’s glorious cock in his ass, couldn’t dispel Castiel’s worries.

*I shouldn’t be here.*

“You know you don’t actually owe me anything,” broached Dean tentatively. “If you don’t wanna continue this arrangement it’s all good.”

*God, I’m terrible at this. If I can’t communicate with my whore...sex worker!...who expects nothing from me and demands nothing from me, then how am I supposed to forge a healthy relationship with a spouse? With April?*

*I don’t want April as a spouse.*

*I don’t want to communicate with her, healthily or otherwise. If it were up to me, I’d never see her again.*

*What do I want?*

“I’m sorry,” Castiel managed hoarsely. “I wish...” He shook his head. So many words were on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t bring himself to say any of them.

*This is nice. I want you to stay. I want you to hold me like this every night. I want to feel the stretch of your knot lingering every day when I get to work, want to see the imprint of your fingers on my flesh, want to smell you on my skin and taste you in my mouth. I want to be free of my family and their expectations and—*

“Naw, don’t apologize,” said Dean, his casual tone belied by the clench of his hand against Castiel’s side, the shift of his hips against Castiel’s ass, the twitch of his cock within Castiel’s body. “It’s not like we signed a contract or nothin’. This is a business relationship, Cas. Nothing more, nothing less.”

*Of course. How could I forget that again? Especially given how often he goes to pains to remind me?*

A long, sad sigh deflated Castiel against the bed. He’d thought seeing Dean would help him feel better. He felt worse. His vacuous hopes that Dean wanted to see him, Castiel, and not merely the sizeable payday that Castiel provided, had been proven ungrounded. Again. Tomorrow, Castiel would return to his everyday life, would see April, would go to work, and Sunday he’d go to church
and then the office, and Monday would be business as usual, and on and on every day after. If he ceased his futile, silly interest in Dean and canceled their arrangement, he wouldn’t even have Friday night with Dean to look forward to.

Having false hope that Dean might care was better than having no hope.

“But, uh, you should know...” Dean breathed in his ear. “...if we stop doin’ this...I’ll miss you...”

Stunned, Castiel twisted in Dean’s arms. There was no angle at which Castiel could get a clear view of Dean’s face, but from the corner of his eye he watched Dean blink blearily.

“What...” Castiel licked his lips. “What did you say?”

“Nothin’,” Dean mumbled, turning his face against the blankets so that Castiel could see even less of his expression.

“Of course he said nothing. I imagined it.

Why would Dean miss me?

Why would anyone miss me?

“It’s just...” Dean lifted his head, met Castiel’s eyes, and caught his lip with his teeth, looking bashful and young. Familiar false hope flickered in Castiel’s breast and he quashed it. “I mean...this...being with you...has been...ya know...fun. Different. You’re different. Even when you were being a dick it felt like you heard me, listened to me, saw me, and not just as a pretty face, but as a person with thoughts and feelings and, like, value. That’s...um...unusual. Clients don’t usually give a damn about me beyond how much it costs to bury their cock in my ass. And you don’t even want that! It’s...uh...nice. Fucking you is awesome. I...uh...” He took his arm from Castiel’s waist and raked it through his hair. “I look forward to seeing you,” Dean admitted in a rush. Expression open and hopeful, he looked at Castiel expectantly.

I’m supposed to answer?

How am I supposed to answer?

“Oh.”

Of course he looks forward to seeing me. He gets to bury his knot in an obliging hole. Isn’t that what all alphas want? And I’m guaranteed work. No walking the streets with Castiel Novak-Shurley on the calendar, insisting on massively overpaying. At this rate I’ll single-handedly put him and his brother through college. Who wouldn’t look forward to that?

...but what if that’s not what he means...

...of course that’s what he means. Stop being ridiculous. Stop hoping.

“And...you’ve seemed into it?” continued Dean, desperation tingling his voice as his face fell. “Like, you seem to enjoy this, is what I mean. The sex. With me. As opposed to the other sex workers.” Castiel waited and uncomfortable silence was broken only by the rush of air from the room’s heater. “Shit, man...are you gonna give me anything?”

Oh. Now I get it. This is a bid for higher pay. Now that he knows how much I enjoy his company, now that he’s got me hooked on his scent like it’s a drug, he wants more. He wants to bleed me dry.
I should have known.

“I give you fifteen hundred dollars a night,” Castiel answered bitterly.

“Not what I mean.” The drowsiness faded from Dean’s expression; he shifted their joined hips, twisted onto his back, so that they could converse more comfortably. “Obviously you don’t gotta tell me anything personal, but you don’t tell me anything. You wanna stop, fine, but…was it something I did? If what I’ve been doing isn’t good for you, we can change things up. You’re the boss.”

“No, everything you did...” ...almost everything you did... “...everything has been good, Dean. Everything has felt good.” ...except when you’re...you. Except that you’re a sex worker. Except that you remind me of your profession, remind me that none of what we share is real.

Nothing is real with you, and nothing is real with April.

People like me don’t get to have real, meaningful relationships. I should have looked at Michael, looked at Luke, looked at Gabriel, looked at my parents, and understood that. But I dared to hope...no. I deluded myself, despite reminders to the contrary, that what Dean and I shared might be more than what it appeared to be on the surface: a lonely 31 year old virgin hiring someone almost young enough to be his son to pop his cherry.

God, I’m pathetic. He’s been nothing but clear with me, while I’ve behaved obsessively. I’m in the wrong. I should apologize to him.

“Ya get this look on your face when you’re thinking real hard about something, Cas,” Dean said. “’s happened at least once every time we’ve met up. But then you never say a word. Really leaves a guy to wonder.” There was a beat pause. “Not that it’s any of my business.”

Something was off in Dean’s voice, something incongruent in his final words, something familiar. Reading people other than Naomi wasn’t Castiel’s strong point but it was almost...

...almost as if he’s reminding himself, instead of speaking to me...

...what if...what if I’ve been reading this all wrong?

“Would you want it to be your business?” asked Castiel hesitantly.

No, stop, what am I—?

“Yes,” Dean answered immediately, then flushed and looked away. “I mean, not that I’m volunteering to be your therapist or nothing, ain’t got an MD and don’t plan to get one, but, like, we could talk. If you wanted. About stuff. Or whatever. I told you about Sammy, and I thought...” Dean shrugged, an awkward movement that shook the bed and jostled their bodies and caused Dean’s cock to tug at Castiel’s rim. Castiel shuddered, the thrum of bliss an unwelcome addition to his circling thoughts.

“So...when you returned after our argument two weeks ago, and mentioned your brother, that was your attempt to initiate further intimacy between us? Interpersonal intimacy to accompany our sexual intimacy?” Castiel spoke slowly, carefully watching Dean’s reaction. Dean’s nod confirmed his supposition, and he continued, “It struck me as unusual that you would open up to me about your family...but you indicated that you didn’t feel it your place to educate me or inform me. I interpreted your behavior to mean...that is to say...I thought...”

I thought you realized the money was too good to turn down.
“I don’t usually,” Dean acknowledged. “It’s just...”

“...there’s something different about me?” Castiel posited. Dean nodded again. Is it that I offered you so much money? But...this doesn’t feel like it’s about money. If it were, why hasn’t he named a sum? Where are his demands, if this is mercenary? “Is it that I asked you to knot me?”

“Yeah...no...I mean...kinda? Like, that’s hot and all, and dude I really like fucking you, but it’s more than that. There’s something else about you, something more, and it’s not just that you smell awesome. It’s how you react to stuff, and the things you say, ‘interpersonal intimacy to accompany blah blah blah,’ you know?” Dean looked the question at Castiel hopefully, but Castiel shook his head. He didn’t know. He had no idea. He was a robot – he was Naomi’s robot – and his relationship with Dean was his last gasp of free will. “I dunno, I guess I thought...but I was wrong. Shoulda known better.”

“You thought what, exactly?” Castiel asked. His chest felt unjustifiably heavy, his lungs tight, his heart clenched.

“Nu-uh, I’ve done enough sharing and caring,” said Dean. “I haven’t got the first clue what’s goin’ on in that noggin o’ yours. So, let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“What do you wish, Cas? Before, when I asked you what you wanted, you started to tell me, but then you shut down. Again. But you had that ‘thinkin’ deep thoughts’ look in your eye. So. Spill.”

*What do I wish?*

“It’s too much,” Castiel whispered, turning away from Dean. Too many of the things he wanted revolved around Dean. After a lifetime of prudence and forbearance Castiel knew *precisely* how insane it was that he even occasionally, fleetingly, considered throwing away everything he’d worked for to pursue...something...with a sex worker he’d known a mere three weeks. He didn’t even know what that “something” would be. In a perfect world, what would he *want* Dean to be to him?

*My friend. My lover. My alpha. My...*

*My mate?*

*It doesn’t matter. We don’t live in a perfect world.*

There was no forging a future with Dean, even should Dean want such a thing, so long as Castiel was...who he was. He didn’t dare give up his life of privilege, give up his accomplishments, give up his family.

*That implies that I value the things I’ve worked for, implies I value these accomplishments, implies I value my family.*

*Why should I value them? Because Naomi does? My ‘accomplishments,’ such as they are, are as hollow as I am. And my name means nothing to me.*

Dean’s hands, strong and large, curled around Castiel’s shoulders, palms kneading at his shoulder blades, fingers rubbing gently at his clavicle. Castiel shuddered and eased. His muscles were bound by tension and too many hours spent sitting in an office chair staring at a computer. When he was in college he’d been part of a hiking club, he’d had time to exercise, but now he was lucky if he stole thirty minutes on the treadmill at the company gym in the basement of IADB headquarters, and he
never stretched, and he felt the loss of strength everywhere Dean touched. Dean slurred indistinct soothing words against his skin, hummed supportive notes, rolled to ease the pressure on Castiel’s ass and massaged down Castiel’s sides. Skilled fingers unerringly found the painful knots in Castiel’s muscles and rubbed them until heat and pain and euphoria combined to leave Castiel floating.

“I wish this was real,” he whispered.

Dean’s hands froze.

**But of course it’s not.**

“What makes you think it’s not real?” asked Dean.

*Unless it is?*

No. It’s not.

“‘This is a business relationship, Cas,’” Castiel quoted, mimicking Dean’s casual tone. He wanted to be angry but he was too tired, too done, too hopeless. There was no point in getting angry about the unchangeable. “‘You’re the boss, Cas.’ Time and again you’ve emphasized that this is your *job* and nothing more. I could list a dozen instances. Need I go on?” Castiel’s tone grew acidic the longer he spoke. He’d not realized how *angry* he was over Dean’s refusal to treat him as more than a client, but now the feeling burgeoned.

*I want you. I want this to be real. I want to know who you are. I want you to know who I am. I want to hear you say ‘Castiel.’ I want to hear you scream my name when you come, want to know...want to believe...that I’m the source of your happiness and pleasure...not some faceless, nameless client, not some pseudonym mask I’ve donned, but me. I want to exist in your eyes as a person with value independent of my ability to pay you, independent of my family name and position. For once in my life, I want it to be enough that I’m Castiel.*

*I can’t—*

“Yeah...uh...when I said that stuff...that was a crock of shit,” Dean admitted. Castiel started, twisted, and caught a side-eyed glimpse of Dean’s sheepish expression. “Thought it was what you wanted to hear. You’re so new to this, and you say so little...I mean, most clients aren’t the sharing and caring sorts, and that’s good, cause like I said – not a therapist – but we usually at least make small talk. You’re a damn cipher. And after you got all prissy about hiring me the second time, I thought you wanted to fire me but didn’t have the nerve. Our relationship has been strictly business so far but that’s only ’cause you’ve shot me down every time I suggested otherwise. I dropped enough hints, I figured...and I get it, I’m a sex worker and that freaks you out. But just ’cause I’m paid to have sex doesn’t mean I don’t have preferences. Most clients are just...clients. But you’re hot and having sex with you is a fuckin’ blast and when you actually *talk*, you’re personality seems kinda fun and, I dunno, if you wanted more...I’d be cool with that...but you always ignored me so I didn’t push.”

“You dropped hints?” said Castiel, baffled. “What...” His mind flicked through cherished memories of their few times together. “You said you’d fuck me for free.” Though excitement suffused Castiel that Dean might have actually been serious, the words came out an accusation. Dean leaned up on an elbow and shot Castiel a lopsided grin.

“And I *totally* would,” confirmed Dean. “Best lay of my life.”

“I thought you meant...why didn’t you say...” Fumbling, mind blown, Castiel twisted and smeared
his lips over Dean’s cheek and mouth. It could only loosely be called a kiss, but Dean chuckled and reciprocated. Dean’s cock tugged painfully on Castiel’s rim and Dean cooed and murmured reassurances to ease Castiel back onto the mattress, mouthing at his shoulder blades, his neck, nipping at his ears. Castiel whimpered and arched back against Dean, chasing the solid support of his alpha.

*My alpha?*

*My alpha. Yes. Always Dean. No one but Dean.*

“You want that, Cas?” asked Dean, husky and thick in Castiel’s ear. He rolled his hips against Castiel’s ass suggestively, pressing his swollen knot into Castiel’s sensitive rim. Arousal increased the heat in Castiel’s cheeks. “You want me to be your alpha?”

As embarrassed as he was that he’d inadvertently spoken the thought aloud, there were no words for how desperately Castiel wanted Dean to be his. He nodded frantically, back of his head bumping against Dean’s forehead and nose. Dean laugh, nuzzled at his neck, lapped at his scent point.

“I’d be down with that. You’re absolutely delicious.” Reverence tinged Dean’s voice as if this seedy motel room was a church, as if Castiel’s scent was the blood and body of Christ promising deliverance. Castiel shuddered at the touch, shuddered at his incongruous, sinful thoughts, shuddered as it dawned on him that from the day they’d met Dean’s behavior had been worshipful but Castiel had misinterpreted Dean’s interest because of his prejudices and assumptions.

“You truly like how I smell?” asked Castiel, awed by Dean’s behavior, awed by the desire Dean awoke in him. “I thought you said that because…”

“Dude, how have you not figured out that I don’t play those games?” said Dean. “I’m hot as fuck. I don’t have to fake scent attraction to get my clients to come back for more. Most of ‘um smell ‘meh.’ I mean, they’re all alphas, scent attraction is like one in a million…but you?” Dean groaned and sucked a bruise into Castiel’s skin, humping his ass. “Money’s been my fave since I was a kid. If I could buy body wash that smelled like greenbacks I’d use it every fucking day. Part of what I love about this job – pay’s great. Covers school, supports Sammy, enough left over for a nest egg…and when I’m with you, it’s like the fuckin’ *embodiment* of all that planning come true…it’s good, Cas…it’s so fucking good…”

“Studying…? What’re you…?” It was increasingly hard to think, increasingly hard to concentrate, with Dean mouthing at his sensitive skin, with Dean’s hips pressing against him, with Dean’s erection filling his channel. Dean’s dick was thickening again, his knot fattening, and Castiel clenched around Dean, hopeful and desperate for round two, exhausted and half-dreading the overstimulation, reflecting on their recent conversation and wondering if he was allowed to hope yet.

No. There’s nothing to hope for. He’s not…we’re not…and he’s not hard again, either, no way. He wasn’t even fully flaccid…too optimistic by half, Castiel…

“MBA,” Dean growled in his ear, rolling Castiel onto his stomach, rolling himself atop Castiel, slotting his legs between Castiel’s legs, pressing his hips and chest hard against Castiel’s body. He spoke in staccato sentences, thrusting between each. “Accelerated 5 year program. Two years to go. Expensive as shit. Fucking worth it in the end. Gonna provide for us. Give my bro the life I never had. Saved up six figures workin’ nights and weekends. Whoring, man. Pays *awesome*. Gonna start a hedge fund.”

*That’s a good reason to go into business. But it’ll be hard for him to break through and get enough money to be a mover and shaker, no matter how much he wants to earn millions, no matter how*
much he deserves success.

And here I am, with a job he’d probably kill for, with a life that sounds like it’s what he’d want, and I don’t appreciate what I have. If I told him the truth, he’d think I’m such an unappreciative assbutt.

Unless I…

“I could…I could help…I’m an investment banker,” Castiel panted against the bedspread. It wasn’t wishful thinking. Dean was getting hard again, with the unbelievable refractory period of someone scarce out of puberty. Castiel’s refractory period left a lot to be desired; his cock was soft against the bed, his knot mostly deflated from his earlier orgasms. Every press of Dean’s cock within him stabbed pleasure like agony through his body, more intense than he could believe, more rapturous than he could imagine, more painful than should be possible.

“Knew there was a…a reason…I liked you,” said Dean. “But I gotta know…if you and I were a thing…if I fucked you…because I wanted to, because we wanted to, not ‘cause you paid…would my job be a problem?”

“You wouldn’t quit?” asked Castiel, stunned.

“I wouldn’t quit,” Dean confirmed. “I’ve never offered to fuck anyone for free, Cas. This—” Dean drew his hips back sharply, thick knot stretching Castiel’s skin, tugging at his sensitive rim, suffusing Castiel with so much feeling that he muffled a sob against the bedspread. “—this’ll be only for you.” He slammed his cock back into Castiel’s body and Castiel gasped as pleasure rushed over him. Blankets bunched in his fists, Castiel struggled to breathe with Dean’s weight pressing him down, struggled to breathe through his hopes and desires and the distracting bliss of Dean fucking him. He’d accept any price, agree to anything, to ensure that Dean didn’t stop, never stopped, making love to him.

“What if—” Thrust. Groan. Light flared in Castiel’s eyes and he squeezed them shut, trying to hold onto his train of thought. “This is a very distracting way to have a serious conversation,” he gasped out in a rush.

“Sorry,” Dean mouthed against his shoulder. He shifted his weight, switched to quick, hard jabs into Castiel’s body, their skin slapping together each time. Castiel couldn’t hold back tears, the line between pain and rapture blurring to non-existence. “Really am…sorry…but you’re…fuckin’ irresistible…you’re like a fuckin’ drug, Cas…”

...he’s my drug...

Being fucked raw hurt, but asking Dean to stop was inconceivable. “Can’t stop…never wanna stop…” Dean groaned.

We’re each other’s drug…it’s not just me, our connection hasn’t been in my head, we are compatible.

Do I want this? God, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes…

...do I care if he keeps earning his money as a whore?

“What if someone offers you money to knot them?” managed Castiel.

He had to know the answer.

“No one...ever...has...” Every word was a grunt, a thrust, and Castiel hung on Dean’s words, tried to
hold on to the meaning behind them despite his mounting bliss. “No...one...but you...” Castiel’s cock was soft. He’d thought that meant he couldn’t come, but the intensity of the feelings suffusing him suggested otherwise. “Fuckin’...fuckin’ twink like me...might as well have...bottom...tattooed across my forehead...” Castiel was close to his climax, closer than he had any right to be, and he wanted more, wanted all of Dean, wanted their time together to never end. “And I love it...fuck do I love a cock in my ass...I’ve dreamed ‘bout you knottin’ me, Cas...want...want all of you...wanna make you feel as good as I do when I—”

“No!” Castiel burst out as bleak horror froze him. Dean’s hips pivoted and stilled, his chest pressing into Castiel’s back as he panted.

“Cas?”

Trembling, Castiel tried to collect himself, tried to make sense of what Dean had been saying in the context of their conversation, tried to make sense of his own reaction. Dean’s body weight shifted off his back and Castiel cried out again as cold air rushed in on his damp skin.

“Is it ‘cause I’m a sex worker?” asked Dean, forced distance making him sound cold. “‘Cause I’ve let other alphas knot me? Don’t want a used ass?”

“No, no, don’t...don’t put words in my mouth, I never said that!” Castiel’s hips involuntarily rolled up from the bed and Dean hissed at the tight clench around him. “I accepted...I accept...you...it’s not...I don’t...I can’t...I’m not not...”

I’m not an alpha!

Castiel’s body was stuck in over-drive, his thoughts a muddled mess. He couldn’t stop the tears falling from his eyes, couldn’t stop his body from chasing climax, couldn’t stop the words spilling from his mouth.

“This isn’t my body, Dean, this isn’t me.” Castiel rutted up from the bed as he babbled. He scarce knew what he said, only knew that if he didn’t find some words, any words, Dean would stop pressing into him and when Dean stopped whatever they had would be over because Castiel was Naomi’s perfectly molded alpha and he didn’t want that, he didn’t want to be her pawn or an extension of her will, he didn’t want to do as she said, and his thoughts ran away into nonsense and he let what he was feeling spill out as he never, ever allowed himself to. “I have no idea who I am or what I want but when I’m with you I feel good and I’m not supposed to, I’m not supposed to feel anything, and God, I don’t want this to stop, I don’t, even though I shouldn’t want – shouldn’t want this, shouldn’t want you – and I knew it wasn’t real. I knew you were a service provider whom I paid for this and now you’re saying – I don’t know, don’t know how to make you see...what I want...what I need...” Castiel squeezed his eyes shut against a nauseating wave of confused pleasure-tension-pain. “Please, Dean...please...this is what I need...but the other...I can’t...I can’t, I really can’t, I’m sorry...Dean...”

“I’m here, Cas.” Dean’s weight settled close around him again, his voice soft and tender in Castiel’s ear, and Castiel wept with relief. “I’m not going anywhere. We both suck at this communication shit, so if you want something, if you don’t want something, you gotta tell me. Can you do that?” Castiel nodded. Silence stretched out. Dean didn’t move, and with Dean pinning him to the bed, Castiel couldn’t force Dean into motion, could scarce shift his hips to tingle inadequate friction over his insides. “Cas – talk to me. What do you want?”

I literally just agreed to communicate and then said nothing.

He’s right, we really do stink at communicating.
“Don’t stop.”

Dean groaned and obliged him, pressed his forehead to Castiel’s shoulder blade and fucked into Castiel’s body slowly, steadily, forcefully.

“You feel so good moving inside me,” Castiel moaned.

“My what feels so good, Cas?” growled Dean. Castiel shook his head, but Dean stilled when Castiel made no reply. “Tell me.”

“Don’t stop,” Castiel begged.

“Use your words...” Dean chided. And the bastard didn’t move.

“Your...your...your cock,” gasped Castiel. Dean groaned, teeth pressing against Castiel’s flesh. “Your cock feels so good, Dean. God I...I love it...love your knot...I...please! Fuck me, please – fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me…” With a sinful chuckle, Dean rolled against him once more and Castiel trailed off, mouthing incoherently into the blankets.

“You beg for me so nice,” Dean said thickly. “Fuckin’ your pretty little hole is so great, Cas...”

Castiel.

“Don’t worry...relax...I won’t stop...I don’t wanna stop...never wanna...aw, fuck...fuck...”

Quick thrusts, desperate grunts, slick skin sliding on skin, and the hot feeling like sunshine on Castiel’s back, sunshine within Castiel, drowned out anything else that Dean said. There was only feeling, only acceptance, only a burgeoning sense within Castiel that he’d owned what he wanted and Dean hadn’t rebuked him, hadn’t told Castiel that he wasn’t allowed to want, hadn’t told Castiel that he had to change. Dean wanted Castiel. Dean wanted Castiel just the way he was.

Dean has seen me, and I’m enough.

“Oh God, Dean!”

Cock still soft, Castiel came, choked sound dying in his tight throat. Dean hissed, swore, fucked Castiel through his orgasm and came himself, collapsing atop Castiel and giggling with ecstasy.

“Heavy,” Castiel muttered.

Still shaking hysterically, Dean rolled off him, rolled with him, so that they both lay on their sides on the bed. Every movement shifted Dean within Castiel, pulled and pressed at Castiel’s body in a new way, and he gasped and groaned as another climax nearly rolled him under, arching back against Dean.

“You’re so fuckin’ hot, Cas,” mumbled Dean, lips dry against Castiel’s sweaty neck, hands kneading down his chest, mussing the sparse hairs that dusted his breasts and abs, a palm resting over the taut swell that Dean’s cock and over-full condom made at Castiel’s belly. With a whimpering moan, Castiel came again, limp and shaking against the bed, against Dean. “When I saw your car pull up that first night I wondered who the fuck was the doofus in the busted-ass Continental...but I...I had it all wrong...I had no idea...you’re awesome...you’re...”

“Not the...only one...judging by appearances...” Castiel managed around panting breaths. Dean’s arms enfolded him.
“Dunno ‘bout that, Cas…you look like a fuckin’ wreck, and based on what I’ve gathered so far, that’s a pretty accurate assessment.” Dean chuckled, chest pressing hard to Castiel’s back each time he laughed, but despite an obvious attempt at making the jab light-hearted, the words stung.

“How so?” Castiel asked, gritting his teeth against another surge of bliss.

“You’re all conflicted.” Drowsiness suffused Dean’s voice. “You’re an alpha but you want a knot, and…the alphas who hire twinky alphas like me, they ain’t like you. Sorry if it came out kinda mean, I got no filter. I didn’t mean it as a bad thing. Like…like yeah you’re a wreck but you’re adorable. Seein’ you, even though I ain’t got a clue what’s troubling you…I wanna take care of you.” Dean’s fingers trailed gently over his chest, petting him, and if Castiel could have purred he would have.

“Ya make me go all protective alpha and shit. Seriously. Say the word and I’m your attack dog. You got someone you need put in their place?”

“No more assumptions,” Castiel mumbled. “I’d rather you be blunt and maybe hurt me than constantly wonder if I’ve misunderstood you. And…and specific. Earlier, when you talked about us having more, being more to each other, what did you mean?”

There was a long, tense silence.

Castiel wondered if he’d misstepped again.

_I hate this uncertainty. I didn’t feel this way when I followed Naomi and Charles’ plan for me._

_But I didn’t have Dean. He’s not part of their plan._

_Do I have Dean?_

“You and me,” admitted Dean. “Being a thing. Not a formal Friday shindig, no exchange of money, but, like – we could have sex when we’re both available, order a pizza to the motel, talk ‘bout how much IADB is fucking up their business model and Roman Enterprises is swooping in for the kill and the latest corporate mergers, that kinda thing, ya know, investment shit. Heck, maybe even share our full names! If we’re feeling _real_ naughty.”

We’re fucking up our business model?

_Who cares? Who cares about IADB or Naomi or what the Novak-Shurleys expect from me?_

*Dean wants me, and what we have together is mine…ours. That’s more important than…than anything, then everything else going on in my life._

And I know that’s insane, and I know I shouldn’t feel that way, and I do anyway.

And that’s fine.

“Like…like we’d be dating?” For once in his life he didn’t give a _damn_ what Naomi would think of him, didn’t hear her voice whispering judgement and condemnation in his ear.

“…fuck buddies?” Dean suggested hopefully.

_This is mine. What we have together is mine. Dean is mine. My alpha. My knot. My…_

“Boyfriend?” countered Castiel, as hopefully.

Dean’s thumb pressed into Castiel’s temple and rubbed soothing circles. Castiel’s eyes slipped shut, warmth and comfort combining with his post-orgasm fatigue and the exhaustion of the stressful week
to flatten him against Dean. Trapped, Dean’s other hand kneaded at the small of Castiel’s back, and Dean wiggled a leg between Castiel’s. The air in the room was warm against Castiel’s sweat-dampened bare skin. When they’d arrived, before they made love, Dean had turned the thermostat up and stripped Castiel garment by garment, hanging them neatly in the closet. Dean was considerate. Instead of insisting that Castiel modulate his expectations to his surroundings, Dean sought to accommodate, to comfort, to ease, to succor. Castiel had thought Dean was good at customer service – a waitress didn’t bring a patron a drink refill out of affection, but because supplying victuals was part of her job and her tip improved if she provided good service – but after their conversation that evening, Castiel no longer believed Dean so mercenary. He’d never really believed Dean cutthroat, but he’d been afraid to read too much into Dean’s behavior, afraid to trust his own assessments.

His assessments had been wrong so often over the years.

*Have they really been? Or have my parents and eldest brothers told me I was wrong, and did I go along with their viewpoint because it was easier to follow their lead than to resist?*

The silence stretched out and Castiel felt a tremor of nerves. “Those things you describe – making love, getting meals, talking about our lives – those sound like the things boyfriends would do, but if you’re reticent, you can tell me.”

“No…you’re right,” conceded Dean with a sigh. “I’ve never…but I guess…we can try that. For you, Cas…boyfriends.” He sighed again, relaxing against Castiel’s back. “Cas, my boyfriend…” Dean murmured as if trying the words out to see how they felt in his mouth, and he trailed off with an approving hum.

*He says that, but if he prefers “fuck buddy”…well, that’s better than now, client and provider. I can accept “fuck buddy.”*

A rush of happiness flooded Castiel, so achingly new that tears filled his eyes. The smile that twisted his lips was so foreign that his facial muscles twitched.

*I can remember the last time I laughed, remember the last time I smiled…*

“My omega…”

…but when was the last time I did any of those things because I was genuinely happy?

*I don’t know.*

Castiel wasn’t sure if Dean breathed the words in his ear or if, half-asleep, he imagined them, but they felt right, as Dean’s knot in him felt right, as Dean’s presence felt right, as Dean’s scent felt right, as Dean’s hand cupping his face felt right, as everything about their relationship felt right in a way that little in Castiel’s life had ever felt right.

“I’m glad you don’t want to knot me,” Dean whispered. He’d definitely said that aloud. With bated breath, Castiel waited for Dean to continue, straining to make sure he didn’t miss a word. “Don’t get me wrong. I like getting fucked…and I have imagined what it’d feel like, if it was you…even…even pretended it was you, when I was with…but you’re different. I know it’s some scent bond bullshit but I like what we’ve got. I like how it feels when I’m with you. Not just here…” Dean’s hand slid down Castiel’s torso and fondled his limp cock and balls. After their marathon sex, Castiel was sensitive even though he was limp, and he whimpered. Dean patted him gently and tucked Castiel’s cock and balls into a more comfortable position as if his genitalia was precious. “…but also here.” Dean’s hand drifted up; Castiel waited with anticipation, a flutter of butterflies in his tummy, as he waited…waited…waited for Dean’s hand to settle over Castiel’s heart.
Dean’s hand pressed against Castiel’s forehead.

The nerves that had plagued him, struggling like there was something trapped within him, pounded against his rib cage as if trying to get out, vanished. Peace suffused him. His mind went quiet.

Castiel had never felt anything so wonderful.

“Castiel,” he mumbled. “My name is…”

“Castiel,” echoed Dean. “I like it. My name…still Dean.” His lips curled into a smile against Castiel’s back, hand kneading at Castiel’s temple.

…my alpha…how remarkable…

…he’s wonderful…

Smiling in return, clasped close and snug against his boyfriend, Castiel fell asleep.
April stepped around a corner, theoretically out of earshot, and Luke looked over his shoulder, met Castiel’s gaze, and leered.

“She seems to really like you.” Luke waggled his eyebrows.

Every word had a twist, a pause, a subtle, intentional inflection, and despite a lifetime of exposure to Luke’s doubletalk, Castiel had no idea what the subtext was intended to communicate. His understanding of Naomi hadn’t taught him to understand Luke; Naomi’s subtext always had meaning but Luke’s often didn’t – subtext introduced for subtext’s sake, to obfuscate and confuse and disorient – and Castiel found him baffling.

“I suppose,” Castiel answered neutrally.

Experience had taught Castiel that the best way to deal with Luke was to pretend to greater knowledge than he had and not rise to the indecipherable challenges that Luke routinely threw at his feet. Gabriel loved to watch them; he said that Castiel’s impassivity drove Luke “batshit,” but Castiel had never observed Luke to be off-kilter, bat-like, shitty, or otherwise.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what she’s hiding with that scent enhancer she’s doused in.” A speculative sneer replaced Luke’s leer, and he swirled port in his glass, slipping a hand into his pocket. “She slick you, brother? You’re smellin’ pretty rosy yourself – masking a scent bond? Knotting before marriage? What will our parents say? Scandal!”

Experience had taught Castiel not to grit his teeth, not to rise to the taunts, not to betray how juvenile and entitled he found Luke’s behavior. When he was younger, he’d pointed out Luke’s character flaws to their parents. The attempt had ended in Castiel being punished because Naomi had been disappointed that Castiel didn’t understand the merits and responsibilities of their social position as well as Luke did. Luke had no compunction about smiling to Naomi and Charles’ faces, turning around and mocking them when they were absent.

“No. I’ve not had relations with Miss Kelly.”

“You’ve not had relations with Miss Kelly,” Luke echoed mockingly. “Pity. Someone’s banging her. If it’s not you, my money’s on Mikey.”

“Or perhaps you are engaging in a meager misdirection to draw suspicion from your own behavior,” Castiel suggested. Luke froze, eyes narrowing, canines visible as he plastered a grin on his face. Castiel had only spoken in the hopes that a jab would keep Luke from pursuing the distasteful subject, but watching Luke’s reaction, Castiel wondered if for once he’d scored a hit.

“Castiel’s right.” Michael entered the parlor so abruptly that he must have been lurking in the hallway outside. His immaculate appearance, perfectly tailored suit, and million dollar smile – though Michael’s smile had only cost $52,143, Castiel had seen the bills – didn’t suggest a man that would lurk anywhere. In pursuit of every advantage in negotiations, he cultivated the appearance of someone who’d never listen at a keyhole. Michael Novak-Shurley? Perish the thought! So if he knew things he shouldn’t, he must be that perceptive, that clever, that wily. Michael absolutely listened at keyholes. “I’d never sully my knot on someone else’s leavings, even my own brother’s. She’ll make you a fine wife, Castiel.”

Disgust roiled Castiel’s stomach.
He hoped he never found out if April would be a good wife.

He saw no way to avoid their future wedding. Naomi and the Kellys were already discussing dates. Their lawyers were negotiating the per-nuptial agreement.

With Michael there, the burden of verbally sparring with Luke lifted from Castiel. Luke insulted Castiel for practice, for fun, but the Cold War between Michael and Luke was legendary. Clients and executives from other banks spoke to Castiel about their rivalry in hushed, awed whispers. To the victors would go the spoils – only one brother could run IADB when Naomi and Charles passed, and Michael and Luke each believed it should be them.

Determined to ignore them, Castiel retreated to memories of his morning with Dean. His ass clenched at nothing, triggering the delightful cascade of lingering aches and pains that grounded him, reminded him of how sweetly his boyfriend had made love to him. Afterwards, when Dean’s knot had faded, he’d offered Castiel his number. Castiel had explained that his phone was a monitored work line, and with Dean’s help he’d obtained a second phone, one that Dean called a “burner” – difficult to trace, loaded with pre-paid minutes and texts purchased by the hundred. That phone was a reassuring weight in his back pocket and periodically it vibrated to let Castiel know he’d received a text. Only one person had the phone number, so unless it was a misdial, Dean had already gotten in touch to arrange their next meeting. Getting together would be more difficult now that Castiel wasn’t Dean’s client. They were both busy, Castiel working eighty to ninety hours a week, Dean juggling two jobs and his classes, but that Dean had contacted him was heartening. Castiel longed to see what Dean had sent, longed for the reminder that, unlike anyone in his family, Dean wanted to see Castiel, but he didn’t dare check, not where his brothers might see.

And I’m assuming he’s contacting me to arrange a time. What if his intention is instead to apologize and cancel? ‘Sorry not interested after all.’

No. Dean wouldn’t do that to me. He hasn’t hesitated to speak his mind before. If he didn’t want to be my boyfriend, he’d not have pretend interest when we were together only to rebuke me once we were apart.

“...thinking about her now, unless I miss my guess,” Luke concluded smugly. Castiel started and startled back into the conversation. His brothers watched him; they wore matching assessing, cool looks, Luke’s lips curled into a condescending smirk, Michael’s tucked into a judging frown.

“I’m disappointed in you,” Michael said, his tone and his disdainful sniff a perfect clone of Naomi’s mannerisms. “If you listened to us as you ought, you’d learn a great deal.”

“Of course, I’m—”

“As usual, your assessment is flawed, brother.” Luke’s gaze was yet fixed on Castiel but now every barb and innuendo was aimed at Michael, and Castiel was relieved for the reprieve. “The selection of Miss Kelly to be our lovely sister-in-law proves that our mother, for one, thinks that precious Cassie is beyond learning.” So much for my reprieve. Castiel pushed his feelings down, shoved his concerns aside, focused on the reassuring reminder that vibrated at regular intervals from the cell phone in his pocket. Someone didn’t think Castiel hopeless. Someone didn’t think Castiel too unmolded to live. Someone didn’t think Castiel needed a forceful omega wife to steer him toward appropriate alpha behavior. “Forgive me if I trust her assessment of our brother’s inadequacies over yours.”

“Unlike you, I recognize untapped talent when I see it.” Michael shot a false smile at Luke, then turned it on Castiel. “I—”
“Excuse me, I thought we’d established that you tapped that potential yourself.” Luke winked at Castiel as if he was in on a joke. “April is a typical omega, ready to use hormones and slick to get her way.” The urge to flee rose, but Castiel schooled his face to stillness and impassivity, schooled his body to a tense facsimile of a calm he rarely felt around his brothers.

“Crude,” said Michael dismissively. “Always a hammer strike, Luke, when a feather touch would be infinitely more effective.”

“The featherweight featherbrain thinks he’s ‘infinitely more effective,’” Luke laughed, giving Castiel a nudge nudge see what I did there look of false comraderie. After all these years, both brothers still thought Castiel foolish enough to be duped into being a pawn to be played against the other sibling. If Castiel had any backbone left he’d dispute that belief, but it was easier to let them think him malleable, easier to let them believe that he might yet choose a side. They could never take him completely for granted when they still saw advantage in using him. “You know what they say about lightweights.”

Isn’t letting them think I’m malleable the same as actually being malleable? What would happen if I stood up to them even once?

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. Enlighten us – what do the oh-so-wise ‘they’ say about lightweights?”

See? I could have said something like that, but instead…

All eyes turned toward the door, where Gabriel stood framed. Whereas Castiel, Luke and Michael wore suits appropriate to the dinner that the Kellys were hosting, Gabriel had come in what could most accurately be called a leisure suit, the height of fashion circa 1975 with a fitted brown jacket and plaid pants woven in a tasteful shade of blue and a shade of green so distasteful that even Castiel recognized that Gabriel’s fashion faux pas was intentional.

“Do tell, Lucy,” Gabriel continued, sauntering into the room. The pants had bell bottoms. Wing-tipped platform shoes, alligator skin dyed in a swirling pattern of toxic green and virulent yellow, poked out from beneath. “Wait. Better idea.” He reached into one of the numerous, unnecessary pockets on his jacket and pulled his phone out. “I’ve got this app that has a ruler function – applicable in so many situations, right? Right! – so let’s see ‘um boys. Find out once and for all which is longer: Lucy’s hammer or Mikey’s feather.”

“It’s not the length that matters, it’s the girth,” Castiel deadpanned.

The utter shock on Michael and Luke’s faces was beyond satisfying. For the first time, Castiel understood why Gabriel took such juvenile delight in egging their brothers on. The dead silence that greeted Castiel’s pronouncement was broken by Gabriel’s incredulous peal of laughter; he bit back another laugh, glanced at Castiel, and gave in, slapping his knee and shaking with mirth.

“What’s so funny?”

April’s bright voice drew all eyes to the doorway again; Gabriel turned, took in her proper, parent-approved appearance, and broke down again, gasping half-words in an incoherent attempt to explain himself.

“Castiel made a witticism,” Luke said, speaking loudly to be heard over Gabriel’s ruckus. “Care to share your adorable joke with your charming girlfriend?”

No, but I’d like to share it with Dean…he’s got length and girth…

“She’s my fiancée, and I fear it would lose something in the retelling,” apologized Castiel. Gabriel
gasped and doubled over again. “It’s a matter of using appropriate tools when working with nails.”

“Oh!” April’s expression lit up. “I didn’t take you for a mani/pedi kind of man.” Castiel blinked, baffled how she’d drawn that conclusion from his statement, but before he could ask, she continued, “How metrosexual of you! Perhaps you’d care to tell me more during a tour of the house?” Assuming his reply, she walked up beside him, caught his arm, and took a step toward the door, tugging him with her. “During dinner, you’ll recall my mother mentioned that there some fine art deco paintings in the family quarters upstairs? I know how much of an art connoisseur you are. It’ll be just like Versailles!” Resignation settled like a stone in his gut and he curled a hand about her wrist. She smiled at him, nodded toward Michael, Luke, and at the still laughing Gabriel, as if his behavior was ordinary, and led Castiel from the room.

“Show ‘er your girth, Cassie!” Gabriel called after him.

They walked together in silence. The Kelly mansion was opulent and ostentatious. Gaudy Ming vases on equally gaudy Rococo tables lined walls hung from wainscoting to ceiling with a mélange of art painful to the cultured eye. Though the various styles were familiar, everything from Byzantine icons to Lichtenstein-esque pop art, there were no recognizable pieces nor peculiar techniques to mark the work of well-known artists. Someone who knew nothing about art would be awed, mistaking plenitude for substance. Castiel was disgusted.

Better no art than this olio…or better a more narrow collection, a focus, that would show an actual interest in the works even if they lacked the knowledge or means to acquire more noteworthy pieces. I’m not merely being a snob. The distastefulness doesn’t merely stem from the works being unknowns, it’s the sheer audacity and ignorance boastfully displayed by the abundant inanity of the collection. They don’t care what they own, so long as they are seen to own it.

“Your brothers are amusing,” April ventured, guiding Castiel down a hallway and up a flight of stairs. Something indefinable in the air shifted as the moved from the public areas of the first floor to the family rooms on the second, and Castiel’s nerves flared. Expectation hung heavy about his shoulders. “You must have many happy times together.”

‘Abundant inanity’ is an apt description of the family members as well as their domicile…

“They certainly think they’re hilarious,” said Castiel. April laughed as if he’d told a joke. At least while she laughed she wasn’t talking. Plush carpet muted their steps, the air redolent with wood polish and the blended redolence of the Kelly family’s combined scents.

“This is my parents’ bedroom,” April said, pushing open the first door they passed. The room within was enormous and of a piece with the rest of the house. A huge, clunky Baroque tester bed draped in taffeta and brocade was the tacky centerpiece of the mismatched bedroom set, the varied pieces resting on a wall-to-wall Turkish carpet that likely cost more than they paid the help per annum. The more Castiel learned about the Kellys, the more he detested them, and the more he understood why his mother had chosen them of all the families who might try for the hand of a Novak scion. The Kellys were desperate to impress, obsessed with the appearance of notoriety with no interest in the substance, willing to supplicate themselves to the will of those they perceived as their social superiors, and rich enough to be worth notice.

No other recommendations were required.

April watched Castiel expectantly.

Right. He was supposed to be admiring the artwork. With a show of concentration, he turned to the walls. They were hung with a profusion of still lifes, a hodgepodge of works from different countries
and different time periods, many pastiches of the works of better known artists. The pieces had little
to recommend them and little in common; some were vanitas, others bouquets of flowers, others
paeans in oil to hunting or bounty or whatever hobby the original commissioner wished to publicize.
They hung in a random order, as in the treasure rooms of old, gauche and presumably chosen more
for how well they formed a mosaic than for their quality.

“They’re nice,” Castiel lied easily.

Once he’d found lying difficult.

To survive in his family he’d learned to lie as easily as tell the truth.

_No, falsehood comes more easily than honesty. Telling the truth is a risk. A pretty lie is always safe,
always guaranteed to be what the listener wants to hear._

“Aren’t they _just_?” gushed April. “I knew, as cultured as you are, you would appreciate our
collection as most of our visitors aren’t able to. We’re rarely blessed by such august guests.”

Even April’s attempts to flatter Castiel were thinly veiled self-flattery. The Kellys couldn’t _help_
patting themselves on the back, smug that the Novaks were interested in them. Talk over dinner had
been of a future visit to “introduce the Novak-Shurleys to the neighborhood.” Castiel dreaded the
prospect.

_I want to get away. I want to check my text messages. I want to be with Dean. He doesn’t act like
I’m a name. He doesn’t act like I’m Naomi’s perfect protégé. He acts like I’m Cas, desirable in and
of myself, fine the way I am, no veneer of glamour and celebrity needed. I can tell Dean the truth…I
can tell Dean most of the truth. I can be myself…I can try for the first time to see what ‘be myself’
means._

“I’ll own…” April’s said in a faux-conspiratorial whisper as she laid a possessive hand on Castiel’s
shoulder. “This old fashioned nonsense isn’t _really_ to my taste. Despite your warm words, your chill
reaction suggests you agree? I think you’ll find my room more welcoming.”

As if in a dream, Castiel let April seize his arm and steer him out of the Kellys’ room, down the hall,
to another door. No sooner was it pushed open than Castiel was assaulted by the overwhelming scent
of flowers – April’s scent multiplied and intensified as if she’d soaked every item in the room with
her perfume, as if she were screaming smell in his nose. Her bedroom was equally _loud_, a stereotype
of an omega’s personal space taken so far that in another context Castiel would have thought the
room intentional parody. She pulled him into the room, nudged the door shut, and let out a sigh as
she kicked off her heels. Everything was pink or purple. Everything was plush and frilly. Everything
was lacy and glittering and modern and clean. Every surface gleamed as if freshly polished. Every
mirror brightened the faint light until Castiel’s eyes stung – or maybe that was her scent coating him,
settling into his clothing, encompassing him in a thick fog that dampened his awareness of everything
else.

April said something, smiled, laughed, and apparently took Castiel’s silence for acquiescence, for she
grabbed his arm again and dragged him to the bed. Her tasteful black cocktail dress – _the only
tasteful thing in the room_, Castiel thought dazedly – made her seem like the only still object, the only
constant in a world awash in a pink froufrou nightmare.

_It’s like drowning in a bottle of lilac-scented Pepto-Bismol._

There was nothing wrong with the color pink. Heck, Castiel _liked_ pink, and had several pink shirts
and a handful of pink ties that always brought a moue of distaste to Naomi’s face but which she
couldn’t object too because there was nothing actually inappropriate about them. Heck, Naomi hadn’t even taken them when she’d emptied Castiel’s closet. The issue wasn’t that the room was pastel. April’s room would have been equally disgusting had it been turquoise instead of magenta, had it been chartreuse instead of violet. Castiel’s knees hit the edge of the bed; he lost his balance and fell against it. The mattress was so soft that the bed bounced beneath his weight and April giggled as if they were playing a game.

There was a mirror over the bed.

*Why* was there a mirror over the bed?

Castiel started to rise but April’s hand on his chest arrested him. Surprised, he met her dark eyes, her face framed by red locks that clashed with the pink bedding. A painting he hadn’t noticed haloed her in stars and hearts and exclamation points; it couldn’t have been more perfect had she planned it.

*Come on, Castiel. From what I know of her? She definitely planned it.*

Desperate to look at anything but April’s expectant smile, Castiel’s gaze shifted to the wall behind her, lingered on Warhol-style pop art as April breathed meaningless praise, leaned forward, and kissed him.

*How did I not see this coming?*

Strands of her hair fell and pooled on Castiel’s face, tickling and teasing. She swept a finger beneath his eye.

“Eyelash,” she whispered. “Make a wish.” She leaned down and kissed him again, shifting her weight to crowd him against the bed.

*If I turn her down, the whole pseudo-relationship will crash down around my ears. Naomi will be furious and will restrict my activities even further.*

Fear and distaste widened Castiel’s eyes, and though he didn’t kiss back she took his silence for assent, pressing her lips to his aggressively, teased her tongue against his sealed lips. Her saliva tasted like she smelled. Bile rose in Castiel’s throat.

*It’s not like I have any choice but to marry her, any choice but to knot her and try to produce an heir.*

Resignation burned as badly as the bile did. Castiel weakly reciprocated and April behaved as if he’d surged into her enthusiastically; she pushed his shoulders down against the bed and straddled him, the skirt of her cocktail dress riding up to her waist to reveal satiny pink panties whose sheen was only slightly dulled by the stretched gauze of her stockings.

Her underwear matched her bedding.

*Does it really make a difference if we make love now or later?*

April’s hips ground against Castiel’s crotch and she stopped kissing him, leaned up, frowned, muttered something that sounded like “soft as a cloud,” and settled back down. The bed was unpleasantly plush, trapping him like quicksand, but Castiel suspected he’d misheard. Her tongue passed between his unresisting lips, the fabric of her pantyhose snagged and tore on the zipper of his pants, a stubborn, mildly irritated sound rumbled in her throat, and something hard dug into Castiel’s butt cheek.
The new cell phone.

It vibrated.

Dean had sent Castiel messages.

Dean wanted to be with Castiel.

Dean wanted to talk to Castiel.

*Dean would look incredible in pink lacy panties.*

Castiel’s cock stirred with interest, April purred a triumphant sound against Castiel’s lips and Castiel caught a glimpse of the two of them in the mirror overhead. Vertigo inverted him, flipped him upside down, twisted the world around as he caught his own gaze, expression deadened by surrender. With a gasp, he shoved April off him, the bed bouncing as she tumbled to the side, and sat up. He felt like he was asea, his vision of the room swimming, his body jostled and rocked to nausea.

“Don’t worry.” April’s hands closed, vise-like, around Castiel’s shoulders, her manicured nails digging into his flesh even through the wool of his jacket and cotton of his shirt. “Naomi’s told me about your inexperience. I don’t hold it against you – honestly, I consider it a plus. It speaks well of your commitment, your faithfulness. It’s rare to meet an alpha invested in such old-fashioned notions of celibacy…I find the prospect of teaching you, molding you, very…appealing.”

No…no…I can’t, I can’t do that, even for mother, even knowing that April and I will be married. I can’t touch her. I don’t want to touch her. I don’t want to knot her. I don’t want to knot anyone. Have to…have to…

...have to be the alpha Naomi expects me to be...

...have to be a dutiful son...

The cellphone vibrated again.

...have to get away from her...

Castiel rose so abruptly that April pitched forward. Panting like he’d run for miles, he wheeled around, watching her warily.

“I won’t judge you,” she said brightly, projecting composure like a sedative – or that might have been her scent suffocating him. “And we have our parent’s stamp of approval.”

...have to run...no...have to smooth this over, have to find an excuse, an excuse not to make love to her...

...an excuse not to marry her?

Castiel couldn’t imagine an adequate excuse. There was nothing he could say to Naomi that would deter her once she’d set her mind on a course of action.

“Mrs. Novak suggested that I not tell you that I’d spoke to her about this, but such *dishonesty* smacks me as...juvenile,” she said. Steeling himself, Castiel “You’re a mature alpha. I’m a mature omega. There’s no reason we can’t discuss sex like adults.”

“We’ve known each other for a week.” None of the anxiety or sickness twisting his insides in knots was apparent in his voice; he sounded hoarse but otherwise like himself.
“Don’t pretend to naïveté,” she scoffed. “It doesn’t suit you. The courtship is a formality, Castiel. Our parents’ lawyers finalized the pre-nup days ago. Since we’re trapped doing all the boring, unpleasant parts of courtship – does anyone actually enjoy the ballet? We have tickets to go in two weeks, snore! – we should at least get the benefits!”

“I like the ballet,” Castiel answered before he could stop himself.

“Castiel, Castiel, you’re missing the point.” She rolled her eyes, reached out, and gently took his hands in hers. Castiel’s palms were sweaty. Her fingers felt like icicles. “Of course I love the ballet—”

“But—”

“—but we’re supposed to be getting to know each other. Sitting for three hours in silence in a darkened concert hall doesn’t help me get to know you. Exchanging family visits and eating overdressed salads and well-done roasts while your brothers squabble and our parents compete to demonstrate which is most qualified to invest our joint dowries doesn’t help me get to know you. Getting dinner at the finest restaurants in the city when our names have been on the reservation lists for weeks and half the other diners are celebrity spotters doesn’t help me get to know you.

“You’re shy. I understand that. I appreciate that, and recognize the merit in your retiring nature, as I suspect your mother and siblings never have. You’re a good man, Castiel, in a world and an industry that rarely rewards goodness. I will reward your goodness. Your rivals – your brothers – sabotage themselves in your eyes because they can’t believe that you are exactly as guileless as you seem. They’ve known you your whole life but they don’t see you. I see you, Castiel. I will help you. While they argue and destroy each other, each thinking to win you as an ally, you can come out on top. You can lead IADB. If you prove yourself, Naomi will leave everything to you – to us. We’ll be the ultimate power couple.”

“She…she said that?” asked Castiel, too stunned to come up with a better response.

“Not in so many words,” April conceded. “But it’s been tacit in her negotiations with our family. Why do you think she partnered you with me, when she could have betrothed me to Michael or Luke? She wants you to succeed, Castiel. You’re her favorite.”

Only a deep, steadying breath kept Castiel from laughing. April didn’t know a fraction so much as she thought, and proved herself as shallow and misguided in her attempts to “play the game” as her parents were in their callow efforts as collectors. Naomi had pitted her three alpha sons against each other their whole lives. Whichever proved strongest at the social machinations and self-control that Naomi saw as strength would prove themselves worthy of inheriting. Michael and Luke loved the game, thrived on it, played it so automatically that Castiel wondered if they realized that Naomi had manufactured their rivalry. Castiel refused to play. Castiel didn’t want to inherit IADB. Naomi found Castiel’s recusal unacceptable, and once Naomi set her sights on she never gave up until she succeeded. She manipulated him, pushed him and pulled him and beat at him until he couldn’t fight any longer, and Castiel complied with her directives and whims rather than sustain the treatment that resulted from continued refusal and resistance.

April had no idea the viper’s pit she’d leapt into, but Castiel understood Naomi’s latest move on the chess board.

If Castiel wouldn’t compete for her favor, she’d force Castiel into marriage with someone who would compete for her favor.

“That’s what Michael and Luke never realize. I’m not their pawn. All of us, eldest to youngest, are
Naomi’s pawns. Our purpose is to be manipulated in her game, and her objective is to maximize profit. We’re assets, not people.

April rose, wrapped her arms around Castiel’s neck, kissed him again, and sighed when Castiel didn’t react. Dropping her head onto Castiel’s shoulder, she said, “You’re making this so much more difficult than it has to be, Castiel. Tell me what you want, and I’ll be that.”

I want Dean.

I want to be knotted.

I want to escape from this room, escape from this house, escape from this marriage and this business and this family and never, ever, ever look back.

Could…could I do that?

No. Of course not. Naomi would find me. Naomi always finds me, wherever I hide, whatever solace I seek in outside activities, and drags me back into the fold.

“I’m not ready for this,” said Castiel, skirting as close as he dared to the truth. He’d never be ready for a sexual relationship with April, but if he could find a way to appease her—

“Naomi cautioned me that you might prefer the company of a certain male alpha,” April suggested as if pulling her ace. “I don’t mind if you violate our vows. I make no pretense that I’m a virgin.”

SHE KNOWS!

“That’s not…” Castiel took a deep breath to quell panic. Calm. In control. Emotion was weakness. Feelings were a vulnerability that could be exploited. It wasn’t a surprise that Naomi knew about Dean. Castiel had suspected she did. That Naomi hadn’t acted on that information reflected a deliberate plan, though Castiel suspected April had destroyed that plan with her early admission of her knowledge. April was a novice at reading situations but Naomi was a professional and she’d taught her sons to emulate her savviness whether they wanted to learn or not. Castiel felt the oddest twinge of protectiveness. April thought she was lapping the competition when she was actually drowning in the deep end of the pool.

Naomi would eat April for breakfast.

April watched him, lips parted, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling. A distorted phantom of her stared at Castiel from the mirror overhead.

“Perhaps what you propose would be best,” Castiel said, stuffing all his feelings in a box and drawing on the steadiness forged over a lifetime of fending of Naomi’s ripostes. “As you’ve suggested, what you and I have is a business arrangement. Sentiment has no place in such dealings. While I don’t know what my mother has told you, I can make some educated guesses. Let me assure you – regardless of your belief that sex is necessary to ‘secure’ me, you are incorrect. We can reach a mutually satisfying, beneficial arrangement without resorting to touching each other.”

“Offspring within five years is one condition of the pre-nuptial agreement,” said April triumphantly.

Castiel could swear his heart froze in his chest.

His cell phone vibrated again.

If not for the whisper reminding Castiel of Dean’s existence and interest, Castiel would have
Castiel would have to knot April.

“I’m not ready for this,” he repeated steadily, turned, pulled the door open and walked from the room, hoping slow, deliberate steps would obscure that he was fleeing.

Behind him, April laughed.

April waxed raptures at Castiel for the entire two weeks leading up to the ballet. She loved the ballet. Castiel grew to loathe the ballet. Dread built in him as their date approached.

The only way Castiel sat through the dance with her hand continually kneading his knee and her scent heady around him was by shifting periodically to feel the plug he’d put in. Dean had an hour free between scheduled clients that night and if they were quick about it – and didn’t let Dean slip his knot in to Castiel’s body – they’d have a little time to make love and grab a meal.

“I see you’re warming up to me,” April said with a predatory grin as they parted, kissing him and fondling the half-erection that had plagued Castiel all evening.

Even Dean’s touch couldn’t erase the feel of her fingers on him, like ants crawling over his skin, but at least when he was drowning in bliss Castiel stopped caring, stopped thinking, about anything other than Dean.

“Dude, this is fuckin’ amazing,” Dean laughed, washing down his sizable mouthful of hamburger with a swig of beer that had been delivered, no ID requested, by their waitress. “You want a bite?”

“No thank you,” said Castiel. Since he’d started working such long hours, since he’d stopped exercising much, he’d had to cut back on what he ate or risk a ballooning waistline. Nightly vigorous sex and weekend pole dancing meant Dean didn’t have similar concerns. Watching Dean enjoy himself was enough. Castiel had eaten before he left the office; IADB had done a cost-benefit analysis and discovered that the increased productivity that resulted when the company paid for food to be delivered to the building was more than adequate to cover the actual cost of the meals. Aside from mandatory family dinner and dates with April, all of Castiel’s food was provided on the job.

“Dude, you gotta lighten up,” Dean continued, gesturing emphatically with his hamburger, ketchup and juice dripping onto his plate. A line of pungent liquid flowed down Dean’s arm and Castiel repressed the insane desire to lick Dean clean. “Enjoy the finer things!” Dean paused, chewing, and quirked an eyebrow at Castiel, sniffing pointedly. “Not just that. Sure, sex is awesome, but food! Pot! Sunrises! The smell of the ocean! Traveling! You gotta live or else what the fuck are you busting your balls for?”

“I wish I knew,” Castiel admitted. He colored and looked away. One glance from Dean, one smile, one chuckle, and Castiel’s defenses fell away. Either Dean was the most ingenious, guileless man on the planet – unlikely, given his varied professions – or he was manipulative in a way that Castiel had never imagined and could scarce prepare for. Whenever Naomi’s voice in his head suggested that Castiel be on his guard, though, he couldn’t summon an iota of interest in stopping Dean from demolishing his defenses. He wanted Dean to demolish his defenses.

“Wait, what?” Dean asked blankly.

“What?” Castiel returned, equally confused.
“You know, I’ve done the math,” said Dean, tearing another chunk from his sandwich. Castiel averted his eyes as Dean continued to talk around a mouthful of food. “You’re workin’, what, a hundred hours a week? You must be makin’ crazy-ass bank.”

“I’m not sure what an ‘ass bank’ would look like but I suspect it’s not to my taste,” Castiel interjected, hoping to distract Dean from his likely conclusion.

“You’re a fuckin’ hilarious S-O-B,” Dean continued without missing a beat. “And brilliant. And gorgeous, like, this whole, blue-eyed, dark-haired, tanned skin, suit thing you’ve got going? Really works for you. Really works for me, too,” added Dean with a bawdy wink. “If I had what you had, man, I’d be in seventh heaven: house in the ‘burbs; Maserati – no, Bentley – no, Jag – no, no I got it, pure classic, vintage Chevy Impala – wait, fuck it, why pick? All of ‘um in the garage; trophy omega to hang from my arm and bounce on my knot; vineyard in Tuscany for those times we don’t feel like going to the villa in the Bahamas—”

“You have a vastly exaggerated idea of how much money I earn,” Castiel said dryly. Dean’s inclusion of an omega to call his own stung more than Castiel could justify.

“—the whole nine yards, because why the fuck not? Who’s gonna stop me?”

“Your accountant?”

“Dang, Cas, quit trying to inject your reality in my multi-millionaire fantasy.” Dean rolled his eyes. “You’re missin’ the point – intentionally, I think. I’d do things that make me happy. I’d buy things that I enjoy. It’d be awesome. Yeah, I’d work the long hours – you know I ain’t afraid to work my ass off, literally and figuratively – but there’s gotta be a point to all that work. Not just workin’ for the sake of workin’. There’s an end goal – retiring young, helping out Sammy, puttin’ together a legacy that means that any kids I have won’t have to worry like I’ve worried, that kinda thing.” I wonder if there was a time that Naomi and Charles thought that? “Dude, you’re miserable. I’m just tryin’ to figure out why.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Castiel, tearing his eyes from Dean’s earnest expression. “I have the world on a platter. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I’m not so wealthy as your fantasies suggest but I do well enough. I’m part of ‘the 1 percent.’ I want for nothing. I’ve never gone hungry. I’ve got a family – both parents, three elder brothers, a younger sister – who are invested in my well-being and interested in seeing me succeed. I’m an alpha. Even my job was the result of nepotism, though I’d not have been retained my position if I didn’t perform adequately. From a certain point of view, I’ve never worked a day in my life. I have absolutely no right to be unhappy. I’m sorry that our life experiences are so different; however, I think you have all the tools to make them converge. You’re remarkable, Dean.”

Dean froze with his burger inches from his face. “Wow. That’s, uh, that’s really flatterin’, Cas. Bullshit, but nice to hear. And totally ass-backwards from my point. Why put in the time if you’re unhappy at the end of the day? A few safe investments, some occasional trades, and that hefty bank account of yours could see you through the rest of your life, ‘specially since it sounds like you got an inheritance coming. You could just…stop. Isn’t that the whole point of being filthy stinkin’ rich? Gettin’ to the point where you don’t have to work? You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. Man, I hope you’re right about me, ‘cause that’s what I want – to put in my time, make my fortune, and retire at 35. I can’t wait.” Dean shot him a dazzling smile, a couple crumbs flaking off his lips.

Could I really stop?
Life doesn’t work that way. Even if Naomi would let me leave IADB – which she never would – she’d still be my family, Charles Shurley would still be my family. Michael and Luke would still be my family. There’s no separation between the bank and our lives.

“It’s not that simple,” said Castiel.

“Really? S’not? No one’s entrusted you with the nuclear codes,” Dean pointed out. “It’s not like you’re, I dunno, Donald Junior, or…like, Ralph Lauren or…or a Novak or something. Sure, a few people, their family names are synonymous with their corporate interests, but…look, I dunno. I’m just talkin’. That was my topic of conversation. If you’re done, you’re done, I won’t twist your arm. You come up with something.”

“What should I say?” asked Castiel sadly.

*If Dean knew the truth, he’d understand.*

That’s oddly reassuring.

*But I’m too cowardly to tell him my full name.*

“Fuck, I dunno,” Dean said. “Seemed to have loads on your mind when we were fuckin’. Need a cock in your ass to loosen up?” Dean’s stunning grin took much of the sting from the words; he meant them as a joke, and it was on Castiel and his personal deficiencies if he couldn’t take them in the spirit that Dean intended them.

*Or this is a sign of that manipulativeness that I suspect the existence of but can ascribe no specific behaviors to? He knows it makes me uncomfortable to speak cavalierly about sexual matters, yet he regularly does so.*

*It doesn’t matter. I already decided: I’m his to use. I’ve been a tool my entire life; I’d rather be Dean’s tool then Naomi’s.*

A topic…any topic…if I could be anywhere in the world right now…I’d still want Dean with me…but wouldn’t it be nice to have my greenhouse back, to grow things, to cultivate, pollenate, to…

“Do you know anything about beekeeping?” asked Castiel hopefully.

“Wha? Damn, no, not a thing,” Dean replied, shaking his head. “Why don’t you tell me ‘bout it?”

*No one wants to hear about my interests.*

That’s not true. Gabriel always listened. And now Dean is listening. It’s enough. *For as long as I have this, for as long as I have him, it’ll have to be enough.*

Dean dug into his burger, Castiel stole a fry, and described his ideal apiary. Dean listened and asked questions, grabbed a napkin and pulled a pen from who-knew-where and drew a landscape plan, and Castiel, briefly, forgot his worries.

*There’d be a greenhouse, and a clover field, and a half dozen or a dozen hives on pallets, and fresh produce and herbs available seasonally…*and Dean cares enough that’s drawn me a floorplan.

*Why do I think he’s manipulative? Has Naomi conditioned me to suspicion so completely that I can meet no one without wondering what their angle is?*  

Dean doesn’t have an angle.
I don’t think.

He’s never asked me for anything. Heck, he knows I have decent money and we still go Dutch on every date.

I think I could fall for him, given half a chance.

Countering with his own napkin layout – the salt shaker was an oak tree, the contents of the sugar packet he tore open a field of wildflowers for the bees to feast on and sweeten their honey – Castiel took his thoughts, balled them up, and pushed them far, far away, as deep as he could bury them in his mind. Novaks didn’t fall in love with anything except money, power, and themselves. Castiel cared for none of the three, and he’d accepted years ago that his life would be loveless.

There wouldn’t be love in his life with April, and there didn’t need to be love for him to enjoy Dean’s presence for as long as Castiel could indulge their shared flight of fancy.

What Castiel had with Dean was enough.
Outside, a cricket chirped endlessly. The temptation to find a boot, go outside, and flatten the poor insect was powerful, but Castiel restrained himself. His irritation stemmed from exhaustion. He wasn’t angry at the bug. There were too many crickets for him to kill all of them anyway.

It was well past midnight. April had invited him to a red carpet movie opening for an art film that Castiel hadn’t caught the name of. The movie had been excellent, but a continual susurration of conversation and the frequent hum of cell phones set to vibrate had filled the theater, as loud and obnoxious as the cacophony outside. Flashes of light had spoken to screens being turned on continually. The event had benefited charity, seats sold for hundreds of dollars each, and the point was to be seen to give. The Kellys donated as ostentatiously as they collected. The name of the movie, its nature, and its quality were irrelevant. When it ended, no one had applauded until his own enthusiastic response triggered a desultory round of clapping from the glitterati.

Despite mutterings throughout the film about how “prosey” and “abstract” and “Kafka-esque” the film was, April praised it enthusiastically at the end – once she realized that Castiel had enjoyed it. Then she’d regaled him with her interpretations, explaining why she thought the film Kafka-esque, without at any point realizing that she was ascribing authorship of “1984” to Franz Kafka. Castiel couldn’t be bothered to correct her. Even if he tried, she’d say, “of course I knew that, silly…” and keep on as if Castiel was the foolish one. Maybe, if Castiel was lucky, April would bring up her Orwellian, Kafka-esque interpretation to Naomi, and get put in her place by someone whose opinion she actually valued. Maybe, if Castiel was really lucky, he’d be in the room when it happened.

Nearly three months into their relationship, Castiel detested April.

The cricket was obviously the only reason he couldn’t sleep.

The buzzing of a cicada, loud as a chainsaw, probably had a hand in Castiel’s insomnia, too.

His frustration, his circling thoughts, his loneliness, and April’s floral scent soaked into his pores? Definitely not factors in his inability to sleep.

With a frustrated growl, Castiel rolled over, buried his nose in his pillow, and tried to sleep.

His pillow smelled like April.

Why did his pillow smell like April?

Scratch that. It was either in his imagination or she’d been on his bed and regardless Castiel didn’t want to know.

Sleep and move on. Things will be better in the morning.

It was a lie, but a gentle one, one that had carried him through puberty and high school and college and earning his MBA, heartened him during his early, tumultuous days at IADB. How he’d reached 25 with the belief that had some kind of autonomy seemed ludicrous in retrospect but at the time he’d actually thought he’d have authority and standing in the business, thought that since he was an adult and had done as his parents asked, they might listen to him. He’d learned better, and before long, he gave up on asserting himself, gave up on defending himself, gave up on fighting back, gave up on everything.

I gave up on myself.
How is this my life?

A flare of temper invigorated him and pushed sleep away. Surrendering to the inevitability of remaining awake, Castiel rolled out of bed, stripped off the sheets and blankets, tugged off his pajamas, and went to take a shower. Everything reeked of April. He stuffed the linens in his laundry basket for Eve to wash in the morning. He wished he could peel his skin off and bleach it, too.

If Dean smells her on me…

Castiel quashed the thought. It was absurd. The longer they were intimate, the better Castiel was able to differentiate the nuances of Dean’s smell. He’d never smelled Dean when the alpha hadn’t had recent sex with multiple partners and the undertones of Dean’s scent shifted to reflect the scent of every alpha who pegged him. The reminder niggled at Castiel, as so many reminders of Dean’s infidelity…no, of Dean’s lifestyle choices…niggled at Castiel. Castiel shouldn’t be jealous. He recognized that his unhappiness with Dean’s profession was Castiel’s problem and not Dean’s, but bitterness remained. If Dean cared for him, if Dean wanted him, if Dean saw their relationship as anything more than his initial offer of “fuck buddies,” wouldn’t Dean want to be reserve himself exclusively for Castiel?

Castiel should talk to Dean about his reservations. ‘No more assumptions’ had been Castiel’s directive, and Dean had been so open since then.

…but has he been open? We’ve been dating for three months but we spend the majority of our time having sex. Really, really good sex, but still just sex. He’s told me a little about his life – more than before – but he hasn’t said where he goes to school, hasn’t introduced me to his brother, hasn’t told me where he lives…

Yeah, because I’ve been so much more candid then him.

If I want more, I have to offer more. But I can’t do that, so…

Speaking to Dean about his jealousy required admitting that Castiel was still selfish, still a jerk. Telling Dean meant confessing that Castiel had lied when he said he didn’t mind Dean continuing to work.

So instead Castiel lied and said nothing was the matter.

And never gave a last name.

And never asked Dean’s last name.

And never mentioned his family or his job or April.

And then had the nerve to think he cared about Dean.

Not that he had admitted his affections aloud, to Dean or anyone else.

Dean’s job isn’t the problem.

I’m the problem.

Shambling into the bathroom, Castiel turned the shower on, let the water run until steam clouded the mirror, and stepped under the flow. In the first instant the water was too hot, searing him, and he hissed, but he quickly adapted. The heat was slightly excessive, and Castiel’s thoughts quieted under the ache of continual overstimulation. Water soaked his hair, flowed over him, left red lines over his
skin, and he lost track of time, lulled by the patter against his body and the surrounding tiles.

If he lay down in the tub, let the liquid sluice over him, he’d probably fall asleep.

Taking a deep breath, pushing away the dangerous temptation, Castiel caught a whiff of April.

With another hiss, Castiel rounded, grabbed his loofa from his rack of toiletries, doused the scrub in soap, and scoured his skin. The musky smell of body wash filled the air, but April’s inescapable floral scent lingered. He washed the soap off, poured more onto the loofa, and scrubbed at himself again, again, scrubbed his skin rough and aching, scrubbed until finally, finally, he couldn’t scent her on him. All he picked up was his own aroma, disgusting, cottony and inky, twisted, the damn embodiment of everything Castiel hated about IADB and capitalism and his life.

*But Dean likes the way I smell.*

Peace settled over him. He was clean – as clean as he could be. He set the loofa aside, stayed in the shower a few minutes longer, turned the water off, and dried himself. A faint miasma of flowers hovered around his laundry bin. Never mind waiting until the next day. He’d expunge the scent himself. It was bad enough he had to spend time with April; she had no place in his apartment, no place in his private life, no place in what passed for his sanctuary. Donning a clean pair of pajamas, scented lemon by fabric softener, Castiel took the laundry bin, held it awkwardly at arm’s length, and headed to the main house. He didn’t need Eve to do his laundry. He could do his own laundry. Castiel was a Goddamn adult.

Figuring out where the detergent was stored and how to start the machine took Castiel far too long – he hadn’t washed his own laundry since college, and their machine was much fancier that the coin-operated ones he’d used at Harvard – but eventually he got everything set and, with a press of the “start” button, the washer hummed to life. Satisfied, Castiel headed to the linen closet to grab a fresh set of sheets. He’d transfer the laundry to the dryer in the morning. Eve wouldn’t have to do a thing, at least not for him. A yawn bubbled out of him, and he took the stairs out of the basement, crossed the kitchen, headed to the central foyer, across the marble tiled floor, up the plushly carpeted stairs, and down the long hall of family and guest bedrooms toward the linen closet.

*Sheets, then bed. I should be able to sleep now. It’s nearly 2 AM, and I am tired, I just—*

“Cassie?”

Startled, Castiel turned. Gabriel watched him blearily, standing in the doorway of the bedroom that had been Gabriel’s as a child. Unlike Michael and Luke, who preferred to live with Naomi and Charles, Gabriel had an apartment in the city, but many nights he stayed at the family mansion. Free food, he always explained with a laugh, though Castiel wondered if that was the only explanation.

Sure, Alfie is an excellent cook, but though the meal is technically free, in truth it comes at a steep price. Besides, like me, Gabriel is usually still at the office at dinner time, so why come home?

“I needed fresh sheets,” Castiel explained awkwardly, returning his gaze to the night-darkened closet. He had no idea how Eve organized the linens; most of the beds in the main house were kings, but Castiel’s was a queen. There had to be sheets the right size somewhere, and—

“What, you wet the bed? Little old for, ya know, midnight emissions…” Gabriel’s presence was heavy and warm behind Castiel, and he turned again to see Gabriel making a lewd gesture, hips thrust forward, cock a misshapen lump beneath his PJs, hand stroking at air.

“No,” said Castiel, too roughly. Castiel doubted he could manage an erection when his room smelled
of April, much less an orgasm. He no longer bothered prepping to see Dean if he would be seeing
April first; in her presence, arousal was impossible.

I’ve got it. The antithesis of arousal is April. Ha.

And the pre-nup says we must produce heirs. Maybe I can convince her to get pregnant off some
other alpha and we can pretend it’s mine.

I’m jealous of Dean getting knotted even though I’m neither willing to nor interested in knotting him
myself, but the prospect of April being knotted by someone else is profoundly relieving.

As long as she gets what she wants, I doubt she’d mind…

“Wooo, touchy, touchy.”

“What do you want, Gabriel?” Castiel asked, exasperated, frustrated, angry – unjustifiably so.
Gabriel had done nothing wrong.

There was a beat pause.

“What’s going on with you, Cassie?” The sass was gone from Gabriel’s voice. He was pensive,
worried, and he lay a hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

“I told you – new sheets,” Castiel snapped. He didn’t want to talk about April, or Dean, or the prison
his life had become.

Now, Cas, be reasonable: this mansion has always been a prison. Isn’t that why they call it ‘the big
house?’

If Castiel told his brother the truth, Gabriel would be sympathetic, would be understanding, would
talk a pretty line and when they were done Castiel would be in the same situation he’d been in before
Gabriel spewed vapid reassurances. Validation of Castiel’s feelings, confirmation that his
assessments of the Kelly family and April were correct, would change nothing but would make him
feel worse.

“April’s a total bitch and I think she’s banging Lucifer…” Gabriel tentatively offered.

“On my bed?” said Castiel resignedly.

“Why would you think…oh, the sheets.” Gabriel sighed. “Something’s gotta give. You know that,
right? She won’t change. You’re a pretty swell dude, Cas, but you can’t save her.”

“Believe me, saving her is the last thing on my mind,” Castiel said with a hollow, self-deprecating
laugh.

What I really need is someone to save me.

Gabriel can’t. Gabriel has had 30 years of chances to save me from this family. He’s held silent
when he could have protected me, opting instead to restrict his interference to offering a shoulder to
cry on after the fact. I love him for the support he’s given me, and now that we’re both adults I
understand that he was only a few years older than me. It was all he could do to save himself. But
what Gabriel did for me wasn’t enough when we were children, wasn’t enough when we were
teenagers, wasn’t enough when we were in college, and isn’t enough now.
“Then why…?” Gabriel trailed off expectantly. Castiel had no idea what Gabriel’s expectation was, no clue what the unspoken question was, and with an irritated eye roll Castiel hoped was obscured by the night he returned to trying to find the right sheets. “Cas, why are you putting up with her? You must know she’s not chaste, and her family is…well, I can’t imagine our mother knew what kind of people they were before she started setting up this farce of a courtship.”

“That’s optimistic of you,” said Castiel.

“You don’t think she was taken in?”

“Not for a minute,” Castiel said, shaking his head. He checked the tag on a pair of sheets he’d dug out of the box and sighed with relief – finally, a sheet that would fit. It didn’t matter if the top sheet was too big, but he needed the sheet beneath him to lie flat or the wrinkles would drive him crazy. “You, Michael and Luke are all older than me and she hasn’t suggested matches for any of you. Why April? Why now? Why me? If you don’t think that she has calculated every step, you’re more naïve than I thought. Not only is there a pre-nuptial agreement, there’s even a signed and notarized contract stipulating how many guests each family is allowed to invite to the reception, and how much money they may spend on caviar. They’re arguing about wedding dates, and another lawyer visit may be necessary to resolve the conflict. Naomi’s actions are intentional, and if you think I’ve any way out of this, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Cassie…”

Grabbing the sheets, Castiel rounded on Gabriel. “Save your lamentations. You have no solution and your regrets are useless to me. Did you know they’re requiring April and I to produce heirs? Infidelity doesn’t violate the pre-nuptial, but infertility would. I couldn’t be more bound if Naomi and Charles had locked me in chains in the basement. So save me your questions about why, as if I have any choice in this. You know I don’t, and your suggestion that I have agency is patently absurd, counterproductive – hurtful, even. Please stop. Save your show of ‘I would if I could but…’ for the next call we get from the Policemen’s Benevolent Association.”

“Wow…harsh…” Gabriel shook his head but his lips were twisted in an irreverent smile.

In the end, Gabriel was as much a part of the family, a much a part of the problem, as everyone else. Where Michael and Luke and Naomi saw profit as a game, saw life as moves on a chess board, Gabriel saw everything as a joke. This wasn’t a game or a joke to Castiel. This was his life; he was really trapped working at IADB, he was really going to marry April, he was really going to knot her, he was really going to turn his back on Dean, he was really going to sacrifice himself on the altar of Naomi’s expectations, and harsh didn’t begin to cover the injustice and unfairness of it.

“Good night, Gabriel,” Castiel snarled, and stalked off.

Though he went back to his room, though he made his bed, though he covered himself with the sheets and turned off the lights and closed his eyes, though he didn’t catch of a whiff of April, it was a long time before Castiel fell asleep.

There’s no way out.

Dean (9:01 AM): Yo Cas I got like two hours between classes wanna grab a meal at noon?

Naomi, as always, has predicted my escape routes and cut them off.

Gabriel (10:12 AM): Finally got mother dearest to give the greenlight to expanding the internship program that you keep smiling and nodding about whenever I try to talk to you so I know you don’t
actually give a shit but I’m excited so congratulate me okay? She thought she had me when she said that if I couldn’t add 6 interns immediately the plan was toast but for once in my damn life I had the upper hand I started taking applications two months ago! Take that bitch. And yes I know she reads our text messages. Huge bitch.

What wouldn’t she expect?

Luke (10:21 AM): Gabriel is such a bore. Would you help me convince mother to fire him? I’m tired of him treating IADB and this family as a joke.

What would none of them expect?

Michael (11:15 AM): Gabriel wants to saddle me with some young pup who has scarce popped a knot. You’re always behind on your assignments so you can use an intern more effectively than I.

There’s nothing that Naomi wouldn’t expect. She made me this way. She knows how I think. She knows what I’ll do before I do, because what seems to me like an impenetrable maze is actually a single clear path, hedged in by plans she’s laid since before I was born.

April (11:41 AM): ❤ ☺ rsvrtnt 4 2 8:30 @ 734 Main dont b l8!

She can’t seriously think that April is an appropriate spouse - an appropriate daughter-in-law! Unless April is far cleverer than I’ve any cause to think her. What if the face she shows me isn’t the one she shows Naomi? There are many ways to manipulate and use people. Naomi’s approach is unusually blunt; perhaps April has assessed that I would be savvy to such strategies and sought to get past my defenses by playing the fool? Perhaps she thought I’d find such behavior endearing?

Dean (11:43 AM): Shit sorry to cancel no can do something came up uggghh this sucks I want you flat underneath me moaning legs spread wide is that too much to ask ??

I wish I could disappear.

It was all Castiel could do not to sigh and drop his head against his desk. The clunk as his skull struck hard wood would be satisfying, but if Castiel did something so out of character, the IADB security staff would catch it on the cameras and report his actions to Naomi. April had made them dinner plans, and Dean had been forced to cancel. Too often, it felt like the only thing that got Castiel through the day was the reminders of Dean’s interest: their rare times together, Dean’s texts arriving on the spare phone that Castiel carried to the bathroom to check, the lingering ache that ghosted through Castiel whenever he shifted in his seat. He wanted to etch Dean into his flesh, tattoo him into his skin, taste Dean forever in his mouth, drown himself in Dean’s scent. Knowing he was obsessed didn’t prevent or reduce Castiel’s attachment, and that scared him. In a lifetime of rationality, Dean was Castiel’s descent into insanity.

If he could, Castiel would happily leap off that cliff again and again. Though Castiel would lose everything, Dean would catch him when he fell.

Castiel would give anything to believe that. But Dean was young and ambitious, as caught up in the novelty of having someone see him as a man and an alpha and a top as Castiel was thrilled to not be judged for his desires and not be known as a Novak-Shurley. They were both of them, together, escaping the roles into which life had forced on them. Within a few years, Dean’s shoulders would broaden, Dean’s degree would be finished, and with his brilliant mind and indefatigable drive to succeed, he’d take the business world by storm in whatever field he chose to pursue. Such a man didn’t need Castiel.
Unless he’s trying to use me, too.

...fuck it...

Castiel’s head hit the desk with a thunk. It didn’t fucking matter if Naomi knew that Castiel was exhausted and struggling. She’d engineered the situation with April, most likely to push Castiel into being an active contestant for her inheritance instead of passively allowing himself to be pushed and pulled at the whims of other family members. Let her see the effect her arbitrary matchmaking had on him.

The phone rang.

Castiel ignored it.

His computer speakers’ pinged to let him know he had a new e-mail, then pinged three more times in quick succession.

Castiel ignored it.

His cell phone rang.

Castiel ignored it.

Unless NYSE had imploded there was nothing so urgent happening that Castiel couldn’t take 30 fucking seconds to himself for once in his damn life.

There was a knock on his door.

Castiel ignored it.

There was a second knock on his door, considerably louder than the first.

“I’m busy,” Castiel shouted.

“Good! I can help!” called Gabriel’s muffled voice through the door.

Bullshit, Castiel longed to answer. Gabriel’s help was no help. Gabriel had encouraged Castiel’s hobbies. Having interests outside of finance had never gotten Castiel anything but trouble. Gabriel had shared his porn with Castiel, bought him sex toys, encouraged him through puberty. Sexual deviancy had never gotten Castiel anything but trouble. Gabriel had given Castiel the merest taste of what familial affection looked like. Expecting anyone else in the family to give the least damn about him had never gotten Castiel anything but trouble. Every time Gabriel tried to help in his own pathetic, inadequate way, Castiel’s life became that much more onerous.

Gabriel had suggested that Castiel return to Dean.

God, Castiel missed Dean so much he could almost smell Dean’s unique mélange of fresh cut grass, summer-baked dirt and sweetened lemonade. Castiel assiduously cleaned himself after their encounters so as not to betray his liaisons, but perhaps he should have a keepsake, something small, something personal, something coated in Dean’s scent, something that Castiel could reach for when he felt awful, something with which to reassure himself that their connection wasn’t the product of Castiel’s strained imagination.

No. Dean’s scent would be a crutch, a vulnerability to be exploited should Castiel’s interest and investment ever be discovered.
Stop pretending Naomi doesn’t already know, that April doesn’t already know.

Castiel had to be strong enough to stand on his own.

“Comin’ in,” Gabriel announced cheerfully.

Castiel lifted his head, “Gabriel, go a—”

The door opened with a creak and a click.

The smell of summer intensified.

Gabriel walked in.

Dean stood behind him.

Castiel’s mouth fell opened. Gabriel approached, grinning, oblivious to Castiel’s amazement, equally oblivious to Dean freezing in the doorway, rigid with shock, nostrils flaring as he scented the air.

The front of Dean’s pants shifted.

Castiel tried and failed not to stare. His underwear felt uncomfortably tight.

“Congratulations, Cassie, you’ve won your very own, brand-spanking new – no actual spanking, please! – intern, D—”

“Dean…”

“—Winchester.” Gabriel frowned. “What did you say?”

“No…no, nothing. I saw your text about the internship. Is this…” Castiel knew he sounded off – breathless, stammering, unable to keep his eyes off the vision of Dean before him, unable to control his pulse. Gabriel’s frown deepened, he sniffed, sniffed, sniffed, and his eyes narrowed. Slowly, he turned from Castiel to Dean. Castiel had never seen the alpha look more like a scared boy; Dean’s shoulders were hunched in his over-sized, off-the-rack suit, his tie belled in front, too wide and knotted too low, and one of his pants’ cuffs had come unfolded, covering the black sneakers that he was trying to pass off as dress shoes. Seeing Dean’s distress brought Castiel instant clarity. For all that Dean was his top, his sexual partner, his fuck buddy – his boyfriend – Dean was 21 years old, a student, an alpha new to adulthood yet responsible for a younger brother. At Cajun Delights, Dean was in charge, but at the IADB building, Castiel was the boss and he had to act like one.

“Mr. Winchester is the intern you mentioned to me?” Castiel asked flatly, schooling his face to an emotionless mask. Naomi was still watching. They could betray nothing.

“Yeah…yeah, he…” Gabriel shook his head, shook his frown off, but the smile he plastered on was as fake as Castiel’s neutral expression, a show for the cameras that couldn’t detect and transmit scent or sound but picked up every twitch.

Oh God, will they notice the bulge in Dean’s—

—no, no, focus, Castiel!

“Dean, this is my brother, Castiel Novak-Shurley,” said Gabriel, gesturing Dean forward. Castiel rose, straightened his suit, held out a hand, met Dean’s eyes, saw him mouth Novak incredulous, then Dean’s indecision melted away, his gaze firmed with confidence, and he strode across the office and took Castiel’s hand forcefully.
“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Novak-Shurley,” Dean said politely. Hawk-eyed, Gabriel watched every move they each made. “Mr…uh…Mr. Gabriel tells me that I can learn a lot from you.”

“Did he really say that?” asked Castiel, raising a skeptical eyebrow at his brother. Gabriel’s expression faded into a sheepish smile, and Castiel dared hope he’d dispersed Gabriel’s suspicions.

“Not word for word,” Dean conceded with a shrug. “But I understand how lucky I am to have this opportunity; International Angel Deposit Bank is the finest investment firm in the country. I want to learn from the best.” There was something steady and unreadable in Dean’s gaze. Castiel swallowed and realized he was still shaking Dean’s hand. So much for me behaving like the adult of the two of us. Castiel dropped Dean’s grasp and wiped his sweaty palm on his slacks, chanceing a glance at Gabriel. Gabriel smiled but his eyes flicked up and to the side, in the direction of the camera mounted in the corner of the room, and Castiel nodded.

“Well, then…yes,” Castiel said, gathering his thoughts. “I’ve not had a chance to eat yet. Gabriel, what do you say you and I take our young protégé out for a ‘getting to know you’ lunch?”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea…” Gabriel’s nod was too brisk, the narrowing of his eyes too shrewd. Castiel thought he’d hidden his lapse but no – Gabriel hadn’t been fooled, not for a moment.

“But—” Dean protested. Both brothers turned steely gazes on him and he swallowed. “But I was hoping to have a chance to speak with Mr. Novak…Mr. Novak-Shurley…alone…get to know my new boss…mano-a-mano?” Dean shot Castiel an imploring look, but Castiel hadn’t a clue what Dean was begging for and nothing was more important than escaping from the watchful, controlling eyes that surveilled Castiel’s office. There were things Gabriel needed to know, things Dean needed to know, and there was no way to talk about them while trapped.

But I’m always trapped.

“Cassie is right.” Gabriel put his hand to his stomach. “You hear that?”

“No, I—”

“My stomach is growling so loud,” Gabriel lied. “Come on, time to go!”

“But—”

“Now, Mr. Winchester,” Castiel cut in harshly. Dean’s eyes went wide, his mouth snapped shut again, and he nodded.

“Of course. I’m sorry, Mr. Novak-Shurley. Whatever you prefer.”

“So.”

“So.”

“Oh, they have cheesecake!”

“Gabriel, we’re not actually here for lunch,” Castiel said with fond exasperation.

“Who said anything about lunch? Dessert!” Gabriel winked.

“Why are we here?” asked Dean hesitantly. Castiel and Gabriel turned to him, and he wilted under their combined attention. “Sorry. Fuck it. Forget I said anything. Especially the swearword. Christ, I’m bad at this.”
“You’re not, Dean,” Castiel said, shaking his head. “This is…an unexpected situation. None of us could have planned for it.”

Grimacing, Gabriel caught a passing waitress’ attention, communicated with a gesture that he wanted the cheesecake, and then said, “Right, so, what is the situation?”

Dean colored and looked away.

“Dean is the sex worker I told you about,” Castiel explained. He hadn’t asked if Dean minded being outed but judging by the utter lack of surprise on Gabriel’s face at this announcement, he’d already sussed the truth out, and beating around the bush was counterproductive.

“That wasn’t on your resume,” said Gabriel, turning a frown on an astonished Dean. “So lemme get this straight – you’re a full time student, you just finished an internship at Goldman Sachs, you’ve got an off-hour job at a grocery store, and you’re a sex worker at night?”

“Not exactly,” muttered Dean, side-eyeing the people around them. The café was bustling with the business power lunch crowd, tightly packed tables crowded with laptops and tablets and posh leather portfolios. No one appeared to pay them any mind; even if someone were listening, they’d not have been able to hear over the cacophony. Castiel, Gabriel and Dean had a small table in the corner. It was nearly too small accommodate three grown men, but the location ensured they could have a private conversation despite their chaotic surroundings.

“Sam – my brother? – he has the grocery store job,” Dean explained when neither Gabriel nor Castiel’s expectant gazes turned from him. “And I’ve got a job at Crowley’s on the weekends.”

“Oh, my bad, so you’re a full time student – five classes?” Gabriel waited until Dean nodded to continue. “Five classes, this internship – which is slated at twenty hours a week and which you said would be no problem – sex work, and stripping?”

“Uh huh.” Dean was making an impressive attempt to sink through the wall behind him, slumped into his shapeless suit, eyes fixed on the scratched and nicked surface of the table.

“Man, do I pick ‘um!” laughed Gabriel. “Cassie, we have ourselves a winner. Dude, when do you sleep? Like, IADB thrives on workaholics – the whole fucking investment industry thrives on workaholics – but you take the cake.”

“’m not a workaholic,” mumbled Dean. “I just got…like…there’s shit I want out of…stuff I want out of life, and the only way to get that pie in the sky is to work for it, so I work for it. My baby bro deserves my best effort, ya know?”

“Shoulda gotten pie instead of cheesecake,” Gabriel sighed. “But yeah, I do know.” Gabriel shot Castiel a surprisingly affectionate look. Dean raised his eyes without lifting his head, glanced at Gabriel, and smiled. “Alright, so all that awkwardness and scenting and shit back at the office was because you two bumped uglies like four months ago?”

“Something like that,” said Dean.

“What, didya fire him, Cassie?”

“Something like that,” Castiel echoed with a sigh. “I stopped paying Dean for sexual relations not long after you and I discussed the matter.”

“I sense a huge ‘but’ coming after this…”
“Cas does have a mighty fine butt…” Dean murmured hesitantly, shooting them both looks to see how they reacted. Castiel colored and looked away.

Gabriel assumed an expression of mock effrontery. “TMI!”

“…but we’ve continued to have a relationship,” continued Castiel. “I think Dean’s preferred expression is ‘fuck buddies.’”

*He looks so uncomfortable every time I say ‘boyfriend’…better not to…*

“With the air quotes! *Again!* We’ve talked about this. Continually. Since you were *eleven.*”

“I do it because I know it…riles you.”

“So you like to see me riled? Have you talked to your ‘fuck buddy’ about your incest kink?”

“Please, for your edification, picture Michael and Luke naked. Together.”

“I hate you so much, Cassie.”


“Our eldest brothers,” Castiel explained. “They’re…challenging, at times.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” asked Dean. At least he no longer looked cowed.

“It means our older brothers are huge douche kazoos,” said Gabriel. “Epic cock weasels. Alphas with a capital ‘phathaaaaw.’” He stuck his tongue out in mock disgust.

“I don’t think that’s a letter…”

“Unbelievable ass munching kissy faced mama’s boys,” Gabriel concluded. The waitress appeared from the throngs and set his cake down. “Aw shit that looks *amazeballs* thank you!!”

“Mama’s boys…” Dean looked an unknown question at Castiel. “Your mother is Naomi Novak,” he muttered as if to himself, as if he’d just put that together. “Your *mother* is Naomi fucking Novak.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” said Castiel with a sigh.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” spluttered Dean. “She’s one of the richest women in the *world.* She was *Time Magazine’s Alpha of the Year three years in a row.* Warren Buffett calls her for financial advice. Her net worth is greater than the GDP of half the countries in the world.”

“Aw, Christ, a fanboy? *Really?* And I was starting to like you…” Gabriel rolled his eyes overdramatically. Dean looked at Gabriel helplessly and turned his questioning gaze on Castiel.

“Dean, why do you think we’re having this conversation in a public café?” asked Castiel.

“As far as I can tell, because your nutcase of an older brother likes the cheesecake.”

“Hey, don’t insult your new boss,” said Gabriel around a mouthful of food. A bead of strawberry compote dripped down his chin.

“Our mother is…” Castiel trailed off, fishing for the right word. Despite the condemnation of her that sometimes filled his thoughts, that occasionally spilled out when he talked to Gabriel, speaking ill of her felt wrong. Dean’s mention of her wealth and accolades only served to solidify how guilty, how
ungrateful, how privileged Castiel was. Naomi could be difficult but thanks to her his life had been easy, comfortable, and he shouldn’t complain about that when so many others were in need.

“…a Grade A certified Bitch with a capital oh yes I went there?” suggest Gabriel unhelpfully.

“You’re awfully catty today,” Castiel observed.

“As opposed to when?”

“Later, you’re going to tell me what Luke did to upset you this badly.”

“Inscribe that on your tombstone, Cassie – if you have to ask what annoying shit Lucifer does, I know my real brother Castiel is dead and some kinda doppelganger bullshit is sitting with us for lunch.”

“Um…”

“I’m sorry, Dean,” said Castiel. “Our mother is…difficult. Controlling. She has certain expectations and she can be…if those expectations are not met, she…” Castiel grimaced. Every way he thought of to explain Naomi’s behavior sounded petty. Nothing she did was so bad, objectively, not when compared to the manifold benefits of their life of luxury. Castiel would lay strong odds that millions of Americans – billions of people worldwide – probably Dean included – would trade what they had in a heartbeat for what Castiel had, even accepting the challenges of living under Naomi’s strict rules. He shook the thoughts off, caught Dean’s skeptical expression, and continued as if he’d not trailed off, “She has IADB security conduct 24 hour surveillance on our offices, hence the need to have this conversation here.”

“That makes sense,” said Dean, but his expression showed no sign he actually understood.

“When Cassie was 15, he wanted a project for over winter break.” Gabriel’s one-eighty from clowning around to dead serious gave Castiel whiplash so badly that it took him a moment to realize what story Gabriel was about to share.

“Gabriel, no!” Castiel’s stomach flipped and churned; the room smelled like food, the cheesecake was mostly eaten and reeked of sugar and strawberry, and Castiel felt vomit and panic rising.

“Sorry, bro, but I know you’ll never tell him, and as your…whatever the fuck you two are to each other – he needs to understand,” said Gabriel.

“If Cas doesn’t want me to know, then don’t tell me,” Dean said, as firm and authoritative as anything he’d said all day.

_There’s the alpha I know and lo—_

Castiel cut the thought off.

“Tell him,” Castiel croaked.

“Cas…”

“Cassie…”

“It’s fine. Tell him. You’re right, I never will, and I don’t know how else to…about Naomi…I want him to understand, and I can’t…” Castiel swallowed bile. “Excuse me, I have to go.”

Rising so abruptly that he knocked the table, causing their complimentary glasses of water to jostle
and tinkle and slosh water onto the linoleum, Castiel bolted through the crowd toward the bathrooms at the back, indifferent to who he bumped in his haste. Usually, Castiel found the café large and pleasant, but it was so jammed that Castiel couldn’t breathe. Four individual unisex bathrooms lined the back hallway. The first two were in use, people calling out apologies when Castiel jiggled the knobs, but the third was vacant and Castiel stumbled in, kicked the door shut behind him, and pressed the button lock. Castiel had never been so grateful for the privacy in his life; he fell to his knees before the toilet, retching up burning yellow and the digested remains of his breakfast.

Boarding school had been an unpleasant chapter of his life. Castiel was continually singled out: by those who looked up to him because of his family, by those who looked down on him because of his family, by those who wanted to cozy up to him because he was rich, he was an alpha, he was popular – as if the strangers who constantly forced themselves on his attention had anything to do with popularity – and Castiel always, always felt alone in a crowd. He hated his school, but a proper alpha from a proper family needed the most proper of educations. By Naomi’s standards, that meant New England, school uniforms, river stone buildings adorned with ivy emanating an air of age and augustness though they could scarce be older than a century, and fawning, shallow people gossiping, networking and pretending to study with other fawning, shallow people. Before Gabriel graduated it hadn’t be so bad, but Gabriel finished and left for college when Castiel was a sophomore, and then he was alone, entirely alone.

Castiel’s stomach heaved and he threw up again.

When he could steal time to himself, he planned for winter break. He would rehabilitate the greenhouse. He would make it beautiful again, make it live again, and then over the summer he’d do a botany project for AP science. He’d already spoken to the teacher about an independent study. He’d get school credit, and if his results were good, he could use the data for an Intel Science Project. Surely, Naomi couldn’t object to that – wouldn’t it reflect well on the family if Castiel was a businessman who was also a skilled researcher? – wasn’t any accolade a good accolade? – and Castiel had a stack of books from the school library to write the literature review for his project and a ream of plans drawn in a notebook.

Naomi didn’t approve.

Naomi had Eve burn his notebook, burn the school books, and sent a sizable donation to the school so that they wouldn’t object to the destruction of their property.

Naomi had the gardener dig up every one of the sprouted seedlings Castiel had planted by hand, tossed them in a pile to compost, and encouraged Michael’s dog urinate on the ground.

Naomi had Luke ransack Castiel’s room. He pulled down every book about nature, every book about plants, every book that even mentioned plants, and tore them apart before Castiel’s eyes, letting the remnants of the pages cover the floor like ash.

Naomi had Gabriel locked in the basement after he tried to help Castiel.

Naomi had Castiel confined to his bedroom for the duration of the vacation, the walls bare of adornment, his personal belongings stripped, the bed lumpy, the only food bread three times a day, the only liquid water, the only distraction books on finance and his maudlin thoughts.

“You’ve been spoiled by the plenty that surrounds us,” Naomi explained. “I’ve erred in your upbringing, and I will rectify it. You will learn humility, Castiel Emmanuel James Novak-Shurley.”

Naomi gave the greenhouse – which Castiel had already spent a week restoring, replacing broken panes of glass, pouring concrete, building benches to hold plants – to Luke and forbade Castiel from
working on it, forbade Castiel from laying his hands on a hammer or nails again.

*Construction, growing things, manual labor? Such tasks are jobs for the help, not a suitable hobby for a Novak boy, an alpha, a child of your breeding and stature. Your achievements outside of finance are irrelevant, Castiel. It is unfathomable to me that you can claim to understand my expectations and yet continually disappoint them. As you seem unable to quit this frivolity on your own, I am forced to interfere. I will see you properly trained.*

*Stop crying.*

*Alphas don’t cry.*

*Novaks don’t cry.*

*You will apply yourself to appropriate studies and at the end of vacation there will be an exam. You will not like what happens should you fail my test. You have sorely disappointed me. I will not let it happen again.*

Castiel coughed and choked on acid, his throat sore and burning, his face streamed with tears.

He was overreacting.

He was being weak, ridiculous, pathetic. He wasn’t living up to Naomi’s expectations, he wasn’t behaving like an alpha or a Novak or an adult.

Shame clenched Castiel’s chest tight. *Why* had Gabriel brought up the greenhouse? Why couldn’t Gabriel have continued to play the fool, continued to put Dean at ease? Hadn’t there been *any other story* that Gabriel could use to demonstrate the strictness of Naomi’s parenting approach? If Castiel had the least warning that such a topic would come up, he could have prepared himself, could have replied as impassively as he ought. Naomi had proven that Castiel’s interests were *irrelevant*, that a greenhouse and plants and even an Intel project did not matter, and that the people who thought they did matter were fools.

*Underneath Castiel’s veneer of proper comportment, he was still a fool. The greenhouse still mattered to him. He still regretted the interests he’d given up, the pursuits he’d been forced to forsake. His skin was a prison. His appearance was a lie. Everything that Castiel projected about himself had been imposed on him. He had no idea who he was, who he might have been if Naomi hadn’t hammered at him until he took on the shape she demanded. He might have been a scientist, a scholar, a recluse, a social butterfly, he might have had many friends or been contentedly alone, he might have been…might have been…*

*I might have been an omega…*

*No. Never that.*

*Biology dictated that Castiel was an alpha. That he wasn’t comfortable with that about himself, that he wanted to be knotted, wanted to be a bottom, was because he was damaged so thoroughly that even Naomi hadn’t been able to fix him. He should be quashing his urges, destroying his desires, preparing himself to wed and breed with April instead of wasting time with Dean.*

He didn’t want to stop seeing Dean.

*He never wanted to see April again.*

*When had what Castiel wanted ever mattered?*
A sharp rap on the door cut through Castiel’s spiraling thoughts.

“Occupied,” he said harshly.

“Cas?” Dean’s voice was clear and somehow completely terrifying. With a gasp, Castiel scrambled back from the toilet bowl, heart racing. “You okay in there?”

Deep breaths. There was nothing to be afraid of. Keep calm.

It’s not Naomi.

It’s just Dean.

Self-control returned quickly. He had to be functional, had to appear unaffected, so he flattened his mouth into a neutral line, deadened his thoughts, forced himself to seem unruffled. If his legs shook under him as he rose and crossed the tiled bathroom floor, at least his trousers concealed his quavering. Dean would never know.

Castiel opened the door.

Dean stood on the other side, hand poised to knock again. A look of concern faded to one of confusion and then annoyance as he took in Castiel’s appearance.

“Thank you, Dean, I’m fine.” Castiel’s voice was raspy from the damage the bile had done to his throat but otherwise steady. He brushed by Dean, sticking his hands in his pockets to hide their trembling and let the cacophony of the dining room wash over him, catch him in the undertow, and drown him.

Let Castiel drown. He’s a whiny bitchy anyway, not the man that C.E.J. Novak-Shurley should aspire to be.

“Gabe said you’d do that,” Dean said. Castiel froze, but didn’t turn, didn’t answer. “That you’d shrug this off as if it was nothing.” Castiel wanted this exchange to be over, this bout of undesirable remembrance to be over, this day to be over, this life to be over. He was more stable than this. He’d learned to be more stable than this, had to be more stable than this, to meet Naomi’s expectations. “You’re about this close to a full-blown panic attack, aren’t you? Or has that bird flown, and you’re on the tail end of one?” Once, Castiel had been young and foolish, hadn’t understood the lengths that Naomi would go to in order to secure what she wanted from him. “I’ve seen the symptoms before. Sam gets them occasionally.” Now Castiel knew better. “We had a pretty shit childhood too, in some ways.” That’s why Castiel wouldn’t test Naomi on working at IADB, why he wouldn’t test Naomi on April. He knew exactly what Naomi was capable of. The price of pushing her limits was far too high.

“Gabriel has given you an inflated idea of the so-called hardships of our childhood in the lap of luxury,” said Castiel flatly. “Comparing whatever trauma you’ve been through to our mother’s idea of appropriate punishment is like comparing...” Castiel trailed off, unable to think of any comparison ludicrous enough to meet his needs. Apples and oranges couldn’t begin to cut it.

Like comparing my life, making six figures a year plus bonuses for a job given to me by my parents, silver spoon shoved so far up my ass that I scarce realize all the ways I’m privileged, to Dean’s life, turning tricks to make ends meet, twenty years old and supporting a younger sibling, having to act as a parent when he’s still a child himself.

Do I really see Dean as a child? Do I really think that’s an accurate description of his life?
“I get it,” said Dean, something unpleasant in his voice that Castiel couldn’t identify. “You got all these assumptions about how terrible my life is – musta been, right, for me to turn to prostitution – and meanwhile your bitch of a ma abused you and taught you to be grateful for the honor.”

“That’s not...” Castiel shook his head. Dean was right, as right as if he’d read Castiel’s mind. When Castiel was honest with himself he knew that how Naomi had treated him was manipulative. Abusive was a harsh term for Naomi’s parenting approach... she deprived me, pushed me, pulled me, destroyed anything I cared about that she hadn’t pre-approved, turned my brothers and I against each other, demonstrated that the only difference between identical behaviors being appropriate or inappropriate was her say so... but perhaps justifiable.

“I’m sorry I lied to you about my identity – a lie of omission, yes, but a lie nonetheless,” Castiel pushed the words out, inflection flat, expression dull. His eyes felt gritty, tears drying around the rims, but he didn’t bother wiping his face. It was too late now. Dean knew the truth. “There were numerous times the past few months when I could have told you, but I was afraid, which – all things considered – is truly pathetic.”

“It’s cool, Cas, I—”

“Excuse me, are you waiting for this stall?” asked a young woman with a large, bright flowered headband that matched the floral print on her dress. Her presence finally forced Castiel to turn, to meet Dean’s eyes, and Castiel didn’t know how to interpret the expression on Dean’s face, neutral and distant, any more than he knew how to interpret the tone of Dean’s voice.

“Have at,” said Dean with a resigned sigh. She bobbed her head and smiled gratefully, ducking past them in the narrow hallway and into the bathroom that Castiel had vacated. For a terrifying moment he thought he’d forgotten to flush, and his thoughts started to spiral again. “Look, this is a shit place to have a serious conversation, but I mean it. It’s fine. It’s all good. We’re all good.”

“Deception is a terrible foundation on which to build a relationship,” Castiel objected.

“That implies I was deceived,” Dean replied mildly. Castiel’s mouth fell open. Dean stared at him impassively, one eyebrow raised in an unknown challenge. “I knew, dude. I’ve known since, like, the third time we hooked up. I mean... okay, I didn’t think through the ramifications, your mom is fuckin’ Naomi Novak... but the gist? I knew you were a Novak. Meg – remember Meg? Raleigh’s self-appointed newbie greeter? – she’s fricken addicted to the gossip rags and she went nuts when you and that girl of yours started dating or whatever the fuck it is you’re doing. How do you not know that you’ve made the cover of National Enquirer like six times?”

Castiel shook his head. Such common publications were beneath the notice of the distinguished Novak-Shurleys. Castiel could imagine how Naomi would react if anyone in the family were to read such a thing; once, Anna had brought home an issue of Teen Vogue, and, well, once, Anna had brought home an issue of Teen Vogue.

“It was a damn good shot,” Dean continued, mimicking Castiel’s steadiness. “You two look good together. Bet she’s a tiger in bed, she’s got that glint in her eye.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Castiel said. His voice sounded hollow.

*If Dean knew, why didn’t he say anything? Why did he act surprised to meet me today? Why did he apply at IADB? None of this makes any sense. It’s like I feared. Dean has an angle. Dean is using me, too. He planned this out. But that doesn’t make sense either. If worming his way into IADB to further his career was part of his plan, why tell me now? Why not keep his secret and play on my influence and gullibility to further himself?*
Castiel felt hollow.

*Maybe if I lose enough of myself this shell will collapse, become all I am, and I’ll stop caring.*

*That’d be nice.*

“You’re not sleeping with her?” Dean’s eyes went wide as saucers, as if it had never crossed his mind that Castiel wasn’t. *And to make the day even better, now I learn just what Dean thinks of me. Fantastic. Philandering, unfaithful, and—* “Why not? She’s hot and she’s all over you!”

“Huh?” asked Castiel stupidly.

“Don’t hold yourself back on my account…”

The woman finished in the bathroom and gave them an apologetic smile as she dodged around them. When Castiel’s gaze returned to Dean, he was shaking his head.

“Even when we resolve to do better at this communication stuff, we’re still shit at it,” said Dean, humor tinging his voice. “You’re confused as fuck, aren’t you.”

“Yes,” Castiel confirmed. “You make no sense.”

“Okay…let’s take a rain check on working this out,” Dean said. “Long story short – I knew who you were. I hoped you’d share, tried to drop some hints that it’d be cool, shoulda known hints go about a mile over your head. You didn’t speak up. Fine. No worries. It’s your life, man. I always knew someone like you wouldn’t want something long term with someone like me. My only surprise was I figured they’d shove me in the mailroom for this internship, not line me up with one of the bigwigs. Truly never occurred to me we’d cross paths. My bad. Your brother’s gonna think we fell in the toilet, so let’s get back to the table and get back to work. I got class in like an hour.”

*He never was serious about me, despite the things we’ve talked about, the love we’ve made, the aspirations we’ve shared. He’s making as many assumptions about me as I am about him. He knew who I was and he never said anything.*

“We need to talk about this.”

*I should end this. There’s no future in it.*

The thought of not seeing Dean, not being in a relationship with Dean, made Castiel feel physically ill.

*No, that’s the lingering nausea from my episode in the bathroom, and the scent bond responding to the potential of a break up. Everyone with a scent bond grows ill when they end the relationship. Everyone survives split sickness. My suffering is nothing special, nothing new, and unremarkable. Even calling it suffering is taking it too seriously.*

Dean pulled out his cell phone, put a hand to his temples, and rubbed, eyes blinking slowly. For the first time, Castiel noticed that they were bloodshot, rimmed red, sunken with fatigue.

*He’d be better off without me. And without him, I’d…*

“Tomorrow at 6 work for you?” Dean suggested.

*…I’d be who I’m supposed to be, who I will inevitably end up being regardless, because Naomi insists.*
“I’ll see you then.”

*Tomorrow at 6, I will end this.*

*If I can...*
Dean (5:58 PM): Krav maga ah pa I said 6 didn’t I I’m not gonna be able to make it.

Dean (5:58 PM): fucking autocorrect wtf even is that alphabet soup that should say craaaaaaaaaaap give or take an a

Castiel (6:00 PM): It’s fine Dean. I understand how busy you are. I think we’ve adequately canvassed the subject previously.

Rubbing at his temples, Castiel set the phone down. He was still at the office. The past 24 hours had been a nightmare of internal debate. The resolution that had seemed so practical, so necessary, the previous day, now seemed like an overreaction. If he and Dean were only fuck buddies, then Dean had no call to know about Castiel’s family. If he and Dean were boyfriends, then maybe Dean should know more about Castiel’s private life, but despite the use of the term “boyfriend” at Castiel’s insistence, they weren’t really boyfriends. They didn’t go on dates, didn’t have deep heart-to-heart conversations. The contrast between Castiel’s relationship with Dean and his relationship with April couldn’t be more stark. He and April went for romantic candlelit dinners, visited the ballet, played footsie under the table. Castiel hated doing those things with April. Castiel hated April. But if he and Dean engaged in similar behaviors, Castiel thought they’d be pleasant.

Sometimes, watching April, he’d project Dean in her place…Dean with flames refracting in his eyes, Dean holding Castiel’s hand, Dean in a fine-tailored suit with his hair styled…Castiel had seen zero evidence that Dean had any interest in a relationship of that nature. Dean never made the least effort to dress up to impress Castiel, never planned outings for them, never called Castiel by pet names or flirted with him. The behavior that was nauseating from April would have been endearing from Dean, if he and Dean were actually dating.

Aren’t those behaviors the hallmarks of a real relationship? If Dean wanted to be more than physically intimate with me wouldn’t he want to do those things? He says he enjoys spending time with me but all we do together is grab quick meals or have sex. My time with April is more like a romance movie, and as he’s reminded me…he’s no Julia Roberts. This isn’t a movie, and he’s not interested. If he were, he’d have initiated further intimacy.

I can’t lay the blame for this at his door. I could plan a date. I could invite him out.

No. I mean, yes, I could, but I shouldn’t. He and I shouldn’t have a real relationship. There’s no future between us. I’m not supposed to improve our relationship, I’m supposed to end it!

Dean (6:05 PM): Ugh ty I know I suck and not even in the fun way seriously gotta give you a bj sometime

Dean (6:05 PM): And if you really don’t want to talk about it you don’t have to obvs.

Castiel (6:06 PM): It’s fine Dean.

It’s not fine.

Nothing is fine.

I want…

Castiel (6:07 PM): When will I see you again?
There was no answer, and Castiel set the phone aside and forced Dean and April and dating and romance from his mind. Such things should be beneath his notice. He should be working. If Naomi knew how he’d been obsessing…

As April said, her and my courtship is a formality, and Dean and I have no courtship, can never have any courtship.

No matter what appellation Dean and I attach to our relationship, we are ‘fuck buddies,’ no more. Never more. And once I marry April, we won’t even be that. I may loathe her and she may have encouraged infidelity but…I don’t think I could do that, not even to her. She can do as she will but I will be faithful – even if “faithful” in this case amounts to celibacy. Aside from producing an heir I hope to never touch her, and I can’t imagine her forcing the issue…the only thing about me she actually cares for is my wealth, and how greatly it might be increased through inheritance.

Setting his fingers on the keyboard, Castiel returned to analyzing stock futures.

Full dark fell before his phone pinged again, mid-winter wind dashing against the glass of the IADB building, panes jointed so closely that no draft penetrated his office.

Dean (8:03 PM): heck if I know busy as fuck midterms I’ll get back to you.

If Dean and he stopped seeing each other regularly outside of Dean’s internship, wasn’t that a de facto break up? Even if Castiel kept silent, didn’t announce his intentions of cutting off relations between them, their trysts would end. Dean wasn’t particularly attached to him, Castiel was a workaholic – they were both workaholics – and their meetings could be allowed to grow less and less frequent until they just…stopped.

And I’d get to see him again, at least a few times…

Coward.

But it’s easier this way. I don’t want to hurt him.

If he doesn’t care for me, how will breaking up with him hurt him?

I don’t want to hurt me.

There. At least that’s honest. This isn’t about Dean’s feelings, or April’s or Naomi’s or Gabriel’s or anyone’s. This is about my selfish desires and my myriad weaknesses.

But I guess I’m going to be weak a little longer.

I’m pathetic. Naomi’s discipline should have been harsher. She tried to train me into the kind of person she is – decisive, deliberate, self-controlled – and instead I’m…wishy washy. Frightened. Timid.

Let it go.

Focus on the work.

The rest will be what it will be.

“Wow, your twinky alpha is a hottie.”

Gabriel sidled into Castiel’s apartment. Of course he had a key. There were several spares in the
main house, so that Eve could get in, so that Naomi could get in, and apparently so that April could get in and scent mark his things and maybe engage in trysts with Luke. No one else respected Castiel’s meager façade of privacy, so why should Gabriel? At least Castiel liked his brother. Gabriel’s intrusion didn’t feel like an invasion so much as…

…no. It still felt like an invasion.

There were more objections to Gabriel’s description of Dean than Castiel could iterate without sounding a fool, so he settled for glaring at his brother and holding up the two ties he was considering wearing for the evening.

*He’s not wrong…Dean is hot, and sweet, and companionable, and I have to stop using those features as excuses, stop treating them as the reasons I haven’t ended things with him yet. Time passes, and I do nothing and delude myself that it’s somehow for Dean’s sake when it’s pure selfishness and—*

“Ugh, neither,” said Gabriel, rolling his eyes. “Don’t you have anything pastel? No more of this gunmetal steel nonsense. It makes you look like a cod. I swear you wear suits like armor around the bitch.”

“Cod are greenish-brown fish speckled with dark patches,” Castiel said, pulling out a blue tie that a past administrative assistant had assured him brought out his eyes. “Trout belly would be a more apt comparison. And I don’t believe I’ve changed how I dress around Naomi over the years, or rather, I didn’t until she replaced my wardrobe last fall.”

“Shit, you’re right,” Gabriel sighed and flopped onto Castiel’s sofa. The living room was modestly appointed; Castiel didn’t bother with interior decorating, as a well-furnished living room would imply that Castiel lived there. That it was his mailing address was a technicality; Castiel lived at the office. All he did in his apartment was shower and sleep. “I can’t call Naomi and April both ‘the bitch.’ How do you feel about using ‘whore’ for April instead?”

“The term ‘whore’ is denigrating to sex workers,” Castiel replied, “unless they’ve expressly indicated that they are comfortable being referred to in such terms. And it’s *always* denigrating to women and men who do not accept reasonable payment in return for the granting of pre-negotiated sexual favors.” He looped the tie around his neck and secured it with well-practiced movements. Castiel had worn a tie every day for as long as he could remember – since he’d first donned a school uniform for the first day of kindergarten.

*Armor is an apt comparison. This is my battle garb.*

“Awww, your ‘fuck buddy’ teach you that social justice warrior talk?” Gabriel cooed. “It’s adorbs. But I think you missed a chapter – that whole ‘women and men’ thing is totes a false dichotomy, google ‘genderfluid.’ More to the point, if April isn’t taking *highly unreasonable* payment in return for the beneficence of her sexual favors, what *is* she doing?”

“Perhaps I should ask over dinner whether she prefers the term ‘whore,’ ‘prostitute,’ ‘sex worker,’ or something else,” said Castiel thoughtfully. Gabriel roared with laughter. “She’s perpetually frustrated that I don’t make more effort to introduce topics of conversation.”

“That’s just ‘cause…” Gasping, Gabriel wiped tears from his eyes and tried again. “She’s just upset ‘cause when you don’t talk she can’t make *absolutely sure* that she’s saying what you want to hear. She can’t pretend she’s *always* agreed with you about every topic under the sun if she doesn’t know your opinion. You drive her crazy, you know.”
“The feeling’s mutual,” grumbled Castiel, loosening the knot on his tie. He had tied it correctly, but despite that it felt like a noose.

When I first started thinking of my existence as a life sentence I got it all wrong. I’m not in solitary confinement for the rest of my days. I’m a death row inmate, a sacrificial lamb to be slaughtered on the altar of Naomi’s ambitions. Why stop at being the sixth richest woman in the world when she can be first? I mean, right now she’s getting beaten by an old French woman with dementia, a Walmart heiress, and three women who inherited candy bar companies when their husbands died. 20 billion dollars isn’t enough for Naomi Novak, not when someone else has more.

At least I no longer have to listen to her complain about J.K. Rowling being worth more than her. Rowling is ‘only’ a writer, and an omega – how dare she be successful?

And yet Naomi is tolerating April.

I wonder if—

“Earth to Cassie,” said Gabriel, waving hand in front of his face. “What, thinking about that sexy-ass alpha of yours again? Oh – wait – my bad, you’re the sexy ass of the two of you, right?”

“Believe me, Gabriel, Dean couldn’t be farther from my thoughts right now.”

“Let’s fix that,” Gabriel said. “Tell me about him.”

“What’s there to tell?” asked Castiel, hoping the flatness of his tone would clue Gabriel in that he didn’t want to have this conversation. “Dean’s a sex worker. I hired him to knot me. We had a regular Friday night date for a few weeks, and then we had a talk and it turned out he enjoyed having sex with me enough that he would do it for free, and we decided to change the nature of our relationship. That’s it.”

That’s not it.

“What’s it?” Gabriel echoed skeptically. “Dude, I don’t know how you manage in this line of work. You’re a shit liar.”

“I would not lie about defecation, no, but I didn’t think that would be a topic of conversation that interested you,” Castiel deadpanned. “And I don’t lie to our investors, so my inability to prevaricate effectively is irrelevant.” Gabriel cracked a smile, but he also quirked an eyebrow and shook his head. His expression said that he knew that Castiel had understood him, that he recognized that Castiel’s pretend misinterpretation was a meager attempt at redirection.

“So…you think he offers his services free to all his clients?” said Gabriel, waving a hand as if he could with a gesture lead Castiel to share more. “No wonder he has to work two jobs, no money to be made by a whore – sex worker – who gives out freebies.”

“No, not for everyone,” Castiel acknowledged. “He’s a businessman, and a good one. From what he’s told me, he doesn’t date, and hasn’t sought sex outside the requirements of his profession since he started work as a sex worker.”

“So…why’s he done that for you?” Gabriel pushed. “Think he knew you were a Novak-Shurley, was hoping to cash in bigger than the cost of a few nights’ flings?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Castiel. Accepting that he wouldn’t escape this conversation any time soon – at least that means it’ll be that much longer before we head to the main house, that much longer before I have to see and scent April – Castiel slumped into the uncomfortable armchair facing
the sofa on which Gabriel sprawled. “Sometimes…sometimes I think he must be ‘after something’ but…I’m not his sugar daddy, even though we both know I could afford to be. I don’t buy him gifts, don’t pay for his lodging…I don’t even pay for meals when we go out together. I don’t even offer. It’s tacitly understood that we’ll split the bill every time. If he was after something, wouldn’t he want those things from me – expect them from me? Further, he knows I’m engaged to April.” He always knew I was engaged to April! “He knows there’s no future between us, no hope of marriage. So if he has ‘an angle—’”

“Air quotes!”

“—then what is that angle? He’s not looking to marry into my fortune, he’s shown no inclination toward blackmail, he’s asked me for nothing…he didn’t even tell me he’d applied for an internship anywhere, much less at IADB, even though now he tells me he’s known since almost the beginning who I was and must know that I’d have helped him acquiew a position with the firm if he’d made the request. Yet, if he knew, why did he say nothing? I don’t understand him.”

“Alright…” Gabriel leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, steepled his fingers beneath his chin, and stared Castiel down. “Radical suggestion. Hear me out. Cassie…Cas-my-lass…has it occurred to you…maybe…just possibly…he actually likes you?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Castiel, shaking his head.

“Of course it doesn’t. You’re detestable,” said Gabriel. “My mistake. Forget I said anything.”

“I wish I understood.” Castiel sighed and leaned back in his chair. The intensity of Gabriel’s gaze was too much; Castiel’s eyes slipped shut and his head drop onto the top lip of the seat back.

“Lemme guess – he actively avoids you until you decide you want a tryst and contact him? And then he begrudgingly concedes that he’d be willing to knot you, since you insist? Even though he can knot whoever he wants? And then you have sex and that’s that?” Gabriel’s tone made it clear he was intentionally parodying his perception of Castiel’s relationship. Castiel sighed again.

How much to say? How much to admit?

“You know that’s not the case.”

Dean always contacts me first. Dean carves room in his schedule to see me. Dean doesn’t always suggest sex, and he seems to enjoy spending time with me over a meal almost as much as he does knotting me. Dean thinks of me, and is concerned for me. Dean even came to check on me at the café the other day, with none to notice but me if he kept to himself.

Dean might actually care about me. That would explain the incongruities I’ve observed in his behavior.

But why should he, or anyone, care? I’m no one. How can anyone care about no one, unless they are seeking profit or see some benefit in befriending me? Personal advantage, ambition and self-gratification are the only reasons anyone save Gabriel has ever sought me as a companion. And if Dean cared, wouldn’t he act more…as if he cares?

He can’t care for me. It’s illogical.

“I know nothing, because you’ve told me nothing,” said Gabriel earnestly. “I didn’t even know you were seeing someone – I knew your Friday night date was caput, and I figured you’d accepted Naomi shackling you to the iron maiden and given up fighting the good fight. And then Dean shows up and I think I catch a whiff of you but I dismiss it ‘cause you’re just down the hall and I catch your
scent pretty often, and then I bring him to your office and I’m amazed I didn’t see fuckin’ sparks or something, you two have so much chemistry.

“That’s impossible,” Castiel replied. “We’re both alphas. Two alphas can’t be…”

*What is he suggesting we are? Whatever it is…alphas can’t…*

“What, can’t be mates? Can’t be scent compatible? Can’t be lovey-dovey rom-com staples? Why not?”

“Because Dean isn’t Julia Roberts, and I’m not Richard Gere,” said Castiel.

“You’ve seen Pretty Woman?” Gabriel scoffed.

“It’s something Dean said when I first hired him,” muttered Castiel.

“Okay – so, we’re going to fix that, and you’re going to see Pretty Woman, but when you watch it I want you to consider something very important.” Gabriel didn’t continue. Baffled by his continuing silence, Castiel looked up, and Gabriel grinned when their eyes met. “What if you’re Julia Roberts, and Dean is Richard Gere?”

“But that’s the role of an omega. And I’m not…

…and I’m not hard-up. I’m fine. My problems are entirely of my own devising.

“Imagine the previews,” Gabriel continued, holding his hands out, wiggling his fingers in imitation of the flashing lights of a movie marquis. “Castiel Novak is a shill for a bank, trapped in a life he didn’t choose. Young, daring, ambitious Dean Winchester meets him and shows him that there’s more to life than the dead-end job he’s been trapped in and—”

“Stop!” Castiel interrupted, voice harsher than he’d intended.

“But—”

“Stop pretending that Dean and I have a…a…a ‘thing,’” said Castiel. “I know – air quotes! – would you listen to me for a change? He and I don’t have a thing! We’re just…he’s just…” *He’s just the most important person in my life, aside from maybe Gabriel.* With a shudder, Castiel resisted the urge to collapse back into the chair, instead launching himself to his feet and heading for the door. “We have to go to dinner.”

“Cassie…”

“Now, Gabriel. I’m done talking about this.”

“You care about him, don’t you?”

Hand on the doorknob, Castiel turned, glanced back, and met Gabriel’s eyes. He couldn’t have said if Gabriel looked earnest or hopeful or sad, but meeting his brother’s gaze made Castiel’s chest ache.

*Care for Dean? God, yes. Too much. Far more than I should.*

*I’m nothing to him.*
And Dean should be nothing to me.

“Can we go now?” asked Castiel, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“As long as you know the answer,” said Gabriel heavily. Muffled footsteps on carpeting spoke to Gabriel coming up behind him. A hand fell on his shoulder, pulled him around, and Gabriel adjusted his tie.

“I know nothing,” Castiel confessed. “What Dean and I have is...nothing. Will be nothing.” Gabriel’s brow knit, eyes tilted with sadness, but mercifully he said nothing more. “Dinner. Now. Let’s go.”

“What, you hungry?” Gabriel made a weak attempt at sounding like he was telling a joke.

“Not even a little,” admitted Castiel, voice bleak, heart bleak, mind bleak, life bleak.

But what choice do I have but to pretend?

None. None at all.

“Castiel!” April’s sudden, loud entry into his office was so unexpected that Castiel jerked his head up, tweaking a muscle in his neck. The pain gave him an excuse for the groan forced out of him as she closed the door behind her.

“April,” said Castiel tightly. “What an unexpected surprise.”

“La, you’re such a hopeless romantic, Cassie!” she chirped, traipsing across the room, stopping to tower above him as he sat in his chair, and running a finger over his cheek. “‘Unexpected!’ Your lies are so much cuter when they’re obvious. I texted you, like, a million times!”

Grimacing, Castiel grabbed his phone from where he’d left it, face down beside his computer. April hadn’t texted him a million times; according to his welcome screen, she’d texted 96 times. Castiel had last checked his phone maybe three hours ago, and had cleared his inbox at that time.

A million is apt hyperbole for such effusions in such a short span. What could she possibly have had to say that prompted the deluge?

Answer: absolutely nothing I want to hear or read.

With a tinkling, affected laugh, she swept around his desk, deposited a bevy of crinkling paper shopping bags in the chair he kept for visitors, circled back to his side and threw herself in his lap.

“I’m sorry I’m late!” she gushed. “Did you miss me?” She smeared a kiss over his cheek and only an iron grip on the armrests of his chair kept Castiel from shoving her to the floor.

I’ll have to burn this suit. Her scent will never come out.

The bouquets of lilacs and roses and lilies that bedecked his office continually were reminder enough of the invisible band around Castiel’s finger and the invisible noose around his neck. April had thus far avoided him at work, and with Dean working his internship, visiting Castiel frequently, leaving the aroma of new-cut lawn around him so strongly that sometimes Castiel could imagine he’d taken his laptop to work in a field in the countryside outside Palmeton, Castiel had almost – almost – come to think of the IADB building as a sanctuary. His workspace was monitored but it was comfortable,
customized, and it smelled perpetually like his alpha.

No! Dean is not my alpha! Dean is not my anything! I—

A burst of green grass scent wafted beneath Castiel’s nose, clearing his senses, relieving the queasiness April’s scent inevitably brought.

Dean may not be my alpha, but I wish—

“I’ve got your faxes, mister…oh.” The door clattered as Dean strode into the room. Weeks into his internship, he was comfortable in the office, comfortable in Castiel’s space, and Castiel was comfortable seeing him there.

Too comfortable, I could get used to this. I was supposed to break up with him, to put a stop to this, and instead I did nothing. Because working with him brings me solace. Because seeing him is nice. Because he makes me happy. Because I miss him when he’s not around. God, I’m letting him in, and it’s terrible. I could get used to—

“Excuse us,” snapped April. Castiel went rigid in his chair as she twisted around to glare rancor at Dean. “We’re busy. Didn’t anyone teach you to knock before entering a private office?”

“Right, I’m…”

Castiel looked desperation toward Dean and Dean trailed off and met his gaze, mouth hanging open.

“You’re rude,” April bristled. “Castiel, I’m surprised at you, allowing a…a…what even are you? Allowing the mail boy to speak to you thus!”

“April, this is my intern, Dean Winchester,” Castiel explained. The tang of lemon, only occasionally a feature of Dean’s scent, burgeoned to turn the air of the room sour. April’s nose wrinkled with disgust. “Mr. Winchester, my fiancée, April Kelly.”

“Charmed.” April didn’t bother putting on airs, didn’t pretend to be polite. Castiel was surprised; they’d dined out often, been to the theater a half dozen times at least, interacted with waiters and concierges and valets by the score, and April was usually the epitome of proper, if flippant, behavior toward her social inferiors, always ready with a benevolently ample tip and a condescending smile for ‘the help.’

Why the aggression? What does she know – about Dean? About me? About us?

“I’m afraid I need to borrow my beaux,” April continued unapologetically. “Go pester Gabriel.” She ran a finger over the curve of Castiel’s face without sparing Castiel a glance, lay a possessive hand on his chest, and Castiel’s nerves intensified.

She already knew I was with an alpha. If Naomi investigated…if she shared the results of her investigation with April…Dean’s name wouldn’t be a surprise…sure, he goes by a pseudonym for his jobs but following him would reveal his real name quickly…God, why did I think it was a good idea to allow Dean to work with me? Why have I continued this farce of a relationship with him? I resolved to break things off and yet…


The lemon scent intensified. “Mr. Novak-Shurley has a deadline to meet,” said Dean bluntly, walking – stomping, really – across the room and slapping down a sheaf of papers on Castiel’s desk. “If you’ll—”
“Excuse me,” April interrupted with a disdainful sniff. “My plans take precedence. Snookywookums and I have a date.”

“April, I—”

“You work too hard,” she overrode Castiel easily, a warm smile curling her lips, her eyes narrowed with anger. “And we have plans.”

No – no we don’t – we didn’t, and I do have work to do – please, Dean – please save me.

Castiel stared supplication at Dean and received nothing but impassivity – indifference? – in return.

“Right then,” said Dean tightly. “Mr. Novak-Shurley, if that’s the case, I have an exam tomorrow. May I leave?”

Don’t go! Dean, why…?!

If he were my alpha, he’d stand up for me. If he were my alpha, he’d protect me. If he were my Richard Gere, he’d get April away from me.

It’s self-delusion to pretend anyone, even Dean, would save me.

Why should he bother, when I can’t be troubled to save myself?

“Yes – thank you, Mr. Winchester.” Castiel was amazed by how steady he sounded. “Your work has been exemplary today, as usual. I’ll see you Friday.”

“You betchoo will,” said Dean with a wink. There was something to his expression – a question? An offer? – but Castiel had been deceived by Dean’s arrival into thinking himself saved from April’s machinations and he refused to read too much into the indecipherable hints Dean threw his way.

Dean knows, as I do, that whatever he and I have is for now, not for always. Soon, April and I will be married, and she’ll not tolerate the competition. Either she knows who he is and is taking steps to mark her territory, or she…

…or she…

…why else would she be so nasty to Dean?

I don’t know.

It doesn’t matter. It’s not like I have any say over what’s going on around me, any control over the events unfolding, any way to prevent the inevitable.

Dean met Castiel’s eyes, expecting something, and when Castiel managed no reply, either vocal or facial, Dean huffed a sigh, turned, and left.

“Next time we’re putting a sock on the door!” exclaimed April.

If Dean cared, wouldn’t he fight for me?

“I can’t believe he’d just…barge in like that! This isn’t his college dorm! And that foolish plebe thinks he can be a banker?”

If Dean cared, wouldn’t he help me?
“Mrs. Novak should never have let Gabriel, of all your siblings, have such an important task as choosing acceptable interns. Such an influential job should have gone to someone responsible, someone trustworthy, like Luke.”

_No. Dean did as he ought. Dean did as his current role demands, and as I should have wanted him to do._

“Has he been any help to you at all? Perhaps we should relegate him to the mailroom. In that suit? He’s clearly more suited to such a…vaunted…position.”

The room reeked of lemon, overpowering the scent of grass, overpowering even the scent of lilac, the tang burning Castiel’s nose.

“Dean has done very well,” said Castiel hollowly. “Very well.”

_If I didn’t lose all sense around him, I’d never have gotten into this mess. I’d be content with what…who…Naomi selected for me…this is what is, what has to be, what will be._

_Maybe if I repeat that to myself enough times, I’ll believe it._

April sniffed her disdain and doubt. “Well, fine, if you say so – but I’ve got my eye on him. There’s something off about someone that young – alpha or not! – acting so…so…cock-sure. If you’ll forgive my language.”

_There’s no escape._

“One of course, April. I’ll forgive you anything.”

April’s responding laughter shattered through Castiel like his body was crystal, like his bones were thinnest ice.

_I’m not sure where I’m going but I have the feeling I’m almost there._

_Just a little bit longer and the struggle will be over._

_Deep will be gone._

_April and I will be married._

_And that will be that._

“Did you really see none of my texts?” she gushed. “Oh, Cassie, you really do work too hard. For tonight, I was thinking…”

Castiel let her description wash over him. As long as he smiled and nodded at the right moments and didn’t contradict her expectations, she’d be content.

Castiel had given up any hope of contentment a lifetime ago.

_GOODBYE, DEAN._

_GOODBYE, CASTIEL._

_It’s been nice knowing him…and nice knowing the person I am when I’m with him…but it’s too late. This is my life. I was weak when I should have been strong and didn’t end things when I should have. I stole an extra week and a half with him in my life, and that was nice, and it was far too_
much, and it will have to be enough.

I can’t let this go on. I have to be content with my oh-so-burdensome lot in this oh-so-terrible life that most people would kill for but that I can’t stop whining about.

I’m blowing my whole situation out of proportion. Probably because, in a lifetime of ease and comfort, I’ve never had anything real I’ve had to worry about, so instead I manufacture fake woes to bemoan.

Pathetic, Castiel. Stop bitching and moaning.

Everything will be fine.

Or everything will be terrible.

And that will be fine.

It’s not like Castiel had any choice.
Chapter 13

The click of a catch-lock seemed preternaturally loud in the executive bathroom. Private stalls ensured that, unlike the mere peons, the corporate heads of IADB didn’t need to whip their penises out and urinate in the open. Castiel lingered in the stall he’d selected, trying to convince himself to return to work, unable to make himself budge though he was long finished with his call of nature. His hands were washed, his pants zipped, his belt buckled, the flaps of his jacket adjusted. There were only a handful of offices on the 21st floor, so even if they’d not had private stalls the chance of intrusion was minimal. The click of the lock was isolated: he’d not heard anyone come on, not heard a footfall, not heard the door close.

*Naomi probably observed how long I’d been absent from my office and sent someone to check up on me.*

*But then why lock the door?*

Setting a hand on the knob of his stall, Castiel prepared to make a show of hastening out of the room and back to his office.

*It doesn’t matter. The catch doesn’t stop anyone from leaving, only prevents entry from the outside. Maybe it has nothing to do with me – Gabriel or someone seeking a little private time, locking the main door as well as their stall door to ensure they’re not interrupted, or—*

“‘Cas?’

A shiver ran down Castiel’s spine. God, Dean’s voice affected him powerfully. Castiel ascribed the effect to the dirty talk Dean growled in his ear when they were making love, when they were knotted.

*No matter what he says, I hear whispers of ‘bend over and take my knot you omega bitch.’ And I want that. Pathetic.*

Working with Dean was like riding an emotional pendulum between two extremes: either a dream come true or a nightmare.

“I’m here,” Castiel acknowledged.

Dean was hard working, intelligent, well-informed, eminently prepared for aiding Castiel in his investments. Castiel had started the third week of Dean’s internship by assigning Dean a dozen clients of his own. The e-mails still came from Castiel’s accounts, the texts from Castiel’s phone, but Dean decided how those clients’ money was invested, Dean made the trades, and so far Dean was doing great.

It was too early to say anything conclusive, but short-term forecast had Dean’s accounts on track to make better returns than Castiel’s.

Michael, unaware that Castiel had divided his work, had actually sent Castiel a *compliment* on his recent savvy and foresight.

*I don’t belong here. Dean does. Why was I born into this life, while he was born into…whatever he was born into?*

*He deserved this opportunity that I’ve taken for granted and rebelled against. I wish I could trade*
places with him.

Though if I did, that would make Naomi Dean’s mother. I’d not wish that on anyone, not my worst enemy...not April...

Right. Because I have so much to complain about.

“What’s up with you?” asked Dean. His voice reverberated off the pristine tiles and sent a tingle down Castiel’s spine. Feeling arousal when he was so maudlin was surreal, but a teasing thought suggested that Dean was likely willing – he was always interested in sex – and at least physical intimacy would divert Castiel’s thoughts.

But Dean had asked him a question.

“Have I been behaving unusually?” Castiel replied.

“Dunno,” said Dean. “Not like I know you well, and what passes for ‘normal’ between us is, ya know, not at all fricken normal, but you’ve been in the bathroom for twenty minutes.”

Oh.

Oops.

“You sick? I could let Gabe know – you gotta have a whole mess of PTO you can use, right? Go home early? Take it easy?”


To prove the point, Castiel stepped from his stall into the wide, gleaming, mirror-lined foyer. A lounge, lined with plush sofas, had six doors leading to the stalls, each fully enclosed and equipped with a urinal, toilet, sink and mirror. Two also had shower stalls and changing facilities, the better to ensure that executives at IADB need never leave the office. Dean stood at ease in the foyer, hands in the pockets of his jacket, shoulders back, comfortable at IADB now that he’d grown accustomed to his surroundings. That first day, Dean had been unprepared to start his internship immediately – had grabbed whatever he had on hand that would be minimally acceptable – but the next day he’d been dressed to the nines in a tailored suit and polished leather shoes. Aside from his youth, he’d neither have looked nor smelled out of place in any board room in the country, despite the mockery April heaped on him whenever she saw him. Everything about him was perfect, from his cufflinks to his tie to his styled hair to his cocky grin to his reek of alpha confidence and superiority. Dean was everything he ought to be, everything Castiel ought to be and had never figured out how to be.

Castiel had never wanted anyone more in his life. Desire settled like a stone in Castiel’s gut.

Arousal possessed Castiel and he didn’t bother to resist. Three wide strides brought him toe-to-toe with Dean and before Dean could turn his startled expression into startled words, Castiel grabbed Dean’s lapels and hauled their mouths together. He wasn’t sure if Dean opened his mouth to reciprocate or if Castiel had caught him about to speak, and he didn’t care. He slipped his tongue between Dean’s lips, sucked in Dean’s delicious flavor, and growled low in his throat, kissing and nipping at Dean aggressively.

“Woah,” Dean breathed between kisses. “Hey, Cas.”

“Hello, Dean.”
“You really wanna do this here?”

“I’m trapped in Naomi’s cage of an office building but that doesn’t mean I can’t spread my wings.”

“Isn’t that why you locked the door?” countered Castiel.

“Wanted to talk,” said Dean with a shrug. “Gabe saw me come in here and I didn’t want him to follow.”

Castiel huffed out a breath and dropped his forehead onto Dean’s shoulder. “If you don’t want to, I would never pressure you into doing something that you are uncomfortable with. I know that this is our place of employment, and how important it is to you that you make a positive impression with this internship.”

“Well, the only one I gotta impress is my boss, right?” There was something airy to Dean’s voice. Castiel lifted his head and caught a twinkle in Dean’s eye.

“Naomi’s your boss,” said Castiel.

“Indirectly,” Dean conceded. “But neither a’ you pay me, and you’re who I answer to, so… whaddaya want, boss man alpha?” Dean’s palms rubbed roughly down the fabric of Castiel’s suit, desperately close, tantalizingly far away with the layers of Castiel’s undershirt, dress shirt, and suit jacket separating them. One seeking hand grasped at Castiel’s crotch and rubbed his dick, teasing him to hardness, and the other trailed up Castiel’s front, gripped his neck, and pulled him in for another kiss.

“I don’t…I don’t know,” Castiel breathed against Dean’s lips.

“There’s gotta be something…” urged Dean, hand leaving Castiel’s neck, working down his back, as the other worked on unbuckling Castiel’s belt. With the skill of a professional, Dean had the garment undone promptly; his free hand slipped beneath the waistband of Castiel’s pants and kneaded at his ass. “Ya always want the same thing – and I don’t blame ya, your ass is so sweet ‘round my knot – but you sure you don’t want nothing else? You could have me on my knees, swallowing you down, or eating you out, or—”

“Just in me,” Castiel interrupted, pressing his butt back against Dean’s hand. “Sometime… sometime I’d like to try…I want you to knot my mouth—” An approving sound hitched in Dean’s throat. “—but right now, I want…I need…”

I need to be reminded that I have something of my own. I need to be reminded that I’m allowed to desire things outside that which I’m allowed. I need to not feel broken, not feel abandoned, not feel like my entire sexual future consists of attempting not to gag at the thought of April’s touch against my skin or her vagina around my cock.

I need to end this, end ‘us,’ but I can’t. If we have but one more time together…

…maybe, after this, I’ll be strong enough.

“Please, Dean.”

“This isn’t how I saw my boss-intern fantasies going,” Dean quipped. “Aren’t you supposed to give the orders, make me beg for it? Bend me over a desk…bribe me…”

The hand down Castiel’s pants left, wrapped around his shoulder and steered him toward one of the walls of the room. Tiles lined the wall to waist height, above which mirrors reflected the sofas, the
subtle browns and sparkling bronzes of the décor, and the flush of Castiel’s skin, made gold and crimson by the atmospheric lighting. Shame twinged in his gut to see his desire-slanke ned expression, the tent of his erection against his pants, but the lust he saw reflected on Dean’s face was delicious and irresistible. Dean didn’t stop until he had Castiel pressed against the glass, smears of sweat streaking beneath his face, his breath forming a mist on the chill surface.

*Maybe this is why April has a mirror over her bed...there is some appeal after all...*

A plea came to his lips but Dean interrupted him, nuzzling aside Castiel’s color, nipping at his collar bone beneath.

“Don’t worry, Cas – I got what you need. Lucky I always carry lube and rubbers in my wallet…”

Dean mashed Castiel’s face into the glass with one hand, and there was only sensation and sound to tell him what Dean did. Cloth abraded his legs and thighs and cold air burst over his suddenly exposed ass. Rustles spoke to Dean doing something and an achingly long time passing with the only contact between them Dean’s powerful grip around his skull.

Thick, blunt cockhead pressed against Castiel’s hole, the brush of fingers against his perineum suggested a guiding hand, and despite their two week hiatus Castiel was still open, still relaxed, still so ready for Dean. His rim stretched and spread, welcoming, pleasure cascading outward, sweeping Castiel’s negative thoughts out to sea. Dean chuckled lasciviously as he pressed his cock into Castiel’s body, pressed his hips against Castiel’s ass, pressed his chest to Castiel’s back, smothered Castiel against the dampened glass.
“So big…” Castiel sighed in profound relief, going limp around Dean’s dick, limp against the glass. Dean had him. Dean would support him.

*Dean cares about me…*

...does he…?

*Of course he doesn’t…*

*He’d tell me, one way or the other, if I asked…*

...which is why I haven’t asked…*better not to know, than to…*

“Such a slut for my dick…” Dean breathed, pivoting his hips back, pressing them forward. Pressure dragged through Castiel’s channel and he moaned and would have crumpled if not for Dean’s support.

...*better not to know than to lose this…*

“Like it big, huh?” chuckled Dean, hips rocking in time to his laughter. Bemused, Castiel began to
nod frantic agreement but his forehead clunked on the mirror and he stopped. He pressed his ass into Dean’s thrusts, longing to feel more, to take Dean deeper, to be stretched wider. “…fuck, Cas… know you love when…when I talk dirty…but don’t know if I…hell…if I can today. This feels so fucking good…” Dean’s movements were already growing urgent, his knot already tugging at Castiel’s rim. “…missed you…”

“So saw me…every day…” Speaking was a struggle, words coming out low and breathy and guttural. Pleasure spread through Castiel every time Dean was embedded within him, every time hard cock rubbed over his prostate, every time thick knot punched into his ass. Castiel was incandescent with bliss; he was amazed he couldn’t see the brilliant reflection of his rapture glowing off the mirror to sear his retinas.

“Not like this,” Dean explained in a rush, pressing his face to Castiel’s shoulder, biting at the cloth of Castiel’s suit. “Do you know…how fuckin’ delicious you are…as you fall apart around me? Wanna eat you up – swallow you down – mark you…”

Thrust.

**Bite me?**

Thrust.

**Claim me?**

Thrust.

**Mate me?**

Thrust.

**Fuck. Yes.**

With a ragged cry, Castiel came, shuddering, trembling, muscles contracting around Dean, fingers scrambling for purchase on the glass. Groaning, Dean’s hands clenched around Castiel’s and, muttering a string of curses, he fucked Castiel through their paired climaxes.

Dean didn’t knot him.

A wail Castiel couldn’t have predicted, couldn’t have expected, couldn’t have stopped, tore from him, rasped over his throat, and he collapsed, tearing Dean free of his ass with a wet sound. Shaking overtook him, and even the comfort of cold tiles against his overheated skin was minimal.

“Cas?” Dean’s voice was made breathy by pants. Castiel blinked tears from his eyes and opened them to see Dean squatting beside him, a hand outstretched, his cock hanging out of his pants, condom swollen with come, knot a thick bulge at the base.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel managed, slumping back against the wall.

“What just happened?” asked Dean.

“Nothing,” said Castiel, his equilibrium and control starting to return.

*What was I thinking? Why did we do that? Why did I initiate that? Why did I get upset?*

*Is this what losing my mind feels like?*
What if my belief that there are no cameras in the bathrooms is wrong? What if Naomi saw…I’ve suspected that she knows about Dean, or at least knows I’m having relations with someone, but thanks to this ludicrous violation of societal norms, she might have proof, she might have video. She could use that to force me to marry April – not that she needs the leverage – and, worse, she could use it to blackmail Dean, to ruin him, to destroy his dream of starting his own investment firm when he’s barely gotten a foot in the door.

Forget the awkward position I put myself in with this tryst…how could I do this to him?

Selfish, shallow, self-centered, entitled, spoiled, privileged, cruel—

“Come on, don’t shut down on me,” Dean implored. His eyes slipped shut and he breathed out a silent oh of residual pleasure. A flicker of movement dragged Castiel’s gaze to Dean’s dick, the condom pulsing as he spurted into it. The wild urge to tear the condom off and drink Dean’s come down enveloped Castiel in another crest of bliss and he whimpered, squeezed his eyes shut, and sank back onto his elbows. “You asked me to be blunt – honest with you – I hoped…no, I need you to do the same…”

He’s right. He deserves to know what I’m thinking, deserves to know how I feel. To not communicate with him is to treat him as...as nothing, as a cock on which I bounce, not as a person. And he is a person – a person I care about and respect – hardworking, kind, brilliant, beautiful, funny, straightforward, knowledgeable, dedic—

“Cas?”

“Sorry,” Castiel repeated, swallowing to clear his throat. He forced his eyes open. Sweat streaked Dean’s forehead, made a mess of his gelled hair. Red flushed his cheeks, exuberance brightened his eyes, and his post-coital glow made his earnest expression ridiculous. He opened his mouth to speak but Castiel held up a hand and said, “Sorry I lied and said nothing was wrong, and sorry I initiated a liaison here, knowing that as soon as I thought about it, I would grow distraught.”

“Is that why you…?” Dean trailed off but Castiel shook his head, not understanding. “Is that why you’re freaking out?” Dean made a gesture that took in Castiel’s disheveled appearance, his rumpled pants, his bare butt dripping lubricant onto the spotless floor, the stain growing over his crotch, and the smear of sweat and mucus and saliva and tears Castiel had left when he slid down the wall.

I could leave it at that...he never has to know that I...

Stop it. For once in my life, I need to have some spine and tell the truth.

“No,” Castiel confessed, turning his face toward the tiles and closing his eyes once more. “It should have been – I’m appalled by my behavior and feel terrible that I may have compromised your position here – but that wasn’t why I grew distressed.” His courage failed. Silence stretched out the soft smack that suggested Dean had opened his mouth to speak provided Castiel with the impetus he needed to press on. “It’s...it’s shameful to admit...I was upset that you didn’t knot me, though intellectually I understand how ludicrous it would have been for you to do so in this circumstance.”

Silence.

Well, not silence. Castiel’s breath rasped through his passion-roughened throat. Castiel’s heart pounded against the cage of his ribs, as Castiel longed to pound against the invisible bars of the cage that was his life. Castiel’s blood rushed hot through his veins, not a sound so much as a feeling, a sense of vibration that made his fingertips tingle. A wet sound punctuated his shifts against the formerly immaculate tiles, made filthy by their indiscretion – made filthy by Castiel’s disgusting
behavior and the cavalier disregard with which he dragged Dean into the gutter with him.

Castiel would have given all he had to know what Dean was thinking.

No. Dean deserves more than that, more than my possessions. I assign scant value to what I have – I came by it too easily to respect it – I’d give all I have up in a trice. For Dean’s sake...Dean deserves that I sacrifice something that means something to me.

That, Castiel, is utter bullshit. If I really wanted to give up my life, nothing is stopping me. I can leave anytime.

No I can’t. Naomi won’t let me go. She’s imprisoned me for her own reasons and she won’t release me until she’s satisfied.

And I stopped thinking she’d ever be satisfied by my behavior, by my accomplishment, by me, far too many years ago.

“God, you’re an asshole.” Dean sighed as if defeated and a whoosh of breath blew over Castiel’s face.

Distance opened between them, air chilled by the vent overhead. Castiel’s stomach sank. Come made a mortifying, gooey mess in his underwear. The longer he stayed away from his office, the greater the chances that security would notice his absence, report it to Naomi, and he’d face the consequences for growing to loathe his job so completely that he hid in the bathroom rather than work, sought solace in the brief all-encompassing bliss of sex rather than own up to his mother that he was unhappy. He’d admitted to Dean that he cared for him, confessed that his grief was over Dean’s not knotting him, as shameful as that was, and now he had Dean’s answer.

Dean thought he was an asshole.

Dean didn’t care about him.

A tear made a rivulet down Castiel’s cheek, disappeared, reappeared a moment later as a cold droplet that landed on his hand.

“Seriously, Cas – sometimes I think you’re figuring your shit out and then you go and say crap like that and I honest to God wonder what the hell I’m doing here, what I’m doing with you,” said Dean. Two more tears streaked down Castiel’s face and dripped from his chin.

Stop crying, Castiel.

Boys don’t cry.

“I’m getting so fuckin’ sick of rehashing this same bullshit with you,” Dean continued. More tears fell. “What the hell do you think just happened?”

You came to check on me, and instead of thanking you or explaining what troubled me, I forced you to have sex with me in the name of assuaging my unhappiness, and that didn’t even work. Now I’m miserable, and you’re unhappy.

“Fuck,” Dean muttered. “ ‘course you won’t answer. Shoulda...Cas – Cas, look at me.” Grimacing, Castiel rocked his head against the wall in a lame attempt to shake his head no. “For once in your Goddamn life, trust me and listen to me and treat me like a fucking person.”

The anger in Dean’s voice startled Castiel out of his wallowing; he opened his eyes and blearily
looked toward Dean. The gorgeous alpha sat sprawled on the floor, leaning against the base of one of the couches, and even angry and rumpled he was gorgeous, authoritative, ready to take the business world by storm.

*I'm a prisoner, yes, but if I’m not careful, I may yet be a jailor as well...the millstone around Dean’s neck, the shackles binding his ankles...no, no – I don’t have that much power over him, thank God. He won’t succeed because of me, but he’s remarkable enough to succeed despite me.*

“Cas,” said Dean firmly, leaning forward, expression intense. “I consented to have sex with you. Here. Now. Then you go and spew that whole ‘you compromised my position here’ horse hockey, like, what, I wasn’t even fuckin’ involved? Like I’m just a convenient cock you grab cause you don’t want to blow your wad with an inflatable? How dare you steal my agency from me?”

Stunned, Castiel blinked, more tears spilling down his cheeks.

“You either start treating me like a person or I’m outta here – not out of the internship, because this is my fucking life and working here is a fricken dream come true – but outta being your fuck buddy, or your boyfriend, or whatever the fuck term you arbitrarily decide is most appropriate this week. Got it?”

*No! Please don’t…please…*  
*…go. If he breaks up with me before I can break up with him, that’s better, right?*

“Yes, I…I understand. If you’d prefer to terminate our relationship, I understand.” Castiel was proud of the semblance of stability he achieved by the time he finished speaking. He’d learned long ago that long words and proper grammar helped him maintain an effective masquerade. Even when he didn’t feel erudite, he could sound erudite.

“For fuck’s sake, Cas, you’re still doing it,” Dean snarled, leaping to his feet. “You don’t understand jack shit! What’s the point of trying to fuckin’ communicate if you're not even gonna fuckin’ listen? If I’d known what a pain-in-the-ass bitch you were gonna be about this I’d have told you to jack off in a fuckin’ bathroom stall.”

Castiel’s astonishment grew with every word Dean said. He did understand Dean’s first point, and Dean was right. What he couldn’t comprehend was what had caused this latest outburst. Alarmed, he tried to shrink back against the wall but he was already as small as he could be.

“I’m…” Castiel started to stammer, then snapped his mouth shut.

*Yes, he’s scary when he’s angry. Big rageful alpha. The kind of man I should be. Naomi would expect me to rise to this challenge, stand my ground, fight back – unless she was the one yelling at me, and then fighting back would be tantamount to a death sentence.*

*Hyperbole will get me nowhere.*

*I have to focus. What did Dean just say?*

*He said I don’t listen.*

*Rather than replying to what I think he said, what I believe he implied, I must answer his actual statement. Dean isn’t Naomi. For some reason, he actually wants to know what I think, not hear polite nothings that match his pre-conceived expectations of what he believes I should think.*

“Fuck this,” snapped Dean, stalking to the door. His hand was on the knob before Castiel found his
“You’re right,” Castiel blurted. *Please let these be the right words.* “I’m sorry. I wish… I wish I could show you what life is like with my family. No one says what they mean. No one is straightforward. I’m so used to reading between the lines and reacting to what I infer that I forget that some people *doesn’t* interact that way. You have no idea how unique and special you are to me, Dean, nor how much you mean to me. *Do* want what we have to continue. I’m trying. Can’t it be enough that I’m trying?”

“No.”

*Of course it can’t be.*

*It was absurd to think that he and I can find common ground. We come from different worlds.*

Don’t kid yourself, Castiel. That’s not why we can’t find common ground. We can’t find common ground because I refuse to take the least chance, daren’t expose myself to the slightest risk. Remind me again: whose prison am I confined in? ‘Cause right now it’s looking a heck of lot like I locked myself in this untenable position.

“I told you, Cas – I’m not your therapist, and I’m not your charity case, and I’m not your courtesy dick,” said Dean. “I’ll work with you, ‘cause I’m not giving up this internship because you’re a dickhead, but outside o’ that? Don’t bother dropping me a line until you’re actually ready to talk about this shit, and about how you intend to change. ‘Cause believe it or not, ‘trying’ to change and *actually changing* are two completely different things, and I’ve heard a whole lot of the first and seen hide nor hair of the second. Now get your act together and get your ass back in the office. You’ve got work to do.”

Castiel opened his mouth.

Dean opened the door.

Castiel snapped his mouth shut.

Dean stepped out and snapped the door shut.

Getting his hands beneath him, Castiel stood. His reflection was ghastly, his face tear-streaked, his pants splotched with tears and worse, his butt hanging out. Hands trembling, he pulled his trousers up, redid his belt, and listlessly tried to adjust himself such that his appearance wouldn’t scream ‘I’ve just had sex.’

It was impossible.

“Wow, Cas, you look like shit.”

Castiel hadn’t heard the door open. He’d never wanted to deck his brother more. Gabriel’s cocky grin, reflected in the mirror, was the limit.

“Thank you, Gabriel, you do as well. Now, if we’re done exchanging pleasantries, will you please leave me the fuck alone?”

Gabriel’s smug look fell away, replaced with shock. “What happened?”

“I’m an asshole incapable of meeting minimal standards of human communication and I’d rather not discuss it.”
“You and Dean had a fight?”

Castiel laughed hollowly. “Something like that.” He glanced over his shoulder, met Gabriel’s eyes, saw the concern etched into his features, and mustered a sad smile. “He’s right about me. There’s no substance behind my words. I’ll say whatever I think those around me want to hear. Then I dare suggest I’m honest with him. It’s shameful.”

“You know…until we had that talk with Dean at the café I had no idea you didn’t realize how profoundly abnormal our childhood was.” There wasn’t a hint of jocularity to Gabriel’s tone, nor the faintest trace of a smile gracing his face. His brow was knit, his eyes shadowed, his lips twisted in a thin, pale frown. “Naomi fucked us up, Cassie. She fucked all of us up. I…I’ve been quietly funneling Anna money so she can disappear. One of these semesters she’s just…not going to come home. It’s the least I can do. Truly the least. I should have done more to protect you. I should have taken more of Naomi’s bullshit onto my shoulders. I should have given you an escape. I’m sorry.”

“Noble and useless,” said Castiel, though not maliciously. “There’s no way you could have done more, Gabriel. How could you have stood up to Naomi? You were a child, and you’re not an alpha.”

“Neither are you,” Gabriel said. Castiel’s jaw dropped. “I don’t know what you mighta been, how you mighta acted, if darling mama hadn’t brow-beaten you into submission – more like Mikey and Lucifer, maybe, thank God that didn’t happen, two of them is bad enough – but you’re not an alpha.”

“That’s absurd,” said Castiel.

“No,” Castiel interrupted. “I’ve let Naomi define me for 30 years. I’ll not let you take over for her now that I’m finally attempting to figure it out for myself. There’s a lot I’m confused about, but I know what I am. If you’re going to insist you know better than I do, you can, as I suggested before, kindly fuck off.”

“I love it when you swear,” said Gabriel with an incongruous, pleased sigh. “Gotta get you doin’ that more often. Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

“Gabe…”

“Stuff it, Cas, I’m helping.”

Gabriel crossed to stand beside him, wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and by means of the mirror shot Castiel a cocky-yet-bluff look. Castiel’s façade of strength and resistance crumbled.

Maybe I’m really not an alpha. Gabriel’s ordering me around…he’s more of an alpha than I am…and he’s a beta…

“Thank you,” Castiel murmured. The words didn’t feel like nearly enough, but they were all Castiel had.

“And after this, go apologize to that boy of yours,” suggested Gabriel. “He’s good for you.”

“I’m going to break up with him,” said Castiel bleakly, avoiding Gabriel’s gaze.

“Or do that.” Gabriel shrugged. “Sounds like a shit idea but if it’s what you want I’ll support you. Just – maybe take some time and think about that. What do you want, Cassie?”
Dean.

Dean doesn’t want me.

That’s not what he said.

“I don’t know,” Castiel lied.

I don’t want to think about this anymore. I don’t want to think about anything ever again.

“Then keep pondering ‘til you figure it out,” said Gabriel, steering him toward a bathroom stall. “Because it’s important. I’d ask you to do that for me – I know you would, if I insisted – but that’d defeat the point. Do it for yourself, Castiel, because you deserve to sit back and look at yourself and think, ‘in a perfect world, what would I do?’”

I let myself think about that, I figured out what I wanted, I took that chance, and I did it. I went to Dean that first time and was knotted. That was supposed to be the end of this. I was supposed to go back to normal, go back to how I should be, and instead everything has gone from bad to worse.

Gabriel’s wrong. I can’t stop at merely ‘thinking’ about what I want, and there’s no achieving the impossibilities that cross my mind when I dare to consider what might have been. There’s no changing my current life situation. All things considered, reflecting on what I might want is as meaningless as imagining what a bee wants as it flits from flower to flower, imagining what a blade of grass wants when it twists toward sunlight. We all do what we must to survive.

To Castiel’s relief, Gabriel said no more. He used a towel to sponge the gunk from Castiel’s cheeks, patted the wrinkles from his suit, took care of him, treated Castiel as gently as a child.

Castiel wished he was still a child.

He’d been able to dream then.

Don’t be ridiculous. I was never able to dream. Even small dreams were stolen from me.

I was never a child.

And I suspect Dean never was either.

He’d understand if I gave him a chance to prove himself, if I confided in him. He made that clear at the café.

I thought he was keeping his distance from me, treating me like a client even though I’m no longer paying him, but that’s wrong. I’m the problem. I’m still treating him as a sexual object – I’m treating him as the service he provides, instead of the man and alpha he is – and then I lie to myself and claim I care about him.

What, actually, do I care about?


I’m that selfish after all.

Naomi tried to fix me, but even she couldn’t.

What do I want?
I want to be a man that Dean can care about.

I have no idea how to do that. I could experiment, try acting modulating my behavior until I find an aspect he approves of, but that won’t answer the fundamental problem. I’ll still be playing a part for the approval of others. If I play a part for him, how am I any different from April? And if I win him through fakery, I still won’t know who I am.

I should act like myself.

How do I act?

Would Dean like me, if I acted like...whoever I am?

“I don’t know,” Castiel muttered again. Gabriel looked a question at him, tucking the flaps of Castiel’s jacket over the wet spot on his pants. Castiel shook his head. There was no explaining what his thoughts. “I don’t know.”

“If I could figure it out for you, I would,” Gabriel offered tentatively, solemnly, genuinely.

“No one can tell me who I am,” Castiel said with a sigh.

“But damn did our mother try.” Gabriel managed a smirk.

God...yes, she did. Isn’t that precisely the problem? Beneath a lifetime of tutelage in Naomi’s home...what do I have left that isn’t hers?

I don’t have to figure out what I want.

I have to figure out who I am.

Somehow.

Castiel Novak (12:10 AM): We need to talk.

The past week had been wretched.

Castiel Novak (12:11 AM): Not now of course I know you’re working. I’m sorry I have poor timing.

Considering how bad the past few months had been, that the recent days had been even worse was...remarkable, troubling, and highly unpleasant.

Castiel Novak (12:13 AM): But when you’re available, if you’re willing to converse with me, I’d like to arrange a time when we could meet.

Without the prospect of seeing Dean outside of the confines of IADB, the time Castiel spent with April was even more unbearable.


Even Gabriel had started to avoid him, he was so sullen.

Castiel Novak (12:15 AM): If you’re amenable.

If Castiel could have, he’d have avoided himself. Insomnia made sleep hard to come by. When he
was exhausted, he couldn’t sleep but his thoughts stopped circling. His mind was eerily silent. He went through the motions of life, minus a few essential ones. He’d eaten so little at recent meals with April that she’d joked that he must be on a diet and suggested she might mimic him (“have to fit a designer wedding dress, la di da!). He’d gone down a belt notch in seven days and couldn’t bring himself to care. The few months Castiel had been with Dean, he’d felt, but now he was back to being an emotionless android, Naomi’s favorite sock puppet.

This is for the better.

Dean Winchester (12:16 AM): Has anyone told you that your words get all big and fancy when you’re nervous?

Castiel’s heart skipped a beat, his hand shaking so badly that he dropped the phone onto his lap. He sat in his living room, quiet and dark save for the light of the screen. He knew he was behaving eccentrically but he could think of nothing else to do, and though fatigue gnawed at his mind like starvation would have at in his stomach, sleep was light years away.

Dean Winchester (12:18 AM): We can meet now if you want

Dean Winchester (12:18 AM): Nothing going on here

Dean Winchester (12:19 AM): It’s cold people stay home

Dean Winchester (12:19 AM): My Saturday night regular cancelled

Dean Winchester (12:19 AM): Something something Chinese New Year

Dean Winchester (12:20 AM): Where do you want to meet?

Castiel took a quavering breath, let it out slowly, and wrote,

Castiel Novak (12:21 AM): I’m not accustomed to thinking of the sorts of venues open at a time such as this. Do you have any suggestions?

Dean Winchester (12:22 AM): Public or private

Castiel Novak (12:22 AM): Private

Dean Winchester (12:23 AM): Not Cajun Delights

Castiel Novak (12:23 AM): Is that meant to be a query?

Dean Winchester (12:24 AM): My bad. I take it, from your troubled approach to this discussion, that you expect our conversation to be of a serious nature and would prefer that we not have it in the presence, or even the pseudo-presence, of those with whom we are acquainted?

Dean Winchester (12:25 AM): That is how people like you talk, right? Shoulda realized you wouldn’t understand any other way.

That’s unfair of him.

But warranted, given how condescendingly I treat him.

Castiel sighed.

Castiel Novak (12:26 AM): Fine. I’ll pay for a room at Cajun Delights and meet you there, unless
you’d prefer I pick you up?

Dean Winchester (12:27 AM): Already there already got a room see you soon.

Castiel felt like an ill-used marionette as he rose, his arms limp at his sides, his legs splaying as if he’d forgotten how to walk. He shambled across his living room, made his way down the stairs by feel, missed the bottom step and smashed his face and knuckles against the front door in a failed attempt to catch himself. Pain radiated outwards. It didn’t matter. He didn’t want to talk with Dean, didn’t want to end their relationship “for real” even though the past week had made it clear that they were effectively “done” even if they hadn’t officially exchanged condolences. Dragging his feet, Castiel circled the house to the enormous shared garbage. Lights in the main house spoke to family members still awake – Luke’s window glowed over the barren winter landscape, and one of the guest rooms was illuminated. The Kellys were visiting again. Dinner had been endless; Castiel had drifted through it, as he’d drifted through everything since his insane decision to solicit Dean in the executive bathroom. Naomi had frowned at him but had not called him aside when he begged leave to go to bed, so he supposed his behavior had been adequate.

His car door was unlocked and opened.

He barely remembered arriving in the garage, much less pulling out his keys.

A shiver trailed down his back.

So cold tonight. So tired. I’m glad Dean’s not outside. This is no night for walking the streets, no matter how hot the work is once he’s hired.

The engine was running.

If I don’t focus and combat my drowsiness enough to drive, I’ll get into an accident. Traffic will be sparse this late but that won’t protect me from...I don’t know...crashing into a light pole or driving into a ditch.

The journey to Cajun Delights passed in a blur of darkened buildings and streets made occasionally golden by street lights, streaked with the green, yellow and red of traffic signals. Pulling into the motel’s parking lot, Castiel couldn’t have described the route he took nor the places he’d passed, but the car was intact and no sirens pursued him so he must have done an adequate job at following the rules of the road. Neon green and red and yellow and purple illuminated the Cajun Delights sign in a gaudy imitation of Mardi Gras, the illustration depicting the letters hung with beads. The parking lot was large enough that, though a dozen or more cars were parked there, it seemed deserted. Castiel pulled into an isolated spot near the entry, switched the car into park, and...

...sat.

I’m supposed to move.

Gabriel said I should consider what I want. This is what I want. To break up with Dean. To comply with Naomi’s expectations for me. To be a dutiful son, a diligent man, and the paragon of an alpha.

To marry April, make love to her, raise children with her, spend the rest of my life with her?

Castiel shuddered. With the engine off, the chillness of the night seeped into the car like icy fingers brushing over his skin, the world around him mirroring the desolation he felt within.

Try as I might, I can’t pretend I want a future with April Kelly.
There were moments when Castiel could delude himself into thinking he truly wanted to make his mother proud, but when he thought about April, those delusions crumbles. The lies he told himself were revealed. The apparently solid foundations of his life crumbled, a sand castle before the tide.

He didn’t want to marry April.

He didn’t want to be Naomi’s ideal of a son, a man, nor an alpha.

He didn’t want to break up with...

Setting his jaw, clenching his teeth, Castiel undid his seatbelt, opened the car door, and swept out into the frigid wind that gusted across the open expanse of cracked concrete. Loose windows rattled in their frames. The lobby was brightly lit, eternal, no different regardless of the hour. A church bell clanged out once, 1 AM, the sound diluted to an eerie echo by the breeze.

Castiel strode across the parking lot and threw open the lobby door.

Benny sat behind the reception desk, staring at something in his lap, and didn’t look up as the bell on his door jangled and cold air rose then faded as the room sealed once more against the winter.

“54,” Benny grunted.

Castiel didn’t slow his pace. If he shortened his stride he’d fall on his face, or turn and flee without speaking to Dean. Broad steps took Castiel across the lobby, down the hall, past the humming ice maker, to a familiar room at the far end: the first room he had Dean had shared, a lifetime ago.

I thought I knew what I wanted then.

Why am I so sure that I was wrong then, and correct now?

The door was open a crack. Castiel pushed it open, a squeaking hinge announcing him.

“Benny?” called Dean.

“No.” Castiel stepped into the main area of the room. Dean lounged on the bed, pristine white blankets indented around his slim form; he grabbed the remote and turned off the muted television.

“Cas,” Dean sighed. “Man, you look like shit.”

“So people keep telling me.”

Joining Dean on the bed was temptingly inconceivable, but the only other surface suitable for sitting was the presentation table – the stand on which an omega or other bottom could situation themselves for easy access, the stand on which Dean had offered himself for Castiel’s knot, when Dean knew so little of him that he thought Castiel would knot him, thought Castiel would knot anyone.

I’ll knot April. I have to.

Why did it have to be this room? Suppressing a shudder, Castiel instead crossed to before the television and stood before Dean, who lifted his head but didn’t bother to sit up.

And he’s not affected at all.

That’s a good reminder that this…whatever we have…is in my head, a good reminder that my ability to judge those around me is mediocre at best. My perceptions were so impaired that I believed that Dean sincerely cared about me...what other misconceptions have I formed about my
“Just gonna stand there and stare?” Dean leered, lips twisting into an incongruous coquettish smile, and Castiel shuddered. “Sample the goods if you want. You know my price.”

“I do,” said Castiel, steeling. “I’d like to end our arrangement.”

“Right, so, you’re not changing.” Dean sighed again and fell back on the bed, pressing his palms into his eyes. “Why am I surprised?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re a fucking coward.”

Of course I’m a coward. What else did you expect?

“I found the wherewithal to come here and break up with you,” countered Castiel.

Why am I still standing here? Why am I still speaking with him? Why am I pretending this isn’t over by lingering?

“You think that’s bravery?” Dean snorted and burst from the bed into a sitting position, crossing his long, lithe legs beneath him. Castiel balled his hands into fists at his side, compressed his mouth into an angry line, and stared down at the boy. Dean smiled, unfazed. “Mama’s boy, tossing aside the only toy he’s ever had for himself and running back home – you think leaving makes you anything but a coward?”

“Cowardice has nothing – no,” Castiel snapped. “This is pointless. Goodbye, Dean.”

Two decisive strides carried Castiel toward the door. The weight of world settled on his shoulders, the clench in his chest so tight he felt like he was being crushed by boulders, and his eyes pooled with tears.

“Is this really want you want?” Dean called after him.

No!

Rage exploded the heaviness surrounding him. Rounding on a heel, Castiel stared cold fury at Dean and said through gritted teeth, “Why do people keep asking me that? What I want doesn’t matter!”

“Your ma teach you that?”

“Life taught me that!”

“The life she built for you?”

“Yes!” The truth was blindingly obvious; Castiel shouldn’t have to explain this to Dean. Dean was an eldest son, an alpha, a breadwinner. He should understand! “Naomi has my best interests at heart, I know she does, and if I weren’t broken I’d be the son she wants. I’d be like Michael and Luke. I’d be successful and obedient and I wouldn’t feel this way! I feel worse with every step I stray farther from the path she laid out for me. What more proof do I need that the issue is my deviance?”

Breathing hard, anger heating him through, Castiel stared, stunned, as Dean rose, crossed to him, laid hands on his cheeks, tilted his head up, and said, “You’re not broken, Castiel. There’s nothing wrong
with the way you are.”

“Of course you’d say that.” Spite tinged the words as Castiel thought them, but somewhere between his mind and his tongue they transformed into a plaintive objection. “Will you let me leave?”

“If that’s what you want,” conceded Dean.

Dean’s hands fell away.

The door was all that stood between Castiel and freedom in the hallway beyond. There was an emergency beside this door; Castiel wouldn’t even need to walk past Benny to escape.

He didn’t move.

*Walk, legs.*

*Engage, muscles.*

*I know what I have to do.*

*I know who I have to be.*

...

...*but I don’t know what I want to do.*

...*but I don’t know what I want to be.*

“I should go,” Castiel whispered.

“Be my guest.” Skirting around Castiel, Dean stepped to the door, pulled it open, and gestured out. The light beyond was bright, glowing over the empty hallway. A hum of voices spoke to a couple pursuing their pleasure in a nearby room. “No one’s stopping you.”

*I’m stopping me.*

*I.

Don’t.*

*Want.*

*To.*

*Leave.*

Castiel’s knees gave out.

“Cas...”

“I’m so tired, Dean,” Castiel admitted. Tears slid down his face.

*I’m crying. Again. God, that’s pathetic.*

“I know you are, sweetie,” said Dean soothingly, dropping down beside Castiel, wrapping his arms around Castiel, pulling him into a tender hug. *Sweetie? “I know.” And he’s...he’s touching me? “Dunno how you think you can sort any of this shit sorted when you don’t take care of yourself.”*
He’s being kind to me? “I’m still pissed at you – we’re not done talking about this, and no putting me off like ya did last time, that was utter BS – but if you’re up for working through this instead of running away – stay the night?” Why? “Maybe?” I could...I could do that? “We’ll grab some grub in the morning and hammer this shit out like adults?”

If I spend the night, if I’m not at the house in the morning, if I don’t go to church, Naomi will be furious with me.

She’ll punish me.

How? What can she do to me that’s worse than recreating me in her image and forcing me to the life of her choosing at every conceivable turning point in my life?

Do I really want me to know the answer to that? She can absolutely do worse than she’s done before. If I challenge her, she’ll prove it.

Laughs tangled with Castiel’s sobs, his shoulders shaking, and he collapsed into Dean’s arms, buried his face against Dean’s scent gland, sniveled and cried and wished he could drown in Dean’s wide open, sunny fields of summer grass.

“Come to bed?” suggested Dean, patting his back. He sounded so hopeful.

He told me to listen to him, promised to be blunt with me. What has he said from the beginning? That he’d fuck me for free. That he liked spending time with me. He’s never said he cares, not in so many words, but...

...but neither have I.

Castiel, what do you want?

“I want to stay with you,” Castiel whispered.

“Then stay,” Dean replied, as if it was that simple.

What if it is that simple?

Castiel stayed.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Um this chapter is monstrously long and I'm sorry, but I couldn't figure out a good place to break it.

The phone rang shrilly, startling Castiel awake. His chest ached, his throat burned, his nose itched, but Dean was a hot presence curled protectively about him and as awful as Castiel felt, he somehow also felt good.

Ring.

“Ignore it,” mumbled Dean, tensing and tightening his embrace.

Ring.

“What? Who? Ring. No one will call with urgent business at this hour, which means it’s virtually guaranteed to be family. Ring. It’s Naomi or April or maybe, at best, Gabriel.

There wasn’t another ring. With a deflating sigh, Castiel resisted the allure of Dean’s presence, fumbled across the blankets and retrieved his phone from the pocket of the pants he’d left strewn over the edge of the bed when he’d stripped down to his underclothes and joined Dean beneath the blankets.

He’d brought his phone.

To the motel.

Damn. Last night was full of poor life choices.

But...but staying here with Dean wasn’t one of them.

Bull. Staying here with Dean was definitely a poor life choice. The worst life choice.


The phone vibrated against his fingers and pinged as he retrieved it, indicating that whoever had called had left a voicemail. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he turned the screen on and swiped through to check his messages.

“Castiel Emmanuel James Novak-Shurley,” rang from the speaker before Castiel could get it to his ears, Naomi’s voice rigid with anger, taut with frustration. Dean tensed against him; she’d spoken so loudly that Dean could hear her too. Castiel staved off the urge to hang up and hide his embarrassment. As he’d demonstrated time and again since he met Dean, he was incapable of discussing his family situation honestly or assessing it objectively. Let Dean hear Naomi, hear her castigation of Castiel, and judge for himself. “I know you are at Cajun Delights with your whore
Winchester. Up to now I’ve permitted your behavior because it hasn’t interfered with your duties, but you have exhausted the font of my patience. Have your morning. Enjoy it. You will meet with me, at my home office, at 2 PM. Don’t pretend you didn’t receive the message. Our service plan website reports when a voicemail has been heard. I will see you soon, Castiel, or I will know the reason why not. Good bye.”

The message cut off with a click.

“To save this message, press seven,” chirped the cheerful pre-recorded voicemail bot. “To delete this message, press nine. To—” Castiel hit the disconnect button and slumped back against Dean.

“All thing I don’t get,” Dean murmured, cuddling close to him, “is why you chose Emanuel as your ‘I’m hiring a whore’ name when you coulda used Jimmy. Like seriously, what the fuck were you thinking?”

Whatever Castiel had expected Dean to say, that wasn’t it. At a loss, he shrugged and accidentally whacked Dean in the chin.

“It made sense at the time,” Castiel said.

“Your mom’s a bitch,” Dean offered.

“My mother has a firm view of what constitutes proper behavior from her children and is positive that the surest road to success is to follow the path that she trail-blazed when she built International Angel Deposit Bank from a single Palmeton branch to an investment force to be reckoned with.” Castiel felt like he was repeating a prepared statement. The last Board Meeting he’d attended, he’d said something depressingly similar. “She wants what’s best for us.”

“No,” said Dean firmly, his vagueness fading. “She wants what she thinks is best for you – she wants what’s best for her – and doesn’t give a rat’s ass what you want. That’s not being a good mother. That’s being a controlling bitch.”

What, and Dean knows so much about what good parentage looks like? Castiel bit his tongue. “I suppose I wouldn’t know,” he said instead. “She’s the only mother I’ve ever had, and this is the only family I’ve been part of.”

“Damn, that’s sad,” said Dean. He sounded...sincere?...and he stroked a hand down Castiel’s belly. “I guess I didn’t realize how lucky I’ve been, I got family comin’ out the wazoo.”

“I thought it was just you and Sammy. What, have you got past marriages you’ve neglected to mention?” Castiel hoped he imbued enough humor in his voice to make it clear he was joking. Dean chuckled, reassuring him he’d succeeded.

“Ya take your family where ya find it,” Dean explained. “Yeah, I had my mom and dad...they were pretty great. But we lost ’um early. Since then...I mean, yeah, it’s just me ‘n Sammy by blood, but we’ve got Bobby – my dad’s oldest friend, he took us in after dad died – you might know him.” Castiel shook his head. He couldn’t think of anyone he knew who went by so common a nickname as “Bobby.” “Robert Singer, he works at IADB?”

“Ooh!” said Castiel. “Yes, I’m acquainted with Mr. Singer. He’s a good worker – tireless. We’ve spoken a handful of times.” Dean’s smile twisted the fabric separating Dean’s mouth from Castiel’s skin. Castiel wished he could incinerate the thin layers between them.

“And I’ve got my coworkers – they’re good folk, always ready to help out in a pinch – and there’s Benny, and Ellen, who used to be a family friend and nowadays is Bobby’s wife, and Ellen’s
daughter Jo...” Dean shrugged and wiggled his nose against Castiel’s skin until he stretched the neck of the undershirt aside enough for him to brush flesh. A shiver of contentment and desire trailed down Castiel’s spine; he accepted the former but quashed the latter. Physical intimacy would be inappropriate unless they could finally achieve a commensurate level of emotional intimacy. Too often, Castiel had encouraged the first and avoided the second even as he craved it. “We were never alone, never lonely. Whereas, stop me if I’m off-track, but it sounds like you had scads of family but were always alone.”

“Not always,” said Castiel. “I had Gabriel.”

“He seems like the best kind of asshole,” Dean chuckled.

“An apt description.” Silence stretched out between them, then Castiel said softly, “And no...I wasn’t alone, hardly ever, but I was often lonely. Mother played my eldest brothers against each other, encouraged us three alphas to compete, largely ignoring Gabriel and my youngest sister Anna. My father is a non-entity, often away on IADB business, but even when he was around he was content to follow mother’s lead, in both his professional and personal lives. Naomi wouldn’t have married someone strong-willed enough to challenge her. The family is hers to run as she pleased.”

“Dude, the more you say ‘bout your folks, the more glad I am that my family didn’t look fuck-all like yours,” said Dean.

Thoughts swirled through Castiel’s head but he kept silent, kept silent, until something in him snapped. “I’ve thought you would condemn me, if you knew how unhappy I was with my perfect life.”

“Who’m I to say your life is perfect?” said Dean. “Learned the hard way – what’s easy-peasy for one person is damn near impossible for someone else, and it’s no more fair to blame ‘um than it is to blame a person for...I dunno...being Chinese and speaking Mandarin instead of English. We’re all so fuckin’ different. Would I be miserable, growin’ up like you did? Impossible to say. Listenin’ to you, I don’t think I would be – sounds like your older brothers like it well enough – but, then, a household like that is prime territory for an alpha. Betas like Gabe and Anna, or someone like you? Not so much.”

“Someone like me,” Castiel echoed, baffled. “Dean, I’m an alpha.”

_You’re not an alpha_, Gabriel’s voice whispered to him from a week before.

“Woah.” Dean sat up abruptly and Castiel whimpered at the deprivation of proximity, warmth, and support. “Woah, woah, woah. You mean...? Dude, I figured you were stuffed so far in the closet you couldn’t find your way out, but I thought you at least knew...shit.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” grumbled Castiel, rolling onto his side. Dean looked down at him, eyes wide with awe or confusion or surprise or something.

“Hell,” Dean muttered. “Here I’ve been trying not to push, figured you’d talk when you were ready, s’long as I made it clear that I was cool with you however you identified. I had no idea...but damn if I didn’t stick my foot in it and fall in up to my neck. Apparently, we got way more to talk about than how fucked your family is and how your constant miscommunication and evasion is fricken toxic. I...actually, hold the phone, full bladder and identity shit don’t mix. I’ll be right back, ‘kay?”

“Of course,” Castiel attempted to allow graciously, but he sounded disgruntled. He hated how alone he felt as Dean shimmied off the bed and hated himself for feeling alone over something so inane.
Don’t I have better things to worry about then how profoundly absent Dean is when he’s not actually absent at all? Dean thinks I’m not an alpha? What the hell does that mean? Why would Gabriel, and now Dean, ever suppose anything so preposterous? Of course I’m an alpha. I have a knot. I get ruts. It’s coded into my DNA. It doesn’t get any simpler than that.

But I don’t want to be on top in any sexual situation. I feel weird, off, when my knot is touched, or when it swells, and sickened at the prospect of actually knotting someone. I love being a bottom, and love being knotted. I get off when Dean calls me ‘his bitch,’ ‘his whore,’ ‘his omega.’ I’m not competitive, or domineering, or aggressive.

Yeah, and those are all stereotypes that don’t reflect how actual alphas behave. Within the presentation types of ‘alpha,’ ‘beta,’ and ‘omega,’ there are a range of behaviors. I’m not taken aback when I meet an omega who asserts themselves, because the omegaites have spent two generations fighting back against the idea that being an omega inherently means being demure, cowardly, weak, or desperate to be dominated. Likewise, if another alpha comes to me and says, “I’m an alpha but I’m not aggressive,” I’d not judge them for that, because personality is discrete from both gender and presentation.

I am an alpha.

“Ugh...so...we doin’ this?” asked Dean, emerging from the bathroom, raking a hand through his messy hair. Castiel’s stomach lurched and uncomfortable pressure from his bladder intruded on his awareness. Grumbling indistinctly, he fumbled free of the blankets and stumbled to the bathroom.

Oh for fuck’s sake...don’t pretend I’m like every other alpha I’ve ever met. How uncomfortable did I get, even during puberty, when the other alphas would talk about masturbation? From the most domineering to the most submissive, one and all they were excited about their knots, desperate to find some slick ass to jam themselves into, and it was all I could do to pretend to enough enthusiasm not to arouse their suspicions.

I don’t know what suspicions I was afraid they’d have, but I was afraid to admit that I didn’t feel the same way they did.

I wanted to have sex.

I just didn’t see the least appeal in sex the way they described it.

Relieving himself physically in the facilities did nothing to relieve the disorder in his thoughts, and he returned to the bedroom unprepared to engage in whatever discussion Dean thought they should have. Such thoughts had always plagued Castiel – he was different from his peers and to succeed, to meet Naomi’s expectations, he had to strive to compensate for his inadequacies as an alpha.

He’d never let himself think past that, never let himself consider any explanation save that there was something wrong with him that must be fixed.

Judging by the pensive look on Dean’s face, the way he sat perched, cross-legged, on the edge of the bed, Castiel suspected he’d have no choice but to consider his doubts now.

No. I have a choice. I can leave. Our relationship would end. I could resume my life as it’s always been, pick up the burdens I’ve always carried, attend my meeting with Naomi this afternoon and supplicate myself.

Watching Dean watching him, Castiel could think of no prospect less appealing. He didn’t want to go home – ever, if he had a choice – and he didn’t want to leave Dean. He didn’t want to see April
or his mother. He didn’t want to go into work at IADB. He didn’t want to lose the nascent progress he’d made figuring out who he was.

He was simultaneously curious and absolutely terrified by what Dean might have meant about Castiel’s alphahood.

But I can’t break with the family. Wouldn’t it be easier for me to end things here? Or, at worst, to maintain the balancing act I’ve sustained the past few months? Juggling IADB and April and Dean? However uncomfortable I am with infidelity, April doesn’t care if I liaise with Dean; I can’t see her feelings changing when we’re wed. Things can continue as they’ve been, no modification needed.

Except I want things in my life to change.

Dean’s made it clear; it’s not enough that I try to do better, that I continue to wallow in the existence that makes me miserable while lamely protesting that I wish things would change, while I pathetically dream of rescue from without when I do nothing to aid myself. If I claim I want to change and improve myself, I have to show actual progress toward doing so, not stop at whining that ‘I tried’ while my behavior hasn’t altered. Too often, I see Dean as an object, treat him as a peon, behave as if he is beneath me. I hate that about myself, and it is at stark odds with how much I care about him.

If I want to change, I have to change – face myself fearlessly, face my family fearlessly, be my own knight in shining armor...my own Richard Gere.

If I don’t want to change, if I don’t want to face the parts of myself that I’ve hid from, if I don’t want to stop taking the inadequacy I feel within and projecting it outward...I don’t have to change. No one, least of all Dean, is forcing me to alter myself. I am free to gather my belongings and leave at any time.

If I choose not to change, I will lose Dean.

Dean waited patiently.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Castiel murmured. He flushed as he realized he’d spoken aloud and cagily looked up at Dean. To Castiel’s amazement, Dean shot him a gentle smile.

“I’m not sure ya ever ‘had me,’ Cas,” said Dean. “But in as much as ya ever did...you definitely haven’t lost me. Yet. And apparently now I gotta school you on gender and sexuality and shit. Way above my pay grade, but I’ll try.”

Relief had Castiel nodding slowly. Glancing around the room, he once again assessed his options on where to sit. The prospect of settling onto the bed opposite Dean, facing him, meeting his eyes, was terrifying. A lifetime under Naomi’s tutelage had built Castiel’s internal defenses to the thickness of fortress walls; meeting Dean’s beautiful gaze was like withstanding an assault by a bevy of catapults.

“One request?” asked Castiel, ashamed of his plaintiveness. I shouldn’t be embarrassed. It’s okay to show vulnerability. It’s okay for Dean to understand that I have needs and that I appreciate his consideration and efforts to meet those needs.

You know, Castiel, that thought right there? All the ones I have like that? That kinda touchy-feely nonsense is why Gabriel and Dean are doubting my alphahood. ‘It’s okay to show vulnerability,’ huh? That’s nonsense. An alpha doesn’t show vulnerability. An alpha doesn’t have emotional needs. An alpha is strong, self-sufficient, bold. An alpha is a leader. An alpha provides emotional support, they don’t request it. Or at least, that’s how a successful alpha acts.
I’ve known I wasn’t a successful alpha since I was 14. There’s no point in trying to pretend otherwise now.

Dean still waited patiently, calmly, open to whatever request Castiel had.

With a deep, heartening breath, Castiel tumbled onto the bed and held out his arms – a request, a plea, that he couldn’t put into words.

I know he wants me to talk, needs me to talk, but let this gesture be enough for now, please...please...

Dean caught his lip between his teeth and watched Castiel impassively for so long that Castiel let his arms drop, mirroring the sinking in his chest. He curled in on himself, unable to watch Dean any longer.

“One counter request?” Dean mimicked finally. Castiel blinked up at him. “Can you at least try to use your words, Cas? Explain to me what you’re gettin’ at right now? No judgment. Ain’t sayin’ no. But expectin’ me to guess ain’t fair, ‘specially when I could really fuck things up if I guess wrong. Just try.”

Try...

…not claim to try while I in truth do nothing. Actually try. God, this is so much harder than it should be.

“I...” Castiel licked his lips.

Why is this hard? What I want is so clear in my head. All I have to do is state my desires aloud. If this were a conversation with Naomi – if, while speaking with her, I tried to get away with being this vague – she would insist that I tell her my thoughts. I’ve been translating my thought processes into vocal justification for years.

No. Don’t pretend that explaining to Dean is the same as conversing with Naomi. Naomi would insist on hearing my thoughts, but if I told her the truth, expressed all my hesitancies and uncertainties, she would grow wroth and punish me. It took me thirty years to learn what Naomi expected to hear and how best to provide answers that would meet her expectations.

I balk now because I have no idea what Dean expects to hear, not the least clue how to meet his unknown expectations, and the prospect of him growing angry with me is no less terrifying than the prospect of Naomi punishing me for my deviance.

The insight was so powerful that Castiel could do nothing but stare at Dean for a moment, his mouth hanging open.

“Cas?”

But I have no reason to think that Dean will grow angry with me. Remember when he asked me about apiaries, and encouraged me, and helped me imagine a garden? Dean isn’t Naomi. Yes, his good opinion matters to me, and that’s why I’m fearful, but Dean has never given me the least reason to think he expects me to conform with a mythical version of myself that he’s arbitrarily concocted. Dean meets me where I am, accepts me however I present myself.

When Dean asks me what I think...he wants to know what I think...

“The prospect of speaking with you face to face is daunting to me, especially because when you are far away – even arms-length – the distance seems insurmountable, and I fall quickly into the belief
that you are intentionally denying me succor and take that as evidence that you don’t care for me,” Castiel explained in a rush. Euphoria washed over him. “I’m aware that that’s not what you’ve said and that rarely does your actual behavior jibe with that interpretation of events but when I am stuck in that mindset, I easily read into every nuance of your expression, every twitch of your body language, every shift of your voice, in search of confirmation of my pre-conceptions regarding you. My silence just now was my coming to the realization that I do this because when my mother asks for my thoughts on important matters she never wants to know what I think. Instead, what she is actually asking is for me to analyze the situation, use my knowledge of her to determine what she would want me to think, and to reply with that falsehood. To speak the truth at such a moment is to fail her test. I’ve grown so conditioned to dealing with her that I take that approach to such questions automatically, which renders honest replies impossible, and I only now, while attempting to explain myself to you, realized that I do that. Taken as a whole, it’s been an extremely disorienting few moments.”

“Holy shit, Cas,” Dean breathed, and broke into a smile like the damn sun coming out after so long beneath overcast skies that Castiel had forgotten what warmth and brightness were like. Castiel giggled maniacally. “Fuck...sure I’ll hold you while we talk. And...and thank you. For tellin’ me all that. You really are listening to me.” As Dean spoke, he flopped down on the bed and made a strange motion, like a snake side-winding, to cover the distance between them. He gathered Castiel up in his arms like Castiel was worthy of being held, like Castiel was precious, like Castiel mattered, and Castiel laughed harder.

“I...I’m trying,” he managed.

“No, see, the difference is – you’re succeeding,” Dean corrected. “That was...that was fuckin’ incredible.”

Affection replaced Castiel’s humor so abruptly that his stomach flip-flopped, and he threw his arms around Dean and clung to him. “Thank you, Dean,” he mouthed against the fabric of Dean’s shirt. Dean’s arms enfolded him, one stroking down his back, and Dean shimmied a leg between his. With Castiel’s revelation, with the clarity the moment brought, desires and yearnings came to him, clear as the bell of a buoy sounding over still waters. “I want to succeed. I want to improve myself. I want to be a man worthy of you.”

“Don’t put me up on a pedestal, now,” cautioned Dean. “I got plenty of baggage.”

“I know that,” Castiel said. “You’re still a sex worker.”

“Two steps forward, three steps back,” Dean sighed. “How many times do I gotta tell you, Cas – being a sex worker isn’t baggage. It’s my job and I do it ‘cause I like it.”

“Jealous,” snapped Castiel petulantly. His emotions shifted so quickly he could scarce keep up.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Dean replied, but the words lacked the edge of anger that Dean’s past job-related remonstrance had featured. For now, Castiel had bought himself sufferance, and at least he’d been honest when he admitted to jealousy. “Right. So. Uh. We have got a lot to sort through. Never thought the gender and sexuality stuff would be the easy part of this convo but...kinda lookin’ like it might be. So let’s have at. ‘Cause I think getting you clear on this whole ‘alpha’ thing will help you process the rest. What, if anything, do you know about, uh, let’s call ‘um ‘progressive views on gender, sexuality and presentation?’”

“I’m not socially conservative,” said Castiel with a frown. “There are men and women, of course, and there are people who are transsexual and feel they are ‘trapped’ in the wrong body, and medical interventions are available for such people. As to sexuality, some people are heterosexual, and some
homosexual, and while my mother insists bisexuality is a myth, she doesn’t know that Gabriel identifies as bi. I’m inclined to believe his self-assessment over my mother’s prejudiced insistence. Further, despite the old-fashioned notion that omegas are more likely to be women, that’s been proven statistically untrue; in fact, gender and presentation type are not correlated. Women and men are equally likely to be born as alpha, beta, or omega – as my very alpha mother is imminently fond of reminding people – and further there’s also no correlation between presentation and some people’s perceived transsexuality.”

“Geeze, Cas, sound like you’re given me a damn book report, and worse, it’s a book report based on sources that are like twenty fricken years out of date.” Dean’s eye roll was audible. Castiel scowled. He thought he’d done pretty well! The Novak-Shurleys set the tone of social discourse in Palmeton, and they were known for their liberal views. Heck, when they’d hired Mr. Alfred, he’d been Ms. Alfred, and Naomi had argued with Blue Cross Blue Shield, the company health provider, until they agreed to cover the treatments Mr. Alfred needed to accomplish his transition. “I don’t know where to fricken begin…”

A single finger poked from Dean’s balled hand into Castiel’s abdomen. “Don’t say ‘transsexual.’ It’s rude, and implies that being trans has anything to do with sexuality, which it doesn’t. Gender, sexuality, and presentation may be linked, but they ain’t necessarily, and the preferred term is transgender.” A second finger poked Castiel. “The term for that ‘born in the wrong body’ thing is ‘dysphoria,’ and from what my trans friends have told me, it’s a feeling like...like the parts you’ve got don’t fit with your perception of yourself. So, for a transgendered woman, that might mean having a dick, and finding that weird, and thinkin’ that in a perfect world, she’d have a vagina instead.”

Or having a knot...and thinking instead I’d rather make slick?

No – Dean’s talking about gender, not presentation, and he just said they’re not the same thing. Listen, Castiel.

But wait, what Dean’s saying doesn’t make sense. My mother is a woman, and an alpha – she has a penis, and that doesn’t make her a man...

“I’ll give ya some bonus points on believing in bisexuality, man, biphobes piss me right the fuck off, but ya still missed some sexualities,” Dean continued, poking Castiel with a third finger. “So we’ve got heterosexuals – people who only feel sexual attraction toward people the opposite gender—”

“I know what a heterosexual is, Dean.”

“—and/or people of the opposite presentation type, if we’re talkin’ an alpha or an omega,” Dean ignored Castiel’s interjection. “Homosexuals, same thing, but for the same gender or presentation. Bisexuals, attracted to men and women, but most people who choose that term these days still prefer the opposite presentation type, though it gets muddled if they’re a beta like your bro is. Pansexuals, attracted to all genders and all presentation types. That’s me – honestly, if a person’s got a pulse, I’m there. Don’t get me wrong, I got preferences – dark hair is sexy as fuck, and I’d probably pick a dude over a chick if all else were equal, that kinda thing – but in the end, I like havin’ sex, and I’m not too picky who I have it with. I’m attracted to, literally, almost every single damn person I see walkin’ down the street, and would happily fuck nearly any of ‘um. Now – that’s not to say pansexuals are promiscuous, I’m talking about me, and seriously, don’t take me as the archetype of...anything. You with me so far?”

“Transgendered people experience dysphoria,” Castiel dutifully repeated back. “And there are heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, and pansexuals.”
“Good – there are also asexuals, they ain’t attracted to *anyone*, though they might still like sex, and there’s polysexuals, and there’s others, but those are the most common. There aren’t just cis-male, cis-female, trans-male, and trans-female, neither. Some folks are agender – they’re not male or female – or genderfluid, or genderqueer. It’s a continuum, okay?”

“Of course it is.” The longer Dean lectured, the more Castiel wondered what his point was. The information was interesting and made sense considering the range of sexual and gender expression that Castiel had seen among people he’d known, but aside from Dean’s revelation of his own perceived sexuality, none of it seemed relevant.

Really? None of it? I’ve always been perfectly comfortable in my own skin? I’ve never felt like there was something wrong with my being an alpha?

Give it a rest, Castiel, that’s not what Dean’s saying. Stop desperately looking for salvation and absolution. I’m broken, always have been, and always will be.

Dean pressed a fourth finger into Castiel’s skin. “As a bonus, you completely left out romanticism, which is also a spectrum. Take everything I said for sexualities, and replace the word ‘sexual’ with ‘romantic’ – heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, aromantic – just cause you’re sexually attracted to a gender or presentation type, don’t mean you’re romantically attracted to them. Some folks would happily date a woman but only want to sleep with dudes, or vice versa, and then there are folks like me, who say fuck it to all that romantic mumbo-jumbo. Aro and proud, my friend, and please spare me the bouquets of roses.”

“I have no idea what you…”

Trailing off, Castiel frowned and considered what Dean had told him. What was romanticism? A desire for candlelit dinners? A yearning to be swept off one’s feet? Or to be the one sweeping someone else off their feet? All the things April craved from her relationship with Castiel, all the things Castiel bemoaned Dean’s disinterest in, were romantic inclinations. As a teenager, while Castiel had found romantic comedies puzzling, Anna had gushed about them, cooing her dreams of a happy future with her ‘one and only,’ her noble prince. The older she got, the less she talked about such things – her hesitations led Castiel to suspect that Anna might prefer a princess but was afraid to admit it – but Anna valued the meringue ball gowns and big church weddings, believed there was a ‘one’ for her, longed to be swept off her feet. And while April clearly had no delusions about soulmates, she adored the trappings of being in a relationship and enthusiastically demanded chocolates and flowers and date nights. Once, Castiel might have thought he was aromantic, had he known it was an option, but during his courtship with April and in the course of his relationship with Dean, he’d come to see the appeal of romantic gestures, and to equate their absence with a lack of affection.

*Dean views sexual relationships as ‘no strings attached’ and doesn’t feel romantic attraction. With that in mind…is he capable of caring for me?*

*Don’t be ridiculous. Dean has friends, so he’s clearly capable of caring for other people. And if I’m a friend with whom he also has sex and who he enjoys the company of more than his other friends…then while it’s not romantic attachment, it’s clearly attachment…but I don’t know that he feels that way about me. Mostly he seems to enjoy the sex.*

“I think I understand,” Castiel said at length, repressing his disappointment.

*He’s never said he doesn’t care. I’m reading too much into this. Listen to what he says – don’t assume based on my inferences.*
“Time was, I thought you might be aro,” Dean added, “But your jealousy stuff and exclusivity nonsense means you ain’t exactly – a spectrum, like I said.” Dean shook his head, or at least that’s how Castiel interpreted the rub of skin against his back. “And not to give you the idea that jealousy is specifically a sign of romanticism ’cause it’s not at all. Jealousy isn’t romantic, and being aro doesn’t put a moratorium on monogamy, but…it’s complicated. And speaking of complicated – because all this gender and sexuality shit wasn’t muddled enough, then we get into presentation, which throws a wrench into everything, since some people are only attracted to specific combinations of gender and presentation – a male omega only interested in female alphas, for example – whereas other people are less picky – a beta who likes women but doesn’t care if they are alpha, beta or omega – and so forth. Someone might be homosexual as regards gender but heterosexual in their presentation preferences, or vice versa, and honestly, we just need a whole ‘nother set of terms but no one’s stepped with anything viable. It doesn’t matter, I guess, none of that’s what I’m gettin’ at now.” Dean’s pinky jammed into Castiel’s belly. “Just like some folks are transgendered, some folks are transpresenting. And folks who are transpresenting often get dysphoria, same as folks who are transgendered.”

“That makes sense,” Castiel conceded, pretending he didn’t understand Dean’s implication.

“You’re gonna make me spell this out? No flashes of inspiration? Nada?”

What does he want me to say? What does he want me to admit to? Just that I’m as broken as I always feared...

...no, that’s not what he’s saying. I don’t think. He’s saying...he’s saying there are people who are uncomfortable with their bodies who take steps to change things, that with modern medicine being what it is, if we feel that the hand we were dealt by biology is the wrong hand, we’re capable of changing that.

No, he didn’t say that either.

I don’t understand.

“Spell it out,” Castiel replied.

“Fine,” said Dean. “Castiel Emmanuel James Novak Shurley, I think you’re transpresenting.”

Is that what Gabriel thought too? Did he know about all this? I’ve heard of transgendered people – known Alfie both pre- and post-transition – though the terminology I knew was outdated and inappropriate. If ‘transpresenting’ is real, why have I never heard of it?

“Why?”

“I’m not in your head, so I can only guess based on shit I’ve seen you do, but...” Dean shrugged, jostling Castiel against the bed, bringing their bodies closer together. A wash of Dean’s scent struck Castiel and tension he’d hardly noticed ratcheting up in his chest dissipated. He inhaled deeply, lavishing his senses in the aroma he adored – did I really just think...? Yes, I did... – and eased into Dean’s embrace. Dean was still present, still close, still supportive. Dean said bluntly what he meant, as Castiel had hoped, and there was no condemnation in his supposition, no judgment, and no accompanying retreat. Based merely on body language, Dean would cradle Castiel close regardless of his presentation type.

But what would my mother and father say? What would my brothers and sister say? What would my fiancée say? They’d all think I was crazy. Dean can’t be right. I can’t be like he says. I’m an alpha. I have a knot...
...that I hate...

...and a dick...

...that I can’t imagine thrusting into anyone, ever, for any reason...

...and I don’t produce slick...

...and how many times in my life have I wished that I did?

...I can’t yet admit it aloud to Dean, but there’s something to what he says. Or there might be. It’s possible. Maybe.

Maybe I should have heard Gabriel out last week when he tried to tell me he didn’t think I was an alpha. The whole family wouldn’t condemn me...just the ones I already don’t get along with...

...so everyone but Gabriel...

“You once had a meltdown because I touched your knot, dude, and had another when I suggested that you might knot me,” Dean said. “Loving anal...that’s suggestive, but honestly it don’t mean much either way. I’m an alpha, for sure, not the least doubt in my mind, love my damn knot, love when partners stroke it, love tying it in your fuckin’ gorgeous ass, but I also love when people fuck me. It feels good. Most alphas won’t admit that ‘cause society says it’s oh-so dirty-wrong-bad to get pegged, but trust me – I work in the business of secret desires and alphas lovin’ gettin’ fucked up the ass or vagina or both is one of the worst kept secret desires in all of fricken creation. So the fact that you like my knot stretching you out? Not particularly diagnostic. But the way you react whenever your knot gets involved? I ain’t trans, but I’ve got friends who are, and that’s exactly the kinda shit they describe when they talk about feelin’ dysphoric. So, that’s why I’m tellin’ ya all this, why I think it applies to you, but I dunno for sure. Only you know what’s goin’ through your head. And before you reply – ya don’t gotta have an ‘aha!’ moment like ya did earlier, and ya don’t gotta tell me even if you do, and ya don’t gotta know right away. Okay?”

What, now we’re going for ‘special snowflake’ status? It’s not enough that I’m unhappy and ungrateful to be an alpha, now I’m going to pretend that my dissatisfaction with the body I have indicates that I have some kind of disorder?

“Okay,” Castiel murmured.

Dean and Gabriel are wrong about me. I’m not an omega. No matter how much I might sometimes wish I was an omega, I’m not. That desire...it’s just cowardice speaking, just reluctance, just denial. It’s a meager expression of my longing for a different life, the knowledge that if I were an omega, Naomi’s expectations would be different and I’d be relieved of this soul-crushing pressure. I wouldn’t have to be her perfect alpha son, with the perfect family and the perfect job, if I wasn’t an alpha.

What if I had been born an omega? Naomi’s expectations wouldn’t have radically different. Instead of marrying a beta or an omega and knotting them to produce lots of babies, she’d have arranged a marriage to an alpha who would knot me and produce lots of babies. My heats would have been supervised by a doula, and my brothers would have stood guard to protect me. I would likely still have been pushed toward working at IADB – father does, after all, and he’s a beta and a child-bearer – but in a lesser role, to reflect the leave time I’d obviously have to take for the birth of my children. Or, in the name of forging a business alliance, I might have been sent to work at whatever financial institution my husband or wife owned, as April is being sent to our family.
Being Naomi’s perfectly obedient omega doesn’t sound more appealing than being Naomi’s perfectly obedient alpha.

Except...

...I could be with an alpha like Dean. I’d have people to care for me during my heats. I’d be able to get pregnant and have children, my own children, from my body.

I wish...

The longer the silence stretched out between them, the more Castiel felt the weight of Dean’s expectations that Castiel produce a reply, some kind of reply.

No. Dean told me I didn’t have to answer.

But I want to answer.

What do I want to say?

Castiel let the silence linger, focused instead on how nice it was to have Dean curled around him. Dean’s fingers no longer enumerated points against his skin; they stroked down Castiel’s belly, calluses snagging on the cloth of his undershirt and tickling at the skin beneath. A soft noise accented each of Dean’s exhalles, almost a hum, almost a purr, and tingled light, pleasant vibrations through Castiel. There was no eroticism to their proximity, and there didn’t need to be.

Dean’s my alpha. His mere presence is a comfort. His approval is an anchor. His strength is a support.

And I’m...

...could I be...

...could I actually be...

Dean’s omega?

Wishful thinking, Castiel. Delusional, dangerous thinking.

“I don’t know,” Castiel finally admitted. “Some of what you say...it’s...suggestive...reminiscient...of things I’ve thought, things I’ve experienced. But how would I know? If I was...what you say...”

There’s an easy way to know. The answer is patently obvious. I’m not transpresenting. I won’t go so far as to say such a thing doesn’t exist...though I’m skeptical...but to hear about the newest, fanciest identity politics and automatically assume they apply to me? That’s the kind of nonsense desperate teenagers do. I’m an adult, not a child, and I know who I am.

Now that’s laughable. How often have I lamented that I have no idea who I am? But now my bastard of a brain trots out the “I know who I am” argument, what, because it happens to suit the moment?

That’s Naomi talking, not me.

I know some people are trans. That it might apply to me seems outlandish, weirdly optimistic – an instant cure-all for what ails me. Worried I’m broken? Here, try the snake oil, it’s a panacea, poof! You’re an omega!
...wait, is there medicine that would make me an omega? Where do I get it? Do I need a prescription? How—?

The wild hope that stole Castiel’s breath was astonishing, sudden and all encompassing, the promised ‘aha’ moment, more profound than his earlier one. If there were such a medicine...if Castiel could obtain, if Castiel could take it, if Castiel could change...he would want to. He’d want to try.

_Becoming an omega won’t make me happy. Like I said – snake oil. Presto chango. Life’s never that easy._

_No, but maybe in tandem with other changes..._

_Like what? The rest of my life is set. I am Naomi’s son. I work at IADB. I will marry April._

_If I were an omega, that would have to alter. Naomi wouldn’t let me marry April._

_Naomi wouldn’t let me change at all._

The excitement that had flared through Castiel died as thought a bucket of ice water had been dumped on the flames. Not even an ember remained. Feeling hollow, Castiel let out a slow breath and deflated.

“Can you tell me what just happened, Cas?” asked Dean gently.

“Even if...even if you’re right...even if I’d want to be a...given the chance...it doesn’t matter,” said Castiel, defeated through and through. “Changing superficial things about my identity won’t change my life for the better. In this instance, it would change my life for the worse. As progressive as my mother likes to _pretend_ to be on these kinds of topics...being transgendered or gay is something perfectly appropriate for _other_ people’s children, but we Novaks are above such petty forms of acting out. Healthy, fulfilled people don’t _do_ such things. Don’t you know, it’s secretly a reflection on the parents, or a sign of mental illness in the child, or, or...we support it from afar, offering condescending support to those whose families are affected, all the while patting each other on the backs that such abnormality has no place among the Novak-Shurleys because we were raised right. If I went to my mother and attempted to explain my misgivings...” Castiel shuddered. It was inconceivable that any variation of _I might be an omega_ would ever leave his mouth in Naomi’s presence. She would...God, Castiel couldn’t fathom what she’d do, but it would be devastating and quash any chance of Castiel exploring alternative presentations. She’d be beyond livid, dangerous in her wrath, implacable in her determination to wipe out his deviance.

And reflecting on her reaction didn’t change that Castiel _wished_ he had the option to change himself and explore how it might feel if he were an omega.

“What am I going to do, Dean?” he said hopelessly.

“What do you want to do, Dean?” Dean replied.

A cacophony of answers sounded in Castiel’s mind. At least, when he asked himself that question, he was no longer met by resounding silence, but the overlapping replies were incomprehensible and frightening and contradictory. Unable to formulate them into a meaningful answer, he shook his head.

“Alright, then – I got a question,” said Dean. “Your mom’s a bitch. You’ve established that. _Again._ So – if you think there’s a chance I’m right, and you’re an omega, why does Naomi Novak’s opinion matter?”
The answer was so obvious that Castiel couldn’t believe Dean had felt the question worth positing. “Because she’s my mother?”

“...and?”

“She’s Naomi Novak,” said Castiel. “She’s...she’s one of the most powerful women in the world, in the country, in the banking industry. She’s rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Time put her on the cover, named her Alpha of the Year and said she was the woman with the Midas touch. And she’s my mother!”

“And?” Dean repeated.

“I work for her!” Castiel protested. “I...live at her house! She...she’s arranged my whole life.”

“And?”

Castiel’s jaw worked but no words came.

He didn’t have an answer.

“Do you like working at Angle Bank?” asked Dean when Castiel said nothing.

“You know I don’t.”

“And do you like living at your mother’s mansion?”

“My current living arrangements are better than they used to be,” Castiel replied without conviction.

“Ringing endorsement, sign me up,” joked Dean. “And it sounds like you get along with your family great, right? Doting mother, protective older brothers, a devoted fiancée that you can’t wait to get home to?”

“Dean...”

“What, did I slather on too much sarcasm? My bad.” Dean didn’t sound apologetic – nor should he, Castiel conceded. Discounting Gabriel and Anna, Dean’s assessment of Castiel’s living situation was apt. Too apt. If Castiel decided he’d had enough of Naomi, Michael and Luke’s behavior, Gabriel wouldn’t fault him, and from what Gabriel said, Anna wouldn’t be coming back regardless of what decision Castiel made. Heck, Gabriel hated their family, so much so that he was helping Anna escape, so much so that he was public and vocal in his condemnation. Castiel had no idea why Gabriel stayed, and had assumed that Gabriel felt the same sense of obligation that Castiel did, but now he wondered.

If Castiel went to Gabriel and said he wanted out...

...what would Gabriel say?

The only way to find out was to have the conversation.

More serious discussion – more confrontation – more honesty offered with no clue how it will be received – but if I’m to have anything I want, I need to talk these things out. I don’t need to be afraid of Gabriel. I don’t need to hold myself back from him, any more than I need to hold myself back from Dean.

“Lemme guess – you’re dead broke, that’s why you stay,” Dean suggested. “Spent that six figure salary and seven figure bonus I know you got on eight balls, hookers, and hooch?”
“Those sounded like words but their meaning is beyond me,” said Castiel, shifting uncomfortably.

Dean’s hand curled over Castiel’s heart.

_No matter how condemned I feel right now...this is his way of being supportive. He’s here for me. He does care. His way of caring is...abrasive...but...but he’s not wrong about me nor about my situation._

“You don’t know what a hooker is?” asked Dean with pretend shock.

“My bank account is the only thing that’s my own,” Castiel acknowledged. “And its contents are...sizeable. Money isn’t an issue.”

“So...just to be clear...you hate your job, you hate where you live, you hate your family, you hate your fiancée, you have no friends outside of work, you’re loaded with money, and you’re thinkin’ maybe the time has come for some good ol’ fashioned self-exploration but you don’t have the freedom to do it?”

“That is a concise description of the multitude of issues I face at the moment, yes.”

“Then why do you stay?”

“Huh?”

“Cas – what the hell are you doing? You could go anywhere, do anything, and instead you just...sit at that desk, day in and day out. And you’re _miserable_. What’s the fucking point?”

“I have no choice! Hell, Dean, you think I’d be doing this if I had any other options?” demanded Castiel, temper rising. It was easy for Dean to _say_ that Castiel’s situation was simple, but it wasn’t. Naomi was his family, and he’d striven a lifetime to meet her expectations. He couldn’t just...

...Anna was leaving...

...he couldn’t _just_...

...just _go_...

...could he?

“Naomi would...”

If he tried to leave, she’d be so angry. She’d stop him.

“You’re not a boy any longer,” said Dean, more gently. His touches were soothing, but Castiel couldn’t reclaim the ease he’d felt earlier. “She can’t _actually_ control you. She doesn’t need to. She’s controlled you so long, you no longer think you’ve got a choice – you control yourself _for_ her. Cas, you _do_ have a choice. Your money’s safe from her, right?”

“It is,” said Castiel weakly. “Sort of. That’s...that’s the one thing I’ve managed to keep out of her control. She can access the accounts, but my deposits aren’t with IADB.”

“Okay – first thing you gotta do? Get on the phone pronto and tell your banker she’s not allowed to touch your cash.” For the first time all conversation, Dean’s voice grew gruff with urgency and he leaned up and grabbed Castiel’s phone. “Now, Cas.”

“But if I do that, she’ll hear about it!”
“She won’t – it’s illegal for your bankers to go against your will,” said Dean. “If you tell them she doesn’t have permission to access information about your accounts, they have to honor that or you can sue their pants off.”

“But the bank I chose is loosely affiliated with...I mean...she’s on the Board,” Castiel protested. The phone was a lead weight in his hand, over-hot and impossible for him to lift. “If I initiate this...she’ll know in minutes, Dean. Illegality aside, information travels. And it’s Sunday. I won’t be able to get anyone on the line.”

“Bullshit,” said Dean. “You work every Sunday, and I refuse to believe you’d select a wealth manager who doesn’t do the same. Quit making excuses and make the fuckin’ call, Cas.”

“I’m not...I’m not ready for this!”

Dean took a deep breath, an obvious, vocal attempt to calm himself. “Cas. Look. This shit is hard. Questioning your ma terrifies you, and from what Gabe has said, I get why. You don’t need to break with your family. You don’t have to quit your job. You don’t have to break off your engagement. You don’t have to do any of this stuff, not now, not ever, not if you don’t want to, but if you think there’s even a chance that you’ll wake up one day and want something else outta life, you have got to make this phone call. If Naomi can impoverish you with a single voicemail, she really does own your ass. As long as your accounts are yours, you’ve got the freedom to make those other decisions whenever you’re ready. But if they’re not...”

He’s right.

Oh God.

And why did she ever let me put the accounts with another bank in the first place? It always seemed weird, always seemed out of character...she probably guessed how I’d hem and haw, guess how I’d debate, and knew she’d be able to make a move before I’d ever make a decision.

She already knows I’m with Dean, is already planning to issue some sort of ultimatum when I go to visit her this afternoon.

It’s probably already too late. She’s probably anticipated me and already made the call.

Hands trembling, breath coming in broken pants, Castiel shakily navigated his phone interface and brought up the contact information for his banker.

“You can do this, Cas.”

Terror had Castiel’s heart racing. Even if he was wrong and Naomi hadn’t anticipated him, calling Dick Roman was a declaration of war.

Naomi declared war on me the moment she initiated my arranged marriage to April.

Naomi declared war on me the day I was born. Literally every interaction for thirty one years has been part of a concerted effort to destroy my personhood. Making this call isn’t initiating the conflict. Making this call would be the first return salvo I’ve managed my entire life.

No – I deserve a little credit – the third return salvo. The first was insisting the account be outside IADB in the first place. The second was visiting Dean, getting to know Dean, caring for Dean. And for my next trick...

Castiel hit the call button and switched on the speaker phone. The brash rings filled the room, each
one jolting through Castiel as fear wound him taut, only his skin to keep his nervousness from exploding to fill his surroundings. Dean curled close around him, mouthing at Castiel’s shoulder, silent and supportive.

Click.

“Dick Roman,” answered the investment banker. “What can I do for you this morning, Mr. Novak-Shurley?”

“Good morning, Mr. Roman,” Castiel replied. “Does my mother still have permission to access, modify, and withdraw from my accounts?”

“Of course she does,” said Roman brightly. “At your request, and hers.”

“What would be involved in changing her status?” asked Castiel.

“What modifications would you like made?” Roman countered. He spoke with the suaveness of a used car salesman, but he was savvy and intimately familiar with the politics of the banking industry. An undertone as he asked the question confirmed Castiel’s fears, that merely raising the suggestion was big news and Roman would act in his own financial best interest rather than risk being scooped by another banker.

Once I say the words…

Castiel hesitated.

…there’s no going back…

Dean’s lips spread apart and his tongue lapped at Castiel’s scent gland.

What do I want?

Castiel hesitated.

I don’t know.

Warm contentment diffused through his shoulder, down his back, to the tips of his fingers, to the ends of his toes.

But I do not want my life to go back to how it was.

“I’m revoking Naomi Novak’s permission to access my accounts,” said Castiel decisively. The clack-clack of typing cluttered through the phone mouthpiece. “And anyone else she has authorized granted her permission to. The only person entitled to information about my finances is myself. If my mother, or father, or brothers, or anyone, call, kindly direct them to speak with me if they have inquiries. That’s what I want, Mr. Roman. How do I accomplish that?”

“It’s done,” Roman said, unctuous smile obvious though Castiel couldn’t see him. “Congratulations, Mr. Novak-Shurley.”

“Why?” asked Castiel. Dean hummed against the gland, sucking harder, and shivers overtook Castiel. He’d done it. He’d really done it.

“Because unless I miss my guess, you’re soon going to be a free man, and that’s commendable,” Roman said. “You know, Roman Enterprises is always hiring.”
“Stick to banking,” Castiel retorted. “And leave the suppositions for your guest appearances on ‘Mad Money.’”

“Are you’re granting me permission to disclose this breach of trust amidst the members of the Novak family?” countered Roman, twisting the words to suggest he was making a joke, but with a cutting edge that made Castiel believe him dead serious.

“As I said, the only person with a right to know about my accounts is me, so no,” Castiel replied. He even managed a smile, his bared teeth making it resemble a snarl. Dean’s canines caught on Castiel’s shoulder and he sucked hard enough to bruise. Castiel went rigid, pain and desire and euphoric relief slamming into him. “Good day, Mr. Roman!” he gasped and slammed the button to hang up. His eyes squeezed shut, the intensity of the sensation throttling him ratcheting up, and counted of five seconds. When he opened his eyes again, the screen read Call Ended in large letters and Castiel threw his phone aside. Dean released the pressure on his skin, brushed kittenish licks over the new-made bruise, wrapped a leg around Castiel’s thighs to press Castiel’s ass against Dean’s erection, and latched his lips back onto Castiel’s aching skin, sucking at Castiel aggressively.

“Dean!”

“Sorry,” Dean murmured, rubbing his cock against Castiel’s crack. “Seriously…sorry…watchin’ you be all assertive was really fuckin’ hot…I’ll stop if you want…know I said…no more physical ‘til…but that was a good talk, right?”

“It was,” Castiel groaned, arching his ass into Dean’s rutting hips, arching his neck against Dean’s mouth. “I thought it…we’re okay? Please – please let us be okay. I don’t want to lose you, Dean. You mean…you mean so much to me…”

A wet pop accompanied Dean releasing the suction against Castiel’s neck and cold air rushed between them. With a gasp, Castiel doubled over on himself, arms clutching at his stomach as it twisted into knots.

“Cas…” whispered Dean, with what Castiel thought – hoped – dreamed – was awe in his voice. “Hell, if you don’t want me to fuck your brains out and knot you right the fuck now, speak the hell up or forever hold your peace.”

“Cas…” whispered Dean, with what Castiel thought – hoped – dreamed – was awe in his voice. “Hell, if you don’t want me to fuck your brains out and knot you right the fuck now, speak the hell up or forever hold your peace.”

“We’re okay?” Castiel demanded.

“We’re so much better than okay,” Dean breathed. “Cas…I said you had to change and honest to God I thought you were going to tell me to go fuck myself. And instead…you listened to me. You talked to me. Even when you’re a dick, you keep pushing yourself, trying to do better and understand more. Then you go and say it’s ‘cause you want to be a man that I deserve, and you kick your mom off your accounts like a boss at my suggestion and…” Dean enfolded him, unfolded him, used a knee to spread Castiel’s legs. Hips pivoting, Dean pressed against his ass, ran a hand up Castiel’s chest and spread the fingers of his other hand around the base of Castiel’s cock and Castiel would have given anything, anything, to be slick and wet and ready for Dean to slide into his hole.

…does feeling that way make me an omega?

…does wishing that feeling that way made me an omega…make me an omega?

“You wanna be my omega bitch, Cas?” growled Dean in his ear. Castiel groaned and nodded. “You want me to fuck that wet hole? Knot it? Fill you up with my come? Breed you up ‘til you’re fat with my pups? Mark you so everyone knows you’re mine?”
How much Castiel wanted everything Dean offered flared incandescent arousal across his eyelids, seared through his skin. How did Dean do this to him? Minutes ago he’d been rational, cognizant, intelligent, and now…God, if he was an omega, he’d be on his knees presenting, and as it was…

“Please, Dean, please, please, please, please, please please please please please pleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease…"

Slickened condom enveloping rock-hard cock brushed against Castiel’s ass. He had no idea when Dean had applied lubricant, no idea when their pants had been tugged aside, and couldn’t bring himself to care. Dean’s cock pressed against his hole. Bliss and anticipation rippled outward from the contact, intensifying with every millimeter that Castiel spread. As accustomed to being fucked as Castiel had grown, he gave easily without advanced prep, the coating of lubricant on Dean adequate to moisten him, and Castiel could pretend he was an omega. Instead of fighting that fantasy, for once, for the first time, Castiel surrendered to it.

“Wish I was wet for you,” he gasped.

“You are, babe,” said Dean gruffly. The hand spread about Castiel’s crotch pressed on his pelvis, urged his hips back, and Castiel lifted a leg to make more room for Dean. “Can’t you feel how…” Castiel jerked his hips back and Dean grunted. ‘Fuckin’ slick…and hot…and so tight…’s how I know…no one’s been in this hole but me. Gotta bitch all my own, sexy little omega, slick for my dick, my cock, my knot.” Breathing hard, Dean went still, cock embedded deep in Castiel’s body. Keening noises escaped Castiel as he strained against Dean’s grip, desperate to thrust himself around Dean, but the hand spread around his balls held him still and Dean’s cock spitted him, impaled him, held him in place. He could swear he felt Dean thick in his belly, thick in his stomach, piercing him through in the best possible way.

“But…but you don’t gotta be just mine…I’d share…”

“No,” Castiel whined. “Yours – wanna be…Dean, please…”

Dean rocked his hips back and pressed them forward agonizingly slowly. Shivers wracked Castiel, set his teeth chattering.

“You are mine,” promised Dean. “Havin’ sex with someone else wouldn’t change that. Fact, I was thinkin’ about just that…”

“Not my…not my pimp…” Castiel gritted his teeth and tried to focus. The conversation was dirty talk, but it felt important. Through his haze of bliss Castiel couldn’t hold on to why it was important but he wanted to respond appropriately, wanted to say the things that would get Dean to see what exclusivity meant to him, where his jealousy originated.

“’Course not,” Dean scoffed, snapping his hips forward. Castiel’s thoughts scattered. “But…don’t think you realize…like, I’ve had a lot of sex and sex is never this fuckin’ intense. What we got…this is true mates shit, Cas. Didn’t even…believe in that Hollywood bull… ‘til I fucked you…” How Dean could sound so cognizant while his hips rocked steadily into Castiel’s ass, his cock thrust forcefully inside Castiel’s body, was beyond Castiel. It was all Castiel could do to writhe against the blankets and keep their bodies aligned. “Think you get jealous cause…cause you think what we have…is what I have with everyone who fucks me…it’s not…it’s so not…hell, this is good…so good…so fuckin’…fuck, Cas…” Every pause was a thrust, Dean’s self-control slipping, and listening to Dean lose his mind with every stroke helped Castiel focus, helped him center himself.

Dean had a good point.
“You think if I…if I’m promiscuous…I’ll realize…?” That didn’t sound right to Castiel, but he thought it what Dean was suggesting.

“Not promiscuous,” Dean snapped. With a groan, he rolled Castiel onto his belly and his cock slipped out. Castiel sobbed at the sudden emptiness, but then Dean was atop him, Dean’s dick was pressing into him again, and Castiel’s sobs turned relieved. “You love my cock, right?”

“Yes!”

“Tell me, Cas!”

“Dean!”

With the new angle, Dean fucked him harder, fucked him deeper, and the rationality that seemed briefly in reach scattered again.

“You’re…you’re so big…hot…so hard…God, it feels amazing, I want…I want to feel you forever, Dean, wanna be stretched around you…” The filthy words spilled from him, uncontrollable, and he burst out, “I want to be your omega!”

“That’s right,” Dean murmured, shifting to smother Castiel’s body with his own. Given how lithe Dean was compared to Castiel’s adult bulk, it was absurd that Castiel could feel enveloped, but with Dean’s weight pressing against his back, Dean’s arms on either side of his body, Dean’s legs tangled with his, Dean’s cock deep within him, Castiel felt surrounded and cared for and it was glorious.

*When was the last time anyone other than Dean touched me?*

*April did, but I didn’t want her to.*

*Gabriel does, pats on the shoulder, quick brotherly hugs, but it’s not the same.*

*No one else…*

Dean nipped at the painful spot over Castiel’s scent gland. “You like my big, fat cock?”

“Yes!”

“Cas…”

“I do! You know I do!”

Dean pounded into him, skin slapping at skin, sweat making the thin shirts separating them sodden. Cotton blanket fibers caught at Castiel’s mouth and he licked his lips in a vain effort to remove them, swallowed in a desperate attempt to clear the rasp from his voice. After their long talk and their intense sex, Castiel’s throat was ruined. Everyone he talked to the rest of the day would know and…

…and let them! *Let them know for once that there is something I want and I’m not so afraid of my mother that I didn’t take it!*

“Take it, bitch,” grunted Dean, echoing his thoughts, and Castiel groaned. Dean slammed into him. “Take it…fuck, you look so good all stretched and red around my dick. Would love to see you take something even bigger. Would you like that, Cas?” Dean’s knot caught at his rim, suggesting the feel of a larger cock in Castiel, and he imagined how it would feel to take more. The omegas he’d seen in porn got reamed by alphas whose dicks were the stuff of legend. Dean was well endowed, but that…Castiel had been getting off imagining being the omega in those pornographic films for *fifteen years,*
imagined himself spread wide, imagined himself mewling and begging, known himself twisted and
desired to get fucked anyway and…

…and if Castiel accepted who he was – considered that he might be an omega, that even if he
wasn’t, he wanted a good hard fuck – he could have the huge dick of his dreams.

“I’d love it,” Castiel groaned.

With a snarl that Dean smeared sloppy into Castiel’s neck, Dean’s knot caught. The feel of Dean
enormous within him, pumping come so copious that it sloshed and strained against the condom, was
incredible. Castiel rutted up from the bed, rutted down to rub his cock inadequately against the
blankets, and with a fractured groan he came, clenching around Dean’s dick. Dean made a sound
that Castiel thought might have been a scream if not for being muffled against Castiel’s skin.
Sobbing, Dean curled around him, slid his arms beneath Castiel’s arm pits and around Castiel’s
shoulder, and humped against his ass, incoherent with pleasure.

I do this to him.

And…and if I believe him, no one else does.

Castiel slobbered a moan into the blankets as another surge of pleasure washed over him. Dean
choked and coughed and strained against his back.

I do believe him.

I have no basis for comparison but I have to believe that if sex were always this intense, I’d have
known that – seen signs of it – even what I see in pornography isn’t like this…nothing anyone has
ever described to me is like this…even the tales of prowess I was meant to envy bore little
resemblance to how spectacular being with Dean is.

A soft, vulnerable sound squeaked incongruously from Dean and with a wet slap of skin on skin and
damp cloth on damp cloth, he collapsed, squirming to increase the stimulation.

“How is it always this incredible?” Dean whimpered. He sounded like he’d not meant to speak, like
the words were forced from him in his rapture, and another surge of ecstasy rocked through Castiel.
“Can’t believe I…I thought… I wouldn’t miss you…if you were gone. I would, Cas. I don’t wanna
give you up. Color me selfish, but I want to see you happily fucked out and sated and leaking in my
bed every fucking night, not alone and miserable and surrounded by people you hate.”

Castiel shuddered, imagining waking up to Dean’s delicious smell and gorgeous face and thick knot
every day.

“That…that’d be a dream come true…” he whispered.

“And…and…I wanna give you something I think you’d like…” Dean trailed off, a hopeful note in
his voice, and Castiel waited for him to continue and grew increasingly puzzled when he didn’t.

“Yes?”

“What if…uh…what if I invited someone else to join us?”

Or I’ve had it all wrong and I’m not enough after all. Of course Dean wants me at his side, I’m rich
and well-known and connected. His life will be so much easier if he has my help, willing and
malleable and easily manipulated – and so he tries to divide me from my family, who care about me
and protect me…
God, how am I such an idiot for a pretty boy with a sexy knot? I’m like the worst omega stereotype out there.

“No – no – no – hear me out!” Dean managed, shaking his head. “Hell, I didn’t mean to freak you out. I know how much you like a big dick and I really want you to get that what you and I have got ain’t…ain’t like normal sex…and, and…it’d be fine, I promise, we don’t have to do anything you don’t wanna but I think you’d like it and I wasn’t gonna suggest a stranger, just Benny, he’s a good lay and a beta and he’s got zero interest in anything other than flings, got his heart broken by some chick who ran off with an alpha after saying she loved him and…”

The longer Dean babbled, the more Castiel’s fears and tension dissipated. Castiel had seen Dean at the bank, walking the streets, been with him in bed. He knew Dean wasn’t a naïve boy, nor a dupe, nor unintelligent. But despite Dean’s intelligence and knowledge and experience, he was so guileless when he was worried about something. With Dean, there were none of April’s contrived airs. Dean’s opinions didn’t morph to match Castiel’s, and Dean didn’t pretend to interests he didn’t have in order to impress. At the end of the day, Dean was always Dean, plain and simple. Sometimes he apologized – sometimes he showed interest in the things that Castiel expressed interest in – but Dean didn’t morph into a different person in an effort to be pleasing. For months, Dean’s behavior had been of a piece, part and parcel of Dean’s individuality. He was comfortable in his own skin, happy to grow and learn from Castiel but not willing to fundamentally change himself to be pleasing.

Case in point: Dean refused to stop being a sex worker.

If Dean was courting Castiel – if Dean had an angle, was trying to win him, was trying to take him in, was trying to con him – why would Dean insist on maintaining his autonomy in a job that he knew made Castiel jealous and unhappy?

He wouldn’t.

End of story.

“…but like seriously Benny has got this enormous cock and I think you’d really dig it and if you don’t want to you just gotta say so and come on Cas, give me anything. I’m crackin’ up over here and—”

“It’s fine, Dean,” Castiel interrupted. The serenity in his voice mirrored the serenity drifting peace through his thoughts. “I appreciate the sentiment. The idea of sleeping with someone anonymously for the sake of simply having the experience makes me uncomfortable but I will consider your proposition. If I were to do such a thing, I would want you to be involved.”

“Threesome?” suggest Dean hopefully. “Spitroasting?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Oh, it’s, uh – so, you’d be between us, and you’d have a cock in your mouth, and a cock in your ass – it’s called spitroasting, ya know, like when you’re watchin’ a movie ‘bout Medieval stuff and they have a pig on a stick turning over a fire.”

“Right, a pig on a spit – that makes sense,” Castiel tried to nod but the bed was too solid beneath him and Dean too solid above him. “So I’d be the pig in this scenario?”

“Well, yeah, if you wanted.”

“I thought the idea was to indulge my enjoyment of size…”
“Dude, I know Benny’s a beta but believe me that ‘cock size is linked to presentation’ thing is total BS, Benny’s hung like a goddamn horse,” said Dean fervently.

“I’m not sure if I should be jealous or if I should be concerned that you are intimately acquainted enough with how horses are hung to make such a comparison,” Castiel deadpanned. Dean spluttered for a moment then burst into laughter, shaking against Castiel’s back, grinding him into the mattress, shaking his cock and come-filled condom within Castiel’s body. Tingles of pleasure trailed up Castiel’s body like fingernails skimming over his skin. Only when Dean finally silenced did he add, “I’d prefer you be in me – prefer you knot me.”

“But you don’t even seem into oral – which is weird, by the way, you gotta let me suck you sometime, you’ll like it, I swear – so why would you want Benny’s cock in your mouth?”

“I’m unclear why ‘spitroasting’ is the only permutation of two men using my body that you propose,” said Castiel mildly.

There was a beat of silence and then Castiel felt Dean’s lips spread into an enormous smile against the skin of Castiel’s back.

“I dunno, Cas, you got a pretty tight little hole.” Something dark and lascivious tinged Dean’s voice and he shimmied his hips to emphasize his point. Castiel moaned. “You think you could fit more ‘n one cock in this pert ass?”

“I’m not sure,” Castiel admitted. “But the prospect of finding out intrigues me.”

“Alrighty then,” Dean declared, slapping a hand on the blanket. “I’ll talk to Benny.”

“If I’m willing to try at all, that would be my preferred sexual position,” clarified Castiel.

“ ‘Course, don’t mean to rush you into anything,” reiterated Dean. “Wanna make you feel so damn good that you fuckin’ lose it.”

“I know you won’t push me,” said Castiel. “And I appreciate that. Dean, I…thank you. For being with me, for giving me so many chances, for helping me change and encouraging me to seek what I want. I’m a better person for having met you. I…I appreciate what we have. I’m glad we’re together.”

I’m starting to wonder if the warm glow I feel when you touch me, when you laugh, when we’re together… I’m starting to wonder what that feeling is called, if I can dare call it love…

…but I’m not sure, and saying it aloud would be a bad idea at this juncture. I can’t believe that he’d reciprocate such a sentiment. Didn’t he say he was aromantic? Does being in love count as an expression of romanticism? Is Dean even capable of love?

I’d rather not find out. What we have right now – what we talk about, what we share, is good. I want it to be enough. I never want to push him to a place where he feels he ‘should’ relinquish more of himself than he’s comfortable giving. Dean is Dean, and that’s his greatest virtue, and it’s why I can believe the things he says, believe the affections suggested by his tender gestures and kind touches.

Whatever happens this afternoon when I go to meet my mother…

“I’m very glad I met you, Dean.”

“Same, Cas. Really, really same.”
Dean is enough. What we have together is enough.

And if I do someday want more...we can talk about that when the time comes.
“This is beyond the pale, Castiel.”

Castiel kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I raised you better than this!”

Castiel kept waiting for the euphoric feeling of happiness to fade.

“Treat every meeting as the most important of your career!”

Castiel kept waiting for the ache of his stretched ass and twang of his bruised skin to lead to even the faintest twinge of guilt over his behavior since the previous evening.

“You are late, disheveled, and you reek of whatever low companion you sullied yourself with overnight.”

Shame didn’t come.

“How many times must I teach you that actions have consequences?”

Naomi fumed at him from across her desk, immaculate, her hair tucked in a perfect bun, her makeup done, her suit as fresh and unwrinkled as if she’d just donned it.

“Curatives will be administered promptly and diligently until you learn.”

Unable to muster the least sense that he had, objectively, done anything wrong, Castiel met Naomi’s gaze impassively. His eyes were gritty with fatigue, but he felt...he felt good...

“I have been lenient with you because I believed you had matured enough to be allowed a small degree of latitude, but I see now I have viewed your actions through the rose colored glasses of a mother. I’ll not err so again.”

Utterly depraved, Naomi’s voice castigated him in his head as she castigated him in person, but the words lacked the sting they’d possessed in the past, deprived of their power over him. A disgrace to the family, having sex before marriage, hiring a prostitute, soaking yourself in alpha come!

“What do you have to say for yourself, Castiel?”

She wants to hear my contrition, my apologies, my vows that my deviant behavior will come to an end. She wants to hear that I had wild oats to sow but now that they are out of my system I will return home and be her dutiful little alpha once more. She extracted similar concessions from Luke after he disappeared for several months of frat boy debauchery, and provided he toes the line she’s allowed him indulgences since. Unlike Michael, who I think might actually be as staid and stand up and straight laced as he pretends to be.
And Gabriel...

The longer Castiel stood silent, the more he imagined steam rising from Naomi’s ears. On the surface she was composed, but the pinkness to her cheeks had nothing to do with the blush tastefully daubed over her fine cheekbones. Any answer was better than no answer, but Castiel had no reply to offer his mother.

He wasn’t sorry.

He was *through* playing her game and trying to guess what she wanted to hear.

*She’s capable of anything when she’s this angry.*

Her punishment wouldn’t change regardless of what he said.

*Why did I intentionally provoke her? I could have at least taken a shower first.*

Castiel reeked of Dean so strongly he couldn’t smell his own aroma.

*I’m not ashamed.*

Dean’s scent even over-powered Naomi’s antiseptic scent. It was glorious.

*I’ve no cause to be ashamed. I’m frightened, and have been cowed into the appearance of submission to her will, but I’m not sorry for what I did and I am through telling her the lies she wants to hear.*

“Why should I reply?” he said flatly. “There’s something you *wish* to hear. Instead of my playing a guessing game, why don’t you instead pretend I’ve said what you want? It’s easier for both of us. Then you can move on to whatever unreasonable demands you wish to make of me today.” With effort, Castiel maintained his defiant front even as inside he quailed wondering what would happen next. Naomi’s shoulders bunched and Castiel prepared himself for a tirade. If she was angry enough to rant, she was too angry to *think*. That might protect him from the worst of her wrath – what Naomi executed with forethought was always most devastating. If, on the other hand...

...the tension ebbed from her shoulders, her lips curled in a placid, pale smile, and her gaze met his, blue eyes frighteningly dead...

...if she had the self-control to calm herself, then Castiel’s fears were not misplaced. His heart thudded fear, his palms damp with cold sweat. He balled his hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

*I’m not a child. I don’t depend on her. I am not her prisoner. I am my own person, capable of making my own choices, and I do not have to submit to her demands nor her punishments.*

“Impudent,” Naomi murmured. “No apologies? No contrition or regret?”

“One regret.” Castiel nearly gagged trying to speak. A burst of terror broke upon a rising wave of exuberance. Fire and ice pricked at his skin, every nerve ending tingling as though he’d jammed his hand in a socket by accident. She quirked an eyebrow at him, a subtle invitation. *This is my chance – my only chance – to say...anything. Better make it good.* He opened his mouth but a bubble of hysteria choked him to silence. He couldn’t say...he couldn’t...

*Yes, I can!*
“I regret that I didn’t stand up to you years ago.”

The urge to giggle maniacally overtook him; he bit his lip to keep silent, his chest bouncing with restrained madness. Naomi’s eyes narrowed, crow’s feet lining her skin, lips narrowing to a thin line, ice and fury obvious behind her composure.

“What did you want to meet with me about, Naomi?”

The words came out so calmly that Castiel could hardly believe that was him speaking, hardly believe this was his body standing before his mother. Surely he’d wake up still in bed with Dean, a dreaded day ahead, unknown repercussions awaiting him. His hands shook even clenched, nails digging into his palms. Tension bound his shoulders and back, and slight jolts of pain provided him with essential support. The bruise that Dean had sucked over his scent gland ached wonderfully, the stretch of Dean’s knot yet twinged through his channel, and the smell of green grass swirled around him intensely.

Dean may not be with me – may not be rescuing me directly – but indirectly? He’s here. He’s supporting me. He’s giving me strength. He’s saving me.

No. He’s giving me the wherewithal to save myself, and that is much more powerful than his stepping in and speaking for me. I can do this.

Naomi stared at him.

Castiel, God help him, Dean help him, stared back.

“The pre-nuptial agreement has been drawn up and approved by the Novake-Shurleys and the Kellys.” Her voice was as brittle as her eyes, her posture, the coif of her hair. “April signed it yesterday, in the presence of a notary.”

“You’re a notary.”

“Indeed. April signed it yesterday, in my presence. You will do the same.”

This is it. This is the first day of the rest of my life. There’s no escaping this marriage, no escaping this liaison, no escaping this life...

...but Dean made it sound so simple!

What if I just. say. no.

She can’t make me sign it.

Want to bet?

She almost certainly can make me. She bends me to her will as easily as if I were pipe cleaner. But let her make me. Let her know that I had to be forced into compliance. Let her work for her victory. I’ve lost every battle to date, yes, and I’ve let that cow me. I’ve let myself be defeated before repeatedly without bothering to return fire. I’ve surrendered, not resisted when I might have, because it was easier to concede to her wishes.

I’m so tired.

But if I don’t stand up to her now...

“I will not.”
“I thought you might say that,” Naomi smiled. Fear crackled through Castiel but he wore defiance and pride like armor, held his head high and met Naomi’s gaze. “I’d say I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I know exactly what’s gotten into you. There’s video. It’s disgusting.”

“If your insinuation is that you’ll blackmail me with footage of my liaisons with Dean, I fear you’re off track,” said Castiel. “I care for him and am not ashamed of what we do together. Releasing explicit material of me will be personally embarrassing, but not personally damaging, whereas the damage that could be done to the ‘Novak brand’ is extensive. If anything, mother, I’m in a better position to blackmail you. What is it worth to you, for me to keep my deviant behavior under wraps? After a lifetime of holding yourself up as the paragon of proper alpha comportment, imagine the scandal if my behavior hit the tabloids. At the very least, the Kellys would have to withdraw from the marriage – their demure, blushing omega daughter can’t be tied to an alpha such as myself, right? And what will our investors think? If Naomi Novak can’t control her own family, how is she supposed to run an international conglomerate?”

“You’re such a child, Castiel.” Naomi shook her head in mock sadness. “Congratulations, you’ve finally made a friend for the first time in your life, with a man you pay to have sex with you.” She doesn’t know that I no longer pay Dean! “Clearly he has your best interests at heart, while I’m merely the voice of normal, boring, staid, composed, dull propriety.” She still thinks Dean has sex with me as a service, rather than because he wants to, because we both want to! “Did he tell you how good it feels?” Well…yeah…and sometimes I do wonder if he’s manipulating me, but— “Did he tell you he loves you?” No, he didn’t. “Naïve boy.” Why would he say he loves me when he clearly doesn’t? “This is my fault.” She’s suggesting Dean is using me, manipulating me for his payday. “I’ve tried to shelter you, tried to protect you, and as a result you are ill-equipped to recognize the machinations those in the real world are capable of.” What does Naomi know of real life? She was born into wealth and used the wealth to build more wealth; she’s no more worldly or street-smart than I am. “Life is different outside the ivory tower I’ve sheltered you in.” She thinks she’s so smart, so savvy, but she doesn’t know me – she’s never tried to know me, instead she’s forced me to be what she expects, so that all she need know are her twisted expectations. “You’re old for teenage rebellion, but you were always such a good boy, I suppose it had to happen sometime.”

She thinks she knows me, and she thinks she knows Dean – no matter what she conclusions she’s drawn about our relationship, she doesn’t know anything about us.

“Do you think someone like that is capable of actually caring for someone like you?” Naomi scoffed. “I vetted him, of course, thoroughly, before allowing him to intern with the company. I thought you would appreciate my doing the favor for your whore. I thought you would understand my implications: comprehend that I knew about your relationship and that I sanctioned it so long as you behaved. April is neither chaste nor virginal, as I’m sure you know, so why require that you be? I’ll give you this, the boy you chose is no fool. He recognized opportunity when he saw it, recognized that a relationship with you would further his own ambitions. I overestimated both of you, though. His position was your reward for behaving as you ought, and his reward for being a good little worker bee in his chosen…avocation. A simple business transaction. He should have been satisfied with what he had, and so should’ve you.”

Unless she’s right, and I’m wrong, and she knows more than I do...

Dean knew my identity from almost the start and said nothing, has leveraged his relationship with me into an advantageous placement for himself…things could be as she says…

…I should never have let her keep talking, should have left when I had the chance…

…can I ever be sure that he’s not using me? If I leave IADB, where will I go? To him, of course. He
doesn’t know I have eight figures invested with Roman Enterprises but he has correctly conjectured that I have a sizeable fortune. There are websites that estimate such things and put the numbers out for all to see based on required public disclosures we make when we file taxes. Dean would have been a fool not to Google my name and learn more about me.

...I didn’t Google his name and learn more about him...

...Naomi surely Googled him and me and all of us, surely knows his height and shoe size and how he likes his steak cooked...

...Dean would be a fool not to try to use me...and I fell for it, hook, line and sinker...

...she’s always right, and I’m always wrong, and...

Castiel’s shoulders slumped and he broke eye-contact with his mother, cheeks coloring with shame. The only papers on her desk were the pre-nuptial agreement, bold header declaring, “Castiel Emmanuel James Novak-Shurley, hereinafter referred to as the Prospective Husband, and April Jeanette Kelly, hereinafter referred to as the Prospective Wife…”

As soon sign my death sentence...

...but what choice do I have?

An hour ago, as Castiel prepared to leave the motel, Dean had cupped his cheeks, met his eyes, and kissed him gently, oh so gently. “You got this,” Dean had murmured. “Trust yourself, okay? Don’t let her get you all turned around.” His hands had skimmed up the sides of Castiel’s face, encircled his head, mussed his hair. “No one knows you better than you. Don’t let her steal that from you, ever. Now get outta here…”

He sounded sincere…but Naomi always sounds sincere as well. Neither shares April’s inept concealment abilities. I am naïve...if Dean were using me, how would I know? How would I ever learn the truth?

If I sign, none of this need trouble me again. My path is straight and clear, laid out for me from the day I was born. My life is safe, comfortable, familiar. My success is assured.

Rebelling is frightening – a leap into the unknown, risking betrayal and heartache and pain and failure.

If I stay, I’ll never know who I might have been. If I stay, I’ll never be me. I’ll remain a projection of Naomi’s will forever.

If I stay, I’ll never see Dean again. She’ll never let me, not after I defied her in his name.

Naomi doesn’t know that I no longer pay Dean for sex. No matter what spin she puts on his actions, she doesn’t know that I’ve asked him to stop working as a prostitute and that he’s refused. Her narrative of his actions and intentions only makes sense if he’s trying to ‘win’ me, which he’s never shown the least sign of attempting to do. He’s not humored me, he’s not coddled me, he’s not changed himself for me, he hasn’t vowed loyalty and love.

He’s just Dean.

And I’m just Castiel.

I don’t have to be a Novak, don’t have to do what Naomi tells me.
I’m allowed to be myself – not because Naomi has said so or because Gabriel has said so or because Dean has said so – because I say so. Who I am is enough.

I can do this.

“Even if you’re right, I won’t sign the agreement,” Castiel said in measured tones. “I’ll not marry April.”

I can do this.

Naomi made a long-suffering sigh appear effortless. If Castiel didn’t know her so well, he’d think her exasperated, but Castiel had seen her react to his challenges too many times to be taken in. His defiance was a challenge, and triumph already gleamed in her eyes. She held all the cards and she knew it.

I can do this.

“Go to your room, Castiel.”

I can do this.

“I’m not a child you can punish by depriving me of dinner,” said Castiel incredulously.

I can do this.

“I’m depriving you of more than dinner. The locks on your apartment are being changed as we speak. Your car has been towed. Your cell phone account is on hold. Your code for the gates has been deactivated. As soon as you leave the room, I will call the bank to freeze your accounts. Neither your brothers nor the servants will assist you in leaving the house. I hoped this wouldn’t be necessary, but a good businessperson is prepared for any eventuality – another lesson I appear to have inadequately taught you. I should not have to school an adult on comportment, but as I find myself in that position, as a result of my own failures in the past, I will rise to the challenge and instruct you. Since you skipped the meditative relaxation of church this morning, you will rest in your old bedroom. You are acting like a child, so will be treated like one. Reflect on the poor choices that have led you to this crossroads in your life. Goodbye, Castiel."

…I’ve done this. And now I have to live with the results of my actions.

…the prospect of doing so is…surprisingly unintimidating.

Castiel opened his mouth to counter her, to argue, but her attention turned to something on her desk and he snapped his mouth shut again. Escape from her presence was essential. Castiel needed to think. Her calm delineated of the various means she’d employed to imprison him was intimidating, but in her attempt to show how thorough she’d been, she’d proven that she wasn’t omniscient.

She didn’t think he’d climb the fence to escape.

She didn’t think anyone in the house would assist him.

She didn’t know that Castiel had already called Mr. Roman and that his finances were safe from her interference.

She didn’t know that Castiel had a second cell phone.

With a forced air of contrition, Castiel turned and left the room.
Let her think I’m intimidated, defeated, subdued. I don’t have to stay. She can’t actually make me stay.

The sooner I leave, the better.

Michael and Luke flanked him as soon as he was out the door.

“Oh, brother,” sighed Michael. With the two of them boxing him in, Castiel had no choice but to follow as they led him down the long hallway. “You’ve really stuck your foot in it this time.”

“I’m proud of you,” Luke beamed. “Finally, the mantle of troublemaker has been whisked from Gabriel’s undeserving shoulders.”

“Luke, don’t encourage him.” Michael made a show of scandalized effrontery. “At least when you feel the need to flex your feather, you do so discretely.”

“As opposed to you, who have no need for discretion,” sniffed Luke. “Having never done anything risqué in your life.”

“That you believe that is proof of how admirably I’ve succeeded.”

“You’ve learned well on mother’s knee – when in doubt, pretend to greater experience and knowledge then you have.”

“Yes, and Castiel should have emulated that, should have…”

Castiel zoned out, ignoring their bickering. Short of shoving them aside, there was no escaping their escort, and they’d surely listened at the door and heard Naomi and Castiel’s conversation. Heck, as they clearly acted now with Naomi’s sanction, they may not have needed to eavesdrop illicitly. Easier for her to dial them on her cellphone, leave the line open, and let them listen in. As much as they enjoyed sniping at each other, they shared in the delight of observing someone else suffer one of Naomi’s infamous takedowns. They crowded Castiel up the stairs, forced him to choose between walking to his room or being steered into a wall, and didn’t stop until they stood outside his room.

“Hand it over,” Michael said.

“Hand what over?” asked Castiel.

Luke rolled his eyes. “Cassie always thinks he’s clever. Your extra phone, ninny.”

“Ninny? That’s the best insult you can concoct?” scoffed Michael. “Better to call him an ommie. He might as well be one, with what he and his whore get up to.”


“And ‘ninny’ isn’t?”

“Don’t make us strip search you, Cassie,” added Luke. “We will, and it will be disgusting.”

So they do know about my spare phone. Maybe Naomi is omniscient after all.

Sighing, Castiel emptied his pockets and held out the contents until Michael cupped his hands to receive them. Two cell phones, Castiel’s wallet, a few loose coins and a set of keys jangled and clattered. With a gracious smile, Michael gestured for Castiel to enter the bedroom he’d not slept in for three wonderful, semi-independent years, and Castiel obliged.
As Michael swept the door shut, Luke made a show of pulling a large key from his pocket.

The door closed and the lock clicked as the bolt slotted into place.

The room was bare, as it had been since Naomi destroyed his books on nature: white walls, tan carpet, an immaculate desk, and a bed neatly made in white linens. Diaphanous curtains drifted ghostly over the windows, too thin to obscure the solid black of bars that had been screwed in over the frame. The work didn’t appear new.

*It was cell-like before but Naomi has planned for this…charming…*

There wasn’t a book to read, wasn’t a piece of artwork to stare at, wasn’t a cell phone to toy with, wasn’t a thing to do. The view out his window was of the roof of their extensive garage, made a checkerboard of different colored slate by the prison bars. There was *nothing* to do, nothing for Castiel to distract himself with. He was alone with his thoughts.

Naomi had planned this.

Castiel flopped onto the bed, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes.

*Naomi knew a confrontation was coming and has been waiting to pull the trigger. I’m a prisoner again, alone, with no way to contact the outside world. It’s a waiting game. I’ve never outlasted my mother in a contest of wills. Anxiety and doubt start swirling too quickly.*

*Would Dean come for me, if he knew I was imprisoned?*

*See? Doubts. So quickly, there are doubts. That’s what Naomi is counting on – my conceding because, in the absence of outside reassurance, I have no confidence in myself. Why am I like this? Why am I broken?*

*Because of Naomi. Because she deliberately made me this way, sowing the seeds of uncertainty at every turn, convincing me over the course of years that my judgment was unsound and that hers was absolute, reliable, inviolable, inviolate. And if Naomi is always right, then if I disagree with her, I am by definition wrong. I must be made to understand the error of my ways, must publicly demonstrate my understanding of my error as plainly and bluntly as possible, must be browbeaten into concession so often that I cease to attempt to express or even have my own opinion. Why demonstrate independence and risk being incorrect? Easier and safer to hold my tongue, await Naomi’s pronouncement on any given topic, and conform my views to hers. Better to learn the rules by which she judges the merit of things and utilize those rules when making my own judgments rather than risk saying something she’ll find displeasing. Because the consequences of angering Naomi are…*

The door was locked, the window was barred, and Castiel had no idea when he’d be a free man again – if he’d *ever* be a free man again. Crossing Naomi was a death sentence for his ego, his id, his entire sense of self.

*She’s systematically attempted to destroy my personhood. That was always her intention.*

*That’s one approach to manipulation.*

*April…April is the obvious response to manipulation like Naomi’s. She has no independent personhood to erase, or if she does, she’s cloaked it completely in her infinitely flexible, infinitely pliable reactions to those around her. Whatever she thinks I want her to be, she becomes. Whoever I*
like becomes her new best friend. Whatever I enjoy becomes her new favorite thing. Whatever I suggest becomes the best idea she’s ever heard. With April, the finish line is ever-shifting. Her opinions are always malleable, to be flipped and contorted once she learns how she can better please her chosen audience. And God forbid I point out that her opinion has changed. No it hasn’t, she inevitably insists. I misunderstood. I heard what I wanted to hear. I forgot that she said she’d always loved x, y, and z. I willfully impugned her. The disconnection between her past words and her current attitudes is intentional, always modified to conform to my interests, always my fault that she was misjudged. Her behavior is intended to make me crazy, make me doubt myself, make me stop trying to defy her.

That’s a second approach to manipulation.

Michael and Luke are so embroiled in their own conflict they hardly remember the rest of us exist. They marginalize me, turn me into their pawn, and treat me as a sycophantic follower to be courted and discarded based on the needs of the moment. When they’re pleased with me, they’re lavish with their attentions. Michael once flew me to Tokyo with him. Luke introduced me to every celebrity at a charity gala he hosted. Both were sending the same message: ‘look what I have to offer, if you ally yourself with me. Look what I can give you, if you’ll support me in my bid for familial supremacy.’ Both have grown frustrated by my unwillingness to be swayed by their attempts at bribery. Both are so convinced that I must crave the status symbols that matter to them that they cannot conceive why I’m not won over by their gestures. Compared to Naomi, even compared to April, their efforts are crude and superficial, but they employ what they know – they employ the approaches that would work on them, were our positions reversed. If for some reason I wished to win them over, I would do so precisely how they attempt to win me over.

That’s a third approach to manipulation.

And Gabriel?

Anna?

Dean?

What’s their approach?

Gabriel offers a shoulder to cry on, a confidant in times of need, but never takes the bullet for me. I wouldn’t ask him to, of course. It’s not fair to either of us that we’re treated this way. Nonetheless, he says he wishes he could take my place in times of trouble, that he wishes he could take my burdens on himself, but he never makes the least effort to actually do so. And clearly, on some subconscious level, he doesn’t want to shoulder my cross. That he’s helping Anna but never made a move to aid me is proof of that. There have been times, when we were younger, that he could have acted on my behalf. If he ever did, it was behind closed doors, and I never saw a sign of it, never received a benefit from it.

That’s not manipulation, per se, at least I don’t think it is, but it is...something.

Anna...maybe because she’s a woman, maybe because she’s a beta, maybe because she’s youngest, Anna has never been Naomi’s priority. Anna’s purpose, as far as Naomi is concerned, is to make a good marriage to an eligible alpha, and so long as the interests Anna pursues aligned with making her a desirable mate, Naomi is content to let her go her own way. Anna was still steered, still brow beaten, by both Naomi and her eldest brothers, but she always had a streak of independence.

And she never had the least interest in me.
When was the last time Anna and I spoke outside of the barest minimum required at social functions?

Years, I think. Since I told her that Naomi would never approve of her interest in art, yet Naomi bought her an easel. Botany was not an acceptable hobby for the alpha son of an A-List family, but art was an estimable pursuit for the only-daughter-cum-trophy-wife that Anna was to be.

Naomi supporting Anna in art had the added bonus of making me appear the villain in Anna’s eyes. I discouraged her interests. Naomi encouraged them. Which of us was in the right in Anna’s eyes was clear.

She never showed interest in me, but I never showed much interest in her either.

And perhaps I was jealous.

She bemoans a life as arm candy for some alpha executive. I…I don’t think I’d mind being a trophy wife.

Anna didn’t manipulate me. She ignored me, as she ignored Luke and Michael. She had no time for us alphas.

I suspect…I suspect that, if Anna doesn’t use Gabriel’s gifts to flee the family, if Anna chooses to stay, Naomi will be in for a rude awakening when she tries to marry Anna to an alpha. Something tells me that the last thing Anna is interested in is any knothead telling her what to do.

And then there’s Dean…

Castiel hands dropped to the bed and he stared at the ceiling. It was spotless and white, broken only by a simple light fixture. When Castiel had entered the room he hadn’t bothered to turn the overhead on; the natural light streaming through the window was more pleasant despite the dusky shadows cast by the bars. As the hour grew later – Castiel guessed it was around four, though he couldn’t say for sure – the sky outside faded from blue to milky white.

Maybe a storm would blow in. Snow would be nice.

If it snowed, the Kellys would likely be stuck spending another night at the Novak house.

A storm would be terrible.

Was Dean manipulating him?

Castiel truly, sincerely didn’t believe so.

But he’d been wrong before.

Oh, really? I have been? When, exactly? What plague of false friendships did I fall victim to that led me to believe I was such a poor judge of character? From infancy, Naomi warned me that those outside the family wouldn’t be able to see past our wealth and power, wouldn’t be able to see anything save the advantages of being our friends. I thought her cynical and paranoid, though I didn’t think of it in those terms at the time, but my time at school proved her correct. Everyone at school was seeking advantage, and I was nothing like them, and I had no friends. Yes, some tried to insinuate their way into my confidence, but they did so with all the guileful, guileless mannerisms of children. College was the same. I had study buddies, classmates with whom I could trade notes or collaborate on school projects, but aside from that I mostly stuck to myself. Even if they weren’t dishonest, they treated attendance at Harvard as a game, the goal of which was to fill a rolodex with
as many prominent last names as possible. “Oh? You need something? Let me just call up my friend, my buddy, my old schoolmate Cas Novak – yes, of those Novaks – to see if he can help. Don’t worry, no trouble, we’ll talk about recompense later.”

I didn’t want to play that game.

And, because I was a Novak, I didn’t need to play that game. Our existing family contacts were so extensive...

...I’ve changed the subject again. So much easier to think about how much I hated school than it is to ponder a simple question:

Do I trust Dean?

A gut-wrenching surge of...heat, tension, something...tore through Castiel. Doubting Dean was painful, emotionally and physically. The voice that whispered that Castiel was no judge of others was Naomi’s, and Castiel no longer believed a damn thing Naomi said, a damn thing his own thoughts suggested in the guise of Naomi. His mental embodiment of her was too close to the real thing. The arguments he’d cycled through on why he should and shouldn’t trust Dean didn’t change. Certain points, especially Dean’s unwillingness to quit his prostitution job, seemed unassailable. No matter what spin Castiel put on Dean’s insistence, there was no logical explanation for remaining a sex worker if Dean was manipulating Castiel.

Unless...his purpose is to persist in a point I vehemently disagreed with and force me to change to meet his expectations, rather than his attempting to meet me halfway and compromise. That’s the kind of manipulation Naomi does: establish herself as the authority and use that position to destroy all opposition.

But Dean didn’t start from a position of, “you must change to have me.” He started from, “this is who I am, accept me or not, that’s up to you.” I care for him because of who he is, not despite it. He’s flexible on so many topics, amenable and open.

I went to him with preconceptions. I went to him with stereotypes. I went to him with demands and expectations and a Puritanical set of standards. I went to him and made demands.

In this scenario, I’m the manipulative one, always moving the end point on Dean, using a mask of passivity to push and pull him into compliance with my expectations. I suggest he’s made no effort to meet me halfway, but when have I made an effort to meet him halfway? On the contrary, I decided on a vision of what I wanted from him and then enacted that vision, regardless of what he had to say on the topic. I’ve treated Dean the way Naomi has treated me.

If I was so bad as all that, why has he put up with me?

Obvious reason to tolerate me? I’m rich and I’m a Novak. He’s encouraging me to leave my family. He’s encouraging me to repose my confidence in him instead. I barely know him! I’ve known my mother and brothers since the day I was born; why trust a stranger over them?

How about because I hate my mother and my two oldest brothers, don’t trust them as far as I could throw them, and I’m desperate to get out? Whereas I have no evidence that Dean has ever lied to me.

Bull. He lied to me, if only by omission, when he didn’t tell me that he knew who I was. And how outlandish is his claim that he thought he’d get assigned an internship in the mail room? Naomi helped get him that internship to reward him for keeping to his station and allowing himself to be my
plaything, no strings attached. He knew I worked at the bank. He can’t have believed he wouldn’t at least encounter me. What was his endgame?

But wait – didn’t Gabriel say he’d vetted the interns? That Naomi only let him create the program because he had candidates ready to go? Could Naomi truly have planned all of that out to engineer a moment when Dean walked into my office and ‘discovered’ me there?

Why?

Was she hoping Dean would be forced to admit he’d known my identity all along? But how could she have known that about him? Maybe she assumed he must know, given our prominence? If she knew that April and I had been on the cover of National Enquirer, it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume that Dean had heard the news, but...

...but then why would Dean tell me that he knew who I was instead of continuing to pretend that he didn’t? Why would Dean never ask more of me? Why would Dean go Dutch on our dates? Why would Dean make such sweet love to me? Why would Dean invite a third to our bed to prove that our sexual chemistry isn’t the commonplace? Why would Dean insist on keeping his job? Why would Dean give me the ultimatum to figure my issues out or else forget I ever met him?

None of what Dean has done makes sense if he’s manipulating me.

None of what Dean has done makes sense if he’s not manipulating me.

No...no, I don’t think that second is true.

What Dean has said and done makes sense if Gabriel is correct and Dean genuinely cares about me.

But how can I be sure? Dean said...and Gabriel said...and Naomi said...and I thought...

Hell, I can’t keep going around and around like this. I have to come up with something else to think about.

The silence in the room, in the dusky winter world outside, was absolute.

Anything else!

No topic presented itself.

Is it dinner time yet?

Will they let me out at dinner time?

I can only hope.

Usually, I’d assume not – but since April is here, they might...

April’s presence made the prospect of dinner unappetizing, despite the emptiness of his stomach.

The ticking of a clock bored into Castiel’s mind, the more infuriating because there was no clock in the room. Desperate to distract himself, Castiel tried counting off, but the murmured numbers synced to the imaginary tick-tick-tick-tick and he snapped his mouth shut.

What if—
How about—

I’m being so unfair to—

Tick, tock, tick, tock—

Round and round the Mulberry Bush

The monkey chased the weasel

The monkey said ‘twas all in fun

Pop! Goes the weasel…

Or what was that other song? Luke was obsessed with it when we were kids…

Round and round

With love we’ll find a way just give it time

Round and round

What comes around goes around

I’ll tell you why

The people who sang that song never did explain why. Probably because it was a lie. Castiel had heard theories of karma bruited about but in a lifetime surrounded by cutthroat bankers he’d seen exactly zero evidence that “what goes around comes around.” Sometimes good people had bad things happen to them, and sometimes bad people had good things happen to them, and there was no correlation to the deeds of the hour, no Calvinistic alignment between their virtue and their just desserts, no hellfire and damnation in the next life to punish the sins of this one. The continual subtext of Uriel’s sermons was that the righteous of his flock had good easy lives, and that their success proved their integrity. If they were bad people, they’d not be successful, therefore they were good people, therefore their actions were good, therefore their God smiled on them, therefore they could continue as they were without a single moral qualm.

Here’s a prayer: Lord, grant me the clarity to understand my own flaws, learn from my mistakes, and strive to improve myself.

Naomi has never acknowledge she had a flaw in her life. Naomi has never apologized to me. Even when she claims fault for an infraction it’s merely a means to turn fault back against me or Gabriel or Charles or the Board.

April has never apologized to me.

Gabriel has apologized to me.

Dean has apologized to me.

And I’ve apologized to all of them.

Of course Naomi hasn’t apologized. “Make amends, make corrections, and do better.” She’s told me that since I was a child, every time I’ve apologized for an infraction. She never does that, though. She doesn’t believe she’s in the wrong, so there’s no call to apologize nor make amends nor correct herself. She believes she has already done her best. She believes herself the pinnacle of humanity.
The rest of us can strive to match her achievements – as long as we accept we can never truly succeed.

Dean…whatever flaws Dean may have, however he may be using me, he’s genuine. He listens to me. He grows based on our interactions, as do I. He acknowledges when he’s erred, and changes his behavior when he thinks he’s in the wrong. When I told him that having my knot touched made me uncomfortable, he acknowledged my concerns, believed me, accommodated me, and considered the ramifications of my choice as an aspect of my personality. He never told me I had to change to conform to his expectations, never told me I should cease to have reservations because his preference was that I top for him.

Yes, when we discussed his career, he insisted on maintaining his job. That’s his choice, and pertains to his life and his future and his body. When the topic was my choice, my life, my future, and my body? He considered my needs and my desires and my opinions and advised me based on that consideration. No demands. No ultimatums. Simple acceptance of who I am and what my limitations are.

I don’t know who I am, but sometimes when I’m with Dean…I think he knows who I am, or at least who he hopes I will be once I’m better at communicating with him.

Serenity settled over Castiel’s thoughts. He knew better than to think his sense of peace would last – too often he’d achieved temporary equilibrium only to skew one way or the other as some new event occurred or new thought struck him – but at least for the moment he felt sanguine. Any comparison between Naomi and Dean, between April and Dean, led to the inescapable conclusion that Dean cared about Castiel as a person, not merely as a tool, whereas both his mother and his fiancée would be happier if Castiel was a sentient lamp or a bouquet of cut flowers or a trained parrot – a nice accent to the parlor provided the right things were said at the right time to the right people. For them, Castiel’s ability to think and behave independently was a liability, whereas Dean encouraged Castiel to consider his feelings and report them honestly. Dean considered Castiel’s inability to do so a liability, his nascent attempts at self-improvement a praise-worthy success.

Full dark fell as Castiel’s thoughts circled, stars twinkling in the cold-crisped night air. For a wonder, Naomi had left a lamp in the room, plain silver base with a white lampshade, but Castiel didn’t turn it on. In the darkness, the room was painted in deep shadows, blacks and blues and purples shading the pristine walls like mottled bruises. A macabre thought suggested that the transformation of the room, the contrast between its appearance during the day and during the night, was a mirror to the difference between the Novak-Shurley family in public versus in private. A veneer of perfection hovered about them, but the reality was unenviable.

Nonsense. Most people would trade their lives, no matter how content on the surface, for what I have. I’m being ungrateful again.

Would they really? Money solves many problems, but if it came at the price of family, love, and affection? If I could have those things, I would trade my riches for them.

That’s easy for me to say – I’ve been rich, and I don’t have those things. My family doesn’t love me and I have no friends. I’m not unhappy because I’m wealthy, or because Naomi is sometimes awful. I’m unhappy because I’ve managed to drift through this world for 31 years without leaving the barest mote to show I’ve been here. No one cares about me. No one would care if I disappeared.

No. That, I know, isn’t true.

Dean cares about me.
Gabriel, for all his faults, cares about me.

Michael and Luke don’t care about me. Charles doesn’t care about me. April doesn’t care about me. Naomi doesn’t care about me.

But Dean – Dean does, because I’m me.

Whoever “me” is...

It’s nice that he cares. I care about him, too.

But what if—

No. Stop.

I really should consider—

Stop.

Be reasonable, Castiel, I—

The click of the lock startled Castiel from his reflection. A triangle of light that seemed bright to his dark-accustomed eyes spread wider, partially obscured by a person stepping into the room. The door closed behind them and the bolt snapped into place once more. Blinking, Castiel tried to make out the features of his visitor, but he could see nothing but black now that his night vision was ruined. Whoever it was didn’t move farther into the room, didn’t speak. That the door was locked behind them spoke volumes, though. Either Naomi or his elder brothers had the key, and only someone Naomi sanctioned would be allowed in, would be locked within with him.

Naomi herself.

Charles.


Michael.

Or...

“Mood lighting,” said a soft, feminine voice as the smell of lilacs flooded the room. “Appropriate.” April’s tone was unreadable, eerie, disembodied. Rustles and clunks suggested movement but Castiel had no guess what she did until the bed shifted, a dip forming beside him, and warm weight straddled his legs.

“What are you doing?” Castiel breathed, nerves flaring.

Fingers clasped his and dragged his hands from the bed. Bare skin skimmed smooth beneath his fingertips. April twisted his palm around, curled her hand around his, and lay his fingers on soft, jiggling flesh. Faint light limned the hard curve of her cheekbones, the flare of her nostrils, the fullness of her lips, the line of her pronounced collar bones, and the curved softness of her belly, her side and her...

Her breast. My hand is on her breast.

She’s naked.
What is she doing?

What’s going on?

Why am I just lying here?

I have to—

“There we go,” she murmured. “I know you’re afraid – inexperienced – but there’s nothing wrong with desire, Castiel. It’s natural, healthy – commendable, even.” Castiel’s hand was so stiff his joints ached. Threading her fingers between his, April kneaded at her breast, shifting the plush weight against his palm. “Just like that.” Pressure landed on his crotch.

The spell cast by the faint light glimmering through the window and the lil of her voice shattered. With a gasp, Castiel rocked to his side, using a leg to throw her from him. A thump spoke to her landing and an apology sprang to his lips only to die unspoken as, in a flurry of shifting fabric and dancing shadows, April leapt back onto him.

“Enough, Castiel.”

Her nails dug like claws into his shoulders despite the barrier of his shirt as she shoved him onto his back.

“I’m done buying your show of prudery.”

Her hips settled over his, pressing against his limp cock, stirring the dull ache of his ass.

“I’ve seen the video Naomi obtained.”

No! Stop! I don’t want this!

“I know what kind of man you are.”

Her knees pinned his hands.

“It was sweet of you to let that twink use you after you’d had your way with him; your mother tried to tell me that you were deviant but I knew better.”

Castiel couldn’t fathom how she’d contrived to trap him but she had him surrounded, smothered, imprisoned as surely as he was imprisoned in his room, as surely as he was imprisoned in his life.

“She doesn’t understand you, not like I do.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Castiel kicked at the blankets but could get no traction for dislodging her again.

“You’re fair, eminently so, and it’s breathtaking, beyond respectable that you’d switch to make sure another alpha got their chance.”

That’s what April thinks Dean and I were doing?

“I appreciate your good qualities, Cassie.”

Or does she not care – will she believe or say anything to twist the situation around to her best advantage? And her best advantage always ends with wedding a Novak...
“I appreciate you so much.”

Lips smeared over his and Castiel cringed, gagging.

“And yet you won’t let me in!”

Her mouth dragged wet over his chin, along his jaw, down his neck.

“Is it me?”

Heat and pressure settled over the bruise Dean had sucked into his neck.

“Do you find me unattractive?”

_No! Don’t you dare mark me, don’t you take what Dean gave me!_

“No – stop!” Castiel gasped.

_Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, don’t touch me, don’t—_

“Because I find you delicious,” she continued, indifferent to his protest. “You’re gorgeous, and you smell _so good_. I can’t get enough!” Her teeth nipped at his neck, her hips ground against his crotch.

“I know how compatibility works, Cassie – I know you smell our connection too.”

Castiel flailed but his struggles were ineffective. Every shimmy and surge, she anticipated and shifted and prepared for, her slighter weight bearing him down.

“So – this is the solution.”

_How do I make her stop? Why can’t I make her stop? I’m a man, and an alpha! It should be easy!_

Years ago, he could have thrown her off him easily, but sitting at his computer made him soft, whereas April had spent an entire date regaling him with her extensive daily workout routine.

“You’ll like it. I know you will. I’m so tight, Cassie, a virgin just for you, and so wet – once you know how good it feels inside me...I promised your mother I’d convince you. Don’t make a liar of me!”

Stunned, Castiel lay prone, heels kicking ineffectually at the bed, the knuckles in his fingers cracking as April bore down on her knees and increased the pressure on his pinned hands. Fighting against her hurt, twisted joints already strained by his earlier, vigorous liaison with Dean, and struggling was pathetically ineffective. Dim light caught on the curves of her body as April moved with him, made her body seem to flow and contort inhumanly. Fear beat at Castiel, breath racing, heart pounding, vertigo spinning his head.

_She’s just an omega! Why—?_

Castiel squeezed his eyes shut; watching her made him sick.

_Being an omega doesn’t make her weak, any more than being an alpha makes me strong...if I even am an alpha...all that reflection, all that time alone, and the question of my trans status didn’t cross my mind...why not? Because it’s so patently obvious that I’m an omega that there’s nothing to reflect on. I am an omega, and I have to masquerade as an alpha, and she’s still kissing me, and still holding me down, and I’m slipping into my thoughts rather than trying to escape, because I can’t throw her off, and even if I could I don’t want to hurt her, I just want her to stop, need her to stop, why won’t she stop, stop, stop..._
“...stop, stop, April, please – I know you think I want this, but I don’t – stop – let me go,” he begged. Her mouth was still on him, her vagina leaking slick so prodigiously that moisture soaked through his pants and boxers.

“You defied your mother when you didn’t take a shower, but it doesn’t matter – by the time we’re done, you’ll smell like me, not your disgusting tramp of a warm knot hole,” she vowed.

“No! Stop! I—”

“Enough caviling, Castiel!” One of April’s hands left his shoulder, clawed down his shirted chest, attacked the loop of his belt.

“April, don’t!”

“Whatever that whore has told you, this is what’s best for you. We’re your family – we care for you – we know what you need. I know what you need, and—”

Light burst into the room, dazzling and pink against Castiel’s eyelids. April jerked up, shifting enough for Castiel to tug his hands free. Nausea knotted his stomach, bile surging up his throat as he blinked and brightness seared his vision.

“Get your hands off my brother, you fucking bitch,” snapped Gabriel, usually flippant voice harsh with fury.

Shaking, Castiel shoved April off him, scrambling to the head of the bed. His back slammed into the wall and he curled over himself, panting, a whimper catching in his throat with every ragged inhale. His eyes snapped open, incandescent splotches making a nightmarish dreamscape of the room. April sprawled before him, legs splayed to either side, a manicured trail of red hair like an arrow pointing down her crotch, her breasts bouncing a strange counterpoint to the jostling of the mattress. Gabriel stood in the doorway, splinters of wood and pooled clothing and a pair of heels scattered at his feet, the lock dangling broken beside him. His face was flat with disgust and hatred and he bore what looked like a flintlock pistol, vintage 18th century, extended in one arm, aimed toward April.

Castiel leaned over and retched spit and mucus and bile onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” spat April, expression twisted with rancor.

Embarrassment flushed him and Castiel smeared his mouth over his pants as he curled back in on himself, folded his knees up under his chin and struggled to focus on Gabriel, on rescue, on salvation.

“Something I should have done months ago,” Gabriel replied, rolling his eyes. “Stood for something for once in my Goddamn life. Get out of here, you superficial cow. Lucy’s left his door unlocked for you. You know which one is his. Why don’t you go smear him in your noxious slick – unless the only way you can get off is by raping my brother?”

“You...you...bas...son of a...” April spluttered. With a furious tsk, she balled her hands into fists, used them to shove herself off the bed.

Stunned, Castiel watched her wide-eyed, arms trembling. She traipsed across the room, leaned down to snag her heels by the back strap, brushed by Gabriel, and paused in the doorway. Her makeup had smeared, lipstick making vivid red lines over her cheek, like Castiel had actually fought back, had raked nails over her skin, had cut her. For a split second he could pretend he’d resisted, but he knew the truth – he’d surrendered with hardly a peep, how could he? His stomach rebelled and he gagged
back another surge of nausea. She shot him a sultry smile and a suggestive wink.

“Nice talk, Cassie – what do you say we continue this later? Without your brother sticking his unwelcome nose in. As Gabby said – you know which room is mine.”

“Fuck off,” suggested Gabriel, keeping a bead on her with the antique gun. She blew each of them a kiss and sauntered out of sight. Leaving the door hanging open, Gabriel tossed the pistol aside negligently and leapt onto the bed, stopping before Castiel. “Cassie – bro, talk to me – are you okay?” Castiel shook his head frantic denial. He had no idea what he was but he was definitely not okay. “Hell – I shoulda grokked what they were up to sooner. I didn’t even realize until I saw Lucy twirling that fucking key chain and smirking like the cat that got the canary. Are you done with this shit yet?”

“Which ‘shit?’” asked Castiel. “Were you…were you going to shoot April?” His lips and mouth felt fuzzy and gross, and a wild thought screamed that she’d drugged him before reason took hold and pointed out that this wasn’t a thriller and he wasn’t James Bond and poisoned lipstick wasn’t real. If he felt weird, it was more likely because he’d vomited and he was border-line hyperventilating and he was terrified because he’d been assaulted by his fiancée. No spy gadgets needed to explain how insane and weird he felt. Gabriel made a sweeping gesture toward the busted-open doorway.

“Of course I wasn’t going to shoot her.” Gabriel’s reply was a non-sequitur from his gesture and from Castiel’s racing thoughts, and Castiel watched Gabriel’s twirling hand in confusion, trying to figure out what he meant. “It’s a blunderbuss, and it’s a toy.” Gabriel grabbed the gun, aimed it at Castiel, and pulled the trigger. It clicked. Castiel flinched “Pow, pow!” The barrel, pointed dead-on toward him, was solid metal. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“I figure we’ve got maybe five minutes before April struts her naked heinie to Naomi’s office, so if we’re gonna get, we gotta get,” Gabriel explained impatiently. “And that’s five minutes if Lucifer isn’t a minuteman. I’m not laying odds on that.”

“Leave?”

“You’d rather stay?”

“No,” said Castiel vaguely, glancing around the barren room. “No, I…” The tang of acid mixed with the scent of lilac and brought tears to his eyes. Shaking his head caused a wave of vertigo to crash around him. Castiel shoved himself from the bed and his knees promptly gave out. “Sorry.” The gun in Gabriel’s hand dug into Castiel’s back as Gabriel looped his arms beneath Castiel’s shoulders and hauled him to his feet. “I want to leave.” He gave Gabriel a shaky smile and got a beaming one in return. “There’s something I have to do first.”

“Wha—”

Shaking off Gabriel’s grip on him, Castiel strode out the door and down the hall. He didn’t feel stable; rather, his forward momentum was self-sustaining. If he stopped walking he’d fall on his face. The stairs were particularly precarious but he kept an iron grip on the bannister and fortunately made the mistake of thinking there was one more stair than there actually was, rather than one less. His balance was shot when his foot struck marble-inlaid floor instead of polished wood board, but if he’d misjudged the other direction he’d have fallen down the stairs.

Small blessings. The thought was so ironic and misplaced that he laughed humorlessly.
Gabriel trailed in Castiel’s wake, muttering objections but making no effort to stop him. For once, the size of their house proved a blessing. As seconds ticked by, Castiel’s nerves settled. He grew steadier on his feet, and the shock of April’s attack gave way to anger. Gabriel was right – April had literally tried to rape him, at Naomi’s instigation and encouragement. The purpose behind the attack was incomprehensible. Castiel could not conceive how either woman convinced themselves that Castiel would be more amenable to their plans for him after forcing him to have sex.

It makes some distant kind of sense when taken as part and parcel to the societal expectation that alphas are sex-crazed knotheads, but Naomi is an alpha and she knows better. And she’s known me a lifetime – how could she think I was like that?

Maybe it has something to do with her interpretation of the video she’s seen of Dean and I?

It doesn’t matter. Any doubt I had that I was done with this family...Dean might be lying to me but April cares nothing for my consent, my boundaries, or my personhood, and neither does Naomi. Leaving here doesn’t necessarily mean going to Dean, and even if I do go to Dean, even if he welcomes me with open arms, that doesn’t prove he’s not manipulating me...

...but I hope that when I leave here, I can go to him...

...I want my alpha...

Castiel shuddered and pushed the door to Naomi’s office open. Though it was late – a clock on the mantle read 8:32, well after dinner – she was, as he’d expected, seated at her desk. She looked up and gave him a chill smile, nostrils flaring as she took a deep inhale of Castiel’s scent.

Ugh, what must I reek of now? My own fear-laced scent, overlaid with Dean’s scent, overlaid with sex, overlaid with So Much Lilac.

None of that matters. Stop getting distracted.

Though Naomi was ostensibly working, a pen in her hand pressed to a legal pad before her covered in neat script, the pre-nuptial agreement remained the only printed document on her desk.

“Ah, Castiel – I hope you—”

Two steps took Castiel to her desk. He reached out with both hands, grabbed the corners of the paper, and ripped it in half.

“—what are you doing?!”

The destruction wasn’t thorough enough. The pages shifted in Castiel’s hands and he caught a glimpse of a sweeping script letter A in purple ink, April’s signature still intact. With a snarl, Castiel bunched the papers and ripped them in half again, again, small pieces fluttering down to the floor. Naomi’s indignant protests and Gabriel’s laughter spurred him on until the remaining fragments were tiny enough that they drifted like snow between Castiel’s fingers.

“Impudent, petulant, foolish, child – you have no idea the consequences for your actions! When I’m done with you, I’ll—”

“What?” interrupted Castiel. “What will you do to me? Force me to give up my dreams? Imprison me in the house? Force me into a career you know I hate? Treat me as an asset whose worth is somewhere between that of your investments in IBM and your favorite Bentley? What line item code do you use on your Schedule A to get your tax deduction for me, mother? I’m afraid you’ll have to tell your accountant to change it, because I’m leaving, and I’m not coming back.”
“You will be brought back,” she snapped.

“Try it,” said Gabriel dryly. “I’ve got friends in low places. And do you know how much dirt I have on IADB? So much. So, so, so much. All that’s stayed my hand is misguided loyalty but congratulations, you’ve found the limits of my filial piety.”

“You always were a disgrace,” sniffed Naomi. “You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘piety’ you ungrateful turd of a son!”

“And yet you were still content to ride me like Chuck’s cock,” Gabriel mused, “as long as I lasted. Not very long, as it turned out. Daddy dearest’s put up with you for 45 years – guess I don’t have his stamina – I’m done at 33.”

“How dare—”

“Don’t pretend to be scandalized by sexual innuendo now,” Castiel said, exasperated. “You told April from day one to win me by wooing me into her bed, and you saw me literally having sex with someone without taking a moment to consider the implications of our behavior.”

“Nonsense, I saw—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Castiel cut in. God, interrupting her, talking over her, felt fantastic. For once, she had to listen to him. “Goodbye, Naomi.”

“Castiel, if you walk out that door—”

“Shut up,” Gabriel suggested.

Castiel turned and walked out, Gabriel at his side. Naomi’s angry words followed him but they blurred to meaninglessness, not because she wasn’t audible but because Castiel didn’t give a damn what she said. Laughter bubbled out of his chest, a single awkward bark, another, and then a cascade of sound that doubled him over as he walked to the front door. Gabriel laughed beside him, their mirth drowning out Naomi’s pursuing shouts. No one barred their exit. No one followed them. No one intruded on their shared moment.

They stepped outside and a gust of frigid wind swirled their laughter and stole the miasmic cloud enveloping Castiel. Castiel lifted a hand to wipe away the tears streaming down his cheeks and looked out over the expanse of their lawn, illuminated by floodlights placed to project splendor onto the mansion façade, brown grass and patchy snow and occasional trees and hedges in manicured picturesque configurations.

The weight of what he’d done settled on his shoulders like Atlas heaving up the world.

“Now what?” he asked, solemn, grave, awed, burdened, afraid.


“Thank you, Gabriel.”

“Anytime…and anytime shoulda been twenty damn years ago. I’m sorry, Castiel.”

“But—”

“No. I’m sorry. Now let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Looking at the house as Gabriel tugged him to the garage, Castiel didn’t think he’d ever seen a
structure that less resembled a popsicle stand.

But popsicle stand sounds like a good option for a new business prospect for me…I imagine they can’t be much money to operate…

God, we’re leaving and I won’t be going into IADB tomorrow morning and my whole life is ahead of me and I can do anything…

...that’s terrifying…

...someone, please, tell me what I should do now.

Gabriel was silent as they got his car and headed out unmolested. The gate opened to Gabriel’s code, closed behind them as they made the turn off their private driveway onto the quiet road that led through their posh neighborhood.

If I look back, I’ll turn to salt, like Lot’s wife…

Castiel glanced back.

He didn’t transform into a pillar of salt.

The gates closed silently, blocking the last view of the estate that had been Castiel’s home since he was born. Tearing his eyes away, he blinked back tears and looked forward onto the night-shrouded streets that cloaked the demesnes of their neighbors.

If he never came back here, it’d be too soon.

At least I have Gabriel with me. At least he seems to have a plan, have some idea what we should do.

I have no idea what I should do, what I should ever have done.

But I guess now I finally have to figure something out…
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Okay really all these plotty chapters ended up long...

The silence grew so heavy that breaking it was like fighting through dense undergrowth. He wanted to ask – what happens now? What should I do? Was rebuking mother the wrong choice? – but as desperate as he was to be given direction, he knew asking Gabriel for guidance was inappropriate. Gabriel had filled a parental role for Castiel since they were children but that didn’t mean he was more of an adult than Castiel. Likely, Gabriel was as confused and troubled as Castiel was. Despite Gabriel’s frequent shows of rebellion, he’d never spurned the family either. There was no way Gabriel could have planned this evening – no way he could have a road map for what was to come – it was unfair to beg him to steer Castiel now that Naomi would no longer be doing.

But didn’t he suggest he’d gathered blackmail material on IADB? So maybe he did plan for this…

…it couldn’t hurt to ask him even for a suggestion, a hint, “Brother, what do you think I should do now?” I don’t have to obey him…just listen to his counsel…that’s a thing normal people do, right?

I haven’t got a clue.

Regardless…I can’t depend on Gabriel, not like that.

Time to figure out how to operate this rudderless boat of a life myself…

“Where are we going?”

That seemed an appropriate, safe question, related to their immediate purpose rather than their long term goals. Gabriel was driving so he must have somewhere in mind…

“Uh…my apartment?” said Gabriel. “Where the heck else would we go?”

“You have an apartment.” Castiel lifted a hand to his forehead and rubbed his forehead. Gabriel had been at the mansion often of late but it still was a mark of…something…that Castiel had forgotten that his brother had his own place. Glancing toward the driver seat, Castiel caught Gabriel’s concerned frown, shadowed by the sporadically placed street lights they passed beneath.

“Please tell me you’re not thinking of going to work in the morning,” Gabriel said.

“I’m not planning to go to work in the morning,” Castiel dutifully repeated. “Or Tuesday morning, or Wednesday morning, or any morning ever again, not at IADB. Are you?”

“No.”

“Dean doesn’t know.” Castiel’s vision fuzzed out staring at speed-blurred buildings. The tree-lined boulevards of the suburbs were behind them. The city skyscrapers stood cheek-by-jowl, tall and imposing as they headed to the luxury apartment buildings downtown where Gabriel had bought a penthouse condominium.
“He’ll figure it out right quick when he gets in tomorrow morning and we’re not there.”

“That’ll be too late! What if Naomi doesn’t let him leave? I have to—”

“Hey!”

Castiel didn’t realize he’d started to rise – as if he could leap to action from the cab of a moving car, God, what an idiot he was – until Gabriel put a restraining hand on his knee.

“Dean’s a big boy, he can handle himself. Ma won’t act against him; that’d be kidnapping, and while she’s a bitch, and sometimes borderline unethical, there’s a world of difference between some casual money laundering between friends and abducting and disappearing the boyfriend she disapproves of.”

“It’s true, Dean can handle himself, and he is definitely a big boy,” Castiel murmured.

“TMI!”

“Huh?”

“When was the last time you got a good night’s sleep?” Gabriel’s head shook in time to the click-click click-click of his turn signal as he waited for the automatic door of the building’s garage to lift.

“I don’t remember,” admitted Castiel.

Yes I do.

It was my third night with Dean, the day before I met April.

“Fuck that,” said Gabriel, navigating into the subterranean parking lot. “You’re gettin’ the bed tonight.”

“The couch is fine.”

“No! Bed!” Gabriel’s parking space was one of the only empty ones in the lot; he pulled into the spot, put the car into park, shut off the engine, and slumped into his bucket seat. “You can borrow PJs, too.”

“I can sleep in this.”

“Yeah, you can, but you don’t have to,” said Gabriel, frowning. “Fuck this austerity thing, Cassie. You’re rich and handsome and brilliant and successful and you deserve some of the finer things in life.”

That’s…that’s three people who have suggested I’m good-looking in the past twenty-four hours… I think that’s more than in my whole life before…and brilliant and successful? I’m adequate, and have been successful only thanks to the continual boosts I’ve received from being a Novak…

“I don’t want any of the finer things in life,” Castiel replied, troubled. “I just want…” He shrugged, staring at the dim light reflecting off the black car parked beside them.

…I want to be Dean’s omega. Beyond that, I haven’t the foggiest.

Castiel chanced a glance Gabriel’s way, took in his eyes downturned in concern and lips compressed in a thin, pale line, and went back to staring at the black car.
“Gabriel is right. Dean is right. I think. I’m not an alpha, not really…

“I’m sorry I got upset with you the other week,” said Castiel.

“Whatevs, it’s fine – I—”

“It wasn’t fine then, and it’s not fine now,” Castiel said firmly. Musterling his courage, he turned to his brother. Gabriel watched him, head quirked to the side, and gave him a quixotic smile. “Your comments may have been ill-timed but they weren’t incorrect. I’ve always been…different…and until recently I thought that meant there was something wrong with me, something broken. That belief aligned with Naomi’s guidance. She’s told me I’m broken, that I needed to be fixed, that she could fix me, so many times. But speaking with you, speaking with Dean, has led me to wonder if…if maybe different…just means…different. It doesn’t have to equal wrong or bad or dysfunctional.”

“No, it doesn’t…”

Castiel longed for Gabriel to say more, but he didn’t resume talking. “Dean also thinks I’m an omega,” Castiel added.

“What do you think, Cas?”

I think I’m an omega.

Except…

“I don’t know.” Castiel took a deep breath, struggling to hold eye-contact with Gabriel. “But I…do know…that I’ve never felt like an alpha, and that my feelings and experiences have never matched those of the alphas around me.”

“Look, the bitch and Sue Storm are my parents, too – I get it – but transpresentation isn’t that uncommon – as far as I can tell it’s way more common than being transgendered – and it’s not weird. And it’s not as simple as ‘you must pick alpha, beta, or omega,’ either. You can be presentation-fluid, or presentation-queer, or presentation-questioning. I won’t judge.”

“Most people will,” said Castiel morosely.

“Will Dean?”

“No.” The word escaped before Castiel thought through his answer, so certain was he that Dean was indifferent to his sexuality, gender, and presentation. But what if Dean is actually… The concerns that had plagued him since they started…dating?…flooded in. “At least…I think…but sometimes I wonder…”

“That he’s only into you because he gets to fuck an alpha?” said Gabriel with a coarse laugh. “Turn the tables on everyone who treats him like a twink omega bottom? Get his rocks off and his knot pumped?”

“That he’ll accept anything I tell him, anything I do, because I’m a Novak and I’m rich,” Castiel explained.

“You really think that?”

“Not usually,” conceded Castiel. “But I have to wonder. What does he see in me?”

“Has he told you what he sees in you?”
“Sort of?”

He said…what did he say? What did I imagine? What blanks did I fill in out of misguided optimism? It’s so hard to keep everything straight.

“Have you asked?”

I’m so tired.

“…no.”

And I’m so bad at this.

“Have you told him what you see in him?”

Wow…I don’t…I don’t know…

“I think…maybe?”

I’ve told him I care about him, and that being with him feels good, and that I don’t want to lose him…but that’s not the same as telling him that I think he’s beautiful and brilliant and caring…

“You two communicate for shit.”

“Believe me, no one knows that better than we do,” Castiel sighed. “We’ve been trying to improve. He has suggested he cares about me, but I still…”

“Has Dean ever given you reason to think he was using you?” said Gabriel.

Well…he keeps dating me, keeps letting me back into his life even when I’m a jerk…and he’s worked to split me from the family…and didn’t tell me he knew my name…but there are alternative explanations for all of that…

“I don’t know,” said Castiel. The incongruities in his behavior could be innocuous, or they could be part of a concerted effort to…to do what, exactly? “How can I be sure?”

“Based purely on gut instinct – logic and anxiety aside – do you believe Dean’s manipulating you?”

Castiel considered their time together, considered all the things Dean had said and done, considered the reflections that had circled his mind throughout the day as he lay locked in his room. Though it couldn’t have been more than an hour since April came in and tried to force herself on him, Castiel felt a lifetime away from the version of himself who’d lain helplessly on the bed considering the forms of manipulation.

“No,” Castiel said finally. “I don’t think he has been. But I’m not sure.”

“You can never be sure, Cassie,” said Gabriel, rolling his eyes. “That’s where trust comes in. Caring about someone means trusting them. Believe me, I know how next to fucking impossible that is when you’ve been raised in our family, but if you want a relationship, you gotta figure out some way of getting past that and putting faith in the people you care about.”

“I trust you…”

Do I? Do I really trust Gabriel?

“You shouldn’t,” Gabriel said bluntly. “I’ve left you vulnerable and exposed while I’ve pretended
you can rely on me. I’ve been a shit excuse for a brother and an even shittier surrogate for a parent. I’m gonna try to do better – I’m done with them, too. I won’t go back, and I’ve got one hell of a dossier to keep the bitch from forcing us to go back. I’m sorry for all the times I’ve failed you, Castiel. I’ll do better. I’ll stay with you. If, ya know, you want me to.” The sincerity shining like a beacon from Gabriel’s usually irreverent face was heart-wrenching.

“Thank you,” murmured Castiel. His reply felt inadequate compared to the profundity of Gabriel’s apology, but he could think of nothing else to say.

“Don’t think me ‘til I put my money where my mouth is,” said Gabriel irreverently as if they hadn’t shared a ‘moment.’ “Besides, my point is – whatever Dean does and doesn’t say, it doesn’t fucking matter. Naomi insists she loves us and that she’s a great mom – that doesn’t make it true. And Dean could flat-out say, ‘I’m fucking you ’cause you pay me well’ and that wouldn’t necessarily make that true, either. Besides…didn’t you say you’re not paying him?”

“I’m not,” Castiel confirmed. “Heck, if we grab a meal together, whether he gets the filet mignon or nothing but black coffee, he insists on paying his share. Not that he ever gets steak. He’s frugal.”

“Regardless, it’s not about what Dean says,” said Gabriel. “Or at least not only about what Dean says. It’s about how he acts, and it’s about how you feel about him. If you care about him, if you trust him, then trust yourself.”

“That’s true, isn’t it…it’s not about trusting him – he’s done nothing to render himself untrustworthy in my eyes – it’s about trusting my own assessment of him,” said Castiel. It felt like a revelation he’d had before, multiple times, yet it carried more weight coming from Gabriel. Of course it does. Because I don’t trust my own assessments – I don’t even trust my own assessments of my ability to trust my own assessments. What a mess. “How did you grow so wise about relationships?”

“I’ve watched ‘Two Weeks Notice’ like eight times,” said Gabriel glibly.

“I don’t know what that means.”


“Ah – those are all romantic comedies?” said Castiel.

“I swear, you live under a goddamn rock.”

“Visual media has never been particularly engaging to me,” Castiel grumbled. “And—”

A knock on the back driver’s side window caused them both to jerk their heads around. Someone, unrecognizable with only their belly visible, sidled between the parked cars. With a frown, Gabriel pressed the button to lower his window, remembered the car was off, and went to turn the key.

The person dropped down and was revealed to be Meg, smiling mischievously at them.

“You two idiots gonna sit in your damn car all night?” she drawled, voice muffled through the glass.

“Meg?”

“In the flesh!”

“You told me your name was Rachel!” spluttered Gabriel.
“If it helps, I lied to both of you,” she said with an unapologetic smirk. “Meg’s my most common pseudonym, but both names are bull. No one in our biz uses a real name - just look at your boy Manny there.” She gestured toward Castiel. Manny? Gabriel mouthed exaggeratedly, shooting Castiel a look. Castiel shrugged and gave his brother a sheepish smile. “But I repeat – this is a fricken awkward way to hold a conversation, and it’s too damn cold for me to keep waiting for you outside. Can we go up already?”

“What’s Meg doing here?” asked Castiel as he opened his car door, stopped barely short of hitting it into the side of the car parked parallel to theirs, and stepped out into the thick, chemical-tinged air of the enclosed lot.

“Helping!” Meg replied, popping up to smile at him over the top of the vehicle.

“For various definitions of the word ‘help,’” Gabriel said. He stepped out of the car and slammed the door behind him.

“Hey, you called, I answered,” she said.

“Rachel has been my regular fling for a while,” Gabriel explained as they walked together toward the elevator that led into the building. “When I realized shit was going down I called her to see if she could get a hold of Dean. Any luck?”

_I might see Dean soon_? A thrill ran down Castiel’s back, anticipation and hope and aching loneliness combining strangely.

“Nope,” she said. Castiel’s stomach dropped. “Jenny’s MIA. But I left him a voicemail, and I called his brother and left _him_ a voicemail, _and_ I left a message for that motel owner friend of his, Benji or whoever.”

“Benny,” Castiel corrected.

“Same diff.”

“So how do you know Rachel?” Gabriel asked, hitting the button for the elevator.

“Meg introduced me to Dean,” Castiel explained. “Or rather to Jensen – that’s the name he uses for work.” The ping of the elevator arriving jolted all three of them, and they exchanged sheepish looks as the doors slid open.

“Small world, eh, Manny? Gabe?” She wrapped arms around each of their shoulders and tugged the brothers into the elevator.

“You told her your real name?” said Castiel.

“You didn’t?” Gabriel countered.

“I thought that—”

“Hey, numb nuts, what floor?” interrupted Meg.

Gabriel hit the button for the 15th floor.

Meg’s arm was still around Castiel’s shoulder. Her musky scent, heavy to the point of being cloying yet not unpleasant, clung to Castiel’s jacket. If he didn’t already reek of himself and Dean and April, it wouldn’t be so bad, but adding yet another aroma set his nose and eyes to itching.
“My name is Castiel,” he offered into the heavy silence.

“Yeah, I got that, Manny,” she said dryly.

“No, not Manny. Cas-ti—”

The elevator doors opened onto the lobby foyer outside Gabriel’s apartment door.

Dean sprawled on the tiled floor, leaning against Gabriel’s door, and Castiel got a moment’s glimpse of him relaxed, head back, eyes closed, long legs stretched out before him, boot-clad feet flopped to the sides, before he reacted to the ping of the elevator by leaping up. His impatience was patent as he stood, jittery, beside the elevator door waiting for Castiel to emerge, and matched the anticipation that Castiel felt. He hadn’t dared hope to see Dean so soon; being greeted by him was…perfect. A knot of pain and tension in Castiel’s chest unfolded, a warm feeling spreading out to leave him dizzy.

_Utterly, unutterably perfect._

“Dean,” he breathed.

Gabriel rolled his eyes and brushed past Dean to get to his front door, keys jangling in his hand.

Meg rolled her eyes, sauntered up to Gabriel, bumped him with her hip and wrapped an arm around his neck.

Castiel got one step out the doors and Dean enveloped him, scented him, and murmured in his ear, “You’re alright? Fuck, I was worried – when I saw I’d missed a bunch of calls from Meg, I checked my voicemail, heard the score, and texted my client to cancel so I could high-tail it over here. What’d that bitch do to you? I’ll fuckin’ kill her…”

Questions swirled through Castiel’s head – how had Dean known where to come, why had Dean come, would Dean really pick a fight for Castiel’s sake, and was he angry at Naomi or April or both, on and on – but Castiel could say nothing. Relief swamped him. His head fell on Dean’s shoulder and he sighed. His knees trembled, and Dean’s arms around him felt like salvation and deliverance.

Dean’s scent, calming and sunny and grassy as summer, suffused his senses.

“Are you alright?” Dean repeated, worried.

“I will be,” Castiel murmured. The words felt _true_, as profound a realization as any Castiel had experienced that day. Never before had he looked at his life and seen a glimmer of hope that the future would bring him any joy, but breathing now, surrounded by Dean, Castiel glimpsed better times to come. It was terrifying, but his conviction grew that whatever was ahead, Dean would be at his side, and that lent him strength and brightened his prospects and kept his fears at bay.

_See? I’m not alone. Dean cancelled a job to be by my side. Dean grew angry at April and Naomi on my behalf. Dean cares about me. If I talk to him about my problems…how would he respond? I think…I think he’d listen, and engage, and offer cogent advice. And I think I’m ready to try opening up to him and find out how he responds._

“You two gonna stand out here and hug it out all night?” asked Meg.

The part of Castiel conditioned to take the lead, be strong, be bold, be decisive, screamed that he should stand straight and direct Dean to Gabriel’s apartment, but there was no fortitude behind the sentiment. Castiel couldn’t make himself move. He wanted Dean to take the lead – longed for
anyone other than himself to be in command.

“I’ve got you.” Dean whispered the words as a vow in Castiel’s ear. Castiel let a long exhale leak from him and lifted his head. Dean caught his eye with a shy smile, and Castiel returned it.

*It’s okay. My alpha has got me.*

*How could I have doubted him? What a fool I’ve been…*

Castiel leaned into Dean’s side; Dean wrapped an arm around his shoulders and guided him into the apartment, sidestepping so they could get through the doorway without separating.

Meg rolled her eyes again.

Gabriel’s apartment was large and lavishly furnished. The door opened onto a small foyer with a stand for shoes; the living room, garish with over-plush sofas and a green shag carpet that mimicked grass, was visible beyond. Lights flicking on and noises from within spoke to Gabriel moving about the apartment. His sweet caramel smell clung to the furniture and carpet; every time Castiel visited he felt like he’d stepped into a candy shop. Dean slipped his feet from his boots without letting go his hold of Castiel, and Castiel reluctantly shook Dean’s arm off so he could drop to a squat and untie his shoes. As soon as he stood, Dean held him again, and Castiel was embarrassed by his relief, worried it was obvious in his scent, unable to resist Dean’s allure.

*Self-control is important. These constant slight shifts in my emotional state scream instability. I shouldn’t be like that. I shouldn’t…*

*…what, I shouldn’t feel?*

*Right. I shouldn’t feel anything at all.*

*That’s Naomi talking. I keep saying I want to figure out who I am – I need to entertain the possibility that I am a person who feels profoundly, that I have been repressing myself, that I to experience a wide range of emotions and that I am allowed to express them.*

Lost despite their familiar surroundings, Castiel let Dean steer him across the room and pull him onto one of couches. Dean took the corner seat. Castiel settled beside him, sitting properly, back against the paisley cushions, hands in his lap, knees together, feet on the floor. Dean snorted, grabbed him, pivoted to the side to put his feet on the couch, and dragged Castiel against him. With another slow exhale, Castiel relaxed into Dean, squeezed onto the couch to lie parallel with him, and let his eyes slip shut.

“So now what, buckos?” Gabriel sounded bright and chipper and tired.

“Why am I here?” Meg asked.

“Because since Kali got sick of me, you’re my only regular fuck buddy and I needed help to find Dean and I didn’t realize he’d show up on my doorstep. Also as embarrassed as I am to admit it you are the closest thing I have to a friend.” Gabriel explained in a jumbled rush.

There was a beat pause.

“We’re not friends,” Meg grumbled. “But fine.”

“I’m making coffee,” Gabriel offered.
“I already said fine, you don’t gotta sweeten the pot.”

“Ugh are you kidding? It’s coffee, of course I have to sweeten the pot,” said Gabriel, mock aghast.

“I swear to God, Gabriel Novak-Shurley, if you add sugar to my coffee I will end you,” Meg growled.

Their squabbling washed over Castiel meaninglessly. Dean’s heartbeat was a steady thump beneath his ear, comforting and powerful and soothing. Seeking stability, Castiel synced his breathing to the sound. One of Dean’s hands settled on his head, riffling his hair, massaging his scalp.

“Maybe I should take Castiel to bed.” Dean’s voice was a deep rumble that reverberated through Castiel’s skull, piercing through his reverie. Startled, he opened his eyes. Gabriel sat in his pink upholstered papasan. Meg sat cross-legged on the floor, clutching a steaming cup of coffee, inhaling the aroma with a smile on her face like she’d achieved enlightenment.

_How much of their conversation did I miss? Is it okay? Are they angry?_

No one looks angry. I can’t have missed much.

“Are you coming to bed?” Castiel asked, lifting his head enough to get a skewed view of Dean’s face straight up his nostrils. From this angle, his lips were full and pouty and so kissable. If Dean came to bed with him…

…how thick were Gabriel’s walls?

Better not to risk it.

Dean shook his head.

Wait, what? Oh, right – I asked if he’d join me.

“I wanna hear this plan your bro has,” Dean said. “And, ya know, I called Sam, so it’d be fucking weird for me to leave now.”

“You called Sam?”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to tuck you in for the night?” Dean laughed, his shaking chest making Castiel’s vision swim. “That was like ten minutes ago, dude!”

“I’d like to stay,” Castiel mumbled, dropping his head and closing his eyes once more. “Wanna meet your brother…”

“Cassie’s trying to win the argument he and I had earlier about whether or not he’d sleep on the couch,” said Gabriel.

“Always were the only one person in the family I could best in an argument.” Castiel quirked a smile and Gabriel laughed.

“If you really want the cricks in your back, be my guest,” Gabriel conceded graciously. “Okay, Dean-o, how much school have you got left?”

“Two years,” Dean replied.

“Your cover letter on the internship application said you ultimately want to start your own hedge
“God, does he. It’s all he ever talks about,” snarked Meg.

“Look, Meg, when you put your money in a bank, what do you think they do with it? Easy – they invest it, and maybe if they’re feeling really, really stupidly generous they offer you an account that earns a miniscule amount of interest, or you can get a CD with 1% returns. Meanwhile, the S&P 500 returned 11.9% last year. That entire difference goes into the bank’s pocket, when it could be going into ours.” Dean’s earnestness, knowledge and passion brought a smile to Castiel’s face.

*My alpha is so smart.*

*My alpha...*

Rocking into the couch cushions, Castiel freed his arm from where it was trapped between them, slumped back onto Dean, and lay his hand over Dean’s heart. The thin fabric of Dean’s shirt scrunched beneath his fingers – *he wasn’t wearing a coat when he arrived, and it’s so cold out...oh, Dean* – and Dean’s free hand curled over Castiel’s as he spoke.

“And quit making fun of me, I mean it – this shit is important,” Dean insisted. Castiel blinked and caught a glimpse of Meg’s head tilted up, her lips moving in silent imitation of Dean’s explanation. “We work our asses off, fricken literally, and I’m sick of the profits going to some douchebag of an old white alpha lording it over us from a board room. No offense, Cas.”

“Full offense, Dean,” he murmured. “Fuck Naomi Novak and fuck International Angel Deposit Bank.” Dean barked a shocked laugh.

“You do know your shit,” Gabriel acknowledged. “Knew I chose the right dude for the internship. So what’s the hold up?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve got money saved up, right? Why not just...start your firm?”

“Man, you two live in some weird-ass bubble,” muttered Dean. “I need an MBA. I need contacts. I need a reputation – which might be permanently shot, by the way, since it sounds like your bitch of a mom knows about my side job and my internship is caput. If she blacklists me I won’t be able to get another position, at least not in Palmeton...maybe if I move and go to rival firm like Roman’s...but I can’t go nowhere ‘til Sam and I are done with school. And I need a butt-ton of start-up capital. I’ve been working on it, asking around, but I’m fricken 21 and I’m *not* a Novak. This shit don’t come easy.”

“But you *do* have a plan for starting up?” Gabriel said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Meg. “Twinkle toes has been talking up his hedge fund for two years, encouraging all us whores to save our pennies and buy in.”

“Most of us charge $500 a night,” Dean said.

“Only $500?” interjected Gabriel. Castiel couldn’t tell if Gabriel’s outrage was genuine or not, but Castiel agreed – they charged too little for the amount of work they did.

“And most of us work five or six nights a week. So call it five hundred, and call it five nights – that’s a hundred and thirty thou a year,” said Dean. “Sure, we’ve got expenses, families, homes, taxes, insurance, like to take the occasional vacation, all that jazz, but the money adds up. I’ve only been in
the game three years, and I support Sammy, and I’ve got my side job stripping, and he works, and I’m paying out of pocket for school, and saving up so he can go to college, and I’ve still managed to save up about a hundred thousand. It’s not outrageous for me to ask around and see if other’s have done the same!”

“It’s not,” Meg conceded with a harrumph. “I’ve been saving.”

“Have I understood this correctly?” asked Castiel, looking up. “Dean, you’ve been approaching your fellow sex workers about buying into a hedge fund with you?”

“Yeah – minimum investment $100,000,” he replied proudly. “I’ve got 8 investors so far, though no money has changed hands yet. Need to talk to a lawyer first, get everything drawn up officially. I mean…it’s not that much of an accomplishment. Once I showed them the returns on my own money – didn’t take much convincing from there.”

“You’re really good at this,” said Castiel, dropping his head back down. The loss of Dean’s voice and heartbeat echoing through his head was visceral. Better to see nothing of anyone’s facial expressions than to lose the connection between them.

“I love it,” said Dean with the utmost sincerity.

Castiel couldn’t imagine feeling that strongly about his vocation.

But he could invest, and he was good at it, and…

“We can call a lawyer tomorrow,” he murmured. “I’ve got about ten million saved up. Use that.”

“Ten million?” gasped Gabriel as Dean choked on nothing, chest heaving so hard that Castiel was knocked off him. “Cassie, how the fuck…?!?”

“My starting salary at IADB was $250,000 a year, and I’ve been there ten years.” Castiel sat up, grimaced at Dean, got a sheepish shrug in return, and ticked off points on his fingers. “Annual 10% raise - so I made over $600,000 this year. Success-based bonuses, starting at a minimum of $250,000 and increasing based on the returns I earned clients. That’s a baseline of a half-million a year. Last year my bonus was $1.25 million. I have almost no expenses – add it all up – ten million bucks, post-taxes.”

“And here Naomi told me she was being generous giving me 200k! No such thing as an alpha-beta-omega pay gap my ass!”

“Is it news that our mother is a bitch?” asked Castiel.

“Dude, it’s only been a few hours and I’m already loving this ‘new you’ attitude. Keep up the swearing, you’re doing God’s work,” Gabriel said. “And no, you’re right, it isn’t news that ma’s a bitch and I should know better but I’m still surprised sometimes. ‘Cause I’m as much of a fricken idiot as you are, Cas, dumb enough to think she’s actually got our best interest at heart.”

“It’s not foolish to want to believe our mother cares about us.”

“Misguided, though, and utterly insupportable by the evidence.”

“Ten million dollars?” Dean asked weakly.

“Yes, Dean, currently invested with Roman Wealth Management, but I can withdraw it and put it in your care instead, if you want to start a firm now,” said Castiel.
I mean that. I’d give Dean everything I’ve worked for. And why shouldn’t I? The money is meaningless to me. To him, it’s everything.

And because I care about him and I want him to be happy, want to see him succeed.

Dean seems utterly shocked at the prospect.

That’s another vote in his favor.

It’s not like I’m giving him millions of dollars. I’m offering to let him invest millions of dollars that will still belong to me, and he’ll get a cut if and only if his investments are successful.

“Would you help?” asked Dean.

Wait, what?

“I, uh, I know about the markets and shit, but I’ve not got any management or administrative experience – that’s why I’ve been doing internships,” Dean explained.

“Will we help,” scoffed Gabriel. “Can you imagine Naomi’s fuckin’ face if we make a fund that out-performs IADB’s investment division? I’ve been a manager at IADB for a decade and you’d better fricken believe I will help you whoop their asses. And I know a lawyer who can hook us up on the legal end of things – nice guy, no angle, knows his shit – name’s Cain.”

“Tim Cain?” asked Dean.

“Yeah – you know him?”

“He teaches a business ethics class at Palmeton U,” said Dean. “I took it last year.”

“I swear, there are literally a half-million fricken people in Palmeton, how does everyone know each other?” Meg grumbled.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t know anyone,” offered Castiel. “I have no life.”

“It’s true, he has no life,” Gabriel said. “Okily dokily, neighbors – this sounds like a plan.”

“Really?” asked Dean. “Wait – Gabe – this was your plan? Help me start a hedge fund? Why?” Pale faced with shock, he looked from Gabriel to Castiel and back as though he’d never seen either of them before.


“I mean – obviously, I’ll invest your money,” Dean protested. “But – but that still doesn’t explain what the fuck you’re thinking, backing me. Start your own hedge fund!”

“Exactly – I want in – management, partner, I’ve got the know-how, you’ve got the good looks. Together, we’ll be unstoppable, Deanaluffagus. And we’ve got Cas, of course. Why? ‘Cause even if I could do this alone – spoilers, I can’t – I wouldn’t want to. And taking down dear old mum will be awesome. Right, Cassie?”

But I don’t want to be a banker!

...what else will I do with myself? I’ve got no other expertise, no other skills. I’ve got only one position on my resume, only one focus for my BA and MBA. By letting Naomi steer my path I guaranteed I’d be supremely unqualified for any other line of work. Even finding a bank to hire me
would be a challenge. Everyone knows IADB hires nepotistically…

…though Roman did offer me a job…

“Of course.” Castiel forced a smile onto his face. The shock was starting to fade from Dean’s face, a flush of exuberance pinking his cheeks.

“I’m in,” sighed Meg. They all turned to her, surprised. “What? I’ve got savings. I just didn’t want to put it in this idiot’s hands. But if you two are involved…”

“And you’ve got 8 other investors?” Gabriel asked Dean.

“Yeah – at one hundred thousand each.”

“That’ll give us about twelve million to play with,” said Gabriel thoughtfully, “mostly Cas’ and mine…that’s slim, but doable…”

“If we dropped the limit to fifty thousand we could pull in more of the sex workers,” Dean added. “Everyone wants to save for retirement – we know our ability to do this work has got an expiration date. A lot of folks don’t trust banks and haven’t wanted to commit, but they know me. If we show good returns, they’ll chip in. And heck, even if they didn’t want to trust us with their hard-earned cash, I bet we could make a killing doing hourly commission work – if we get an office, we could offer savings advice, maybe even loans and shit…like a real bank! Staffed by folks they’ll trust. It’s a ready-made, underserved market.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot…” murmured Castiel affectionately.

“Maybe a smidge,” Dean conceded.

“Why should they trust our bank as opposed to other banks?” Castiel asked.

“Look, Cas, you care about me and even you look down your snooty, cute-as-a-button nose sometimes,” explained Dean. “Imagine how folks who don’t know us treat us. We get shit service at every professional outfit, as if the employees there aren’t the folks who hire us, as if what we do isn’t totally legal and our money isn’t as good as other peoples. Our profession is on our Goddamn tax returns. You should see the looks we get when we try to get help from a CPA.”

“Oh, oh, I’m a CPA!” Gabriel exclaimed, bouncing in his chair like a child promised ice cream for dessert. Actually – even now, that’s exactly how he bounces when he’s offered ice cream for dessert. “And boy have I got you and your friends covered. Dude, I would love to help out with their taxes! I hope they’ve been paying estimated…”

“Right, so – maybe not a hedge fund so much as a bank, with a variety of aligned services – loans, accounts, investment, tax support, that kind of thing,” said Dean thoughtfully. “We could make a killing.”

“This is the best plan ever,” Gabriel gushed. “Take all this shit we’ve spent our lives learning and use it to turn a bunch of prostitutes into millionaires. Pretty Woman my ass – who needs a damsel in distress? We got self-saving damsels ‘round these parts.”

*I could use some saving…does that make me the damsels in distress?*

*I really need to see that damn movie.*

“I—”
A knock on the door interrupted Castiel. Dean sprang to his feet and beat Gabriel to the door, glanced through the peep hole and pulled it open, bursting out an excited, “Sam!” as he threw his arms around the person on the other side. Dean’s body obstructed Castiel’s view, but Benny stood behind Sam and Dean, and Robert Singer – Bobby, Castiel corrected himself – was with them.

“How can they look away? He’s captivating.

Or am I the only one who thinks that?

Actually…I’d better be alone in that sentiment…if Gabriel lays one hand on him…

…even if Gabriel has paid for the privilege…

Castiel put the kybosh on that line of thought as his mind spun out disgusted fantasies of who among his acquaintance might have hired Dean in the past. Sam sneezed. Dean looked gawky and young, smiling sheepishly, one hand awkwardly mussing his hair. He offered Castiel an half-shrug and a wink. Gabriel snorted a laugh. Quirking his head, Castiel looked a question at his brother.

Laughing harder, Gabriel gestured between him and Dean. “You two…you have no damn idea, do you…”

“Correct – I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about.” Castiel looked to Dean for support, but his alpha only blushed darker.

Sam sneezed again.

“I mean…I know my scent’s changed since I started seeing Cas…” Dean muttered abashedly. “I can smell it, and Sam said…some ‘o my regulars too…a lot of people have commented…”

“Idjits,” sighed Bobby, rolling his eyes. “Scent-bonded, puppy-love sons of idjits…”

A scent-bond? Us? Really? No one has said word one to me...

...of course they haven’t. The only people I see are members of my family. They didn’t care if I commit infidelity, so long as I married April.

I will not marry April.
They’re going to care.

“Your job’s not in danger, is it?” asked Castiel, meeting Bobby’s eyes, desperate to change the subject.

“What, me?” Bobby quirked one eyebrow, squinted at Castiel skeptically with the other eye, and shook his head. “Hell no. No one at IADB knows I’m here, I got no official connection to these boys, and I’m no kinda dumbass to talk ‘bout my personal life with a bunch of blood-sucking vultures.”

“Vultures don’t suck blood,” offered Gabriel. “I think you mean leeches...or vampires...”

“I want to be one of those blood-suckers,” Dean protested.

“I know ya do, idjit,” said Bobby fondly, reaching up to further dishevel Dean’s hair. Dean scowled, but made no effort to stop the gesture.

“So, uh…” Sam spoke and flinched as everyone turned to look at him. “Food?”

“Promised the kid I’d order pizza,” Benny explained.

“Well, then, let’s get some pizza!”

Competing voices called out their topping preferences and Castiel sank back on the couch and let the sound wash over him. My topping preference is Dean. He giggled. He was so, so, so tired. The prospect of eating was nauseating. Dean’s absence was a dull ache, an itch beneath his skin. Gaze unfocused, he stared at the far wall. His head dropped, his vision blurred, and stunning green arrested him.

Having everyone here is...noisy, and overwhelming...but kinda nice, too...I could get used to the hubbub...it's different from home. Everyone sounds happy.

I like it.

Why couldn’t this have been my family?

What was it Dean said? “You take family where you can find it.” So...so maybe this could be my family? How does that work? Can I just decide they’re my family now? Congratulations, Mr. Singer, you’ve adopted a Novak-Shurley?

“Yo, Cas – whatcha want on your pie?” Dean asked. Castiel’s vision focused to reveal Dean’s still-flushed features. He’d dropped to his knees opposite the couch, Gabriel’s clunky white modern coffee table putting acres of distance between them.

“You,” said Castiel, smiling.

The room plunged into silence and Castiel blushed as his brain caught up with his mouth.

“I mean—”

“Riiiiight.” Dean put a hand on the table and leapt over it deftly, ignoring Gabriel’s indignant squawk. “kay, then. No more pretending Cas is fine. I’m gonna put him to bed, guys. Ya’ll order whatever ya want. I ain’t picky.”

“But—”
Dean leaned against Castiel, enveloping him in fresh grass, and breathed in his ear, “Lemme take care of you, babe – okay? It’d make my inner alpha all warm and tingly.”

Meg broke into astonished laughter.

Castiel went crimson.

…but I do want him to take care of me…

Shooting a defiant look around the room – Meg still laughed, Gabriel gave him a saucy grin, Sam politely averted his gaze, Bobby looked like he might sprain something he rolled his eyes so high, and Benny ignored them, talking on the phone, a hand over his other ears to block the noise – Castiel let Dean lead him down the hallway. As soon as they were out of sight, Dean froze.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “I, uh… I’ve never been here… um…”

“This one is the bathroom,” Castiel offered, gesturing at a closed door. “This is the bedroom.”

Castiel took the lead and pushed open the door, mentally preparing himself for Dean’s reaction.

There was a long pause.

“This is a joke, right?” said Dean.

Gabriel’s room was… well, garish didn’t begin to cover it. Where the Kellys’ bedroom had been a serious attempt at luxury that came off as ridiculous to the knowledgeable eye, April’s had been a nightmare in pink, and Castiel’s was an austere prison cell, Gabriel’s bedroom looked like the Kellys’ room had collided with April’s, the pink replaced with crimson. The enormous heart-shaped bed was neatly made with red satin sheets. Drapes hung above it in artful disarray, anchored in place by velvet sashes that could be pulled aside to drop the bed hangings, as if privacy were an issue in the seclusion of Gabriel’s bedroom. Lava lamps rested on end tables, casting rosy shadows over the bed, the dark red walls, and the maroon carpeting. A disco ball hung from the center of the ceiling where a light fixture would normally go, a silent motor spinning it, casting a dazzling array of white and red sparkles around the room.

“It’s not a joke,” Castiel offered solemnly. “Now do you understand why I’d preferred to sleep on the couch?”

Dean nodded, gave Castiel a nudge to get him moving again, and closed the door behind them.

“I’m going to fuck your brains out on that bed,” he vowed.

But what if we make a mess? What if Gabriel hears? What if—?

Who gives a damn?

“Okay.”

This is Gabriel we’re talking about. He’ll probably clap me on the back and congratulate me.

“Not now, though.” Dean sounded adorably disappointed. “Can’t ditch Sammy with your weirdo of a brother. But later – or in the morning. I…” Dean looked from Castiel to the disco ball to the bed to the door, inexplicable sadness tinging his expression.

“You don’t have to…?” Castiel replied hesitantly, trying to figure out the source of Dean’s reticence.
“Oh, I want to,” Dean breathed. “I want to so bad…is, uh…is that okay?”

“It’s alright with me,” said Castiel. He walked to the bed, dropped to a seat on the edge, and offered Dean a smile. “But you seem troubled.”

“Maybe…maybe a little…” Dean admitted, dropping to a cross-legged position on the floor. His fingers toyed with the curly-cue shag of the carpet. “This is…this is big. All of this is really damned fricken enormous. You’re…you’re really gonna invest all your money with me?”

“Maybe not all my money,” conceded Castiel. “I should hold some back as a safety precaution. It’d be unwise to place my investments in one pool, and even with the best of intentions a firm can lose everything if the market turns. But having seen you work, I have the utmost faith in your nascent banking abilities. You’ve got the expertise, and Gabriel and I have the experience. I think we will form a strong partnership.”

“That’s big,” Dean repeated.

“However, if it makes you uncomfortable, we can step back, or consider alternative approaches…”

“No!” exclaimed Dean, lunging forward so quickly that Castiel flinched. “No,” he repeated, settling back to the floor. “I just…it’s gonna take a few days to process, ya know?”

“I understand,” Castiel said. “What I don’t understand is how this links to your apparent discomfort with fucking me.”

Dean barked a humorless laugh. “Has anyone ever told you that ya sound like a robot when you swear?”

“I rarely swear, so no.” Castiel watched Dean, searching for hints of what troubled him, but there were no answers in the slow shake of Dean’s head. “There’s no call for you to remain with me if you’d rather be with your brother.”

“It’s not that…I want to check in on Sam…but…but I don’t want to leave you, and that’s weird,” muttered Dean, dropping his head into his hands. “Or…I don’t even fucking know…like…it doesn’t feel right, leaving you here after the day you had. But…but it’s Sam. I’m never conflicted when it comes to Sam. He comes first. End of story. Except maybe he doesn’t. It’s confusing as fuck in my head right now.”

“I’m an adult,” said Castiel dryly. “I can change into pajamas and climb into bed without aid.” Castiel’s heart ached at the thought of Dean leaving, at the prospect of Dean’s scent dissipating to be replaced by Gabriel’s, but he pushed the thought aside. Far be it for Castiel to come between Dean and his brother.

I’m an adult. I’ll be fine alone.

But he’s torn about leaving…that’s nice...

“Yeah…’course you can take care of yourself.” Dean shook his head again, hopped to his feet, and crossed to the door. Castiel’s stomach sank but he forced a stoic expression and walked to the closet door to retrieve sleepwear. The sooner he removed his clothing and escaped the reek of lilac, the better.

Step one: burn this outfit

Step two: wear Gabriel’s clothing and hold Dean close until I smell like Dean.
...or borrow clothes from Dean?

God, these are my only clothes...

Step three: buy a brand new wardrobe. Maybe...maybe not suits. Maybe, instead...God, I don’t know. What do I want to wear? Something comfortable. Something that doesn’t feel like armor. Something that—

“Hey.”

Surprised, Castiel turned around. Dean remained in the room, hand on the doorknob, eyes painted red by the ambient light, reflected disco ball squares glimmering against his white shirt like rhinestones.

“Do, uh...do you want to get into bed alone?” Dean asked. Determined not to pressure Dean, Castiel shrugged noncommittally. “Do you want me here? ‘Cause...like, I get it, you thought your life was all planned out and you were gonna marry that Kelly woman and I was your side fling and we were having fun but if you’re not marrying her suddenly our...relationship or whatever...is heavy and real and you weren’t planning that and sure you seemed happy to see me but if you wanna stop that’s cool. I’ve been assuming a lot. And I don’t know why I’m assuming a lot. I want...” Dean shook his head. “I don’t know what I want, Cas, and hell if I’ve got the least fricken clue what you want.”

I want the only thing I’ve ever wanted. I want the only thing I’ve ever dared reach for on my own, the only thing I’ve dared ask for despite the danger of Naomi’s reprobation.

I want you, Dean. Now and always. But I’m not allowed to ask for you. Your affections are for you to grant or not at your discretion, not for me to demand. That’s what I’ve learned, speaking with you, listening to you.

But that doesn’t mean I can’t ask for what I want. Dean deserves the chance to be asked and then state his preference. I can give him space to make his own choices while still expressing myself clearly.

I have to do better.

The wash of red light made the room surreal, like walking through a horror film, like walking through a macabre exhibit about the human body. Pushing aside his dark thoughts and fears, Castiel crossed to Dean, lay his hands on Dean’s cheeks, and paused.

“May I kiss you, Dean?”

Dean jerked a nod, constrained by Castiel’s grip.

Pulling Dean’s face to his, Castiel brought their mouths together. Compared to Dean’s earthy flavor, the lingering scent of April in his mouth was cloying, and he eagerly inhaled, pressed his tongue into Dean’s mouth and lapped up his saliva. He’d never have to taste April again; Castiel couldn’t wait to wash the last vestiges of her from his senses. Dean whimpered as if in pain. Alarmed, Castiel drew back, and his withdrawal drew another distressed sound from Dean. A question sprang to Castiel’s lips but before he could voice it Dean was on him once more, an arm strong around Castiel’s shoulders, lips determinedly working against Castiel’s. Pleasure spread through Castiel, left him reeling. It felt a lifetime since he and Dean had been intimate; Castiel could scarce believe they’d made love that morning.

What if...what if I could be with Dean every day? What if kisses like this became routine?
No – no matter how many times he kisses me, this will never grow routine. Even when common, kissing Dean will never be perfunctory.

Dean’s arm fell away and he settled back on his heels, putting several inches between them. Dean’s head was yet inclined, his lips yet pursed as if to resume the kiss, and the air between them filled with sultry air painted red by the lava lamps.

“I want you, Dean.” Repeating Dean’s name grounded Castiel; at the sound of it, Dean’s eyes squeezed shut and he gathered himself, lips curling in a frown. Castiel hesitated, troubled by the reaction, but forced himself on. “I have since the day I met you, from the moment I scented you. I’ve been reluctant to express my desires in plain terms, given your stated views on personal autonomy and sexuality. I was raised to believe that ‘wanting’ someone, ‘having’ someone, if you will, reflects…consensual ownership of certain behaviors? It’s hard to explain but I’m sure you know what you mean.”

“Relationship equals monogamy,” supplied Dean.

“Exactly – I was taught that forming a relationship means agreeing to reserve physical pursuits only for the person with whom the relationship is shared,” said Castiel. “You’ve made it clear that you don’t view sex that way, but you’re also interested in me in a way that was different. I’ve tried to understand, but I still don’t, not entirely. Physical intimacy is significant to me, and I struggle to comprehend that sexual acts don’t carry the same weight to you. Or, rather, even though I accept it intellectually when you say that sex was meaningless to you, I continue to conceptualize your reaction to sex as the same as my reaction to sex. It’s not at all, though, is it?”

“Couldn’t say for sure,” Dean said. “I’m not in your head, so I dunno how you think of sex, how you experience sex, ya know? But for me? Sex is nothing. It feels good. It’s fun. Then it’s over. And I know that’s not how a lot of people experience it – but that’s it for me. What we got...it’s more than sex, Cas. That’s fuckin’ weird, and I’m still tryin’ to sort out what that means, ‘cause it’s never happened with anyone but you, but I know...you’re...important. You matter, Cas. And it’s not that I won’t change how I see sex for you – I can’t. This is who I am. And if you can’t accept that, then you can’t accept me, and if you can’t accept me, if you haven’t accepted me, then no matter how you think you feel about me, it’s bullshit, ‘cause if the person you want sees monogamy as an end goal and sex as an expression of romantic affection – that ain’t me. It’s never gonna be me.”

“I know,” Castiel breathed. Nothing Dean said came as a surprise. The surprise was that hearing it put bluntly didn’t change Castiel’s feelings, didn’t cause a twinge of jealousy, neither dissipated nor amplified the ache in Castiel’s chest when he imagined Dean leaving him alone. “What you feel here...” Castiel pressed a hand to Dean’s navel, feeling it inappropriate to grope Dean’s penis given the gravity of the moment. “…is nice and good but ultimately, despite our scent compatibility, sex is a physical impulse that, for you, is equally satisfying regardless of who your partner is.”

“Well, not equally satisfying,” Dean said with a grin. “Cas, sex with you is really fricken amazing.”

“But not the only amazing sex you’ve ever had?” Castiel countered. Dean hummed a concession. “I give it more weight, because you are the only person I’ve had sex with. I’ve not got the weight of experience informing me, and the idea of acquiring that experience discomforts me. I don’t know if that’s because for me sex is linked with romantic feelings, or if it’s simply my inexperience leading to reticence. I...I would be willing to explore that. If you wanted.”

“Not up to me...believe me, if we’re gonna keep being whatever the fuck we are to each other, I ain’t got any expectation that you’ll be chastely monogamous while I’m off gettin’ reamed for money. But what you do and who you do it with is your call.” Dean’s sincerity was especially adorable given the content of his declaration, and Castiel smiled.
“What I’ve come to understand today…” Castiel took a deep breath. “Despite everything we’ve talked about, despite everything you’ve told me, I continually have expected certain gestures from you. Since I was a child I’ve been inundated with images of what affection looks like: candlelit dinners and flowers and chocolates and barefoot strolls on the beach. As an alpha, I studied these things, because I was to deliver formulaic romantic experiences to my future spouse. I played the part for April because I had to, and for all I know she actually believes I care for her, though I can’t imagine how she could have convinced herself of such, given my behavior, no matter what gestures I imitated. And when you made none of those gestures toward me I didn’t know how to interpret your behavior. I’m still wrapping my head around the concept of ‘aromanticism,’ but…you’ll never be able to give me such things, will you?” Dean shook his head, expression mysterious to Castiel. “And when I truly think about what I want out of a relationship, instead of what I think I should want out of a relationship…I don’t feel the lack. I don’t need you to bring me flowers. If I want flowers, I can obtain my own.”

*Flowers would be nice…I could surround myself with flowers…*

“I mean, uh…if you really wanted flowers, I could make an effort I guess,” muttered Dean. “Seems kinda…epically…pointless but…”

“You’d do that for me?” Castiel breathed.

Dean nodded, staring awkwardly at the floor. “I mean…kinda seems like a waste, they’re just gonna die in a few days, but if it’d make you happy…I like when you’re happy…and, like, you’re never happy…”

“Don’t buy me flowers. I don’t want you to. What I do want…you told me that you liked being with me, that it felt good here,” Castiel pressed Dean’s navel again, “and here…” He reached his other hand up and curled his fingers around the back of Dean’s head, drew their foreheads together. “Is that true?”

“Yeah…yeah, Cas. The…like, the horniness, that’s nice, but the only difference I feel for you and what I feel for everyone else is intensity, and even then, it’s not…I mean, it’s great but it doesn’t feel irreplaceable. But this?” Dean reached out, grasped Castiel’s scalp, and pressed their heads together more firmly. “I don’t know what the fuck this is and I ain’t never felt anything like it before, not even for Sam, and it scares the ever-loving shit out of me. Heck, it scares me a *fuckton* more than the idea of taking a cool 10 mil and investing it. But I don’t want it to end, Cas. I don’t wanna stop feeling this way about you. I don’t wanna stop thinking about you this way. Haven’t got a fricken *clue* what that means, but…but that’s what I want. Is that what you want?”

“Yes, Dean,” Castiel breathed. His chest swelled around a hot, airy feeling that stole his breath away, and for the first time in his entire life he thought he might have an inkling what everyone meant when they talked about *love*. “That’s *exactly* what I want.”

“Good.” Dean rocked his head down, parted their foreheads, and slammed their mouths together.

“I want…I want to explore being an omega,” Castiel added, frantically returning Dean’s kisses. The euphoric feeling burgeoning within him exploded outwards, his dick going hard, vertigo spinning his head around and making the red lights seem like the swirling depths of the ocean.

“Can’t wait to feel you all slick for me,” Dean growled, snatching at the front of Castiel’s shirt and ripping it open. Buttons popped, and Castiel gasped at the show of strength and dominance, the urge to run to the bed and present nearly overwhelming.

*What kind of alpha wants to present like an animal? Even April didn’t present!*
“That’d be okay?” asked Castiel. Dean tugged Castiel’s shirt from his shoulders and kneaded up his torso to shift his undershirt. Every touch spread fire and Castiel was alight, eyes dazzled by the disco ball and the headiness of Dean’s desire for him.

“Man, you’re thick sometimes,” said Dean, the harsh words softened by his affection tone and desperate kisses. “And not in the fun way. I don’t give a flying fuck what you’ve got here.” Dean’s hand curled around Castiel’s crotch, palm pressing against Castiel’s dick, thumb unerringly finding Castiel’s pucker through the fabric of his pants and underwear. “However your body might change, you’ll still be Castiel. That’s all I give a damn about.”

“My alpha!” Castiel groaned, knees trembling.

“Hell’s yeah,” Dean snapped, grinding his erection against Castiel’s leg. Had they really been having a serious conversation moments before? The zero-to-sixty of Dean’s arousal never failed to stun Castiel. Despite Dean’s words, on some level passionate sex did relate to emotional intimacy with Dean, it must; there was no other explanation for how often their serious conversations devolved into desperate love making.

“And I…I want to ask Benny to join us sometime!”

Dean snarled, tore Castiel’s pants down, rutted against him, sloppy kisses slobbering over Castiel’s mouth and cheeks. “I’m fucking you on that bed,” Dean vowed. “Right now – right the fuck now.”

“What about Sammy?” Castiel struggled to form his incoherent thoughts into sentences as Dean crowded him and steered him across the room.

“Definitely not fucking Sammy on any bed ever, or asking a damn thing about his sex life,” said Dean. “He’s my brother, that’s fuckin’ gross.”

“You know…know that’s not what I—” Castiel bit his lip against a cry.

Dean seized him, twirled him around, and a quick grab at the back of Castiel’s head slammed Castiel chest-first into the bed. Feet still planted on the floor, face mashed into the satin blanket, Castiel’s ass stuck out, perfectly placed for Dean to grind against. With astonishing control and precision, Dean unbuckled Castiel’s belt, popped the button on his pants, and in a single movement tugged trousers and underwear down to pool around Castiel’s shoes and socks. Grabbing Castiel’s hips, Dean brought them together, his erection thick and hard and contoured despite the barrier of his pants as he rocked against Castiel’s ass. Only the bite of Dean’s zipper against Castiel’s exposed skin kept him grounded enough to speak.

“Aren’t you worried about leaving him out there alone?” managed Castiel in a rush.

“The only stranger is Gabe, and yeah, Gabe is an incredibly strange stranger, but fuck it. Benny and Bobby are with him. He’ll be fine. But you gotta do one thing for me.” There was a wzzz sound and Dean’s bared cock nudged against Castiel’s ass. Castiel moaned, rolling his chest against the blankets. Keeping still was impossible. He needed Dean inside him now – no – five minutes ago – no, always, always and forever.

“Anything!”

“Keep quiet!”

Rubber squeaked as Dean slid a condom down his length, lube squelched as Dean spread it over himself, and he slid into Castiel with a single smooth stroke. Castiel choked back a sobbing moan, clenching his fingers in the blanket.
Is it weird that our emotional conversations always end in sex?

I don’t care. Being with him feels so good…

No…no, I can’t just leave this…I do care…

“Dean!”

“I said quiet, Cas!”

“I know…I know but…stop for a second!”

That Dean obeyed instantly was gratifying. He curled around Castiel, cupped his shoulders, communicated unconditional support with body language and said, “I’m sorry – I came on damn strong. Are you alright?”

“I am…” Castiel drew in a haggard breath and let it out with a shudder. Dean still impaled him and Castiel longed to surrender, to beg to be fucked senseless, but Dean’s transition from intimate conversation to sex troubled him. Struggling to find the words to express himself, Castiel said, “Why are we having sex?”

“Because you’re drop dead gorgeous and sex is fun?” offered Dean, puzzled. Castiel could swear he felt Dean pulsing within him, felt Dean’s cock swelling and spreading him.

I could leave it at that…I could…

Castiel gritted his teeth and pressed on. “Why are we having sex now? We…we had a good talk…I think we understand each other better…you said…you said sex was just fun but you could get it anywhere but every time we have these conversations you end up…we end up knotted…”

“Oh!” Dean’s hands caressed down Castiel’s sides. Thinking grew easier, the bonfire of desire incinerating him coming under control beneath Dean’s skilled ministrations. “Um…like…talking shit out…feels good? And you had seemed so troubled before…you enjoy having sex…?” Dean didn’t continue. It took Castiel most of a minute to process that Dean expected an answer. Castiel nodded, plush mattress compressing beneath his head. “I like making you feel good. Talkin’ about this shit is hard. You deserve to feel good after.”

“And the aggression is…?”

“Too much?” asked Dean ruefully. “You’re usually into it…”

“It’s an act?” Castiel said, more disappointed than he could say. His stomach plunged, and for the first time since they’d met, having Dean within him felt vaguely unwelcome.

“No!” Dean said. “No, Cas, it’s definitely not an act. Shit, man, I might be a twink and a whore but I’m still an alpha and the way I feel when I’m with you…I don’t even know what the fuck happened with your fiancée but I know you reek of her and if I caught scent of her now I’d track her down and make it clear I’m the only one you get to stink of. But I’m not a goddamn animal, I can control my possessive alpha bullshit. I just…don’t…cause I’ve seen how hot-and-bothered you get when I push you around.”

The tension eased in Castiel’s stomach and he slumped against the bed. Above him, enfolding him, Dean sighed and embraced him.

“You’re not wrong,” Castiel murmured. “I do like it…”
“But if now isn’t the moment, we can stop,” said Dean sincerely. “Fuck, have I pressured you into sex other times? I never meant to – I just fuckin’ love sex, and knowing I can make you feel good is…it’s awesome, I can’t even describe it…and I figured you knew I’d stop if you wanted me to. Another fricken thing we shoulda talked through, ‘stead of me makin’ dumb-ass assumptions. What do you want, Cas?”

“What do you want, Dean? You don’t have to…to perform to my sexual desires,” Castiel replied. “This isn’t a transaction. We’re in a relationship.”

“I have what I want,” Dean breathed, kissing at the curve of Castiel’s neck. “You’re my omega, Cas. And I don’t just mean this—” He wiggled his hips for emphasis and Castiel’s vision blanked red. “—I mean…hell, I dunno. Why do we keep tryin’ to have serious talks while we’re fucking? You smell so damn good I can’t think straight. I’ve never had a friend like you, Cas. I’ve never met someone who I like talkin’ to so damn much and like fuckin’ so damn much. I can count on one hand the number of folks I give enough of a shit about to bother talkin’ all the complicated interpersonal shit out with. I don’t wanna fuck things up with you. And I don’t want you to fuck things up with me. Whatever kinda sex you want, I’m good for it. Trust me to let ya know if you ask for something I’m not into – and spoilers, I’m basically into everything, or at least up for trying anything once. But right now – what do you want, Cas?”

What do I want?

I want Dean to be my alpha. I want us to keep talking. I want him to keep making me feel this good. I want him to be with me, to stay with me, to choose me. Not sexually, but intellectually – I’m done questioning what Dean and I have. I want him, and only him, and I don’t mean sex. This connection we have – this bond – this scent compatibility or whatever it is – as long as this continues to be ours and ours alone, I don’t give a damn what of himself he shares with others.

As long as Dean comes back to me, as long as Dean wants to come back to me, that’s enough.

What do I want right now?

“Make love to me, Dean,” he murmured.

“You want it rough?” asked Dean.

“No…no…I’m important to you?”

“Yeah…”

“Show me.”

With a shudder, Dean drew his hips back, pulled himself most of the way out of Castiel’s body, and pressed back in slowly. Arms slipping beneath Castiel’s armpits, curling around his shoulders, Dean mouthed at Castiel’s bruised scent gland and thrust again, thrust again, working into a steady, mind-blowing rhythm.

“Perfect,” Castiel breathed. The word struck his ears with a strange echo, and he realized Dean had said the same thing at the same time.

“Seriously,” Dean murmured. “So fuckin’ perfect for me, Cas.”

“I love you, Dean.”

Dean froze.
“Is that alright?”

“Yeah…yeah…it’s good…it’s fine….” Dean swung into motion once more, so tender, so sweet, Castiel struggled to believe this was the same man who called him a fucktoy, insulted him and threw him around.

But either way, I love him, love how he makes me feel…either way, I don’t want him to stop…he could call me a fucktoy again. That’d be okay, too. But maybe not right now. Next time...

“So good…”

Dean thrust and pleasure mounted throughout Castiel’s body.

...and I no longer doubt there will be a next time, and a time after that, and a time after that...

“So good…we’re gonna be so good for each other…”

...so good...

...so perfect...

“Oh...ohhh...Dean…”

With a soft moan, Castiel came. Dean continued to thrust, continued to murmur praise in his ear, and to that gentle feeling and those kind words, Castiel’s exhaustion finally swept him away and he fell asleep.
Waking up cold, untouched, alone, wrenched Castiel from sleep to wakefulness. With a miserable cry, he sat bolt upright, satin sheets sluicing from his body like water.

“Cas?” Dean mumbled, mealy-mouthed. “You okay?” The sheets and mattress shifted and a soft *pat-pat-pat* sound defied definition until Dean’s hand brushed Castiel’s leg, patted the blankets beside him, and came to rest on his knee.

*Not alone…I’m not alone…I don’t have to be alone anymore…*

Relief-weakened, Castiel *fwumped* back onto the bed. The glow of Dean’s warmth drew him and Castiel rolled over, curled close to his alpha, and relaxed with a replete sigh. Dean’s arm slid around his waist and tugged him closer.

“It’s nothing,” murmured Castiel as Dean shimmied against him and pulled the slippery blankets over them. “I had a bad dream.”

“Don’t worry little ommie, I’ll keep the monsters at bay.” Fatigue slurred the words badly enough that Castiel wasn’t sure he’d heard right, but he opted to pretend Dean had offered him protection. The sentiment warmed Castiel, eased him further, and as Dean’s breathing evened out, Castiel matched him and let his eyes slip shut.

*What am I allowed to want?*

Dean’s breathing slipped back into the steady slowness of deep sleep within minutes.

*As I look forward and consider – what will tomorrow bring? What will next week bring? What will next month bring? – what desires am I allowed to reach for?*

Though Castiel mimicked Dean, heartened by the heat of Dean’s slim body slotted against his back, sleep didn’t come.

*How much is too much to ask?*

*I want to live with Dean. I want to see him more often. I want – need? – the constant reminders that how he feels about me and how he cares about me are different than how he feels about others. I don’t want to be a banker. I want…*

Nebulous images of green growing things formed in Castiel’s mind’s eye, verdant pathways beckoning him to explore, but he quashed the fantasies.

*No pipe dreams…focus on the doable, the practical, the important. What do I need to accomplish tomorrow?*

*I need a new cell phone. I need clothing. I need a place to stay. I need to call Roman and make sure my accounts are secure. I need to work with Gabriel to outreach to his lawyer friend. We need to get*
the ball rolling on the investment firm, and—


Dean’s arm tightened around Castiel’s middle, his hand curling up to ball in a fist over Castiel’s thudding heart.

_How much is too much to ask? Maybe…maybe no amount is too much to ask. Maybe it’s okay to ask for what I want – and it’s okay for him to answer as he will._

“May I move in with you?” Castiel whispered in a terrified rush.

“Duh,” Dean mumbled, lips smearing over Castiel’s neck. “Where the heck else were ya gonna live? _Here?_” Dean chuckled, each rise and fall of his chest shaking Castiel. Castiel’s tension dissipated as quickly as it had formed. “But I ‘preciate ya not takin’ it for granted.”

“I’m never going to take you for granted again,” Castiel vowed.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” said Dean fondly. “S’ok. We’ll both fuck up. That’s life. But so far we’ve done an okay job working through our fuck ups, so, ya know, that bodes well, don’tcha think?”

“I think it bodes excellently.” Castiel smiled and wiggled closer to Dean. Their bodies aligned, Castiel could feel every breath, every muscle twitch, and the flaccid bulk of Dean’s cock pressed against his ass. “Thank you, Dean.”

“Any time, Cas,” Dean replied. “Now – go to sleep.”

_Any time, Cas…I think…I think he really means that._

Wow.

_And I actually considered that Dean was manipulating me. I actually considered giving him up for Naomi and April, whom I knew were manipulating me._

_What a fool I’ve been._

_But now my eyes are open, and if my way isn’t clear, it’s at least less obstructed than it was before…_ I know one thing I want.

_I can build the rest of my life around that one thing. I can build my life around Dean._

Dean rubbed soothing circles over the valley formed by Castiel’s breasts, pressed into his sternum and chest and heart, and Castiel sighed out contentedly.

“Any time, Dean,” he breathed.

_And if Dean doesn’t want to build his life around me? If Dean doesn’t want something long term?_ I’ll make this a good relationship for both of us for as long as I can. I’ll strive and fight for what I want.

_That’s the best I can do, and it will have to be enough._

With Dean firmly in place as the constant in Castiel’s life, the North Star by which to align himself,
tomorrow seemed infinitely more manageable.

I’ve got this…and Dean’s got me…

We’ve got this.

“This is where you live?” stammered Castiel. Blue shadows punctuated by gleaming blobs of magenta, yellow, green and blue illuminated the outlines of a couch, a chair, a coffee table, and reflected off the screen of a small television. Two large windows overlooked the street below, Christmas lights entwined around the fire escape outside. “So when Meg told me that the sex worker alphas available to have sex with other alphas were on the same block as the Christmas lights…”

“Better than a neon ‘open’ sign,” Dean said proudly, flicking on the overhead. Brightness whited out Castiel’s vision; he blinked it clear and took in a neat, clean living room. Sam swept in familiarly, tossed his backpack onto the couch, and ducked through a doorway to Castiel’s left – a kitchen, dark save for the light from the refrigerator as Sam opened it and examined the contents. Uncertain how to proceed, Castiel shifted his grip on the shopping bags he held, shifted his feet in the too-small shoes he’d borrowed from Gabriel, and glanced around.

Dean lived in the building overlooking Raleigh and Van Aiken, mere feet from where he made himself available to potential clients.

If I was hoping for a living arrangement that wouldn’t constantly remind me that Dean has sex with other people in exchange for money…

This is for the better. I need to be reminded of the nature of Dean’s employment. It’s unfair for me to pretend that he’s monogamous. He wants me – expects me – to accept this aspect of his life, not put on blinders and assume a constant state of denial. He deserves my acknowledgement and cooperation and support.

My boyfriend is a sex worker.

If, after all this time, I’m still not comfortable for me, that’s on me, and I have to learn to be comfortable with it. Or I have to give up on this relationship and accept that my affections are for a fantasy, not for the real man who is Dean Winchester.

“I think it’s weird too,” Sam offered, stepping back into the living room chewing on a carrot, an open container of hummus in his hand. “Want some?” he added, holding the hummus out.

“You think ants are weird,” Dean said, rolling his eyes. “Ants are weird,” protested Sam. “With their little body segments and their wiggly antennae and some of them fly and some are enormous and some sting and they build these creepy hills everywhere and they can carry a hundred times their weight do you know how crazy that is? If you could do that you’d be stronger than Captain America and…why are you both staring at me?” He snapped off another bite of carrot and mumbled, “You’re weird. Do you want some hummus?”

“Ants are fascinating,” said Castiel, “and a necessary part of natural ecosystems. As to hummus… there’s nothing to dip, unless you’re also offering me your carrot stub?”. Sam flushed.

“Yeah, hospitality, Sammy,” Dean bustled to the kitchen, flicked the light on, pulled out a bag of pre-peeled, pre-cut carrots, dumped them in a bowl, and came back out. He grabbed a carrot, dipped it, and continued, “Whelp, this is it – home sweet home.”
Feeling like an intruder, Castiel set down his heavy bags and stretched and flexed his fingers to work out the aches and stiffness in them. The day had been busy and exhausting, unlike anything Castiel had experienced before. The Lincoln was lost, left at his parents’ house, and Dean didn’t own a car. Castiel had never considered how challenging and time consuming navigating life via public transit was.

They’d left Gabriel’s early so that Dean and Sam would get to their respective schooling on time. Castiel had accompanied them, though he got off the bus several stops earlier to visit a strip mall that included an AT&T store and a Goodwill thrift shop that Dean swore would provide everything needed for Castiel’s wardrobe. Dean was mostly right – they lacked acceptable shoes, underwear or socks. The quantity of disorganized clothing filling the racks was overwhelming, but Castiel emerged with two huge bags of garments in a variety of styles. Unsure how to dress for his new life, he’d instead picked out everything that appealed to him, and his new wardrobe ranged from two ill-fitting suits and a week’s worth of ties through worn jeans and flannel shirts.

Meandering through the neighborhood led him to stores selling other necessities. A drug store provided an array of toiletries, a department store provided underclothes and shoes, and after some hemming and hawing he selected Chase as his bank and opened an account with funds that could be accessed more easily than his encumbered investments. No one task was time consuming but combined they took most of the day, and Castiel was late to meet Dean at his regular bus stop after class.

He’d not walked so much, not been so active, any time since college. His legs ached and a quiet stream of remonstrance filled his mind – how out of shape he’d grown, how lazy he was, how easy and normal today should have been, when for him it had been alien and discomfiting. He was out of touch, so privileged he felt weird doing simple tasks most people took for granted, and alone, exhausted, still reeling from the previous day, it was easily to slip into self-condemnation.

Dean had smiled and greeted him with a kiss, and they’d met up with Sam on the return trip home. Being with company – being with Dean – helped quiet Castiel’s thoughts.

Except…

Sam was still holding the hummus toward him. With a shake of his head, he took a carrot, dipped it, and bit off a chunk. The smooth flavor of chickpeas, the tang of garlic, and the sweetness of carrot flooded his mouth. His stomach grumbled.

He’d forgotten to eat in the midst of his shopping spree.

The bags shifted and fell against Castiel’s legs, contents spilling onto the floor.

All three of them yet stood in the entryway wearing their winter gear and eating carrots and hummus.

“This is awkward,” Castiel muttered.

“Very,” Sam agreed.

Dean hummed noncommittally and bit into a carrot. Time passed – seconds or minutes, Castiel couldn’t have said – with only the crunch of chewing to break the silence.

*I need to…I need to configure my new phone and charge it. I need to wash my new clothing. I need to put my hosts at ease.

*I need to find my own place. This is going to work. That I’m uncomfortable is par for the course, but*
this is Dean and Sam’s home. They deserve to be at ease in their own space, without my intruding. This was a bad idea. It’s unfair to Sam, especially. He never volunteered to cohabitate with his brother’s significant other. And I—

“Alright, fuck this,” snapped Dean. “Cas – sit your ass down on that sofa. Sam – quit moping and if you got an issue with this set up, speak up. I’m grabbing a brew. Let’s talk this shit out like fuckin’ adults.” Tossing a carrot stub in his mouth, placing the bowl on the table, Dean jerked his coat off and negligently threw his gloves and scarf against the door.

Sam and Castiel exchanged sheepish looks. Uncertainty still gnawing at him, Castiel shrugged off Gabriel’s jacket, straightened the suit he wore beneath, and crossed the room to sit, straight-backed, knees together, in a worn armchair. Dean, energetic despite the late hour and long day, sprawled on the couch, glanced at the empty space beside him, and gave his brother a pointed look.

“You’re such a jerk,” Sam muttered, but he obeyed Dean’s suggestion, set the hummus down beside the carrots, removed his fitted jacket, and slumped onto the sofa beside Dean. “And it’s not that I’ve got an ‘issue’ with Cas. I don’t know him well enough to have an issue with him! That’s the issue. This came together damn fast. I’m allowed to be disgruntled.”

“I’m sorry,” said Castiel. His chest tight with anxiety, he rose and took a step toward the door. “I’ll go.”

“No,” Dean said sharply. “Cas, sit your ass back down.” Grimacing, Castiel reluctantly followed Dean’s instructions, the clench in his chest intensifying. “Look, Sam – you’re right, and I’m sorry. You know how I operate. Never bring anyone home. Never mix…this…” He made a vague gesture that encompassed the living room and Sam sitting beside him. “…with…that…” He flicked his fingers toward the window. “Other than, ya know, proximity. And we talked about that – this place came damn cheap and you agreed it was for the best. Up to now we were on the same page. Since I guess it wasn’t clear enough when we talked yesterday, lemme reiterate: One,” he lifted a finger, “Cas isn’t a gig, Cas is my boyfriend. Two,” he lifted second finger, “Cas’ family sucks balls, and not in the fun way. They’ve been treating him like shit his whole life and breaking with them was damn hard for him. Three,” he lifted a third finger, “Cas has nowhere to go. He’s either gotta stay with his older brother – the dude we met last night? – ya know, the same dude who epic failed to protect him for thirty-some-odd years? Or get his own place – which takes time – or stay in a motel – which is expensive – or stay here.”

“But Gabriel—”

“Cas…” Dean met Castiel’s eyes, expression hard, and Castiel sighed and settled back in his chair. Dean was right. Of course Dean was right. When they were children, Gabriel had failed Castiel. Castiel knew that. Gabriel knew that. That Gabriel intended to do better now was fantastic – Gabriel hadn’t gone to IADB that morning, he’d called Tim Cain, he’d been texting with Castiel throughout the day, as soon as Castiel sent his new phone number – but Gabriel had a lifetime of mistakes to make up for. Dean’s gaze returned to Sam as Castiel conceded the point with a nod.

“I know it’s sudden,” said Dean. Sam watched him warily. “There was no way in fuck-all to plan for this. Cas’ life gettin’ disrupted disrupts my life and yours, too. I never discussed the possibility of Cas movin’ in here ‘cause, well, Cas never gave me any indication that we were anything other than a casual fling. Okay – not casual – but it was clear that whatever we were doin’ together, he’d keep up with his cushy life, and I’d keep up with mine, and we’d mess around, but he was stickin’ with his family. Obviously, that’s out the window. When unexpected shit happens, what do we do?”

“Roll with the punches,” Sam muttered by rote.
“Exactly,” said Dean with a grin. “And, bonus, no one actually got punched this time, so that’s awesome!”

“I guess.” Sam sighed, reached out, grabbed a carrot, and aggressively dipped it in the hummus.

“It’s not my intention to sow discord in your lives,” Castiel offered. “I could…” Both brothers turned to glare at him. Cowed, Castiel fell silent, eyes downcast.

“Hell,” Dean muttered. “Cas, get your ass over here.” Startled, Castiel looked up once more. Dean’s expression had grown earnest, Sam’s concerned, and Dean waved for Castiel to join him on the couch. Unsure what Dean was thinking, Castiel obeyed. Before Castiel finished sitting, Dean had an arm around his shoulder, pulling him close, and Dean’s other hand cupped his cheek and turned his head so that their eyes met once more.

“You’re not a problem,” said Dean.

“But—”

“Shut it,” Dean interrupted. “You. Are. Not. A. Problem. You’re not an inconvenience. You’re not ‘sowing discord’ like some Biblical plague or some shit. Sam and I have been talking through crap and sorting our shit out since I hit 18 and decided to get my own place – and he decided to come with me – and I get these kinds of conversations make you nervous but you worrying and playing the martyr makes shit worse. Besides, I’m, like, 99% sure you are literally in danger and what kinda alpha would I be if I let my omega go somewhere I can’t protect him? So chill and let me talk to my brother, okay?”

He…he thinks of me as his omega? Him saying that isn’t merely dirty talk? Oh, Dean…

“Should I give you privacy?” Is asking that me ‘playing the martyr’ again? Castiel leaned out so he could see Sam and gauge his reactions. Sam still looked troubled; Castiel didn’t know him well enough to guess what the laden brow darkening his youthful features meant.

“I’m cool with you staying,” said Dean. “Sam?”

“What happened to you, Cas?” Sam asked. “Dean’s told me bits and pieces but…look, it freaks me out that this happened so fast, and it freaks me out that you’re a stranger and gonna be living here, and it freaks me out that, like, I’ll come out here to do homework and you’ll be hanging out at the dinner table or something, and it freaks me out that I might hear you two…you know…and…hell if I know. Sorry. I spent all day at school trying to convince myself that I’m totally cool with this but it’s a lie and while I want to help, I can’t pretend everything’s fine. I’m not totally cool with this. I’m not sure if I’m even a little bit cool with this. But I’m willing to try. I get that you’re in a tough position. Dean’s told me a lot about you but nothing that ever have led me to think he’d call you ‘his omega.’ Heck, I never thought Dean would call anyone ‘his omega,’ or ‘his alpha,’ or ‘his’ anything.”

Castiel opened his mouth and glanced at Dean. Competing arguments spewed vitriol in his head, familiar castigations that he was a spoiled rich boy who’d never suffered any real harm in his life competing with a reminder – in a voice resembling Dean’s – that the parenting methods he’d been subjected to were manipulative and abusive. Grimacing, he snapped his mouth closed.

“Don’t share anything you don’t want to,” Dean offered, pulling Castiel against him more intimately.

He’s being so sweetly protective…

…but am I reading too much into his behavior?
...do I want Dean to see me as ‘his omega,’ to be protective of me?

*God, do I.*

Curling closer to Dean, Castiel dropped his head onto Dean’s shoulder.

“I mean, you don’t owe me your life story,” Sam said in hasty contradiction of his previous words. “Sorry – it’s none of my business. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s alright,” Castiel said. “You don’t have to sublimate your needs and concerns in the interest of protecting me. You’re right to be reticent. In your position, I’d be reticent as well.” …*or maybe not, I cannot conceive of what it would be like to be in Sam Winchester’s position, it’s so alien to anything I’ve experienced.* “My sense is, you’d like to better understand the ways in which my life has been difficult, so as to justify to yourself why taking me in is the ‘right thing’ to do?” Sam nodded. Castiel inhaled slowly, exhaled slowly. “Very well.”

“Cas…”

“There’s a lot I haven’t told Dean – because it’s personal, because I was taught that our family business was *our business* and not to be shared with outsiders, because I’m afraid I’ll face condemnation – but I think it would be best if I try to explain.”

“You don’t have to,” repeated Dean.

“I know I don’t.” Castiel smiled gently. Dean flushed.

*God, he’s adorable.*

*I love him so much.*

Warmth suffused Castiel, pushed back his nerves, soothed the tension binding his chest. Dean knew much of what had happened to Castiel and didn’t think worse of him. Sam’s concern and earnest desire to know Castiel better suggested he’d react similarly, or at least that he was inclined to give Castiel the benefit of the doubt.

“I don’t know what Dean has shared with you,” Castiel said, licking at his lips to work moisture into his mouth. “My name is Castiel Novak-Shurley. My parents are Naomi Novak and Charles Shurley. I…” He swallowed. Dean’s arm slid from Castiel’s shoulder, shimmied between his back and the couch cushions, and settled at the base of his spine, kneading gently at his flesh. “That sounds like a good entrée into life, and it was, but there were…problems.”

…*that’s suitably humble yet accurate, right?*

“It’s difficult to explain my mother to those who’ve never met her,” Castiel continued, speaking slowly to give himself time to formulate each thought before expressing it. “Naomi is…” *Domineering? Aggressive? Assertive? Arrogant? I don’t even know what description to use.* “She’s controlling.” *That’ll do…* “She had…stratospheric…expectations, and the consequences for not meeting her expectations were…severe.”

And Castiel told them everything, about Naomi’s pushing him and molding him, about his brothers and his sister, about boarding school and Harvard, about losing himself piece by piece until he no longer remembered how to be anyone but Naomi’s ideal of an alpha businessman son.

It took two hours.
“He can stay,” Sam said, looking horrified, when Castiel fell silent. He was strangely breathless, weirdly exhilarated, bizarrely dizzy, like he’d been displaced from his body. His lips felt fuzzy and tingly, his throat dry.

*Oh. Right. I haven’t had anything to drink. I haven’t eaten.*

Castiel popped a carrot in his mouth.

“I’m so glad you’re out of that situation,” Sam added. “Why’d you stay so long?”

“And because they were my family, my home,” said Castiel. “Because it never occurred to me I had a choice. But I... I do have a choice. And I choose Dean.”

Dean beamed at him. Sam gave them a thoughtful look. The room smelled of fresh green grass mingled with Sam’s aroma, an earthy, musky scent that Castiel couldn’t put a name to. Though it had been mere hours, though his meager belongings yet made a haphazard pile before the door, Castiel felt at home, felt safe and welcome, as he never had in the mansion he’d grown up in. Dean’s smile broadened, his canines peeking out between his lips, and the hand on Castiel’s back drifted lower, one finger tickling at the top of his crack.

“Right,” said Sam. “I know that smell. Just... keep it down, okay? I’ve got homework to do.”

Castiel flushed and Dean laughed. “Duh, bitch, of course I won’t fuck up your school. That shit’s important. Come on, Cas, lemme give you the grand tour.” Dean’s suggestive touch left Castiel’s back, his arm wrapped possessively around Castiel’s shoulders and, with a show of strength, he hauled Castiel to his feet. Dean steered Castiel down a short hallway, past a closed door, and into a small, neat bedroom. In Castiel’s mind, Dean was passionate, impulsive, brilliant but disorganized; the room was incongruous with that image, bed made, band posters hung in frames on the walls, a closed jewelry box atop his otherwise tidy chest of drawers, only a tie hung over the closet door knob to suggest Dean was anything but orderly and conscientious.

*But why did I think him haphazard? He juggles school and two jobs while studying investing and managing his money and taking care of Sam. To pull that off, he must be ridiculously organized. Why shouldn’t that translate into well-kept personal space? The living room was neat too... subconsciously I credited that to Sam’s influence on their shared space... but I don’t even know Sam. Dean’s diligence deserves acknowledgement.*

*But I can see why I thought it Sam’s influence... he’s a stranger to me, yes, but Sam dresses well, speaks with clear diction and correct grammar, and makes an effort to comport himself in a distinguished style. Dean, when free to dress as he will, musses his hair and wears loose shirts and tight, worn pants and untied boots. He looks disheveled, and he works as a sex worker, so once again I’ve made assumptions, and—*

“Dude, Cas, you are so killing my boner,” Dean whined.

*And he says things like that to me.*

*Dean consistently deserves so much more credit than I give him. He’s remarkable.*

“Please talk to me,” implored Dean.

“I’m sorry.” Castiel smiled, crossed to the bed in a single step, and sat on the edge. “I was thinking that this room did not match how I expected your private space to appear, and considering which of my preconceptions about you led me to feel that way. Though I’ve known you for months, been intimate with you, seen you in a range of circumstances, I somehow still retain unfair stereotypes of
the ‘kind of person’ you are. I hate perceiving you that way, hate when I catch myself having such thoughts. I’m trying to do better.”

“You…you actually told me…” Dean breathed. His astonishment mortified Castiel. Had he been that poor about communicating his thoughts?

“I will do better,” Castiel vowed.

“I know you will,” said Dean. “You already are. I…I…” He shook his head, dropped to his knees before Castiel, cupped Castiel’s cheeks and drew him into a soft kiss. “I really like you, Cas.” Dean whispered the words like an embarrassing confession, his breath sultry as it teased at Castiel’s nose and mouth. “I’m so glad you’re staying with me.”

“I’m glad you’ll have me,” said Castiel. “And that Sam appears to be growing more comfortable with my presence.”

“He’ll come ‘round,” Dean said. “He’s a good kid. Hate that I sprung this on him, but as we discussed – wasn’t any way to plan for yesterday’s bullshit storm.”

Humming agreement, Castiel leaned down and kissed Dean again. Dean’s bedroom was calming, soothing, the neatness and order pleasant, the all-encompassing purity of Dean’s scent euphoric.

…and if I stay here…as long as I stay here…it’ll come to smell like me, like us…

That would be wonderful.

I hope I get to stay a long time.

I hope Dean wants me to stay a long time.

Dean pressed up into another kiss, another, curling his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, delving into Castiel’s mouth with his tongue. Arousal tingled outwards, mixing with Castiel’s hunger and thirst, dizzying him with desire and fatigue.

“Taste fricken divine,” groaned Dean, his voice rumbling through Castiel.

Placing a quick peck on Dean’s lips, Castiel smiled. “We have to be quiet, remember?”

“True, true,” Dean murmured. “You’re the noisy one – but I know a prime way to shut up that pretty mouth of yours. With your perfect dick-sucking lips? It’s a crime that you haven’t wrapped ‘em ‘round my cock yet.” Dean half-rose, a leg bent beneath him, a hand on the edge of the bed to pull himself up, then froze and gave Castiel an earnest look that heightened Dean’s youthful appearance and made Castiel’s chest ache with affection. “If that’s okay…? It’s been a rough couple days – I can pass on the dirty talk and the rough stuff if you want…?”

“Knot my mouth,” Castiel responded flatly. Dean gawked and scrambled to his feet as Castiel let his jaw drop and his eyes slip shut. Castiel’s nerves thrilled expectation and desire. His first blow job...either receiving or giving…rustles and the zzzzz of a zipper lowering communicated Dean’s actions; Castiel slid from his perch on the bed, settled on his knees on the floor, and waited.

“Good boy,” Dean murmured. “So ready for me – know exactly what I want…don’t even gotta tell you…” Hot, smooth skin brushed Castiel’s lips, smeared tangy, pungent liquid over his cheek and nose. Unthinking, Castiel licked at the corner of his mouth, tasted his first drop of Dean’s come, his first taste of Dean’s cock. A concentrated burst of sun-baked grass flavor saturated Castiel’s taste buds, forced a desperate noise from him, before he realized what he’d done.
“Condom!” Castiel gasped, throwing himself back from Dean’s warm presence, forcing away the temptation to lock his lips around Dean’s cock, swallow, and drink Dean down.

“Fuck,” Dean groaned. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay…it’s…”

*It’s so not okay. I don’t want him to have to wear a condom with me.*

*But, given his profession…I can’t ask him for more. Condoms are essential for his safety, for the safety of his clients…I won’t risk his job or his health…*

Unable to resist the allure of the moisture coating his upper lips, Castiel lapped up the remaining pre-release, as delicious to him as the finest meal his family’s money could buy. Crinkly plastic suggested the opening of a condom, though Castiel couldn’t guess what Dean’s fervent “*shit, Cas*…” was related to. The return of Dean’s cock to against Castiel’s lips was wonderful and sad, artificially-flavored plastic rubbing Castiel’s skin in place of real, live, wonderful flesh.

*Someday…maybe…*

Castiel dropped his jaw.

With a replete sigh, Dean slid his cock into Castiel’s mouth.

A groan boiled from the back of Castiel’s throat. Dean was big, solid, hard, a musky, grassy smell mixing with the fruity coating of the condom to suffuse Castiel’s mouth. Dean’s dick seemed endless, but the part of Castiel’s mind still capable of considering his situation objectively pointed out that there couldn’t be more than three inches of cock laying thick on his tongue, pressing against his cheek, butting against his palate. Instinct screamed for Castiel to swallow and he did, once, twice, eyes watering.

Dean stopped moving.

Castiel’s throat heaved against Dean’s bulk.

“*Shh*,” murmured Dean. A hand settled atop Castiel’s head, another cupping his throat, palm massaging him. “You’re okay. Breathe, Cas.”

Alarm supplanted his arousal, but Castiel surrendered to Dean’s ministrations and focused. He managed an inadequate inhale, throat spasming. His exhale whistled from his mouth, gusted around Dean’s dick. Pooling saliva streamed down his chin as tears streamed from his eyes. The next breath was easier, though, and the next easier still. The urge to swallow didn’t fade but Castiel could control it, restrain his gag reflex.

“Like I said,” Dean breathed. “Perfect dick-sucking lips. Taking my cock so well. Don’t gotta do anything else if you don’t want to – be my good little cockslut, so open and slick for me, and…” Dean’s cock slid out of his mouth, eased back in. “Just like that,” Dean murmured, breathy, strained.

*I wonder how this feels for him?*

*I could find out – I could ask him to reciprocate…he’ll probably offer…*

*Would I be comfortable with that?*

As Dean gently rocked his hips forward and back, forward and back, Castiel’s mind drifted, lulled
by pleasure and ease and the ubiquitous scent of pleased, satisfied alpha. His role was minimal enough that he wondered if there was some additional behavior he should engage in to better pleasure Dean, though he had few ideas more he could do. Experimentally, he rubbed his tongue over the bottom of Dean’s cock, but Dean didn’t react beyond continuing his stream of reassuring, filthy praise – “look at you crying around my dick, I should…fuck…I should make you choke on it, but I’ll let you off easy this time cause you look so pretty on your knees…so pretty, Cas, God, I…” Dean’s fingers pressed into the back of Castiel’s head and urged him forward into every thrust. Castiel obliged, but his one attempt to take more of Dean’s length knocked cock against the back of his throat and momentarily blanked his senses with panic. Only Dean’s touch and Dean’s words calmed him.

“You don’t have to push yourself.” Dean spoke softly, lilting, voice deep and manly and gruff, a lifeline for Castiel’s distressed thoughts. “Your mouth is so fucking sinful – it’s perfect – BJs are hard – we’ll practice, you’ll get better – so don’t worry, please don’t…hell, Cas, that’s awesome…don’t freak. You don’t gotta do more.” With Dean’s support, calm reasserted itself quickly.

This is enough. This is good. He’s happy. I don’t have to do more.

I want to make my alpha happy.

But I won’t be able to take his knot.

Disappointed tinged Castiel’s muddled thoughts, but he believed Dean, trusted Dean – if Dean said what Castiel did was enough…if my alpha is satisfied…Castiel was content.

Time drifted, Castiel’s awareness befuddled by heat and desire and pleasure. Giving himself over, putting his faith in Dean, was glorious. As Dean’s thrusts grew hastier, his voice breathier, his hands slid to the sides of Castiel’s face, massaging the sensitive skin behind his ears. Every thrust blossomed brilliant colors over the back of Castiel’s eyelids. An idle thought suggested Castiel lift his hands, grasp Dean’s ass, encourage him to thrust harder, but the impulse produced no movement. His limbs were dead-weight, thick with desire that, unacknowledged, had simmered through him but now exploded outward like fireworks bursting around him.

Castiel swallowed.

With a fractured groan, Dean went still and the condom bulged obscenely into Castiel’s mouth, sloshing as Dean pumped it full of come.

So close, yet so far…

…maybe…

…want to taste him, want to swallow him, want him to mark me as his, make me reek of his scent for all to know that he’s my alpha and I’m his…

…his omega…

A distressed whimper caught in Castiel’s throat, amplified as Dean’s cock slid out of his mouth and Dean’s weight settled onto the floor beside him. Castiel couldn’t force his eyes open but he didn’t need to see Dean to know his position. Dean enfolded him, slotted their knees together, and slumped into Castiel, his head on Castiel’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” Dean whispered, mouthing over Castiel’s scent point. Pain twinged through Castiel’s shoulder, caused a stutter to his heavy breathing and the heaving of his chest. Only when Dean brushed a kiss over the spot did Castiel realize the pain was the bruises that Dean had sucked into the
flesh the day before.

That was yesterday morning.


It feels like it’s been a year since I saw my mother.

Not nearly long enough.

“You okay, Cas?”

Castiel opened his mouth but only an awkward croak came out.

He wanted…

He needed…

He was so glad that…

“Aw, fuck – sorry…”

Why is Dean apologizing?

“Come on, up ya go…”

Dean’s arm looped between Castiel’s arms and his chest and hauled him up and back, dragging him onto the bed. Castiel’s legs, benumbed by the time he’d spent kneeling, tingled and sprawled, limp and useless.

My alpha…so strong…

Deft hands touched his waist, though Castiel didn’t realize that Dean had undone Castiel’s pants until cool air swept over his aching cock, over his perineum, down his exposed crack.

No! Don’t touch my co—

Two fingers thrust, dry, into Castiel’s hole. A guttural groan tore from him and Castiel arched against the bed, legs falling aside.

“Quiet!” Dean admonished.

Only catching his lip between his teeth prevented another groan as Dean pressed deep into Castiel, pressed a powerful finger against the nub of his prostate, and caused electric pleasure to surge through him. Something warm and soft brushed over his dick, skirting his knot. Bliss forced whimpers from him and Dean chuckled, close over Castiel’s sensitive skin, air blowing over the moistened tip of Castiel’s dick.

He’s kissing my cock. His mouth is…is on me…and it’s good…it’s okay…don’t…

“Don’t stop!” Castiel gasped.

Castiel thought that Dean whispered “never” but the word and its meaning were lost in a rush of euphoria. Dean’s fingers skillfully massaged his channel, Dean’s mouth tenderly worshiped the shaft
of his cock, and Castiel was gone.

And I live here now. This could be every day. This could be every night.

With a strangled sob, Castiel came. His climax extended, on and on, cock straining with load after load of thick come, and Dean never stopped touching him, pleasuring him, driving him higher and higher. Only Dean’s increasingly unrestrained laughter kept Castiel aware of existence beyond the infinite confines of his skin.

“Wha…what’s funny?” he managed.

“You are, man,” Dean laughed. “Riding my fingers like it’s your fuckin’ job and spewing like a damn fountain – can’t believe what a whore you are for my dick, just suckin’ me off and a little fingering can get you off this hard and…” Rolling against the mattress, Castiel pressed a moan into the bedding and came again and Dean laughed harder. “Add in how you reacted to me calling you a whore and…man, as fricken bat-shit nutso as it sounds, sometimes I think you could be it for me.”

Castiel came a third time. Shaking, he forced his eyes open. Dean perched on the edge of the bed, shaking with amusement, his tanned, flushed cheeks dripping with white streaks of Castiel’s come. Threads of semen tangled in his hair, globbed in his eyebrows, and beaded from the edge of his nose. Speechless, awed, hot with rapture, Castiel stared until his eyes teared up and another surge of bliss tore through him.

“My omega,” said Dean fondly.

Perfect.

This is…this is perfect.

“My alpha,” Castiel whispered.

Dean nodded and beamed at him. Come pooled on his plush lower lip and Castiel shuddered through another lesser surge of bliss.

Absolutely, utterly, beyond perfect.

Thank you, Dean. Thank you for everything...thank you for being everything to me.

Chapter End Notes

My wife has an ant phobia. Hun, if for some reason you’re reading this...that exchange is for you. I have to acknowledge: ants are fucking weird.
With a hopeful smile, Castiel set the bowl of pasta coated in tomato sauce down on the table. Sam glanced up from his homework and sniffed, expression unreadable. Castiel thought it smelled good and the spoonfuls he’d sampled while cooking suggested it was edible. He’d followed the recipe instructions assiduously, made the sauce from canned tomatoes, measured the Italian spices to the nearest eighth of a teaspoon, pre-seared the ground beef and incorporated the drippings in the Bolognese, but he had no faith that he’d succeeded at cooking something palatable. His desire to make good food could taint his judgment.

“Thanks,” Sam said with a sincere smile, taking the bowl. Despite his apparent acceptance, he returned his attention to a textbook, glossy pages covered in dense text interspersed with pictures of plants and diagrams of…cellular structure, Castiel thought. Curiosity warred with a sick feeling that Castiel was depressingly sure of the origin of.

Ignore it. It’s too late for me to love botany but it’s not too late for Sam.

Dinner.

Dean’ll be home soon.

Without glancing at his bowl, Sam twirled his fork, wrapped it in spaghetti, and took a bite. A splatter of sauce hit his school book; he wiped it away, chewed, swallowed, then noticed that Castiel was still watching him.

“Uh, it’s good?” Sam offered. He looked nervous and uncomfortable.

They’d cohabitated less than a week and Castiel was no more sanguine about the living arrangement than he’d been his first night at Sam and Dean’s apartment. Dean was rarely home, in class or helping Gabriel organize the firm and, six nights a week, working. Generally, he no sooner returned then he collapsed asleep – a few hours in the early morning, a few hours in the evening. Tonight would be similar, Dean would return, eat quickly, sleep, then leave again. Castiel tried not to think about how soon his alpha would be in the arms of another.

Instead of with me, where he belongs.

No. It’s okay.

The more times Castiel told himself it was okay, the more true it became. He didn’t really mind Dean having sex with other people. He missed the companionship, the comfort of Dean’s presence, the warmth of another person in the bed, the freshness of Dean’s scent when they were curled together. Living in the apartment helped. Dean’s smell was pervasive. Castiel could bury his nose in Dean’s pillow and sleep, deep and satisfied, until Dean got home, crawled beneath the covers, cradled him close, and passed out with his face pressed to the curve of Castiel’s neck.

No matter how many people he is with, none of them get to experience him soft and warm and tender night after night. That’s all mine.

“Cas?” asked Sam.

Right. I’m standing here. Staring at him eat. Looking through his textbook ignoring conflicting feelings it stirs. Sam must think I’m so weird.
Castiel wanted to live with Dean, but if he was making Sam uncomfortable…maybe it would be better if he left.

_Sam told me it was okay. Sam told me he understood. I have to try to believe him, have to try to trust him._

_If only trust and faith were so easily bestowed._

“Sorry,” Castiel mumbled, turning back to the kitchen counter. The room was small but well-kept and clean, the dishes mismatched, the food organized in the cupboards. The remainder of the pot of pasta simmered on the stove, kept warm for whenever Dean arrived, and the oven pinged to announce that the garlic bread was done. Thankful for the distraction, Castiel busied himself with oven mitts, retrieving the tray, sliding the loaf onto a cutting board, turning off the oven, the minutiae of making dinner. Aside from the clatter of cooking utensils, the only sounds were the soft slurp of Sam eating and the rustle of pages turning.

_Well, at least he’s eating._

_I’m helping._

Castiel wasn’t foolish enough or self-deprecating enough to think himself useless. He was active, strong, and wealthy. He kept busy. At his insistence, he’d be paying half the rent and utilities – Dean had argued that Castiel should only pay a third, since Sam and Dean were two people and Castiel was one, and wasn’t getting his own bedroom to boot, but Castiel had ultimately convinced him – and chipping in for the groceries that Sam picked up on the way home from his after-school cashier job. Gabriel had taken the lead on organizing their investment firm-cum-bank and Castiel had been with him, making calls, buying equipment and furniture, communicating with Dean’s potential investors, talking with banks and government agencies, and writing a business plan. Their to-do list was massive, and while Castiel didn’t share Gabriel and Dean’s enthusiasm for the project, he did his part. He wasn’t as busy as either Sam or Dean, though, and as a result, as hard as he’d worked the past few days, he didn’t feel he’d done enough.

Hence, Castiel was learning to cook.

_If I’m to be Dean’s omega…I should cook for him, right? That’s a societal stereotype, sure, and tons of alphas cook, and more alphas than omegas are chefs, so there’s no actual correlation between cooking and omegahood – and besides I’m an alpha…no I’m not…maybe I am…the point is, the prospect of Dean returning home to a meal, of him eating it and being satisfied, makes me happy. And will hopefully make him happy._

_That’s all I need, all I want._

Castiel’s stomach rumbled.

_Should I wait for him before eating?_

_I could at least cut the garlic bread, and give some to Sam, and—_

“Did your mom really lock you in your room for two _months?_” Sam blurted.

Castiel froze with his hand on the bread knife. Glancing over his shoulder, he took in Sam’s earnest expression. Leaning forward as if to approach Castiel despite the table separating them, loaded fork held forgotten in his hand, Sam’s brow was knit with confusion and worry. Memories, all-encompassing, flooded in.
... when will she let me out? Why is she treating me like this? I don’t understand. What I did wasn’t that bad. No. My behavior must have been bad – must have been far worse than I realize. That’s why I’m locked in here, why I deserve to be locked in here – because I think I did nothing wrong but I did. I did something horrible. I must reflect on my actions until I understand, internalize, and accept how to do better…but it’s not fair! Is it? Surely the others will see that, surely they’ll understand and help me.

*Michael will never disobey mother. He helped her rip my plants up.*

*Luke will never disobey mother. He destroyed my books.*

*Gabriel…*

*Gabriel didn’t help destroy what I created, but he’d never disobey mother, either.*

Appetite gone, Castiel’s shoulders slumped. Listlessly, he took up the knife and cut a slice of bread.

“Yes, she really did,” Castiel acknowledged. “Like I told you Monday.”

“That’s fucked up,” Sam breathed. “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“Garlic bread?” Castiel took up a piece and turned, offering it toward Sam. After dealing with his family’s ingrained stoicism, the guilelessness and openness of Sam’s expressions was novel. No one reacts that sympathetically to someone else’s pain unless they’ve got an angle…no, Castiel, that’s in my family – other people are actually empathetic. If there’s a disingenuous bone in Sam Winchester’s body, I’d be shocked.

“Yeah, sure…” Sam dropped his fork into his half-eaten pasta and held the bowl out for Castiel, who set the garlic bread on the lip. “Have I been…have I been a jerk?”

“Huh?” Brought up short, Castiel froze, hand still outstretched as if he held the garlic bread as Sam withdrew his plate.

Sam took a big bite of bread and continued, words muffled by chewing.

“You hardly come out of Dean’s room when I’m around and even when we’re in the same room like now you don’t talk, just do your thing, and I asked Dean about it ‘cause it’s weird but he said we’re not all chatty Cathy’s and that you’d been through a lot and that I shouldn’t worry about it or push you but…” Sam paused to swallow. “I always thought money would solve all our problems, ya know? Dean and Bobby told me that life didn’t work that way – we lived with Bobby after mom and dad died but before Dean was 18, did you know that? – but I thought they were full of it. How tough could life be if we owned a house and could afford vacations and…well…you know…I thought they were just trying to…distract me – divert my attention so I wouldn’t obsess over what we didn’t have and would focus on what we did have.

“But everything you said the other day…they’re right. Money plus communication and love is, like, a trifecta of awesome but I wouldn’t give up my family and my life as it is now for what you described and it so sucks that you went through that and then I was thinking about it more and realized – everyone must think your life is perfect because your family is rich. That just makes it suck worse because who are you going to complain to? Who’d take you seriously? Even though I don’t think I said anything nasty that’s what I was thinking that first day before you told me about your mom, like ‘poor rich boy, boo hoo hoo.’ I don’t think that anymore and I’m sorry if I made you feel unwelcome or if I’ve said anything that led you to think that I think you’re overreacting. I’m sorry if I’ve been a jerk. You are welcome here. I’d never send you back to a mother who abused you and
siblings who didn’t help you. No one deserves a family like that. And, um, Dean really likes you, and you seem like a cool guy so far – this pasta is awesome, I can’t believe it’s your first time cooking, and you made the sauce from scratch! – and, uh, yeah. I guess that’s…I guess that’s all I wanted to say.”

“Thank you, Sam.” Moved more than he could express, Castiel’s voice sounded fuzzy and disconnected to his own ears, neutral compared to the emotions roiling him. “You haven’t been a jerk. I feel like I’m intruding in your space and in your life, but not because of anything you’ve said or done. I didn’t want to get in the way of your routines and habits, so I gave you distance.”

“I’ll make new routines and habits,” Sam shrugged. “Starting with encouraging you to cook, like, always. Dean’s a good cook too but he doesn’t usually have time, and I once burned water. Yes, really. So I scavenge meals most evenings, leftovers and microwavable crap, because Dean’ll kill me if I do anything that loses us the security deposit on this house. No pressure, though! Only if you want to! It’s not an expectations or a requirement or—”

He’s just as nervous as I am!

Of course he is, he’s only 16!

And here I was intimidated by him!

“Sam!” Castiel interrupted, laughing, settling comfortably back into his body. His stomach grumbled again, reminding him he’d not eaten. We’re both being ridiculous. The tension ebbed from Sam’s expression and he eased into a smile that grew wider the longer Castiel laughed. “I enjoyed making dinner and I’d be happy to do so again. In the meantime, may I join you, or would that interfere in your studies?”

“No, no bother!” said Sam, hastily slamming the textbook closed and shoving his homework aside. “I was only doing school work out of…ya know, out of habit, ’cause I usually eat dinner alone. Come on!” He gestured at an empty chair with his half-eaten garlic bread.

Heartened, relieved, truly comfortable for the first time in a week, Castiel got himself a bowl of spaghetti and a slice of garlic bread and sat down opposite Sam.

“So...” Castiel poked at his food with his fork. His nerves gave a little thrill. This isn’t home, and Sam is definitely not Naomi, and I’m allowed to be interested in whatever interests me. It’s okay. He wants to talk to me. I’m not bothering him. Curiosity is safe...curiosity is fine...curiosity might even be encouraged... “What are you studying?”

“Botany!” Sam exclaimed, glancing at the textbook. The cover depicted a blossoming flower being visited by a bee. “I haven’t figured out what I want to do yet – as a career, I mean – but I’m considering veterinary science. To do that, I have to major in biology or double major in biology and chemistry or go pre-med – there are a lot of paths but the commonality is, lots and lots and lots of advanced science coursework. I rocked the Bio and Chem APs and the SAT IIs but I figure the more of a head start I get, the better. Palmeton U offers extension courses for high school students, so I’m taking Bio 130 – Plant Science – for college cred! Plants aren’t really my ‘thing’ – zoology is next semester, I can’t wait! – but it’s interesting. Flowers are ridiculous – I had no idea!”

“Aren’t they just?” Castiel murmured, taking a bite of pasta.

“Sorry, what’d you say?”

Castiel swallowed. “I didn’t know you were interested in science.”
Sam rolled his eyes. “Did you know anything about me other than my name?”

“I knew you were sixteen,” Castiel said. Sam rolled his eyes again. “But I’m positive your brother cares profoundly for you, please don’t take his not discussing you with me as—”

“I know Dean,” Sam interrupted. “I know, Cas. He’s private—thinks he’s protecting me by keeping his job and his family separate. Maybe he’s right, I dunno. No one’s ever given me a hard time, like when I walk down Raleigh at night on my way home from work, but maybe that’s ‘cause I’m a beta? Anyway…honestly…still kinda can’t believe he brought you— or anyone—home. We’ve talked a little about...you know...relationships and stuff...”

“Sex?”

Sam flushed, gave a single nod, and said, “And about his job. You probably know more about it than I do. But based on everything he’d said…I was surprised when he said you’d be staying with us. Really, really surprised. Heck, I was surprised when he called and said you needed help and we were going to meet up with you. He’s never done anything like that for anyone but family.”

*Family...*

“I was surprised too,” admitted Castiel, viscerally recalling how it had felt to step out of Gabriel’s elevator and see Dean, beautiful, powerful and supportive. “But...glad. Very glad. I care deeply for your brother.”

“Good, because if you hurt him, I’ll kill you.”

Castiel blinked as Sam broke into a broad smile that didn’t give any indication whether Sam was joking. “I...I think you’ll have to get in line?”

“Aw man...someone else threatened you first?” Sam said, crestfallen. “Was it Bobby? I bet it was Bobby...”

“No – Benny.”

“Duh!” Sam sat back in his chair, grinning, and gave himself a playful smack in the forehead. “Of course it was Benny. For a while there, I thought he’d be the one Dean brought home, but I guess not.”

“I don’t think Benny’s looking for anything long term,” Castiel said. “The love of his life is the cafe he wants to open.”

“True, true,” Sam murmured and turned his attention to his food.

Companionable silence fell. Castiel focused on his dinner, growing increasingly convinced it actually tasted good, that he wasn’t deluding himself and that Sam wasn’t humoring him. The botany book sat closed on the table, bee and flower bright and colorful and alluring.

If Castiel wanted to read a book about bees, about gardens, about flowers, about science, no one would stop him. No one would burn the book. No one would belittle and mock him.

*But Sam needs that book to study...*

*But Sam wants to be a scientist, he must have other books about botany. And I’m a millionaire. I can buy books about gardening if I want.*
“Maybe...maybe I could flip through that textbook sometime?” Castiel asked hesitantly. Sam looked up, startled, glanced at the book, quirked an eyebrow, and shrugged.

“I mean – sure? But aren’t you, like, a decade outta school? Why would you want to study a school book?” Sam stuck out his tongue and made an overdramatic blech face.

“I like plants,” said Castiel defensively.

“That makes sense,” Sam said. Mind bogglingly, he said it like he actually meant it. “It’s kinda dry sometimes—”

“If the plants are dry, you’ve got a problem.”

Sam flushed. “Right – I mean—”

“Sorry – I shouldn’t have interrupted. You were saying?”

The rapid recovery of Sam’s enthusiasm was endearing. I could grow to love him – as a family member – as much as I love Dean as a...well, time will tell. “You gotta see this diagram, it’s crazy – it’s about polysomy in certain types of brassica – that’s mustard—”

“I know,” I do remember some things, wow.

“And...well, just look at this!” Sam flipped through the textbook. Rising, Castiel walked around the table, absently scanning over the room, the steaming pot, the countertops, the fridge, and...his gaze settled on Dean, standing in the doorway watching them with a gentle smile on his gorgeous face. Freezing halfway to Sam, Castiel smiled back, warmed, comforted.

How long has he been standing there? How much has he heard?

Enough that he has that pleased expression on his face.

I’m glad that Sam and I getting along brings him happiness. I’m glad when things I do brings him joy. Anything that brings easy grin to his lips and that twinkle in his eyes...

“Cas?” Sam asked, looking up, hand slapping the page he’d been searching for. He followed Castiel’s gaze. “Oh, hey Dean! Have some pasta! Castiel made it, it’s delish. Cas, here’s the picture I meant!”

Eyes still on Dean, Castiel finished circling the table, half-listening as Sam explained the diagram. He was interested in what Sam said but Dean was mesmerizing, gorgeous, captivating. Contentment was writ large on Dean’s face and permeated his scent.

Who cares what his job is? This life – this family – this man – this is what I want.

With a warm smile, Dean sniffed the air. “Something sure does smell good,” he said.

His eyes never left Castiel.

There was zero chance Dean meant the pasta.

Castiel glowed with satisfaction.

I made my alpha happy.

Everything is going to be fine.
“Yo, Caz-ma-taz!” Gabriel answered, breathless. A feminine voice spoke indistinctly in the background. “Shush!”

“I haven’t spoken yet,” said Castiel, frowning.

“No – not you – I mean, yes you! Crap – Cas, gimme a sec.” Changes in the volume of Gabriel’s voice suggested him turning to and from the phone’s mouthpiece. Rustles muffled the sound further, and Castiel thought something covered the receiver, but he could still hear what Gabriel said. “Daddy is busy, but I’ll be right back, okay? Don’t move!”

Castiel’s frown deepened.

There’s no chance Gabriel has children…is there?

Gabriel had a hasty, muted conversation with the mystery woman. Though her voice was unrecognizable, it was definitely adult.

No. There is absolutely positively no chance that Gabriel has children. Gabriel is a child himself.

Except when he’s not – except when Naomi’s inappropriate behavior and my repressed childhood forced adulthood on him far too young...

He’s got a right to act juvenile now, especially since we broke from our parents. When else has he had the opportunity?

“Okay…” Gabriel huffed out a breath. “Okay…what’s up?”

“If you were busy you didn’t have to answer the phone – I didn’t mean to interrupt,” said Castiel.

“Aw no, this is just foreplay,” said Gabriel. “I’ve always got time for you, bro.”

“I appreciate that but unless you’ve sired pups I’m unaware of, there are things about your personal life I’d rather not know.”

“Sired…pups?” Gabriel said, stunned, and broke out in helpless laughter. “God that’s…no. Never. Ugh! I’ve been investing some quality time and funds in some of our potential clients.”


“Fine.” Gabriel’s eye roll was audible. “But if you ever want some kinky tips…”

“…then I will ask my sex worker boyfriend,” Castiel completed the sentence quellingly. “I do not want to know about your fetishes. Especially if one is a desire to be called ‘daddy’ by your partners.”

“Air quotes!”

“How could you possibly know that? We’re on the phone.”

“Because I know you, Cassie!” Gabriel declared. “That’s also how I knew it was important that I answer the phone – you text if it’s not something important! – and how I know this call is about…hmm…”
“It’s simple, really—”

“No! Lemme guess…Dick Roman’s job offer?”

“I’ve already declined,” Castiel said. “We’d be off the phone already if you’d let me—”

“The escándalo article in People about your break up with April?”

“There’s an article about me?” Castiel shook his head. “Gabriel, all I need is a—”

“Benny get back to you about carving out office space for us at Cajun Delights?”

“No, I—”

“Dean propose? Sam get into Northwestern? You finally do that threesome with Benny?”

“I…no…how do you even know about that?”

“The all-seeing eye of Gabrielo Mysterio knows all.” Gabriel attenuated his syllables in what Castiel supposed was an attempt to sound eerie.

He sounded obnoxious.

“Clearly not,” said Castiel, disgruntled. “Nothing you’ve said comes close to the reason I called.”


“No,” Castiel said. “You want to guess – guess. Your wayward child can wait.”

“Wayward…child…? Oh, Rachel is wayward alright but she’s no child. The things she can do with her mouth? And her ass? And her ti—”

“Do you have Samandriel Alfred’s phone number?” interrupted Castiel.

Never try to riposte against Gabriel in a word duel. He knows full well there are things I have no desire to know, and he has no compunction about saying them. How have I not learn this lesson a thousand times over?

“You’re right, I would never have guessed that,” Gabriel said thoughtfully. “Why the heck do you need Alfie’s phone number?”

“Well, you know, he trans—”

“He transitioned and you want to ask his advice about it!” crowed Gabriel. “Come on, gimme that one – I almost guessed, right?”

“I was hoping he could recommend a doctor,” Castiel added. “Do you…do you think asking him is a good idea? Maybe I shouldn’t. He works for our mother…I don’t want to put him in awkward position…”

“Nuh-uh, you don’t get to make that decision for him – if he wants to talk to you, he’ll talk to you, and if he doesn’t want to talk to you, he won’t,” said Gabriel. “‘sides, how many times do I have to tell you – don’t you worry a hair on your pretty little head about mother dearest. She’s not coming for us.”

“I’m not sure what worrying has to do with my hair,” Castiel said.
“Nothing, ‘cause you have nothing to worry about,” Gabriel replied. “Naomi won’t come for us. Naomi can’t come for us.”

“So you keep saying,” muttered Castiel.

She’s controlled every aspect of my life for thirty years and now she’ll just…stop? Impossible. The only remarkable thing is that she hasn’t come for us – for me – yet.

“Trust me,” Gabriel said, tone flipping from irreverent to sincere. Castiel sighed. He wanted to trust Gabriel, but he knew too well what Naomi was capable of.

Whatever Gabriel has on her and IADB must be incredible. But if he has exceptional blackmail material, why won’t he tell me what it is? Why didn’t he use it ages ago? Why—

Or I could trust him, accept that he is looking out for me, and try to be sanguine about this.

He never protected me before.

But people change. I’ve changed. He’s changed. If I can’t grow with him as a person, I’ll lose him as a confidant. As rocky as our history has been, I don’t want that – never want that. Sam and Dean are my new family but Gabriel is my brother and my best friend.

And I can learn to trust him.

“Gabriel—”

“Maybe I should go?” Meg’s voice was distinct now that Castiel knew that was who Gabriel was with.

“Hold that thought,” Gabriel said. Castiel wasn’t sure which of them he was speaking to until clatters suggested the phone being put down and Gabriel and Meg had a rapid, obscured conversation.

Castiel sank back in the sofa in Dean’s living room. Friday and Saturday nights were…unpleasant. Castiel tried to be sanguine, but in the few weeks since he’d moved in with Dean he’d already grown to dread them. Dean walked the street or entertained one of his regulars, Sam worked at the grocery store until 10, and Castiel sat alone and lonely, forbidden by Gabriel from working after 6, aware that Dean was close but out of reach. He distracted himself as he could, but once the apartment was clean, the laundry was done, food prepared for the weekend, and the dishes washed, he was at a loss. Sometimes, he watched TV. Sometimes, he read Sam’s biology textbooks. Sometimes, he read the news or a book on his phone.

Sometimes, like tonight, he sat and stewed until he reached the point he had to do something and ended up inadvertently interrupting his brother’s kinky sex.

Maybe he should hang up.

Castiel needed a hobby. What did people who didn’t work a hundred hours a week do with their time?

“And I’m back,” said Gabriel. “Phone number – 779-555-8674.” Castiel scrawled the digits on a torn piece of paper that had once been Sam’s homework. “And now I’m gone, ‘cause I promised Rachel I’d quit wasting her time. Sorry, bro, I—”

“What changed, Gabriel?” The question burst from Castiel before he could stop himself, accompanied by a surge of fear that Gabriel would hang up without replying.
He’d probably answer anytime I asked him…but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever work up the nerve to ask him again…

“Uh…Alfie’s name? His gender identification? His job title? His pronouns? His—”

“Why did you stand up for me now, blackmail Naomi now, instead of at any point in the past?” Castiel clarified, heart pounding.

“Oh.”

Castiel grimaced. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have…it’s okay, you don’t have to answer – get back to Meg – Rachel – she’s waiting for you. And probably stiff, if she’s been holding her position this entire conversation. I—”

“I couldn’t do it alone,” said Gabriel solemnly. “Look, Cas, I get it – I’m sure that intellectually you understand that I was a kid that whole time you were a kid, but…I was a kid. I hated how our brothers squabbled and hurt each other, I hated how Naomi pushed and pulled you, but I didn’t know what to say or what to do or how to rebel. When I tried to protect you, I got punished too. I couldn’t face that. I was a kid. And since I stopped being a kid… I’ve tried to find an escape, but standing up to mom and dad and Mikey and Lucy? Easier said than done. You didn’t look like anything was gonna sway you from Naomi’s One True Path, even abject misery, even the promise of a lifetime of loveless, fake marriage. I’m just one lame-ass, cowardly dude. What was I supposed to do? But I still wanted to do something, so I kept my eyes open for unethical bullshit, kept records of questionable deals. I didn’t use any of the information but at least by gathering I could pretend I was doing something. Never really thought I’d do anything with that dossier. But then I saw you with Dean – smelled you with Dean – and I had second thoughts – third thoughts – fourth thoughts – you get the idea. You started standing up to Naomi. You’d found something you wanted. I wanted to help but it never seemed like the right moment – and then the bitch sent the whore to your room and…well, you know the rest.”

But he helped Anna…

But he gathered blackmail material…

But he never asked if I wanted out, never tried to help me escape when I was younger…

…he was younger too. Expecting Gabriel at 20 to have the same sensibilities and capabilities as Gabriel at 34 is ludicrously unfair. I wasn’t ready to stand up to Naomi at 20, and neither was he. And I never tried to resist, never helped Anna, never gathered blackmail material, never asked Gabriel if he wanted to escape. I gave him no reason to think I’d support him if he acted.

He didn’t want to break with the family. He didn’t want to hurt our siblings or our parents. He didn’t want to take a dangerous risk. He didn’t want to be alone.

His reasons for not acting are basically the same as my reasons for not acting. We were both terrified children. There’s no way I can hold that against him. No matter how much juvenile bitterness I harbor that Gabriel couldn’t protect me, he wasn’t an adult. He was a victim of our parents’ manipulation and abuse, just as I was.

“You’re not ‘lame,’” Castiel said.

“Air. Quotes. You’re right. I’m not lame. I’m fricken awesome. You are so lame.”

“My perception of you does skew unfairly,” Castiel continued. “You weren’t my parent but you were the only role model I had. I put you on a pedestal. Naomi forced us to grow up too quickly, and
I’m sorry for the part I played in that, sorry for the expectations I placed on your shoulders. I can’t promise I won’t continue to make mistakes like this. Even if I police my behavior, I’m sure in an unguarded moment I will suggest once more that you had greater power and autonomy than you possessed when we were both children – but I am sorry, and I will try to do better. Please continue to call me on my inappropriate behavior. You’re the only brother I’ve ever wanted, the only brother I’ve ever really had. Thank you, Gabriel.”

Silence answered Castiel’s pronouncement.

Gabriel was never silent.

Except, now, he was.

“I’ll leave you to your evening,” said Castiel, smiling. “See you at the meeting with Benny tomorrow?”

“Yes! Yeah…” Gabriel sounded…startled? The nuance stolen by long distance conversation made his tone incomprehensible to Castiel. “I…um…thanks, Cas. Back atcha. Best bro award is all yours. Not that there’s much competition.” The longer Gabriel spoke, the more his usual jocularity returned. Castiel’s smile widened. “I mean – between you, Michael and Lucifer? If I wasn’t absolutely positive that Naomi would disembowel anyone who tried to have an affair with Chuck, I’d question whether we’re even related to them.”

“We’re not,” said Castiel. “They might be family by blood but by any measure that matters? They’re strangers.”

“Excellent, excellent – Naomi can’t disown us if we disown the other Novak-Shurleys first!”

“Naomi already disowned us. It was in the Enquirer.”

“And here I thought you didn’t follow the news!”

“Meg showed it to me.”

“Meg leaked those pictures of you and Dean, too.”

“I assumed.”

“Do you mind?”

“Not in particular.”

“You know, you should give Anna a call. She thinks you hate her.”

“Then we’re on the same footing, since I think she hates me.”

“She might, a little.”

“She has a right to, a little.”

“She’s talking about coming back after school… ‘cause we’re still here, not because of the Cosa Nostra.”

“…Naomi does run the family like the mafia…” said Castiel thoughtfully.

“And we’re starting a rival gang! It’s gonna be awesome, bro.” Gabriel’s enthusiasm for the banking
scheme was unabated. Castiel wished he could enter into it, wished that when Dean gushed, Castiel could gush as well.

*But I don’t want to be a banker.*

*It doesn’t matter. This is for the best.*

“We’re going to do excellently,” Castiel agreed.

“So, while your friendly neighborhood free therapist is *in* for consultations – anything else to get off your chest?” said Gabriel.

“Forgive me, but you are *not* the man I want removing things that are covering my chest,” Castiel deadpanned. Gabriel’s easy laughter was the perfect response. “I think…this has been a good conversation. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. See you tomorrow?”

“Like you can get rid of me!”

The line went dead, cutting off the sound of Gabriel’s continued amusement. Castiel lowered the phone, stared at it, and then took up the sheet of paper on which he’d written Alfie’s phone number.

*I can’t change my career path. Naomi ensured that was immutable. But my presentation? My body? I have control of myself. I have autonomy over myself. And I can do this.*

*Castiel (8:54 PM): Good evening Mr. Alfred. I’m sorry to text you so late. This is Castiel Novak.*

Castiel stopped typing and stared at his name. He didn’t want to be Novak any more. He didn’t want to have anything associated with his mother and father linked to him. They *weren’t* his family. The longer passed and the more he reflected on his childhood, the more he wondered if they’d *ever* been his family. Nothing in his experience matched the simple acceptance and fraternity shown him by Sam or Dean, or even by Benny or Bobby.

*Naomi can disown me to her heart’s content. I don’t want her name, don’t want anything more of hers than what I already have.*

*I want a family, a real family.*

*Maybe I can become a Winchester.*

*What would Dean think if I asked him about that? Would it make him happy? Would it make him uncomfortable?*

*Maybe I’ll ask him…someday…*

He backspaced his name and resumed typing.

*Castiel (8:54 PM): Good evening Mr. Alfred. I’m sorry to text you so late. This is Castiel.*

Nervous, he moved to set the phone aside, reaching for bird guide that he’d borrowed from Sam, but his fingers hadn’t released the case when the phone vibrated.

779-555-8674 (8:55 PM): *Hey Castiel! How’ve you been? I tried to contact you but your phone number doesn’t work. Guess I know why. Should have realized course you couldn’t keep your old number on the family plan.*

*Nope – can’t have a family phone number if I’m not part of the family.*
Castiel (8:55 PM): I’m good.

Castiel backspaced his reply again.

Castiel (8:55 PM): I’m great.

779-555-8674 (8:55 PM): Awesome!

779-555-8674 (8:56 PM): Um so why did you text me?

779-555-8674 (8:56 PM): Not that it’s not awesome to hear from you things here have been all screwed up since you left but ya know.

779-555-8674 (8:57 PM): It’s a little weird.

Taking a deep breath, Castiel sighed, focused on the rush of air over his dry lips, and let the tension ebb from his shoulders. Alfie had replied to him. Alfie was an adult who could choose what queries to reply to and how to reply, and deny Castiel if Castiel asked him anything that made him uncomfortable. Alfie had a choice. Castiel did nothing wrong simply by asking a question…

Castiel (8:58 PM): You’re right, and I’m sorry, and it’s about to get more weird.

Inhale. Exhale.

Castiel (9:00 PM): I’m looking for a professional to discuss my presentation status with and was wondering if the doctor you saw for your gender transition takes clients for presentation transitions. If so, would you recommend them?

Castiel (9:01 PM): I know this is a personal topic and I’m sorry to intrude on your private life.

He typed a second apology before he could stop himself – Don’t answer if you don’t want to… The ping of Alfie’s reply came before he could hit send.

779-555-8674 (9:01 PM): OMG CAS ARE YOU TRANS?

779-555-8674 (9:02 PM): Her name is Pamela Barnes and she totes takes trans-presenting clients and she’s amazing A+++++++++++++++ highly recommend

779-555-8674 (9:02 PM): Pamela Barnes 779-555-1649

Castiel (9:03 PM): I think I might be an omega.

Castiel (9:03 PM): To be honest, I’m nearly positive.

779-555-8674 (9:04 PM): That. Is. Fantastic. Ask me anything. I’m an open book. Gender transitioning has a lot in common with presentation transitioning. I mean it’s way different emotionally but the treatment is similar – hormones and surgery.

779-555-8674 (9:05 PM): I know how confusing and weird it can feel when you’re not sure. And I know how your parents are about this stuff. So if you want someone to talk to, I’m here. No one should go through this alone.

Castiel (9:06 PM): I’m not alone.

Castiel (9:07 PM): But I appreciate your offer. Having one more friend who supports me is wonderful. Thank you. Do you want to get lunch sometime? We can talk? But only if it’s safe. I don’t
want you to endanger your position with my family.

779-555-8674 (9:08 PM): Fuck Naomi. I’ve been job hunting for months. I only stayed because I couldn’t afford my top surgery and she wanted to show off how understanding she was by paying for it. Figured I might as well milk that for all it was worth. Now that I’m set? I want out.

779-555-8674 (9:09 PM): Do you know anyone hiring experienced personal chefs? I can send a resume and references.

Castiel (9:10 PM): I’ll keep my ears open. But my current circle of friends are not the ‘personal chef’ sorts.

779-555-8674 (9:11 PM): And of course I’d love to grab a meal sometime! I remember how hard your mom came down on you when you tried to be friends with me, instead of treating me like the help, so I kept my distance. Now that you’re out? In multiple meanings of the term? Yes!

Smiling, considering his reply, Castiel tapped through phone’s menus. His contact list was sparsely populated – Dean, Sam, Meg, Benny, and Gabriel were the only personal numbers he had stored, though he had a handful of other numbers entered, people he’d been working with on Dean and Gabriel’s bank. The menu to add Alfie to his contact list popped up and Castiel entered Samandriel Alfred to the list.

Castiel’s birth family was large, insular, yet not close.

Castiel’s found family was small, open, growing, and intimate.

Samandriel (9:12 PM): I’m so happy for you!! Contact me any time!

Castiel (9:12 PM): Thank you Alfie. I will.

The apartment no longer seemed lonely. The evening no longer seemed interminable. If Castiel needed anything, there were people he could contact. If he wanted to do anything, there was no one to stop him or say he shouldn’t. If he went out, when he returned, no one would ask where he’d been, who he’d seen, or what he’d done.

He didn’t want to go out.

But what if I want is to see Dean? Well, we can’t have everything we want, but the key is: I have a choice now. Whatever I do, Dean will say ‘cool’ and ask me to tell him about it.

I had no idea how abnormal my family was until I encountered a normal family.

So…of the available options…what do I want to do?

He wanted to read Sam’s Peterson guide.

Content, Castiel took up the book, curled up on the couch, and turned to a page of finches, colorful plumage vividly painted.

I could hang a bird feeder on the fire escape…learn what birds are brave enough to chance downtown Palmeton…come spring, it’d be warm enough for plants, too…

Would that be okay?

…who’s to stop me?
Well, Dean might. But I don’t think he will. And he won’t grow angry if I ask permission. He’ll probably be surprised I thought I needed to ask permission.

This is my home now.

This is my family now.

I’m free.

Those birds that always hung out on the berry bush were chickadees! They’re so cute! The weed whacker never scared them, I bet the Christmas lights won’t either…

A click pulled Castiel’s attention from his book and he looked up to see the door swinging open and Dean stepping into the room.

“Heya, Cas!” said Dean with a cheerful wave. His windswept hair stood up in tufts, his cheeks pinked by the cold. He blew on his hands as he stepped in and closed the door behind him.

“Hello, Dean.” Castiel set the book aside and rose, though Dean waved at him to remain seated. “I wasn’t expecting you back so early. Are you hungry? I made chicken eggplant casserole for the weekend.”

“Naw, I’m good.” Smiling, Dean shrugged out of his coat; the resulting stir of air tickled Castiel’s nose with Dean’s scent, mingled with that of an unknown alpha. Castiel resisted the urge to sneeze. “Had an hour between clients, figured there’s no point in freezing my ass of when I could be up here.”

He smells like someone else. Why would he come here when he’s like this? He knows how uncomfortable it makes me.

Yes, and he also knows, as well as I do, that I have to get used to it. Better that he expose me, better that he not sugar coat it or hide, better that I learn to cope, learn to accept, learn to move on.

But he didn’t have to come back now. He could have spared me…and…

“Surely there’s profit to be made, even with only an hour,” Castiel pointed out. “A blow job can’t take more than a few minutes.”

Dean looked scandalized. “Only if you’re shit at it! My clients get their money’s worth, thank you very much!” He grinned, stepped up beside Castiel, wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and dragged them side-by-side onto the couch. “Besides – when I’ve got a scheduled client coming up the stress ruins the whole vibe of the quickie. I enjoy my job but not when I’m watching the clock thinkin’, ‘when’s this moron gonna come ‘cause I gotta get outta here by ten of!’ Takes all the fun out of fucking. Also, no guarantee that a client won’t change their mind mid-BJ, decide they want to fuck or knot or something, and then what, ‘sorry, Joe, ain’t got time for that?’ That’s bad for business.” The smell of fresh-cut grass, sun-baked fields and lemon tickled at Castiel’s senses. “‘Sides, by taking on a client I don’t got time for, I screw one of my fellow toilers over. I’ve got work lined up. I’m good for tonight. If one of them doesn’t? They need that BJ more than I do. So unless I see some minute alph’ I know, I’m hands-off. Maybe I lose out on a few bucks. Whatever. This way, there’s no stress. No pressure.” Castiel’s nose stung with the acid tang of Dean’s scent and he rubbed at it.

Dean only smells like lemon if something is bothering him…

“That’s…equitable…of you,” said Castiel.
“What, surprised?” asked Dean, elbowing him playfully in the side. The lemon scent intensified.

“Not at all,” Castiel replied, and the lemon ebbed. He is nervous about my reactions to candid discussions of his sex work. I’ve given him cause to be. And it does hurt, to have to share him with others, to smell others on him, but right now, right here, he’s with me, his arm around my shoulder, his laughter genuine, his presence palpable…none of his clients can say that...

“I thought about grabbin’ some grub but I kept thinkin’ ‘bout you sittin’ here alone stumped by the TV,” Dean laughed.

“I know how to work the television,” grumbled Castiel.

“Uh huh, sure, now you do.”

“I do!”

“Prove it,” said Dean, grabbing the remote control from the coffee table, slouching back in the couch and handing it to Castiel. With an over-exaggerated scowl, Castiel hit the buttons necessary to turn the TV and cable box on, get the sound system running, and switch to the Discovery channel. A show popped on mid-sentence, a rugged man on a boat navigating gray, ice-floe filled seas. Castiel hit mute and turned to Dean with a smug smile.

“Fine, fine, I guess you’re doin’ great without me,” conceded Dean.

“Never,” Castiel said. Dean froze. “I am an adult and capable of managing without you, yes. But am I great without you? Absolutely not.”

But he came up to check on me – no, he didn’t say so in so many words, but he saved that for last, emphasized my ineptitude with the television…he’s here, now, when he could have been anywhere else in the world.

“Cas…” Lemon seeped back into Dean’s scent.

Dean sleeps with others, has sex with others, but he comes home to me.

I’m…I’m fine with that. This is fine with me. I have to figure out how to say that – how to put him at ease.

We’re fine.

Everything is fine.

Every time I say that, think that, it goes back to not being fine with me in the space of a few days to a few weeks.

But I think I mean it this time.

That’s something, at least...

“I’ve had a good evening so far – spoke to my brother, got the number for a Doctor Pamela Barnes who specializes in transitions—”

“I’ve heard of her – she worked with Ash and Hannah!”

“—and have learned a great deal about native varieties of finch.”
“Uh oh, any birdies I should look out for?” Dean asked.

“Don’t worry, I won’t intend to bore you with the details,” Castiel smiled. “How was your evening?”

There was a strained silence, lemon intensifying so strongly that, combined with the other elements of Dean’s scent, the room smelled like Pine Sol.

“You…uh…you really want to know?” asked Dean, gruff, shifting in discomfort.

“Only if you want to tell me.” In an effort to ease Dean, Castiel relaxed against his side, took his hand and threaded their fingers together.

“And if I did want to tell you?”

“That would also be fine,” said Castiel. “We’re fine, Dean.”

*And I mean that.*

Dean took a deep breath.

*Can you scent that on me? That I’m not upset? That I’m not jealous?*

“We’re fine,” Dean echoed softly, sniffig again. “We’re…” The smell of lemon evaporated, lingering in the air but absent from the pheromones Dean continually released. Relieved, Castiel buried his head against Dean’s neck and inhaled. “Hell, Cas…”

Dean moved so quickly, pivoting to his side, that Castiel squawked and tumbled into the armrest beside him. A glimpse of the TV showed him two men arguing but then Dean was over him, blocking the screen, kissing him, pressing against him, hot and heavy and present and delicious.

“My evening’s been pretty good,” Dean managed between frantic kisses, “and it’s about to get a hell of a lot better.”

“That would be—” Castiel groaned as Dean used a knee to push his legs apart and settled their bodies flush, crotches pressed together. Neither of them was hard yet, but with Dean fervent and ardent, rutting against him, Castiel’s blood rushed to his dick, arousal coursing through him. “That would be awesome.”

“You’re awesome,” Dean panted, pinning Castiel to the couch, rocking against him with increasing desperation. “God, you’re awesome. You’re so awesome for me, Cas. Had to see you – couldn’t get the image of you here alone outta my head – the things you do to me…”

“I don’t mean to infringe on your time ‘on the clock,’” said Castiel. “You don’t need to check on me.” He tried to keep his tone serious, but it was impossible – he sounded ridiculous, guttural and cracked, interrupted by sloppy kisses. “It’s okay.”

“I believe you,” whispered Dean. Dean’s dick pressed hard against Castiel’s and they moaned in tandem. Frantic in his thrusts, Dean dropped his head to Castiel’s shoulder and sniffed at his scent point, nudging aside Castiel’s unbuttoned collar. “I believe you, and it’s *amazing*. And I *want* to think about you. I *want* to check on you. I want to see you and touch you and fuck you and listen to you lose your Goddamn mind. My…my perfect little omega…”

Climax barreled over Castiel, suddenly, unexpectedly, so soon after they’d started that he’d have been ashamed if not for Dean going rigid with his own orgasm. Breathing hard, Dean collapsed,
only the softness of the cushions preventing Castiel from being crushed by his weight.

Maybe…maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, though…he’s going to leave soon, leave me alone, go to the arms of another…

“You’ll smell like me all night,” Castiel murmured, pleased and concerned.

…I don’t want to interfere with his ability to earn a living…this is his job…I respect that…

…and it’s heartening to realize that, day by day, I mean that, believe that, more and more…

“Good.”

…and he wants to go to work smelling like me.

Wow.

“I love you, Dean.”

“I know you do, you idiot.”

We really are fine. I’m really fine.

Everything is going to be okay.

No.

Everything is going to be awesome.
This chapter has two scenes; the first is plot related but the second largely isn't, and it's the Dean/Cas/Benny threesome, so if you're not interested in reading that, read to the scene split then go to the next chapter. :)

The smiling nurse, scent chemically modified to neutrality, led Castiel down the sedately lit hallway, pushed open a door, and gestured Castiel within. Expecting to be confronted with the familiar immaculate white and gleaming stainless steel of every doctor’s examination room he’d ever visited, he was taken aback to instead step into an office. A low bookcase was artfully arranged with tomes and tchotchkes, a cleared desk sat against one wall, a computer chair neatly tucked against it, and a comfy-looking armchair sat behind the door.

“I’ll give this to the doctor and she’ll be in to see you soon,” chirped the nurse, waving the clipboard of paperwork Castiel had completed while he’d waited in the reception area. She closed the door behind him and after a baffled moment, Castiel settled into the armchair. He wasn’t in an examination room, wasn’t expected to don a flimsy hospital gown, hadn’t even had his blood pressure checked or his weight taken. The patient intake forms had been a bizarre mixture of standard medical questions – age, weight, allergies, medications, known medical conditions – and questions that would never have occurred to Castiel.

Preferred gender pronouns?

Preferred secondary gender identification?

Legal name? Preferred name?

The questions left Castiel confused, weakened his confidence. Did he want people to call him omega? Switching his designation, asking people to call him omega instead of alpha, would open him to prejudice – he’d become subject to society’s biases against omegas and he’d be subjected to the homophobia and transphobia of those who believed people like Castiel were confused, delusional, mentally ill, desperate for attention. The only people Castiel had talked to about transitioning were Dean, Gabriel, and Alfie. He’d not even had an explicit conversation with Sam. Alfie had switched gender pronouns over a year before he medically transitioned, yet Castiel hadn’t spared a thought for how he’d like to be referred to by others. Shouldn’t he want to publicize his new identity? If he was serious about becoming an omega, shouldn’t he have considered new terminology for himself and reflected on the societal ramifications of his decision? He’d been so focused on himself – on how he felt, what he wanted – that the change in how he’d appear to acquaintances and strangers hadn’t crossed his mind. Maybe he wasn’t ready. Maybe his reticence to share his status with all and sundry meant he was wrong. Maybe he should have told everyone he knew. But who could Castiel tell? Naomi had ensured he had no friends. Aside from Gabriel he’d not spoken with anyone in his family since he’d left home.

But that doesn’t justify why I haven’t told Meg, Benny, Bobby, Sam…I could tell them…

…do I have to? They’ll scent it on me once I start taking hormones…
...God, am I really going to do this? If I can’t even tell Sam, how can I pretend I’m ready to make this change?

Because this decision isn’t about anyone but me. This is my choice. This is my identity. It’s none of their damn business. And I am going to do this. Every time Dean calls me ‘omega’ I feel more like myself. Every time I imagine having slick, losing my knot, I feel like I belong in my own body as I never have before. Every time I think of myself as an omega, instead of as an alpha, I feel whole, so good, so relieved, so right.

But what if I’m wrong? What if—

No. Stop. I’ve made this decision, and when I feel most comfortable, I’m certain it’s the right one. It’s only when I grow anxious or nervous or frightened that I doubt this. When I’m most secure, I’m most confident. I can’t listen to the voice of doubt in my head. I can’t listen to Naomi.

But what if—?

Desperate for a distraction, Castiel let the colorful book spines on the shelf draw his eye.

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals

Getting to Know You, or How I Learned to Let Go and Accept Myself

It’s Never Too Late: From ‘I Wish’ to ‘I Am’

That last title reflected Castiel’s thoughts too well. Curious what reassurances it might offer, he started to rise when a knock arrested him.

“Come in?” he said, puzzled.

The door nearly clocked him in the head as he settled back into the chair. A tall woman with sharp eyes and sleek dark hair took a step in and then rocked back.

“Woah, sorry!” she laughed, voice sultry and melodic. “Why’d ya say ‘come in’ if you were that close to the door?”

“If you’re looking for the doctor, she’s not arrived yet,” Castiel grumbled.

“Dr. Pamela Barnes,” she said with a broad, friendly grin, thrusting her hand toward him. Castiel took it, tersely shook her hand, and settled back in his chair, troubled, as she took a seat at the computer chair and swiveled to face him. “I see Samandriel Alfred recommended you here – how’s
Alfie doing these days?"

On the one hand, it was a relief to be given a reprieve from talking about his transition. On the other hand, there was no dodging the purpose of his visit. The sooner they began the conversation, the better. Still, Castiel forced himself to rise to the challenge of small talk.

“He’s good,” said Castiel. “Happy. Happier than he was.”

_Though he’s still trapped working for Naomi, so things can only improve so much._

Awkward silence fell.

“Hey, Mr. Novak?” Dr. Barnes said. Castiel flinched. “Castiel?” Some of the tension leaked from Castiel’s shoulders. He glanced up and caught Dr. Barnes’ eye as she peered at him earnestly. “No judgement here. You came to me, but if you’re not ready to discuss what you wrote on your sheet, you can turn around and leave. We won’t charge you the copay and we’ll hold onto the paperwork if you want, so that when you are ready, you won’t have to rake yourself over the coals to fill it out again. It’s your call.”

_You’re an alpha, Castiel. Act like one._

_Whatever you change about your body won’t change what’s in your head, Cas, and I care about what’s in your head._

Dean’s words, said multiple ways at multiple times over the past few weeks, soothed Castiel, drowned out his mother’s condemnation, and he slumped back into the seat cushions.

“Now or later won’t make a difference,” he said. “I’ve only recently learned there’s a name for the way I feel but I’ve known I was…different…since puberty. Pretending I’m…” He grimaced again. “Pretending I’m _an alpha_ another day, another week, another year, isn’t going to change anything.”


“That’s as good a word for it as any other,” he muttered. “This…self, this body…has always felt wrong. I’ve always felt broken. I’m not like my alpha mother nor my alpha brothers. This…this has never felt like me.” He made a vague gesture toward his chest.

“Emotionally? Physically? Sexually?”

“All of the above,” Castiel replied. “I’m not dominant or aggressive. Touching my knot makes me uncomfortable and is a sure way to decrease my arousal.” The longer he spoke, the easier it became. “I’ve never had the least desire to penetrate anyone, nor to take control of the situations around me.”

“I’m not saying this to discourage you, but understand, Castiel – feeling your presentation is incorrect is about more than not identifying with the culturally established social and sexual roles associated with being an alpha.”

“It is?” he asked blankly. “Then what is it about?”

_You’re supposed to help me! Why are you challenging me on this?_

“The hyper-aggressive view we have of alphaness in America is a cultural construct, and many alphas feel uncomfortable with that, feel pushed to be ‘tough,’ are told from a young age that ‘alphas don’t cry’ and ‘alphas have to be strong,’” Dr. Barnes explained. “Likewise, it is implicit in our
societal constructs that alphas are supposed to be dominant in bed, are supposed to take the lead, and are supposed to be the inserting partner, rather than the partner being inserted into. This is often taken to the extreme of denying the alpha status of anyone who opts to be the more submissive sexual partner. Other cultures, historically and presently, have not subscribed to this false equivalency of penetration with omeganess.”

So I’m an alpha.

Why did she have to tell me that? If the reasons that Dean offered, that Gabriel offered, if the comfort I take in imagining myself an omega…if none of that is enough, then what is enough to determine if I’m trans?

I should have asked Alfie how he knew he was a man. He’d have answered…but would his reply have helped? Alfie didn’t change his presentation; he remained a beta. Because he was switching his gender, he was able to live as a man for a long time before he medically transitioned. No one questioned it – no one could smell ‘the truth’ on him. No, that’s unfair, I’m sure people did question him and give him a hard time but the challenges of being transgendered aren’t the same as those of being transpresenting. I don’t have that option to appear as an omega while I’m still an alpha. Scent blockers would mute my alphaness but anyone within a few feet would still know. Without taking hormones of some kind, there’s no way I could appear to be an omega to test how that feels.

But I could have asked people to call me an omega. I could have told my friends. I could have dressed more demurely, applied scent modifier, done anything to convey the idea that I was an omega to strangers and assessed how that felt. Instead, all I have to go on is how Dean treats me. I love it when he treats me like I’m an omega.

But what Dr. Barnes is saying…what she’s suggesting…is that what I perceive as being “the appropriate way to treat an omega” is a societal construct and doesn’t reflect a reality of how omegas “should” be treated or how being an omega “should” feel.

How am I supposed to recognize if I’m not an alpha? How does anyone sort through this morass to figure out who they actually are?

“It just feels so wrong,” Castiel sighed. The precious happiness he’d managed to nurse since he’d broken free of Naomi’s influence, since he’d told Dean he wanted to explore his transitioning options, since he’d contacted Alfie, ebbed away.

I mean…it’s not just how Dean treats me…my discomfort and uncertainty predates meeting Dean…

Dr. Barnes smiled at him, leaned back in her chair, and crossed her legs. “Tell me about it.”

Castiel blinked. That wasn’t the reaction he’d been expecting.

She’s not telling me I’m wrong about myself. I’m telling me I’m wrong about myself. She’s being prudent – this is a big decision, and I should be sure – and she wants to understand before giving her professional recommendation.

If I can’t explain it to her, how can I justify it to myself?

“I’m not sure I have the words,” he said.

But I have to try to find them.

“Take your time, Castiel.” Her smile widened, welcoming, open. “We’re in no hurry. I’m sorry if my
treatment of your concerns seems harsh but I get a lot of first time patients who just need to be told that – in blunt terms – it’s okay for an alpha to take it up the ass, and that doesn’t negate their alphahood. And if that’s the case with you, rest assured: you’re not less of an alpha no matter how you enjoy having sex. But it’s not the same as needing to transition.”

“And if that’s not the issue?” asked Castiel.

“Then you’ve come to the right place.”

*She’s got a lot of experience. She’s met a lot of people who are in situations similar to mine – and a lot of people who are in different situations. And would it be so bad if I’m wrong, if I’m an alpha with atypical sexual interests?*

Disappointment sank like a stone in Castiel’s gut.

*That feeling right there – that’s what I have to convey to her.*

“When I imagine penetrating someone I feel sick,” said Castiel. “When I consider knotting someone I go flaccid. Omega scents turn my stomach, whereas alpha scents attract me. And it’s not just that I’m homosexual – I am, though I suppose if I become an omega, I’ll be heterosexual? – but that the prospect of ‘acting as an alpha,’ in any capacity, leaves me feeling…dysfunctional. My whole life my parents dictated to me how an alpha should behave and what expectations they had of me. I forced myself to fit their conception of presentation, but it’s never felt right. I didn’t know that people could be transpresenting until my boyfriend told me about friends of his with issues like mine, and honestly…it was like someone turning on the lights after I’d spent a lifetime lost in darkness. I’d always known something was broken in me, and I’d done my best to fill the role expected of me, but it was exhausting and I hated myself for it. I never…I never felt like me, I never saw ‘me’ when I looked in the mirror. I created this false self and performed as that ‘fake me’ day in and day out until I no longer knew who I was. There was only one thing I knew – one thing I managed to hold onto. I wanted to be knotted. So I hired a sex worker, and he knotted me, and for the first time I felt…whole. Complete. Normal. He’s, uh…he’s my boyfriend now.” Castiel flushed and glanced up to see Dr. Barnes reaction, but there was no sign of condemnation on her face. She grinned at him, eyes alight in the dim illumination.

“Sounds like something out of a movie,” she said.

“Pretty Woman?” asked Castiel wryly.

“God, no,” she rolled her eyes. “There are a handful of fantastic independent films about older trans people’s journeys of self-exploration. We have a recommendation list at the front desk, if you’re interested.”

Castiel shrugged noncommittally. While being exposed to the experiences of others might reassure him, it might create new doubts.

*But if I’m this insecure about my decision, am I ready?*

*How can I know unless I try?*

“He asked me to knot him and I…grew upset, I…” *Call a cigar a cigar, Castiel. “I nearly had a panic attack. Dr. Barnes——”*

“Pam, please!”

“Pam, I have no idea if I should be here,” Castiel confessed. “It’s only been a few weeks since my
brother first suggested that I might not be an alpha, less since my boyfriend explained to me what he knew of transpresentation. I’m behaving hastily. I know I am. But everything they say…everything I’ve read on the internet since…the experiences of those who’ve accepted that they’re trans sound like what I’m experiencing. How I feel about my knot, how I describe interacting with my body, is reminiscent of dysphoria. My sexual preferences align with those of an omega. Dean…that’s my boyfriend…he can…” Castiel flushed even redder, and Pam gave him an encouraging nod. “He can get me to…you know…by calling me ‘his omega.’ And…and I read that taking hormones might enable me to make slick?”

Pam’s expression went gentle and she grinned. “That’d make you happy?” He nodded. “Well, be prepared – it’s less common with male alpha-to-omega transitions than female, and it’s less common with no omega parent – your form says your mother is alpha and your father is beta?” He nodded again, disappointment causing a dull pain behind his eyes. “I hate to be a spoil sport – the odds aren’t in your favor. We could do some tests to check, though. About a quarter of XY ‘males’ born biologically alpha have anal glands formed enough to produce slick; about one in ten produce enough to not require supplemental lubrication. But it is possible. However, even if you don’t win the omega lottery in this regard, there are surgical options. Medication can improve the function of partially-formed glands, and recent stem cell research for growing viable glands in the lab – suitable for implantation and able to function properly provided appropriate hormonal stimulation – is promising. There have also been a handful of instances where the glands of omegas transitioning to beta or alpha have been successfully transplanted into others. The demand outstrips the supply, though.”

“And I’ve read about knot-removal surgery?”

“A relatively straight forward procedure, though recovery is slow and painful,” she confirmed. “Would that interest you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s irreversible,” she pointed out.

“Take my knot,” he implored. “Please.”

“Oh man, Castiel, have you come to the right place,” she laughed. “Most alphas, you tell them, ‘we’re gonna operate on your penis, it’s going to hurt, it’ll take a long time to heal, and you’ll never get your knot back,’ and they’re out the door before I can say ‘boo.’ That reaction you had? That’s the ‘show me the money’ moment. Set your mind at ease – you’re on the right track.”

Agape with hope, Castiel looked up at her, heart skipping and racing. “Really?”

“Well, I’m not gonna operate today,” she cautioned him. Nodding, Castiel tried to restrain his anticipation, tried to calm his breathing. “But based on our conversation thus far, you’re an ideal candidate. Which isn’t to say you’re not allowed to change your mind. By necessity, this process takes time, and you can opt out before you get to the permanent body modifications.”

“When can I start?” asked Castiel.

Pam laughed again. “Drat, I took the whole wrong approach with you,” she said. Her voice was bright and heartening, her beta scent musky and unnameable, and Castiel found her confidence in his self-assessment beyond reassuring. “As long as I’ve done this, sometimes I still introduce doubts when I should be shutting my mouth and listening. I’m sorry, Castiel.”

She believes in me. When I tell the simple truth about how I feel, about my body, about my being an
alpha, a professional agrees that I’m not an alpha.

“It’s alright.” Castiel’s words slurred together in his haste. “When can I start?”

Naomi doesn’t know everything. Naomi is wrong about me. I’m not who she tried to make me into.

“Depends – you indicated on your form that you take a daily rut suppressant?” she asked. Castiel gave a single impatient nod. “Do you take them mornings or evenings?”

“Evenings.”

“You can start today,” she said.

“Really?”

“Really.” Pam beamed at him. “But you’re going to hate the first step.”

“Go off my suppressants,” said Castiel.

“And surf the hormonal tidal wave until you have a rut.”

“I read that I can’t start taking omease until my hormones have returned to alpha baseline...?”

“I’m afraid that’s true,” said Pam. “It generally takes from four to six weeks for hormones to regulate, depending on how long you’ve been on suppressants and environmental factors. You’ll be able to start taking the omease-plus hormone cocktail on the third day after your rut ends. Call me when your rut starts, I’ll get your prescriptions set at the pharmacy you indicated...” She scanned his paperwork. “…Rite Aid on Park. I can recommend a therapist if you want someone to talk things out with, and we’ll have a follow-up consultation two weeks after you start taking omease.”

Too much to hope that everything I hate about myself would change...but still...a lot will change, for the better. I have to get through one rut.

I can do this.

“And I can start today?”

Pam nodded.

“I’m ready. Thank you, Pam.”

“You got this, Castiel.”

“I know I do. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.”

“You okay, Cas?”

With his dick balls deep in Castiel’s butt cheeks to spread them wide apart, Dean sounded wrecked. Frantic, Castiel shook his head. He was burning up, feverish and desperate. His cock was hard and aching, his knot swollen, his body screaming for a touch that his thoughts rebelled against receiving. He was so overwhelmed, so overstimulated, that the prospect of feeling more was dreadfully alluring.

“Dean...please, Dean...”
His rut had hit Castiel like a freight train. Dr. Barnes had warned Castiel that his hormones would run rampant. Intellectually, Castiel had been prepared to feel off but the reality was far worse than he recalled from when he’d last had a rut as a teenager. His temper volatile, he’d struggled to help Gabriel with the legal aspects of forming the business while Dean juggled his classes and jobs to do his part. Worries plagued Castiel, that Naomi would reign them in, that Luke and Michael would come for him, and instead of making him nervous, thinking about his family made him angry, seething, furious. He hated the disquiet constantly roiling beneath his skin, hated how his biology made him waspish with those he cared about, so he retreated into work.

Benny had hastily mounted drywall on one end his hallway, blocking access to one set of rooms, so they could use the space as an office. Knocking out a couple walls created one large, dumb-bell shaped room for them to use as their ‘bank,’ and now they operated out of a communal office shared by Gabriel, Dean, Castiel and Meg, who turned out to have an impressive resume as a personal assistant. This is a monumental waste of time but I guess I might as well help, she’d said, and Castiel had hired her. They needed the extra set of hands, and she did good work. Tim Cain was helping them write up a business plan and submit the paperwork required for the various permissions they needed to operate. They needed no permission to invest their own money, though, so Dean was investing for himself and Castiel and Gabriel. In a month they’d earned 3%.

They were going to make a killing.

“Take it slow, Cas…”

Castiel hated investing.

That’s my hormones talking. Once I’m through this rut, once I’m on omease, things will be better…

“No…no, hurry…I can’t…Dean, I can’t…”

Once I get through this…

“I know, babe,” Dean said, kneading soothing circles into Castiel’s ass cheeks.

Once I’m on omease…

“We can stop any—”

“No!” Castiel snarled. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Gabriel spent the most time with Castiel and had taken the brunt of his temper. Dean was so busy, he’d avoided the worst of it.

And wasn’t there to support me or calm me or help me…nothing eases me like catching his scent but he was gone!

He’s here now. He talked to his professors and got permission to stay with me during my rut. It’s enough. It has to be enough. I’m not actually mad at Dean. I just hate…everything…about my life the last few weeks.

Especially right now.

This is wretched. Why can’t I crawl out of my skin? Go straight to the doctor and demand they get rid of my knot – heck, they can take my whole dick, I don’t care so long as this stops.

It’s been an hour and I’m already losing my mind. And I have to get through days of this?
At least Dean is here…and…

“Benny!” snapped Castiel.

“Whatever you two want,” Benny chimed in, calm and collected.

“Cas, if you’re not ready—”

“Shut up and fuck me!”

Dean laughed. “Benny, you heard the man…”

Curled over Dean, Castiel panted desperately. The only relief from the feeling that he might burst was the pressure placed on his knot where it was caught between their bodies. Dean lay beneath him, sprawled on the bed, cock deep in Castiel’s heavily lubed and extensively prepped ass. Castiel couldn’t bear to see Dean beneath him, couldn’t bear to think about how his body felt. Only pressing his eyes against Dean’s clavicle kept Castiel from sobbing in frustration. This wasn’t his body. He wasn’t supposed to feel this way. If anyone touched his knot, even Dean…but there was no other way to get relief! Castiel was incinerating; he’d implode if he didn’t come, if he didn’t empty himself of the semen clogging his glands. Fingers digging into Dean’s chest, Castiel choked out a furious, futile noise.

Large, calloused hands overlay Dean’s where they pressed into Castiel’s backside, two thumbs tugging at his rim, spreading him open, and Castiel writhed against Dean, smearing his anger into an animal groan.

“Gonna be tight,” Benny murmured.

“I said—”

“Take it slow,” advised Dean.

“Shut up and fuck me, you Goddamn assholes.”

Hell, Castiel even sounded like an alpha.

What alpha demands to be fucked during his rut?

He sort of sounded like an alpha…

A thumb continued to pull Castiel open, but Benny’s other hand left. The thick head of Benny’s sizeable cock pressed blunt against him and Castiel rocked back toward the contact. He had no idea if having sex with them would help, no idea if the solution to, “my knot needs attention but I can’t bear granting that attention” was “more anal.” Despite Castiel greenlighting the threesome, he’d hemmed and hawed setting a date, the prospect of being doubly penetrated intimidating, but now he welcomed the challenge. Anything to distract him from the unfulfillable need that consumed him. Anything to keep him from reacting on instinct and jerking himself off into oblivion.

Nothing happened.

Benny pressed against him but made no headway.

Nothing happened.

Dean breathed beneath him with the patience of a fucking saint.
Nothing happened.

*What the fuck, what’s the delay? If Benny isn’t going to…*

Nothing happened.

Castiel struggled to relax.

Something in Castiel seemed to snap, a burst of pain tensed his spine and forced a sob from him, and infinitely slowly, Benny’s cock slid into his body. The pressure was unbelievable, the pain intense enough that it threatened his rut-induced erection, and neither Dean’s cooed reassurance nor his intensely aroused scent were enough to keep Castiel from shaking and crying and mouthing at Dean’s skin. He couldn’t take more, couldn’t possibly take more. As full as he felt, Benny must be done. Yet Benny kept sliding into him, kept stretching him, and Castiel *could* take more and more and more. Benny was bigger than Dean, and with both of them crowding inside him, Castiel was beyond stuffed, beyond what his body should be capable of containing, and there was no end to be found, the feeling went on and on and on and—

Benny’s hips socketed between Dean’s legs, flush with Castiel’s ass.

“Slowly, Cas…” Dean murmured.

Castiel managed a nod, sweat-damp hair flopping over his forehead and ears, and waited, trembling from head to toe. His hips straddled Dean’s, his ass positioned over the edge of the bed so that both men could access him, and his trapped cock throbbed with the need for stimulation. Movements that had always been automatic and insignificant loomed as immense. Every breath rocked him minutely and spiked him through with pain and a tingle of growing pleasure like fireflies trapped within his skin. His faint trembles amplified the slight movements of the two cocks within him, friction searing him to the bone. If only the three of them could keep still, if only he could collect himself, calm the quaver of nerves that the pain caused, focus on the ripples of pleasure until they burgeoned to encompass him, everything would be fine. There was no reprieve, though, no break in the stimulation, there was only an eternity of being incredibly *open* and vulnerable and exposed and stuffed.

*Well, at least I’m no longer thinking about my knot.*

A twinge through his dick forced a moan from him.

….or at least, I wasn’t…

“Cas?” asked Dean. One of Dean’s hands slid to the small of Castiel’s back. The light weight of Dean’s palm pressed against the thin layer of tissue and muscle, pressed against the cocks stretching him taut, and Castiel could swear he felt his skin bulging against the pressure within him, felt a surge of pleasure to feel his sensitive channel rubbed.

Benny groaned.

“Oh God…” Castiel rocked and choked back a scream as he forcibly restrained himself, pain intensifying, pleasure intensifying, need intensifying. 

“Say the word.” Dean’s voice was husky with arousal, thick with concern. Some implication was meant by what Dean said, Castiel was sure, but the meaning was indiscernible.

….maybe….maybe he won’t start until I tell him to?
Please, fuck me...

...is that really what I want? It hurts, having them both inside me hurts...

...but the prospect of either of them withdrawing makes me sick.

“Please…”

Please read my mind. Please tell me what I need. Please give me what I need.

Dean’s palm massaged over the curve of Castiel’s ass, rubbed at the thickness spreading him. Pain and bliss collided and Castiel groaned. Desperate need billowed outward from where he was filled. Dean’s hand left him and Castiel sobbed, only to choke off a moment later as Dean’s palm returned and he repeated the gesture, rocking Castiel down and back. The small movements felt enormous. Castiel’s thoughts begged for more, begged Dean to stop, but moans quelled the words before they could leave his mouth. The pads of his fingers pressed into Dean’s skin. His cock brushed inadequately against Dean’s belly with every rock, every pivot, every twitch.

Stop…don’t you dare…don’t stop…more…I need more…I need...

With a cry as though he was being torn apart in truth, Castiel scrambled one hand back, grabbed the stabilizing hand Dean had on his ass, and dragged it to his cock. Taking the hint, Dean stroked him, Benny’s hands taking over the task of steadying Castiel’s hips for their shallow thrusts.

It was still too much.

It was still not nearly enough.

After everything I’ve said…would he…

...but I need...

...I don’t want him to touch...

...Dean won’t judge me.

Mouthing broken pleas into the smooth skin of Dean’s chest, Castiel nudged Dean’s hand down, pressed him to encircle Castiel’s knot more firmly. Taking the hint, Dean rubbed Castiel’s swelling skin with his thumb, massaging pre-come from him, and left off urging Castiel down onto his and Benny’s cock. Benny pulled him gently into each thrust. Castiel could as soon have stopped rocking as he could stop the tides. Pleasure assaulted Castiel, so powerful he felt drunk, drowning out the lingering pain of being stretched, drowning out the disgust he felt at having his knot touched. Gentle, careful, Dean anchored him and caressed him; Benny was silent save for occasional breathy noises, the tangy spice of his scent interweaving with Castiel’s and Dean’s aromas, easing the tension in Castiel’s chest.

Castiel rocked back, rocked forward.

This was…this was okay.

Dean rubbed him, murmuring gutturally in his ear.

This was better than okay.

Every slide of their dicks within him amplified the feelings of pleasure, drowned out the feeling of pain.
This was great.

Castiel’s eyes slid rapturously shut.

“Don’t stop…”

Castiel drifted, floated, disconnected from his sweaty, aching body, suspended in a sea of mounting bliss. Mewls and whimpers escaped him, his muscles straining to support his weight, but he scarce felt the effort. Someone else’s voice was speaking, someone else’s muscles screaming. Benny’s hands and Dean’s voice were his anchors, allowing him to let go. The build in ecstasy was gradual, sometimes dipping and fading, sometimes bursting outward to fill him, gratification delayed by the languid pace forced on them by care required to spare Castiel’s body injury. If they sped up, his skin might tear, or both men might slide out of him. The thought forced a sob from him, rife with loss at the prospect of them emptying him, bereft merely imagining them abandoning him.

“Not letting you go,” murmured Dean. “Never letting you go, Cas. So fuckin’ beautiful like this, so fuckin’ amazing…my gorgeous omega, my—”

*How can he call me a…? He’s…he’s massaging my knot, I’m in rut, how can he say…*

“—so slick for me, so open—”

*I’m not an omega. He knows I’m not an omega. I can’t be. I was born an…*

“—and you fuckin’ love riding my knot, don’t you? Gonna make you scream before we’re done. Gonna have so much fun gettin’ you through this heat—”

“Dean!” Castiel’s voice cracked as he rode back hard against Dean. Benny grunted, sliding out most of the way, and while Castiel felt the loss acutely, he also couldn’t stop, couldn’t possibly stop.

“—yeah, that’s right, my perfect bitch of an omega, gettin’ so hot and wet for me, gonna make you feel so good—”

“Oh…oh!”

Dean’s thumb dug into Castiel’s knot, both he and Benny thrust into Castiel hard enough to destroy Castiel with pleasure, Dean whispered, “come for me, Cas” and with a scream that tore at his throat Castiel tensed and spurted copious thick white onto Dean’s belly. Benny made a pained sound and pulled out, prompting a second ragged cry from Castiel, but his sadness at being suddenly empty evaporated as Dean seized his hips and fucked into him hard. A second orgasm swept through Castiel, a third, a fourth. Dean’s knot was swollen and neglected, impossible to accommodate while Benny was also within Castiel, but with Benny gone Castiel was incredibly open and loose and Dean punched into his body, growling promises that sounded filthy but meant nothing to Castiel’s pleasure-swamped mind. Come ran in rivulets over Dean’s slim belly, flooded his belly button, ran down the divot where Castiel’s thighs met Dean’s sides, pooled in white puddles around them. The smell of money threatened to sicken Castiel but whenever the disconnect between his scent and knot and body threatened to overwhelm him, Dean snarled in his ear, stuffed his ass full, and another orgasm crested. Rapture drowned out Castiel’s fears and doubts until all that remained was his body electrified by ecstasy and his mind filled with *Dean*.

Dean’s knot caught.

With a deep groan, Dean arched off the bed and came. Another orgasm, like a dying ember catching flame anew, flattened Castiel. Eyes wide open but sightless, mouth agape, Dean thrust desperately into Castiel’s body, knot tugging and catching, swollen so large it brushed Castiel’s prostate. Dean’s
arms wrapped around him, crushing their bodies together, their commingled sweat and Castiel’s release causing their bodies to slide against each other. Castiel’s world narrowed to the feel of Dean surrounding him and filling him and unending, perfect ecstasy.

*This is it. This is what I want.*

Castiel moaned. Another climax rocked him.

Shaking and rutting up, Dean’s movements gradually slowed, sounds of arousal growing more pained and vulnerable. Only with the decrease in stimulation did Castiel’s wits return. The need that had driven him wild was temporarily sated and with a content smile, Castiel turned his head, set his ear over Dean’s heart, let his breathing sync with the steady pounding. Dean gave a final pivot of his hips then went limp save for one hand petting down Castiel’s spine.

“Well, uh…” Benny cleared his throat. Castiel startled and eased back under the next stroke of Dean’s hand. A gurgling sound caught in his ravaged throat, almost a purr. “I…I guess I should go? If that’s okay?”

“That’s fine, brother.” Dean sounded as exhausted and satisfied as Castiel felt.


“Dean,” Castiel murmured.

“Yeah, Cas?”

“All I need’s Dean,” he clarified, wrapping an arm around Dean’s neck. They were coated in sweat and come and lubricant and they reeked of their combined scent, but Castiel couldn’t fathom moving. The mess was already made. They could clean up after they’d rested.

“We’re fine,” said Dean. “Thanks, Benny. You good, brother?”

“I’m good, Dean,” said Benny. “You two’re hotter’n the bayou in August. This condom didn’t fill itself. But standin’ here while you canoodle is, uh, awkward. If you wanna fuck again sometime, though, I’m all in. You know where to find me.”

Castiel pressed his forehead to Dean’s clavicle. “I’d love to do this again, provided Dean is amenable.” Dean mumbled agreement. “That was amazing. Thank you, Benny.”

“We’ll talk,” Dean promised. He moved a hand away, air brushed Castiel’s cheek, then Dean’s hand return.

The quiet snap and click of the door opening and closing seemed loud, the only signal that Benny had departed. Castiel had dreaded no longer having two cocks within him, but so long as Dean remained, Benny’s absence didn’t register as a deprivation, didn’t leave Castiel aching or empty. Their threesome had been fantastic and fun; being so stretched, mixing pain with pleasure, had proved phenomenal beyond Castiel’s expectations, but Benny wasn’t…

*…my alpha?*

*…my boyfriend?*

*…my mate?*

*All of the above?*
Benny wasn’t *essential*. Castiel couldn’t pretend that *anyone* could have filled the role Benny played – Benny was attentive, kind, attractive, and he smelled good – but Castiel could imagine meeting others who could do as much to satisfy him.

Benny wasn’t Dean.

Dean was essential. No one could substitute for Dean.

“Stay with me,” Castiel murmured.

“Dude, we’re knotted for at least the next hour,” Dean laughed. “I ain’t going anywhere.”

Castiel shook his head, and with a supreme effort, lifted himself enough to meet Dean’s eyes. Deep green was tinged with alpha red, like Dean had strayed out of the cels of a Disney classic about star-crossed true mates.

*That’s never happened before.*

“Stay with me,” he implored. “Please?”

*How many times have I heard that alpha red and omega yellow are a myth?*

“Cas, I…I can’t promise…” Dean looked away, lips curling into an awkward moue. “You’re awesome…I like you a lot…but…”

*True mates…yep, it’s a myth…*

“I’m sorry,” whispered Castiel. “Of course. I asked too much.”

“I know I act all alpha tough but I’m 21,” apologized Dean. “I dunno what life’s gonna look like in ten years, much less fifty years. Neither do you. So how can we commit to ‘always?’” Castiel dropped his head back onto Dean’s chest. Disappointment thrummed beneath his skin. “But…” There was something to Dean’s tone that sent hope surging through Castiel. Breath catching, he looked up again. Dean smiled, the red in his eyes glowing and definitely not mythical or imaginary. “I’m here now, and I’ll be here tomorrow, and if it’s up to me, I’ll be here next week, and next month, and next year. And, uh…thinkin’ ahead, based on what I know right now…I hope…I wanna still be right here, with you, in ten years. Okay – like, not right here, Benny’s a great guy and works hard but Cajun Delights is kinda a dump – but…you know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean,” Castiel agreed, sinking back down. Contentment had him purring again. Dean tentatively reached out to embrace him, relaxed when Castiel wiggled into the touch and mouthed a kiss against his chest. “That’s practical, and sounds perfect to me. We’re good, Dean. We’re so good.”

Really, none of us can say where we’ll be in a week or a month, much less years. If you’d told me a two months ago that I’d wash my hands of the Novaks, leave home, quit IADB, move in with Dean and share his bed nightly, I’d have scoffed at the impossibility of it.

I could walk out the door tomorrow and get hit by a car.

“To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do us part” is a romantic notion that imagines two old people dying hand and hand surrounded by family and loved ones, but it bears little resemblance to reality. No one can promise ‘forever.’ Lives change. Feelings change. Mischance happens. But at this moment, Dean wants to be with me and wants to stay with me and wants to work to make our relationship functional and strong. That’s more powerful than any vows
of devotion, lays a better foundation for our future together than any fanciful platitudes repeated publicly for the benefit of friends and family.

I’m so lucky. Imagine if I’d hired anyone else that first night...

...I’d be trying on tuxedos in preparation for marrying April...

...I’d be trapped as an alpha...

...I’d be working at IADB...

This is better. This is so much better.

Time and silence stretched out as Castiel reflected. Dean’s breathing calmed, his heartbeat slowed, his hold on Castiel went pliant, and his hips went limp, causing his knot to tug distractingly at Castiel’s rim. The pressure kept him from following Dean to sleep, reignited the itch of rut under his skin, his cock twitching with interest. Sighing out his acceptance, Castiel rocked back against Dean’s knot.

“Wouldn’t’a thought anything would make ya even more insatiable,” Dean muttered.

“Sorry,” mumbled Castiel, but he didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. Dean’s knot was swollen full, pressing against Castiel’s insides, and the stimulation left Castiel gasping as need sparked through him.

“S’ok…had a rut or two in my time, ‘fore I got suppressants…know how to goes…”

“Dean…I…”

“Whatcha need, Cas?”

“Next time…knot my mouth?” Castiel suggested. “With Benny in me?”

Dean laughed. “Next time…insatiable…sure, spitroast – we can do that.”

“And maybe…” Castiel squeezed his eyes shut against pleasure and hope. “Maybe don’t wear a condom?” The thought of Dean’s come filling him, Dean’s come leaking out of him, Dean’s come in his mouth, forced a groan from Castiel that drowned out Dean’s reply, but not the reluctance of his tone. “Sorry!” Castiel gasped, humping back onto Dean’s knot more urgently. “Too much – always ask too much – and—”

“Woah, it’s no biggie, my next appointment is in four days!” said Dean.

“Huh?” Castiel froze and shuddered as Dean’s dick twitched inside him.

“Monthly check ups, full STD test panel, all part of having a prostitution license,” Dean explained. “Like, I ain’t done anything risky the past four weeks and I don’t plan on doin’ anything risky goin’ forward, but even if it wasn’t the law – better safe than sorry and syphilitic. But after I get my next clean bill of health…and if you get tested regularly too…I…” Dean’s hands settled on Castiel’s hips and pushed him down, urging Castiel to resume thrusting. “…I could do that. I’d, um, I’d like to do that. I’ve never…without a condom…you want me to breed you up, Cas?”

“Yes,” Castiel moaned.

“Get you full of my pups?” he teased, pumping against Castiel harder. Castiel moaned again. “Can just see you, belly fat with babies, you still beggin’ for my knot, leakin’ everywhere…you’re so fuckin’ desperate for it, aren’t you, Cas? Can’t get enough…”
Castiel wasn’t proud that the image of himself pregnant and bouncing on Dean’s knot drove him to
orgasm, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be ashamed either.

“Wish that was real,” he mumbled, quaking through a surge of rut-induced arousal.

“I can stop with that kinda dirty talk, if it makes you unhappy…I’m just love getting’ a rise outta
ya…”

“I know…it’s okay…don’t stop…”

Dean hummed acquiescence, hips working to push Castiel through another trembling climax.

“Never stop…”

There was a beat pause, a skipped thrust, and Castiel’s stomach sank. He’d pushed too far. Again.

“I won’t,” Dean breathed.

Or he wants what I want…he’s just more pragmatic about it…

Wasn’t I supposed to be the pragmatic one?

Naomi tried to make me pragmatic yes, but underneath her imposed stoicism I was passionate, too
passionate – that’s what she tried to destroy, and that’s what Dean awoke.

Dean’s hand cupped Castiel’s ass, nudged him to continue to rock downward.

“Not goin’ anywhere, Cas…my omega…”

Every day gets better…

“My Dean…”

…I wonder if my eyes are omega yellow…

It doesn’t matter. I don’t need romance novel tropes to tell me I’m in love.

Dean’s the alpha for me.
Chapter 20

Life was good.

Every morning, Castiel woke up when Dean’s alarm went off at 6:30 AM. If he was a better man, he’d have woken up earlier, let Dean sleep in, helped Sam get ready for school, headed into their start up bank early enough to check their international investments in real time, but he couldn’t motivate himself to set his own alarm. Dean got home late, rose early, and was a light sleeper, Castiel reminded himself in a repetitious exercise in self-justification. If Castiel woke up earlier, Dean would wake up earlier. No actual problems would be solved. As things were, Castiel already helped with breakfast, reminded Sam to pack his homework, and joined with Dean in playing a strange, pseudo-parental role to the hard-working 16 year old. To make things weirder, Castiel also sometimes played pseudo-parent to Dean, helping him with his business homework and making sure he ate nutritious meals. Occasionally, Dean played pseudo-parent to Castiel, reminding him to eat, encouraging him to take care of himself. Living together, seeing more of each other, complicated their relationship and highlighted some of the issues with their age difference, but it was also nice, very nice.

Every morning, after Dean and Sam left for school, Castiel went for a jog down Raleigh, east on White Oak, through Bailey Park, and back to Dean’s apartment – their apartment. Returning sweaty and aching felt good, felt real; donning exercise clothes felt genuine and true to himself as little had in the past decade. Afterward, he showered like he was washing his real self down the drain and donned his suit like he was putting on a mask. His early Goodwill-acquired clothing had been tailored and supplemented by a visit to Jos. A. Banks. Castiel conceded that he had no choice but to continue dressing professionally but he’d never again shell out the extra money for designer apparel. Like so many of the social trappings his mother had seen as essential, no one cared what Castiel wore unless they, like he, had been schooled since childhood to care what those around them wore. Gabriel cracked daily jokes about Castiel’s variety of ties. Gabriel had stopped wearing ties weeks ago, but sometimes sported a flamboyant ascot.

Every morning, Castiel wistfully eyed his casual clothing and wished he could burn every suit he owned. On the weekends, at Dean’s urging, he’d taken to wearing slacks and vests, no tie, no jacket. As the weather warmed toward summer he could roll up the sleeves and no one cared if he wore sneakers instead of dress shoes. Ceasing to dress formally had proved uncomfortable. Jeans chafed his legs; Dean had reeked of disbelief when he discovered that Castiel had literally never worn denim before. T-shirts were nice, though, and Castiel was building a collection of ones he liked. He wore them beneath his vests when he didn’t want to bother with a dress shirt. Gabriel thought Castiel should dress as he liked at the bank, insisted no one would think the worse of him if he relaxed and gave over formal wear, but Castiel couldn’t bring himself to do so. The ‘Castiel’ who wore slacks and a vest didn’t want to be a banker. The ‘Castiel’ who wore slacks and a vest was him. The man who put on a suit and walked to Cajun Delights … Castiel wasn’t sure who that man was. It wasn’t Castiel, or at least, it wasn’t the person he’d been trying to become since he left the Novak-Shurleys. If Castiel – the new Castiel – went to their office ungirded by suit jacket and shined shoes, he’d not make it through the day. He wasn’t sure what would happen instead, but he was positive it would be a disaster.

Every morning, Castiel went to work. Sometimes, he opened their business for the day; sometimes, Gabriel was there before him; occasionally, Meg was waiting outside, still awake from the night before. Slowly but surely, they were advancing through the scads of bureaucratic red tape that had to be navigated before they could operate legally. Gabriel and Castiel tapped their network of contacts to name a Board of Directors. Castiel and Dean created a business plan. Meg proved surprisingly adept at assessing risk and took responsibility for the development of their risk management
approach. Their team was small but effective and their existing investments were about to pay quarterly dividends for the first time. Projections suggested they’d make a tidy profit. The Comptroller was reviewing their charter application. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was assessing their insurance request. Tim Cain reassured them that the process was slow but their risk of being declined minimal. Castiel didn’t let himself think about the knot of anxiety in his chest that tightened every time they made progress toward their goal, didn’t let himself listen to the voice that suggested that he should be happy that they were inching toward their official opening.

Every morning, Castiel turned on his computer, hoping he’d have no new e-mails that required his attention, hoping he’d open the business plan document and find it more complete than he recalled leaving it the night before. Most days, Castiel toiled alone through the morning, editing and refining, combing the internet for ideas and suggestions of areas they might have missed that needed to be addressed. Afternoons, Dean came in, looking more exhausted every week as he juggled school, his two jobs, and the bank. Despite his tired smiles and insistence that he was fine, Castiel wondered how long Dean could go without breaking under the strain. For Dean’s sake, Castiel had to do better, work harder, be more devoted to the company – the Night Bank, they’d named it, an apt description of the unique niche they’d be filling in the market. It was an innovative idea; Castiel had never heard anything like it. There were challenges – no other US banking firm shared their late hours – but international markets and online venues did, facilitating their work. One of Castiel’s tasks was assembling a list of groups and contacts with whom they could work during the evenings. There was so much to do, and every task had so many steps, that Castiel despaired of ever finishing anything on his to-do list.

Every afternoon, Castiel wondered how long a lunch break he could possibly justify. The days were interminable. Only Dean’s imminent arrival dragged him back to his desk. Dean’s fresh scent and enthusiasm were essential in carrying Castiel through the later part of each day, but sometimes, even that wasn’t enough. Castiel didn’t let himself think about what that implied.

Every evening, Castiel prayed they’d have an influx of customers. Aside from collaborating with Dean, interacting with potential clients was the highlight of his day. Considering how uncomfortable Castiel generally was with new people, that alone was telling, but he didn’t let himself think about the ramifications of his unexpected gregariousness.

There were a lot of things Castiel didn’t let himself think about.

Why am I doing this?

Don’t think about it.

Why did I leave IADB, if only to go someplace else and do all the same tasks I hated doing there?

Don’t think about it.

I loathed working for Naomi, loathed her business ethos, loathed being her pawn, prodigy, protégé and surrogate. Working for Dean’s Night Bank is different. This is our money. Our clients good, hard working people who deserve access to the tricks of the trade that Gabriel and I know from our years as insiders.

Don’t think about it.

I should want to work here.

Don’t think about it.
Besides, I have no other marketable skills. Where else could I work?

Don’t think about it.

I do want to work here.

Yes. Think about that. This is good. This is positive. I’m helping build something new, something real. I should be…I am proud of the firm we’re creating.

The work we’re doing…the people we’re helping…the business we’re creating…we’re doing good, in an industry so often marred by elitism and condescension.

This is good.

Life is good.

They were looking for an employee qualified to work the Night Bank until midnight. Castiel had offered but stern looks from Gabriel and Dean had led him to drop the suggestion. Their business plan called for late hours Monday through Saturday, but until they were fully staffed they closed at 6 except for on Fridays and Saturdays, when Gabriel stayed late. Castiel felt guilty – felt like he wasn’t doing his part – but they had turned down his offer of working the late shift.

And he didn’t want to stay longer.

Would I do it for a job I liked more?

Don’t think about it.

…I like this job fine…we’re doing good work…it’s enough that I work sixty hours a week…

Every night, Castiel walked back to Dean and Sam’s apartment – our apartment! – and made an “old college try” at producing something edible for dinner, with mixed results. He helped Sam with his homework. He straightened up and cleaned. Before bed, he swallowed his hormone supplement and didn’t let himself stare in the mirror searching for changes, didn’t let himself reflect on his behavior of the day and consider whether he’d behaved ‘more like an omega.’ Omease was a hormone supplement and some minor changes were possible, but examining himself for curves or swollen breasts or a reduction in penis size or a shift towards more gentle mannerisms was absurd. On average, omegas were shorter, had broader hips and curvier torsos, were soft-spoken and dainty. Without scent cues there wasn’t a single distinguishing feature between alphas, betas, and omegas.

Don’t think about it…

…I can’t help but think about it...

Castiel did see changes in himself. Though I shouldn’t be looking for them! His cheekbones were more pronounced. His hips were more chiseled. The pudge at his waist was gone, his belly concave when he flexed. His breasts were more firmly curved, more prominent above his ill-defined abdominal muscles. His knot seemed smaller and didn’t swell as much when he and Dean had sex.

Wishful thinking…don’t think about it.

He jogged three miles every morning, walked everywhere, and, since he no longer worked in an office where lunch was delivered to him, accidentally skipped meals as often as not. There was no reason to credit the changes in his appearance to omease. He’d been out of shape, and now he was in shape. With an increase in fitness came an improvement in his physique. End of story.
Except that he couldn’t stop wondering if the omease played a part, couldn’t stop staring at his reflection hopefully.

Emotional changes were even more difficult to gauge.

*Good. I shouldn’t be trying to gauge changes. I should be focused on the multitude of critical tasks on hand.*

*Don’t think about anything but the job.*

Some days he felt volatile, off kilter. He experienced a wider array of emotions than he recalled feeling previously; and more powerfully; he ran the gambit from furious to satisfied to elated, sometimes in the space of a few hours. His reactions were more visceral, more real. *At least they are when I let myself experience them…don’t think about.* Supposedly, omegas were erratic, subject to mood swings that alphas didn’t experience; extreme alphas even claimed omegas were prone to hysterics. Every stereotype applied to Victorian women, regardless of their presentation type, were attributed to omegas. Castiel had seen little evidence of systemic differences, and studies backed him up. Everyone was different, and any perception otherwise spoke more to the confirmation biases of the observer than to any actual behavioral trends among presentation types.

But Castiel *might* be acting more like an omega…

*Don’t think about it.*

*No! I’m allowed to think about myself, allowed to assess how I’m feeling! I didn’t leave everything behind and change myself only to resume the same self-repression in a new environment!*

Castiel was different.

He laughed. He cried. He raged. He reveled.

If Naomi could see him now she’d lock him in his room for a month.

*Did I really not feel those things before, or did I suppress them?*

Dating the change in his emotional state to when he began taking omease was bullshit. Castiel hadn’t changed when he started taking medication. He’d changed when he met Dean, when he allowed himself the indulgence of bottoming, when he defied his mother to take something he wanted for himself.

*If I appear changed, it’s because this is who I would have been if she hadn’t been so determined to turn me into her ideal banking soldier.*

*Maybe the hormones aren’t doing anything…maybe this is a waste of time…maybe I’m an alpha.*

No. They definitely worked. Castiel hadn’t had another rut. Castiel never felt the urge to crawl out of his skin. His knot remained flaccid unless Dean directly stimulated it - which Dean never did save by accident. That *wasn’t* Castiel’s imagination, and it was great. Dean could touch Castiel’s dick without causing Castiel to feel ill. Castiel could contemplate masturbating without worrying how he’d feel when he stroked himself. He no longer had multiple consecutive orgasms, either, and his sperm production was down. His ass had developed a fine curve, but he suspected that was more a credit to his jogging regimen. Bloodwork by Dr. Barnes at his last appointment indicated that his hormone levels were stabilizing at the correct level. In two weeks, he’d have gone through one full omease cycle. There was a chance he’d have a heat.
Castiel craved a heat.

*Don’t think about it.*

And recently, he’d noticed his scent had changed.

*Just my imagination. Don’t think about it.*

*If I’m changing my body, why can’t I change my career? Why should I do something I loathe?*

*Don’t be overdramatic. I don’t loathe banking. It’s not my preference, but I am exceptional at it, and I do enjoy the benefits I’m able to reap for our clients. When I was at IADB, it was different – there was no satisfaction in helping the rich grow more rich – but now? The Night Bank is different. Our business plan includes extension plans for charity outreach. Our clients are lower or middle class. We’ll ultimately be able to take contributions as little as $500. I like that we’ll be helping people. I like that we’ll be serving an underserved population. I like Gabriel and Dean and Meg. I like the prospective clients I’ve met.*

…*and yet I still don’t want to go into work…*

*Don’t think about it.*

Every night, he tore himself away from the mirror, repressed his speculations, and crawled into Dean’s empty bed.

Only on Monday’s did he have the entire night with Dean.

The rest of the time he was alone.

At least the room smelled like Dean.

At least when he woke up Dean would be at his side.

At least he had a few blissful hours to himself when he didn’t have to think about stock dividends or sales forecasts.

Life was good.

*If I tell myself that enough times, I have to come to believe it, right?*

Life was good.

_____________________________________________________

“Cas…”

“Yes, Dean?”

Dean stared at the printout he held, tapping the end of his pen against his cheek. They were reviewing the Market Analysis that Castiel had painstakingly assembled, pages of description on underserved fiscal markets and existing competition. Castiel had gone too in depth and lost sight of the forest for the scads of data point trees. Dean had already helped him pick out several paragraphs that could be cut, but it was still too long. Frowning, Dean caught the pen with his lips and sucked on the cap. Tension and temptation itched under Castiel’s skin.

*Not the time, not the place.*
But look at his lips!

“If you could do anything, and I mean anything, no restraints, no judgment, no fiscal limitations, sky’s the limit – what would you do?” asked Dean, glancing up coyly – coyly? No, that wasn’t coy, he’s eyes are just so gorgeous, long-lashed, green…

Focus!

Castiel blinked. “Huh?”

“Come on, you can tell me!” Dean coaxed. “After all the shit we’ve been through you gotta know I’m cool with you however you are and whatever you’re into.”

Castiel blinked again. “I’d…finish editing this Market Analysis and move on to editing the description of the services we’ll be offering? I keep feeling I’ve omitted something obvious. I’m hoping fresh eyes…” …he really does have lovely eyes… “I’m hoping you’ll see something I didn’t.”

“Cool your workaholic jets,” said Dean. The papers rustled as he set them down on Castiel’s desk. Rocking back in his chair, Dean slouched, crossed his long, lean legs, and tossed the pen down. “Forget about the Night Bank. Forget about IADB. Forget about investing and what you think Gabe and I and whoever expect from you. What do you want, Castiel?”

Don’t think about it.

“I want for you to not waste time, given you have a class in less than an hour,” Castiel replied flatly.

He…he called me Castiel. Has he ever called me Castiel before? Why here? Why now?

Scowling, Dean made a disgruntled noise. “Really? Shuttin’ me down? This isn’t going away.”

Don’t think about it.

“I’m not sure what you’re referring to as ‘this’ but I assure you, if we diligently focus on our primary organizational tasks, we will have the Night Bank operational shortly and this aggravating business plan will go away.”

Castiel’s hands shook. Castiel’s jaw ached with the urge to clench his teeth. Castiel’s chest constricted.

That’s not what Dean means.

Do. not. think. about. it.

What does Dean mean? Why won’t he let this go?

Maybe…crazy thought, I know…because he recognizes my current unhappiness and cares about me and wants me to think about alternatives?

He’s wrong.

There are no alternatives.

I’m not unhappy.

I have no choice but to be happy.
Don’t think about it.

“Cas…” Dean sighed.

“We’re so close to finishing, Dean.” Castiel couldn’t keep a plaintive, importuning note from his voice. “Please?”

“But we’re not,” Dean pointed out. “After we finish the draft business plan, we have to submit it to our investors, our Board of Directors, the Small Business Administration, Mr. Cain, on and on. They’ll submit revisions, objections, addenda…we’ll edit and refine it…and whenever we do finish, we still won’t be finished. We’ll have hardly begun! We’ll still have to actually run a banking and investing firm, turning the hypotheticals into reality. As I said – this?” Dean’s gesture took in Castiel’s computer and his desk, their offices, the Cajun Delights building, and the whole house of cards that Castiel had constructed and was desperately attempting to keep erect.

Don’t think about it!

“This isn’t going away,” Dean concluded.

“I know,” Castiel conceded. “But this is where I belong.”

“Why?”

“Where else would I belong?”

“Hell, I dunno…the Bahamas?”

“Dean—”

“What have I said all along?”

“That opening an investment firm is your dream?”

“What have I said to you about you all along?” Dean repeated, rolling his eyes. Castiel shook his head. Nothing sprang to mind. “If you’re miserable, what’s the fucking point of workin’ your tail off?”

Don’t think about it!

A sick twisting within him marked the exact moment that Castiel’s inner repression turned morphed into burning anger. “I’m doing this for you!” His stomach churned. He was being a jerk. He wasn’t actually angry at Dean, knew his answer was inappropriate, yet it burst from him anyway, a furious growl.

“Fuck that!” Dean surged forward, leaning against the desk, matching anger with anger. “Your martyr act is bullshit, Cas. I neither require nor desire your help if that’s your only reason for participating. You’re right – the Night Bank is my dream, and I won’t let anyone, least of all you, ruin it by your doom and gloom attitude. I work my ass off ’cause I fuckin’ love this industry and you can take your sense of obligation and unasked for noble sacrifice and shove it up your sexy ass. Unless – are you stickin’ ‘round ‘cause you think I can’t cut it without your help?”

Castiel’s anger evaporated as quickly as it had coalesced. “No,” he croaked. He slumped back, let his head fall back, and broke eye contact with Dean. Dean’s intense expression, his scrutiny, his justifiable effrontery, was more than Castiel could face. “Dean, you are one of the most brilliant, capable, hard-working, talented, knowledgeable people I’ve ever met. I truly believe you can do
anything you set your mind to.”

*You’re certainly more suited to this than I am.*

“So it’s yourself you don’t believe in,” said Dean. “I shoulda seen that comin’.”

“Banking is the only thing I know how to do,” Castiel replied sadly.

*Don’t think about it.*

“So, what – old dog, new tricks – at the ripe old age of 31 you’re sunk for options and bang out of alternatives? Not like anyone goes back to school as an adult, or changes careers, or pushes themselves out of their comfort zone, or takes a risk…”

“Dean…”

“No, no, you’re right, I’m just a dumb idealistic kid—”

“I never said anything like that!”

“—what do I know about you world-weary old soldiers? All those scars you’ve got from the Stock Exchange Wars of ninety-diggity-three…I can’t imagine.” Dean heaved a forlorn sigh. Castiel lifted his head and stared incredulity at him; a playful smile twitched the corners of Dean’s mouth, brought the word *coy* back to Castiel’s mind.

*Don’t think about it.*

*Don’t…*

*Why not?*

“I don’t know what else I’d do.” Castiel sighed. In a world of infinite possibilities, he was helpless to think of even one.

*How does Dean just...know...he wants to be a banker? How does Benny know he wants to be a chef? How does anyone figure out their vocation?*

“Cas…normally, we could chat about this, bat ideas ‘round, throw shit at the wall and see what sticks,” said Dean. “When Sam comes to me and whines that he doesn’t know what to do when he grows up, I consider his interests and I give him my opinion and we go back and forth ‘til he’s got a better idea what his options are. And based on what I know of you…I got some ideas of shit I think’d float your boat. Spoilers: banking *ain’t* on that list. But I’ll tell you straight – I’m afraid if I give you my opinion you’re gonna treat it as some kinda gospel guiding light, erect me as your new Naomi and do whatever I say. Neither of us wants that.”

*Would I really do that?*

“Absolutely not.” Castiel chanced a smile. “Nor do I want to attempt to float a boat in feces, whether they’ve been hurled at a wall or not.”

*Probably.*

*Didn’t I think he was my new north star?*

“Okay, spiffy, cool, we’re on the same page,” Dean said with an explosive exhale and a warm smile in return. “I want you to feel you can come to me with complicated shit – God, do *not* add that to
your boat whatever and I hope to never hear the word ‘feces’ outta your mouth again – anyway, I want you to be comfortable and trust that I’ll help talk you through stuff – like we did when you didn’t get sexuality and presentation, ya know? – but in this case…I think you gotta get there on your own. Come up with some ideas. If you want. It’s up to you. And if you come up with something that seems promising to you…then we can talk…okay?”

Don’t think about it.

Dean looked so hopeful, so beautiful and young and optimistic and open and trusting and trustworthy.

…maybe…

Easing his white-knuckled grip on the chair arm rests, Castiel let out a shaky breath and relaxed.

…maybe think about it…

…a little…

“You raise some good points,” said Castiel, desperate to put distance between himself and the difficult conversation and the myriad thoughts it stirred. They had so much work to do before the Night Bank could legally open for business. He couldn’t spare the energy to consider the ramifications of Dean’s words.

…not yet…

…maybe never…

…no. Soon. Because he’s right. I’m not happy and there’s no call for me to martyr myself for this bank. I’m allowed to make my own choices. I don’t have to choose misery. I’ve got the freedom to explore and take chances and pursue what appeals to me.

Which is absolutely terrifying.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t think about it yet.

“I think we’ve adequately abridged the data and explanation demonstrating that our target demographic is underserved,” Castiel said, his eagerness to move on rendering his voice emotionless. “However, the section about competing investment firms is over length. Based on your reading, what could be cut?”

Dean met his eyes and stared so long that Castiel’s skin tingled and a shiver trickled down his spine. There was something tempting, something possessive and controlling, about that gaze that Castiel liked.

Wait…I like being controlled?

God, I do. I really, really do. How Oedipal of me. How about I don’t think too hard about the ramifications of that?

I’ve got better things to think about.

“You’ve raised valid points,” Castiel added. Dean eased into a smile. “I’ve heard you. I’ve listened. I promise to consider your suggestions. But I can’t do more than that, not right now. Okay?”
“Yeah, Cas,” said Dean. “You do you. I’ll be here when you’re ready. For starters – I get that you’re intimately acquainted with IADB but you definitely got bogged down describing their business organization. Also…”

Castiel lost himself listening to Dean, nodding agreement as he made Dean’s suggested changes, focused on editing while he turned over what Dean had said in the back of his mind.

_one task at a time. If I leave the bank now it will damage our applications. I can at least see through the business plan and the formation process._

_But after that…maybe after that…_

…I could do something else…

A nebulous image coalesced. Sunlight glimmered off glass. The air was suffused with the delightful aroma of fresh-tilled soil and blooming flowers. A soft buzzing was audible over the susurrations of fans and the burble of flowing water, constant movement at the edges of his vision comfortable and familiar. Viridian surrounded Castiel, more shades of green than he’d ever dreamed of, more shades of green than even Dean’s gorgeous eyes contained.

Glancing between Dean’s avid expression and his computer screen, Castiel smiled.

Since he’d met Dean, Castiel had learned many new emotions, happiness and loneliness and anger and love, but the unfamiliar sensation burgeoning in his chest was something else again.

_Hope._

_The future looks brighter, and not only because I see Dean every day. He’s an inextricable part of my joy, but he’s not the sole object spurring me toward the distant horizon of tomorrow, next week, next year._

_I could envelope my existence in green._

_And I would never have considered doing so if not for Dean._

_How did I live before I met him? How did I live without him?_

_Badly – very, very badly._

_But as long as I keep growing and learning and listening, as long as we keep chasing that horizon together, I may never have to live without him again._

“I had no idea you found discussing stock futures sexy.”

Day by day, with a lot of help from my new family, I grow into being a person, discover an existence outside of performing the part of Naomi’s perfectly molded soldier.”
God, this is scary…

“I find everything about you sexy, Dean.”

…but so rewarding…

“So, uh…you had an idea? About what we were discussing?” Dean ventured.

“Why would you think that?” asked Castiel.

“Uh…cause you look adorable with that dopey, distracted smile on your face? ‘Cause you smell like joy and I wanna jump your bones, bend you over this desk and have my way with you? ‘Cause you went all vague and then interrupted a discussion of Roman Enterprises to declare, ya know, that you’re into me? Wait, I got it! Dick Roman is one sexy mother-fucker, with that slick alpha hair…and that name? Like dude what kinda guys chooses Dick as a nickname for Richard out of all the possible alternatives? A dude with balls of steel, that’s who. Ya know, there was a rumor going ‘round a couple years ago ‘bout him and your mother having, um, a history of…ya know…hardcore fucking? And Roman has been awfully friendly, offering to back us, suggesting we work under his auspices…whaddaya wanna bet he’s keeping your mom at bay? What if there are videos?”

“That’s horrifying,” Castiel deadpanned. “It’s bad enough imagining my mother having sex with my father, much less with Dick Roman.”

“But you are imagining it…”

“I’m imagining me, having sex with you,” corrected Castiel. “Lots and lots of sex with you. The sooner the better. I promise Mr. Roman has never crossed my mind in such a context.”

“Well, as you said, we’ve gotta finish this business plan…but you know I’m game later…you smell awesome, Cas. Have since you started the omease. I mean…you smelled awesome before, don’t get me wrong, but now…you still smell like money, but it’s…it’s greener.” Dean shook his head. “I don’t know how to describe it, but I dig it. A lot.”

Arousal itched under Castiel’s skin, but he repressed it. As Dean said, despite his flirting, at the office was neither the time nor the place, even if they did have the premises to themselves for the next few hours.

But we could…

“What do you want, Cas?”

I want for you to bend me over this desk and fuck my brains out and knot me.

I want to be surrounded by earth and plants and flowing water and sunlight and bees.

I want an opportunity to tell my mother exactly what I think of her without her interrupting or belittling me.

I want to have you etched into my skin, graven into my flesh, for all to see…

Castiel swallowed and looked up. Dean’s expression was open yet inscrutable.

That last, at least, could be accomplished…if Dean was amenable…

“Dean…” He swallowed again.
“S’ok Cas. You can ask me anything. I’ll say ‘no’ if you ask something I don’t wanna give.”

“Yes – I know that – I…” Castiel took a deep breath and released it slowly. “I understand and appreciate that you cannot offer me ‘forever.’ It shows wisdom beyond your years – is a commendable sentiment, one that prompted me to rethink my attitudes toward affection and commitment and this silly idea that we can forecast the rest of our lives as if the events to come were a book that we could skip to the last page of. I don’t mean to push you or force your hand. I—”

“Cas!” Dean barked an interruption, laughing. Castiel snapped his mouth shut, cheeks heating, and bit his lip to keep from pressing on. “Quit apologizing and ask your question!”

Just. Ask.

“When I go into heat, would you give me a mating bite?” Castiel blurted.

Dean blinked. “I don’t…” he answered slowly. “I’m not…” Dean shook his head. “Maybe? I gotta think about that.”

“That’s fine,” said Castiel. “And to clarify, I neither need you to nor expect you to reciprocate. I would like to offer you forever, but don’t expect you to offer me forever in exchange. Giving myself to you is my choice. You’re my choice. Regardless of what you decide, I’ll respect it, and I’ll still be here for as long as we are happy together. And if you do mate me, and we ultimately grow unhappy with each other, I am prepared to accept the consequences of the breaking of a one-sided mating bond.”

“Wow,” Dean breathed. “Cas, that’s…that’s big. I, um…lemme think about it?”

“Absolutely, Dean. Take as long as you need.”

“Right! Now, back to what really matters! Roman Enterprises!”

Happiness and contentment and hope glowed hot in Castiel’s chest as they returned to work.

Little by little, day by day, life gets better in innumerable ways…

…even if we break up, no force on earth can take away the affection and strength and freedom and optimism that Dean has awoken in me.

For that alone, if for nothing else, I’m his.

Little by little, day by day, when I think I can’t possibly love him more, I do.

If he says no, I could get a tattoo…

“Dean forever” etched in a Cupid’s arrow-pierced heart? “Dean Winchester, Alpha to my Omega” done up in pseudo-Greek? What’s the worst stereotype I can think of?

No. I’ve got it. Dean’s penis rendered like a sports trophy, knot inflated, drops of come spurting, and a plaque that reads, “World’s #1 Knot: Dean Winchester.”

Castiel burst out laughing. Dean stopped mid-sentence and stared at him agape before joining in helplessly.

“Man, I gotta have serious conversations with you at work more often. You’re fricken euphoric, it’s hilarious! You’re awesome like this!”
“Thank you, Dean,” Castiel managed. “I think so too.”

*Dean thinks I’m awesome.*

I *think I’m awesome!* I *really do!*

*Definitely getting that tattoo. Even if he mates me.*

Especially *if he mates me.*

*Maybe after my first heat…whenever that finally happens…*

*I hope the omease is working…*
The apartment was spotless.

Sam was at work at the grocery store.

Dean was at work at the strip club.

The nascent Night Bank was closed on Sundays.

There was nothing to do.

Nothing.

Castiel wanted to claw free of his skin.

I haven’t cleaned the windows yet.

It took ten minutes for him to figure out how to adjust the windows so they’d open into the house, enabling him to scrub years of accumulated grime from the outside, but once he knew the trick, copious amounts of Windex did the trick.

Rendering the windows spotless took less than forty-five minutes.

Sam was still at work.

Dean was still at work.

The apartment was even more spotless.

Frustrated, Castiel hurled himself onto the couch, picked up the flower guide he’d been reading, and failed to make sense of a single sentence. The letters were too angular. The individual words and their disparate definitions refused to convey conceptual meaning.

Castiel threw the book across the room. It thunked off the wall and whumped dull on the floor, pages flapping.

This could be pre-heat syndrome…

Wishful thinking, Castiel. I’d have to be an omega to have heats, and I’d have to heats to have PHS.

I wish Dean was here.

Anger morphed to arousal.

Really? Wishful thinking? When I’m erratic and moody and horny?

Stereotypes, Castiel. Omegas have cramps. Omegas have fatigue. Omegas have depression. There are lots of PHS symptoms; only asshole alphas think that moodiness and unaccountable anger are the main ones.

My current symptoms resemble pre-rut more than pre-heat.

If I have to go through one more fucking rut…
With a snarl, Castiel jumped to his feet and paced the living room. There must be something to do. The laundry was washed, folded, and put away. The kitchen was immaculate, even the tomato sauce splatters on the oven backsplash scrubbed away. The DVDs and Blu-rays were alphabetized. The books were sorted by genre, by author, and by series. He’d cleaned the dead bugs out of the light fixtures and attacked the bathroom grout with a toothbrush.

There truly wasn’t a damn thing left to do.

I have to get out of the house.

I could…go to the office.

And do what? I couldn’t read about sepals. How the heck am I supposed to accomplish a single damn productive thing at work?

I could go…anywhere else…

Yeah? Like where?

It aggravated Castiel that he couldn’t think of a good answer to the simple question. There was a huge world out there filled with places to go and things to see and experiences to be had and Castiel drew a resounding blank trying to think of any activity to tempt him out of doors. The weather was fair. Palmeton was no cultural mecca but it had a few museums and historical homes and some nice parks. Even on Sunday the majority of shops and business were open.

What’s the point? As uselessly irate as I am, I’ll just end up shouting at some innocent service employee. And I probably reek of rut.

Maybe Dean can tell me what to do.

Castiel grabbed his phone.

Castiel (3:41 PM): I’m bored.

An endless thirty or forty seconds passed with no reply.

Of course not. He’s not going to answer. He’s at work. Dancing. Changing costumes. Getting his g-string stuffed with cash.

He never dances for me. He never wears costumes for me. He never wears a g-string for me.

Do men even wear g-strings?

I’ve never asked him to.

What even is a g-string?

He’d look so sexy dancing…

Alluring images of Dean’s features picked out in dim light as he twirled around a pole distracted Castiel, had Castiel’s cock thickening. Dean’s legs were spread wide, his lithe body twisting and contorting, his huge dick scarce obscured by the front panel of his panties. An itchy, insatiable feeling ghosted through Castiel’s ass, the urge to be stretched, the desire to be wet and ready for his alpha.

I do not want a rut. I do not want an erection. I do not want to pop my knot. It hasn’t swollen in a
month and if it never does again it’ll be too soon.

I do not want to be an alpha.

If only this was a heat.

If only I could make slick.

Omease was supposed to fix me, and instead…

Gritting his teeth, Castiel snatched the phone up again and opened his brother’s contact information.

Castiel (3:45 PM): Gabriel I’m bored

Castiel (3:45 PM): Fix it

Castiel (3:45 PM): Please

Gabriel (3:46 PM): Geeze impatient much?

Castiel (3:46 PM): Don’t screw with me tell me what to do.

Gabriel (3:47 PM): Nope no can do never will but I do have something I was gonna send your way that’ll titillate.

Castiel (3:47 PM): Anything


Eying the link suspiciously, Castiel clicked it. A website popped up, images and text loading quickly, the headline writ so large that, even as wound up as he was, Castiel couldn’t help but read it.

*@

Novak-Shurley Clan Shocker!

April Kelly, of the Chicago Kellys, late fiancée of the disowned and disgraced Castiel Novak-Shurley, is engaged to the second-eldest Novak-Shurley son, alpha Luke Novak-Shurley. Naomi Novak, matron alpha of her family, held a press conference at the headquarters of her dynamo investing firm the International Angel Deposit Bank to announce the betrothal and share details of their wedding plans.

The Happy Couple: Luke Novak-Shurley and April Kelly

Wedding Date: September 23rd

Wedding Venue: Undisclosed Private Caribbean Island

Ms. Kelly promises a couture wedding dress created by Vivienne Westwood - but no teasers, we can’t spoil the surprise for the groom! Rumors suggest that the Novak-Shurelys have contracted David Chang to provide an exclusive delectable catered menu. Sure to be the wedding of the decade – follow the National Enquirer for details as they come to light!

*
The article was interspersed with images from the Novak press conference: Naomi, armored in a business suit, not a strand of hair out of place, might have been presenting a stock report to the Board of Directors; Michael flanked Naomi, expressionless, hands behind his back, as rigid and emotionless as a bodyguard; April and Luke stood arm in arm, April beaming, doe-eyed, at her fiancé, Luke sneering toward the camera. Charles Shurley was inconspicuously absent, a non-entity as always. Conflicting emotions roiled Castiel, sadness and anger, relief and bitterness, satisfaction and longing. Doubt had no place in the cocktail of emotions, nor did grief. Though looking at his family triggered a yearning for a different childhood, a happier childhood with a family that cared for him, he didn’t miss the reality of his elder brothers or his mother. Searching himself, he found no remorse. He didn’t want to see them again.

And April…her simpering expression was so part-and-parcel of her behavior since Castiel had met her that looking at her was the perfect ameliorant to wistfulness. If Castiel had stayed, that would have been him standing in Luke’s place – and, given Gabriel’s belief that April and Luke were having relations before Castiel left, would Luke have worn the same smug expression had Castiel and April’s engagement been announced?

*How might I have looked in such a picture?*

*Probably the same as I looked in every selfie April tugged me into: disengaged and hopeless.*

*How do I look in pictures with Dean?*

They hadn’t taken a single photograph together.

The only pictures Castiel had taken with his new phone were of natural scenes that had caught his eye on the way to and from work or during his jogs: a vibrant sunrise, sky streaked pink and blue and green; an unusual flower he’d yet to identify that had found a roothold between slabs of sidewalk concrete; a cherry tree blooming in pink profusion on the roof of a tenement; a glimpse through a window to a room featuring a fountain flowing indoors, water sparkling in the sunlight. He’d been raised to look down on the meager lives of those who lived in the city, but day by day he learned better. Rich or poor, the people of Palmeton found beauty where they could, and if they found no beauty, they created it. Castiel envied them; he’d found little beauty in life and had created none, despite having ample means and opportunity. Since his talk with Dean two days ago, he’d looked on the scenes with new eyes. He *could* find beauty – the photographs proved that. And he *could* create beauty. The only person stopping him was himself…

*…and the shadow of Naomi who lives in my head and tells me I have no choices and no potential outside of the fiscal world.*

Disgruntled, Castiel slammed the back button and closed the article. His conversation with Gabriel popped back up as a new text arrived.

*Gabriel (3:55 PM): Judging by the silence you’re not bored anymore!*

*Castiel (3:56 PM): No now I’m bored and angry.  

*Gabriel (3:57 PM): Aw poor Cassie wassie jealous?*

Castiel stared at his phone incredulously.

*Castiel (3:59 PM): More like I’m baffled, as I’ve always been baffled that our mother chose April as an acceptable mate for any of us.

*Gabriel (4:00 PM); Still not good enough for Golden Boy Mikey though*
Castiel (4:02 PM): Nothing is good enough for Michael, which creates the odd contradiction that, since nothing is adequate, he can have nothing, and has come to a point where anything will satisfy him.

Gabriel (4:03 PM): Look at you getting all wise and philosophical in your old age. Do me next do me next

Castiel (4:03 PM): No force on earth will compel me to ‘do you.’

Gabriel (4:04 PM): Air quotes Cassie really over the damn phone?

Castiel (4:05 PM): Quotation marks in a text are completely appropriate, a critical grammatical component which ensures my meaning is clear.

Gabriel (4:05 PM): Says you

Castiel (4:06 PM): The Chicago Manual of Style agrees.

Gabriel (4:08 PM): Oh God please tell me you’re being pedantic and you didn’t actually look up correct text messaging formatting styles please please please please please

Castiel (4:09 PM): I am being pedantic. Even I have better things to do than read grammar guides.

Gabriel (4:10 PM): I bet you do.

Castiel (4:11 PM): I have no idea what you’re alluding to.

Gabriel (4:11 PM): Brown chicken brown cow

Castiel (4:12 PM): I have even less idea what you’re alluding to than before.

Castiel (4:13 PM): Though that reminds me I want to check city statutes regarding keeping chickens on private property.

Gabriel (4:14 PM): omg how r u my bro?

Gabriel (4:15 PM): That’s me using proper text grammar btw

Gabriel (4:15 PM): and wtf do chickens have to do with anything?

Castiel (4:16 PM): Why are you asking me? You’re the one who brought chickens into the conversation.

Castiel switched to an internet browser and managed to do a Google search for “chickens legal in Palmeton city limits” before Gabriel’s next text came through.


Castiel (4:18 PM): I do. I also want bees.

“With a proper permit, chickens and select livestock are permitted within Palmeton.” The first result explained, delineating the permitting procedure and qualification requirements. They were rigorous but not unachievable.

If I got chickens, and bees, where would I put them? I could open a florist, or a greenhouse – a nursery catering to Palmeton’s wealthy. Wouldn’t that make Naomi proud? “Yes, see that Japanese
Maple over there? The newly planted one? My son grew that from a seedling!” God, she’d have a conniption. It’d be marvelous.

I want…

I want that.

I truly want that.

Not the Naomi part. Her having a conniption would be an amusing ancillary consequence but is not my primary object or desire.

I want to grow a tree from a sapling.

I want to be surrounded by plants.

I want to help people add beauty and life to the dead spaces they inhabit.

And…and I could do that.

And keep bees. And chickens. And maybe a goat. That’s allowed under the statute too…

Gabriel (4:20 PM): Bees sting.

Castiel (4:21 PM): If you’re not careful, or if you antagonize them, yes they do.

Gabriel (4:22 PM): Why do you want bees?

Castiel (4:23 PM): Why don’t you want bees?

...I know someone who has a large plot of land in the city and a property he doesn’t want...all he lacks is the money to redevelop it...

Anticipation surged through Castiel so powerfully that he leapt to his feet. Benny’s dream was to plow Cajun Delights into the ground and build a café. Dean’s dream was to build a bank and investment firm in the red light district. And Castiel’s dream…

...do I have a dream?

I did, once. I’ve always wanted a greenhouse...I simply haven’t been brave enough to strive for it since Naomi quashed my interest in science.

Now I could make that dream a reality. I have the time, the ability, and the resources. All I lack is the knowledge. I’m smart and determined. If I put my mind to it?

I could build anything I set myself to.

Castiel’s cell phone pinged with a new text message, and another, but he couldn’t be bothered to check, too absorbed by his racing thoughts. He shoved the phone in his pocket, let it vibrate against his leg, and paced the length of the room, vision blurred to abstraction.

I learned about corporate mergers and stocks and federal regulations. I learned everything I needed to know to invest effectively, even when I was miserable, even when I hated the work. And when it’s something I want to learn, something I want to study?

How much have I absorbed, merely playing dilettante with Sam’s books?
A few tomes on flora appropriate to our climate zone, a few studies on grounds-keeping and landscape design and common plant issues and ailments? I’ll have a steep learning curve but I could do it. Management books and discussions with Benny, plus everything I’ve learned launching the Night Bank, will cover the challenges of ownership. And if a customer has a question related to plants that I haven’t memorized the answer to, I can always use reference materials or Google it.

I really, truly could make this dream a reality.

Panting with nerves, Castiel raked a hand through his hair. He hadn’t let himself think about keeping a garden in over a decade. A lifetime of thoughts and dreams, questions and preferences and curiosities, flooded him simultaneously.

Okay, okay, if I’m going to do this – what’s the first step, the very first step? I’ve already been learning about plants and operating a business. I’ve got that part covered. I’d need a location.

I have to talk to Benny.

Castiel was at the door, hand on the knob, before he arrested himself.

Don’t be insane. This is dangerously impulsive. I haven’t spoken to Gabriel or Dean. I haven’t left the Night Bank. I haven’t planned anything. I have no idea what I’m actually talking about, how much it would cost, how long it would take – I have zero grasp of the logistics. And what if I talk to Benny and he thinks it’s a terrible idea? What if Gabriel and Dean think I’m being silly? I’ve heard people discuss ‘rebound relationships,’ where after getting out of a bad relationship with a significant other they immediately pursue a new relationship fueled by lust and the euphoria of freedom without taking time to heal. Is that what I’m doing, except with employment instead of friend or lover? If I were serious, wouldn’t I slow down and plan and talk to my family and loved ones first?

No, I’m not simply behaving off-the-cuff. I’ve been interested in botany and horticulture since I was a child. And I do have a concept. Whether that concept interests Benny or not will make a huge difference in feasibility and what my options are. And Benny is my friend and is business savvy. His opinion is as relevant as Gabriel’s or Dean’s would be. If he thinks I’ve the kernel of a good idea, I can trust him, and if he thinks I should go back to the drawing board…hundreds of thousands of dollars are at stake. He won’t humor me.

Good. Because this is probably a terrible idea, and Benny telling me so will be a healthy dose of reality.

But what if…

Leaning against the door, forcing himself to breath and trying to calm his racing heart, Castiel retrieved his phone.

Gabriel (4:24 PM): Because I’m a sane normal human being?

Gabriel (4:27 PM): Fuck Cas I didn’t mean you aren’t sane and normal

Gabriel (4:30 PM): If you really want bees of course I’ll support you. This is the greenhouse thing, isn’t it?

Gabriel (4:33 PM): Please tell me you’re not having a panic attack right now.

Am I having a panic attack?
More like an exhilaration attack…

Castiel (4:34 PM): I don’t think I’m having a panic attack. I’m not sure what you mean by ‘the greenhouse thing’ but yes I am thinking about bees as they relate to my past interests in horticulture.

Castiel’s hands shook as he typed another text, deleted it, typed another, deleted it. Gabriel, unusually, didn’t answer his first text. Perhaps he’d wandered off when Castiel didn’t reply promptly.

Whooshing out a slow breath, Castiel tried to type a clearer explanation.

Castiel (4:37 PM): Dean has pointed out that I am unhappy working at the bank. He suggested I consider what else I might like to do. I’ve been reticent to consider alternatives. I am trained as a banker and it is a lucrative profession. I’ve long thought I wasn’t suited to anything else. But I would like bees and chickens and I have recently renewed my interests in naturalism, in part because Sam is an enthusiast.

Castiel (4:38 PM): If I were to leave banking, I think I’d like to open a nursery – greenhouses, plants, landscaping…

When no reply came, he scrolled through his phone to Benny’s number and opened a dialog box to text him.

Castiel (4:39 PM): I have the kernel of a business proposition and was wondering if you might be available this afternoon to discuss it. It’s extremely sketchy but I’d rather establish your interest early because if you are not interested there is no point in considering it further.

The screen flashed, the speaker chimed, and Gabriel’s response popped up.

Gabriel (4:40 PM): AND BEES????????!!!!!

An image loaded of Oprah Winfrey waving her arms surrounded by black dots, with the word “BEES” in bold yellow text beneath her.

Castiel (4:41 PM): I don’t understand the context of this reference but yes. I would like to also keep bees and sell honey.

…and I could grow produce and sell eggs, and if he wanted, Benny could use fresh local farm-to-table ingredients at his restaurant, and…

Gabriel (4:41 PM): BEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSS

The phone switched back to Benny’s text window.

Benny (4:42 PM): Color me curious. Come on over you know where to find me.

Smiling, exuberant, his earlier disquiet a fading memory, Castiel grabbed his keys, wallet and jacket.

Benny’s curious…

…what if he says ‘yes, I want to do that…?’

Then everything I’ve fantasized about…what, in the last day?...no, since I was a teenager and imagined rehabilitating our greenhouse!...then it all becomes very real.

And that’d be okay…
...that’d be fantastic…

Castiel texted Benny, I’ll see you soon, and his brother, Yes, bees. Somethings come up. I’ll talk to you later.

Gabriel (4:43 PM): Everything okay?

Castiel (4:44 PM): Everything is awesome. I feel awesome. You’re awesome. Dean is really awesome. Benny’s pretty awesome too.

Castiel headed out the door, walked down the hallway, and took the stairs down, texting as he went.

Gabriel (4:44 PM): Well allllllrighty then.

Gabriel (4:45 PM): At least you’re not bored anymore. My work here is done.

Gabriel (4:45 PM): LUKE. AND APRIL. HAHAAAAAAA.

Castiel (4:46 PM): We should send them a wedding gift and wish them joy.

Gabriel (4:47 PM): I can’t tell if you’re serious or not.

Gabriel (4:47 PM): Not that it matters it’s hilarious either way and we absolutely should.

Gabriel (4:48 PM): Anyway you do your thing I’ll ttyl.

Castiel (4:48 PM): Thank you, Gabriel. Have a good evening.

Castiel (4:49 PM): I promise I’ll explain everything.

Castiel pocketed his phone as he pushed open the front door and headed to the street.

Launching into this unprepared is crazy…

…and I’m going to do it anyway.

Welcome to the new Castiel – the real Castiel. There’s nothing wrong with being impulsive. It’s… electrifying…galvanizing…

…it’s awesome…

Benny, Palmeton, Naomi, world, here I come…

“Wait, what?” asked Benny, jaw dropping.

“I will invest in your restaurant,” Castiel repeated, smiling. “Right now. Immediately. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Do ya…do ya wanna see my business plan? Read the sample menu? Try the food?” stammered Benny.

“That would be wise as part of making things official,” Castiel conceded. “But non-essential. I’ve spent enough time at Cajun Delights and observed enough of your management capabilities to recognize and appreciate your acumen. You’re not foolish; you wouldn’t propose opening a café if you couldn’t produce delicious food, and the success of the motel is testament to your abilities as an owner and your commitment to hard work. Do I need to know more before I sign a check? Yes. Do
I need to know more to suggest the proposition? Absolutely not.”

“Uh. Okay. I guess…I gotta think about that a bit? Do ya even want to know the price tag?” Benny asked.

“Do you have the numbers already?” asked Castiel, surprised.

If he’s already got a budget written up, he’s vindicating my esteem of his abilities.

“Halfway there – I’ve got the information on buildin’ from the ground up, but I don’t got a quote on either clearin’ the land or selling this plot and buying another,” Benny said. “Alternatively, if I rented and renovated an existin’ place ‘stead of buildin’ new, the numbers would change. Takin’ all that in account – we’re lookin’ at four hundred thousand, give or take fifty-k.”

Castiel had no idea if that was a reasonable sum for opening a restaurant. He’d have to research. Given what he knew of local new home construction costs, though, it sounded plausible.

What do I know about construction costs? I know how much Naomi’s neighbors spent to have mansions custom-built. Not exactly universalizable information.

Still…it’s a starting point.

“How many acres is this plot?” asked Castiel.

“Six and change,” Benny explained, “but the easement’s a bitch ‘cause there’s a railroad out back. Why?”

“So…” Am I going for this? Castiel took a deep breath. Hell yes, I’m going for this. “I had an idea. For using your entire plot. 6 acres is more than you need for a restaurant, right?”

“Hell, yeah,” Benny agreed. “This wouldn’t be a bad location for digs but I’d need an acre tops; could do it on a half-acre in a pinch since folks could park on the street. You thinkin’ we subdivide and sell the rest of the plot? Revenue’d offset the expense of bulldozing the motel.”

“When the motel is gone, the bank will no longer have office space,” Castiel said.

“True – so another half-acre to acre for them…and another pile of cash to build somethin’ new…it’d be cheaper for y’all to rent offices,” said Benny.

“Cheaper in the short term, but not in the long term – and the Night Bank will be here long term. Dean will see to that.”

“No worries, then, I can sell Dean some of the land cheap and pawn off the rest…”

“I want to buy the rest,” said Castiel in a rush. Benny blinked. “It’s about 4 acres, right?” Benny nodded. “I, um, I don’t want to be a banker. I was kinda thinking…of maybe…opening a nursery.”

There was a long awkward pause and Castiel’s stomach sank.

Benny thinks I’m making a bad choice. Look at his face, he’s baffled! As I feared he would be. Of course he is, because I’m a banker. I will always be a banker. I will never be anything other than a banker. I—

“Not to be a spoil-sport or nothin’ but…you don’t strike me as havin’ a way with kids…”

“Oh!” Castiel’s tension snapped and the excited butterflies returned to buoy him. “God – no, not
children – not that there’s anything wrong with children! – I meant plants. Like a greenhouse, with shrubs and seedlings, that kind of thing.”

“Phew,” Benny laughed. “Didn’t think I was tellin’ ya anything ya didn’t know about little ones but…yeah, I had no idea what you were on about…plants, though, that’s a little less outta left field. A little. Didn’t ya mention liking bees, too?”

“Exactly – I’d also keep an apiary,” said Castiel. “And I could provide your restaurant with fresh produce year ‘round, and maybe other local businesses as well.”

“What, that and beekeeping and sellin’ plants to the public? Kinda all over the place, Cas…”

“It’s only an idea right now,” Castiel said, fighting down a wave of defensiveness. “I will need to hammer out the details. And it’s not ‘out of left field,’ I’ve been interested in horticulture for a long time but my mother frowned on such pursuits as frivolous and wasteful. It’s…it’s hard for me to overcome the stigma she placed on it, but I’m trying.”

Benny nodded slowly, lips pursed and brow furrowed with consideration. Castiel, jittery, resisted the urge to pace the room, to tap his foot, to look around for a distraction; he occupied himself by toying with a loose string in the pocket of his slacks, switched to straightening his vest, re-tucked in his tie, realized what he was doing, smoothed down the front of his pants and tried once more to force himself to stillness.

“This ain’t somethin’ to undertake lightly,” Benny said at last. “Does Dean even know you want to leave the Bank?”

“He suspects,” said Castiel. “I think he’ll support me.”

I hope…I mean, he’s always says he’ll support me but…no. Don’t listen to my doubts. Think of everything Dean has said. Of course he’ll support me.

“Alright.” Benny slapped his hands to his thighs, stood up, and grabbed a paper and a pen. “I think there’s potential in your idea, but there’s a lotta work that’ll have to happen to get from drawing board to reality. For starters, even if you’re plannin’ to fund all this yourself, you’re gonna need a business plan for your nursery.” As Benny spoke, he scrawled down notes. “You write something up and if it looks good, I’ll lease you the land cheap. Meantime, I’ll call ‘round for demo costs on the motel and get an updated quote on buildin’ my place. You gotta talk to Dean ‘bout leaving the bank. The Board’ll need to be informed, the management plan revised, and the projected budget’s all different if they gotta fund offices. It’ll be a shit-ton of work but there’s no reason we can’t get started. You wanna call Dean or should I?”

“Dean’s at work,” Castiel objected, quirking his head in puzzlement. But I could see him soon, that’d be awesome…I want to call him, want to talk to him, about the nursery, about this idea, about anything… Desire and longing itched beneath his skin, his fingers idly toying with the folds around the crotch of his pants.

If Naomi could see how much trouble I’m having standing still she’d ground me for a week…doesn’t look professional to fiddle and shift, gotta stand strong and confident, and I never had trouble doing so until now…

Benny’s pen came away from the paper with a flourish and he stared up at Castiel in inexplicable astonishment.

“What?”
“You…you don’t know?” Benny guffawed. “You don’t know!”

“What don’t I know?”

“Shoulda realized,” continued Benny sagely. “It bein’ your first time ‘n all.”

“Benny…”

“You reek of heat, Cas.”

Castiel’s jaw dropped.

_Impossible!_

...why is it impossible? It’s been six weeks since I started taking omease. Earlier, I was semi-convinced I was going into rut! That’s impossible, omease is a rut inhibitor. It’s not inconceivable I’m getting my first heat – far from it.

“Maybe…” Castiel swallowed against dryness in his throat. His insides were itchy. The arousal that had simmered through him sporadically became more prominent now that he recognized the cause.

No slick, though…I’d feel it, right? That’s disappointing…not unexpected, but disappointing…

“Maybe I should go home…”

“You do that,” said Benny. “I’d offer to escort ya but I haven’t got anyone to watch the desk if I leave. I’ll get your alpha for ya, though.”

“It’s alright – I’m fine,” protested Castiel. “I don’t want to get Dean in trouble. He’ll be home in a few hours.”

“‘Trouble’,” Benny scoffed. “Ya won’t get him in trouble. Sex worker and stripper types both understand how heats and ruts go, his job’s safe. The joint can cope without him for one night. And even if they couldn’t – trust me, you’re exactly the kinda trouble Dean wants to ‘get in.’”

A shiver ran down Castiel’s spine, the itchy feeling he couldn’t quench settling in his ass.

_I want…_

Thoughts crowded his mind and Castiel flushed, eying Benny.

_I don’t have to wait…we could…_

_No. It has to be Dean._

_It has to be Dean._

“Go on home, Cas,” advised Benny. “You’re gonna be fine.”

_Obviously. As long as I’m with Dean, I’m always fine._
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The door burst open, a breeze carried Dean’s scent into the room a moment before he entered, and the off feeling that had defined Castiel’s day exploded through him so strongly that he gasped and tottered to his feet. Dean was flushed, panting as from hard exertion, hair wind-disheveled, clothes sweaty.

“Shit, why didn’t you…” Dean’s nostrils flared and his mouth fell open. In three long strides, he crossed the room and enveloped Castiel, crushing his nose against Castiel’s scent gland. “Oh, fuck. Ohhhh, fuck. I am damn glad I asked Benny if Sam could crash at the motel for a few days, and texted Sam to steer clear of the apartment. You smell divine. The things I’m going to do to you…”

Dizziness and euphoria swept over Castiel so powerfully he swooned; Dean caught him, held him up, inhaled vocally and worked a hand into the waistband of Castiel’s pants.

“How did I not smell this before I left this morning? You’ve seemed off the last few days but I figured…” Dean snuffled at him. Heat burgeoned in Castiel’s gut, the distracting itch beneath his skin coalescing into arousal. He pressed back against Dean’s hand as Dean worked his fingers down Castiel’s crack, tantalizingly close, tantalizingly far, from his pucker.

“Sorry, I…I didn’t know either, I—”

Dean froze.

“What?” Castiel croaked, hitching his hips in a vain effort to force Dean back into motion.

“You’re wet, Cas.”

“Huh?”

That’s impossible.

“You’re slick, Cas.”

I can’t be.

“I’m not, I’m an…I’m…”

What? I’m an alpha?

God, I don’t fucking care what I am as long as Dean bends me over and fucks my brains out. What is he waiting for?

“Tell me you got your test results back,” said Dean fervently. “‘Cause if I don’t get to eat your ass I might cry.”

“Not yet,” Castiel moaned. “The doctor said any day now. We can’t…” Dean let him go, moved away, and Castiel collapsed to his knees. “What are you doing?”

“Mail,” Dean muttered. “Mail…mail…mail…” Envelopes tumbled to the floor as Dean searched through the heap of mail accumulated next to the door.
“It’s Sunday!”

“Yesterday’s mail…”

“We didn’t get any yesterday.”

“…here!” With a triumphant cry, Dean pulled a batch of letters out, inexplicably at the bottom. “Sorry, there was a present for Sam in this one—” He threw the envelope in question aside. “—so I hid it all ‘til I’d have time to deal with it. Maybe…maybe…” He flipped through the letters and, with another crow of victory, held one out toward Castiel, return address Dr. Cara Roberts. Hands shaking, Castiel tore the flap open and scanned with letter within.

Mr. Castiel Novak-Shurley,

Results for your test…

HIV, negative.

Chlamydia, negative.

…negative…

Congratulations, Mr. Novak-Shurley, you do not test positive for any STD…

…enclosed certificate attesting your status…

“I’m clean.”

Snarling, Dean caught him up, hauled him to his feet, enveloped him, and deftly slipped – slipped! – a finger into Castiel’s hole. Castiel threw his head back and groaned.

“Good,” said Dean, guttural and gruff.

Dean pulled his finger out of Castiel’s body, removed his hand from Castiel’s pants.

Wait – what? Why? No, no, no, Dean, you have to come back, you have to come back, God, I’ve needed you since the day we met but this is something else again, so intense, so undeniable, so sudden…Dean, you’ve got to…got to…

…fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me…

Will it – will being in heat – be like this every time?

I cannot wait to find out.

Dean lifted his head and released Castiel. Boneless, Castiel tumbled back onto the sofa and stared agape at his alpha. Dean’s eyes were brilliant red, glow swallowing his usual green, Heat stained his cheeks crimson, his canines unusually prominent as he grinned predatorily down at Castiel. Movements languid, he lifted a hand and sucked the finger he’d had in Castiel, eyes slipping rapturously shut as he slurped.

“Dreamed ‘bout how you’d taste.” Dean grinned, eyelids aglow. “And fuck if it’s not better than I imagined.”

“Dean…please…”
Dean’s grin widened.

The moment stretched out endlessly.

Every nerve in Castiel’s body fired heat and impatience and need.

*This feeling didn’t come out of nowhere, it came from Dean – scenting him, smelling him, his mere presence – because he’s Dean, because I love him, because he’s my alpha, because he’s my true mate.*

*I hope he bites me. I hope he mates me.*

*But even if he doesn’t, I’m his.*

Castiel’s heartbeat loud.

*So why isn’t he touching me?*

The world overturned.

Dean was on him – Dean was over him – Dean was shoving him, positioning him, touching him – cold air struck Castiel’s exposed ass – the hard armrest of the couch dug into Castiel’s belly – Dean was atop him, weighing Castiel down, rutting at Castiel’s ass so hard that the teeth of the open zipper of Dean’s pants bit into Castiel’s flesh.

*Wait, what just happened?*

A finger slid into Castiel’s ass.

*Who.*

*Fucking.*

*Cares.*

“Don’t prep me,” Castiel growled. “Fuck me, you asshole.”

*He’s as desperate for me as I am for him. Need I know more?*

*Fuck no.*

Dean laughed and pressed against him, hard cock sliding down Castiel’s slickened crack, nudging at his hole but not penetrating him. The finger inside him wiggled and Castiel moaned. Sweat beaded on his forehead and down his spine only to flash freeze as Dean came off him, slid out of him, made the couch bounce with his shifting weight.

*Hyperbole much, Castiel? It’s not that cold—*

*But he has to come back, he has to, he has to fuck me, he has to—*

Dean’s presence returned, smothering Castiel in the best possible way. Dean’s cock slid over Castiel’s crack again, slick with lubricant or with Castiel or both, caught on his rim again, but this time Castiel stretched, open and welcoming and *wet* and so, so ready. Dean’s length slid into Castiel in a single smooth thrust and they groaned simultaneously.

“Shit,” Dean breathed reverently, kissing the side of Castiel’s neck, squeezing an arm between the
chair armrest and Castiel’s chest to adjust Castiel’s position, “this feels…” Dean shimmied his hips and moaned helplessly, pressing his face against Castiel’s shoulder. “Fuckin’ hell, this is incredible…”

 Fuck me – fuck me – you have to fuck me – why aren’t you moving – why aren’t you thrusting – please, Dean, please…!

Desperate, Castiel tried to force Dean into motion but Dean’s weight pinned him, Dean’s dick pinioned him, Dean’s powerful arms held him immobile. Words failed Castiel and he whimpered with need. Dean echoed him with a choked off sound.

“I can’t…” Dean’s voice broke on a sob and, shaking his head, Dean smeared liquid so thick over Castiel’s shoulder that it soaked through the fabric of his shirt. “Cas…you feel…you smell…” He groaned, guttural and broken.

 Does he need to stop? Is he not able to do this? Or not interested in doing this?

 Is Dean okay?

Enough reason remained in Castiel’s head for the thoughts to form, concerned and sympathetic in response to how distressed Dean sounded, but vocalizing his concerns – suggesting that Dean actually stop – was inconceivable.

 Whatever the problem is…he has to fuck me…

“Do it,” Castiel managed to croak. “Please, Dean!”

With a broken groan, Dean lifted his hips and slammed them home. Rapture and satisfaction exploded through Castiel’s body.

 Yes – yes, just like that, oh God, don’t—

Dean stopped.

Only stuffing his forearm against his mouth kept Castiel from sobbing. His teeth dug into his skin, the pain grounding him, as tears streamed down his face.

“Sorry!” Dean gasped. “I’m…oh, hell…you got no…no idea…how fuckin’ amazing this feels…I can’t…don’t wanna…can’t hurt you, Cas, can’t, you’re mine, my omega, gotta take care of you, gotta…gotta be good for you…gotta satisfy you…feel like I’m about to fucking explode…I’ve never…”

 I’m the only person he’s topped for.

And we’ve always used a condom.

And we’re true mates – as impossible as that is, I’m sure we’re true mates. I find his scent intoxicating…if he’s feeling what I’m feeling, if he’s as desperate right now as I am…

…how could he be, I’m in heat, and he’s not in…

…unless he is in rut? Despite his suppressants? I can’t tell by his smell, but mates often cycle-sync… and his eyes…

…even if he’s not in rut, this experience must be overwhelmed. In his position, I’d be overwhelmed…
Castiel’s stomach turned.

*Don’t think about that…think about…*

“Dean…” Castiel gathered himself with effort, struggled to focus despite the racing of his heart and the quiet, constant plea for more that reverberated through his head.

*If I’ve got even an iota of alpha left in me…he has to listen when I give an order…*

“Fuck me,” Castiel commanded.

Dean’s answering cry shattered into a snarl as he lifted his hips and pounded down into Castiel’s body. He didn’t stop after, didn’t pause. Unrelenting thrusts pushed Castiel into the couch, pushed him to the brink of incoherency. Eyes squeezed shut, there was only blackness, only Dean enveloping him, only ecstasy bursting through him with every penetration, only the rub of fabric to stimulate his dick, only his arm pressed to his mouth and his teeth digging into his flesh to keep him from losing his mind. Every press of Dean’s cock against his prostate, every thrust of Dean’s cock within his channel, flooded Castiel’s senses. Bliss peaked with every thrust as if he came again and again, but actual climax eluded him. The need for release, the need to feel Dean’s release, was all-encompassing. Castiel sobbed unrestrainedly, unable to move or shift or speak his ecstasy. He was a body for Dean to use, a hole for Dean to fuck, and it was *glorious*. Dean grunted against him, a gravel accompaniment to the *whump* of cloth against Castiel’s ass. Even as Dean’s knot swelled and stretched Castiel and tugged at his rim, Dean’s thrusts didn’t slow. Incandescent heat suffused Castiel like the blinding gold of sunlight illuminating the backs of his closed eyelids.

Dean pulled out, thrust down, and his swollen knot bounced off Castiel’s rim, too fattened to penetrate Castiel.

“Fuck,” snarled Dean. “You fuckin’ *bitch*…take it, take it…” Dean thrust again, again, but his knot was too thick, Castiel’s hole too tight. Castiel’s thoughts screamed need and betrayal and self-recrimination – *he’s my alpha, I have to take his knot, it’s my duty – and I need it, oh God, I need it, I’m burning up, I have to come and I can’t, I can’t, only he can get me off…*

Crying, Castiel struggled to make his limp legs spread wider, to open himself further, anything to have Dean embedded within him. Fleeting sensations, vague pressures and slight shifts of Dean’s body against his spoke to Dean’s actions: Dean braced himself on the couch between Castiel’s legs, drew his hips back until only the tip of his cock remained in Castiel’s hole…

“You will take my knot, you gorgeous fuckin’ cock slut,” Dean snapped.

…and Dean pounded down with all his might.

Dean’s cock stabbed into Castiel’s body, his knot pushing within with a burst of bliss and pain.

Castiel howled.

“Come for me.”

What tenuous grip Castiel had retained on the world vanished as Dean’s knot stretched him and pleasure incinerated him. Semen pumped out of him, his awareness of anything save rapture flowing out with his come. His hole clenched around Dean’s knot, milking him, and Castiel howled as pleasure continued to bowl him over, wave upon wave, like he was battered by the ocean.

“One…” Dean’s voice ghosted, surreal, through Castiel’s thoughts as they faded to darkness, dragged down by the undertow of inexpressible delight and satisfaction.
...absolutely...
...perfect...

“You’re okay,” murmured Dean in Castiel’s ear, tenderness edged with concern. A hand pet down Castiel’s chest and belly, slowing as sweaty patches of skin made Dean’s grip uncertain. “Scared the bejesus outta me…but you’re okay…come on…talk to me, man…”

“Dean?” Castiel whispered.

Castiel tried to whisper.

The only sound that emerged from him was a keen that broke around a choked sob.

Castiel was crying. Surprised – how did I not realize I was in tears? – Castiel tried to swallow and choked again.

“Breathe,” Dean said soothingly, shifting their joined bodies. They were tucked side by side on the couch, Dean wedged against the couch cushions, Castiel’s arms dangling limp over the edge. A pillow supported Castiel’s head, fabric sodden with tears and worse. “Come on, Cas – breathe for me…”

Have to…have to breathe…have to obey my alpha...

Castiel tried to inhale through his nose, coughed as he found it clogged with mucus, and gasped raggedly through his mouth.

“Good,” said Dean. “I’ve got you.”

“Know…” Castiel croaked. He coughed, splattering the fabric before him with spit, and tried again. “I know you have.”

With a relieved sigh, Dean eased against his back. “There you are,” he whispered. “Welcome back.”

An attempt to reply ended in another coughing fit. Each jerk of his body tugged Dean’s knot against his rim. Renewed arousal tingled beneath Castiel’s skin, though only minutes must have passed since his previous orgasm.

I’ve heard a lot of omegas complain about their insatiability during heat…and I can see how it could get old, especially if one didn’t have an obliging partner…but so far, this is incredible.

…but if I didn’t have Dean with me?

“Stay?” asked Castiel.

“Don’t worry,” Dean replied. “I’m not going anywhere. Gotta take care of you. That’s my job.” Any unease the expression of obligation might have caused was eased by Dean’s tone, proud, caring, affectionate, and his continued gentle touches to Castiel’s chest. “Was that…was that good?”

An involuntarily laugh turned into another coughing fit, prompted another burst of pleasure prompted by Dean’s knot swollen within him, and Castiel’s cock twitched against the come-soaked fabric of his trousers.

“Cas?”
“You’re adorable,” Castiel breathed. Dean went stiff against him, his cock shifted in Castiel, and Dean spluttered as Castiel moaned softly. “That was fantastic, Dean.”

“Good,” sighed Dean, relaxing again. His hand brushed down Castiel’s chest, over his belly, slid Castiel’s pants down and tangled briefly in Castiel’s pubic hair before Dean’s touches trailed up toward his heart. Castiel shivered and bit back another moan.

“Getting hot again? Already?”

Castiel tried to muster a non-mortifying reply but Dean’s palm pressed down his chest, pressed so hard at his navel that Castiel thought he could feel the sensitive flesh within him moving against Dean’s immobile dick, continued down to Castiel’s crotch and cradled Castiel’s half-formed erection.

“Damn,” Dean breathed, awed. “That’s…hell, Cas…”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel mumbled.

Dean wrapped his thumb and pointer around Castiel’s cock, cradled his balls with his other fingers, and stroked gently. A hitched, helpless noise escaped Castiel, pleasure shivering through his skin and setting his heart racing, and he rubbed his hips back, chasing the sensation of Dean moving within him though Dean’s knot bound him in place and prevented pulling their bodies apart, thrusting them together again.

“Don’t be sorry,” Dean soothed, massaging Castiel’s dick to hardness. “’s what I’m here for. You take what you need. My cock is at your service.”

“No, I…”

“It’s okay.”

“You’re…” A flare of pleasure blanked Castiel’s mind. “You’re so much more to me than a dick to ride!”

“I know.” Dean sounded confident. Despite lingering guilt, Castiel couldn’t stop himself from rolling his hips back against Dean’s knot, couldn’t stop thrusting his erection into Dean’s loose grip. “And you’re so much more to me than an obliging hole.”

“Dean!”

“Take what you need, pretty omega,” murmured Dean, humping up against him. Something within Castiel’s shifted, stretched him differently, sloshed, and Castiel moaned.

Dean’s come is in me – no condom, no barrier, nothing separating us, not now, not ever again. Even when Dean is no longer in me, his come will be…it’s not a mating bite but it’s a mark, indelible, more powerful than a scent bond, and likely as evident to those we meet…

...that’s glorious...

“Didn’t get…didn’t get to feel your come…filling me…” Castiel gasped. Disappointment flared briefly then was subsumed by mounting bliss.

“Next time,” Dean promised. “Gonna fill you ‘til I can’t thrust without my seed spurtin’ outta you, gonna breed you, make you fat with me…you like that, Cas? You want that?”

“Yes!” Shuddering and moaning, mouthing at the soggy pillow, Castiel went stiff against Dean and
came, imagining himself swollen with Dean’s come, ass leaking with it, streams of semen coating his legs, and Dean licking up every drop.

“Two,” said Dean smugly.

“Are you…are you counting my orgasms?” Castiel gasped.

“Fuck yeah, I am!”

“Why?”

“It’s gonna sound stupid…” muttered Dean.

“Dean, you’re brilliant. Nothing you say sounds ‘stupid’ to me.”

“Air quotes, Cas? Really? Now?”

“Don’t you dare turn into my brother.”

“Ugh, never!” said Dean. There was an awkward pause punctuated by an aftershock of pleasure cascading through Castiel. He shuddered and clenched; Dean moaned, then blurted, “I wanna get a tattoo! Since I can’t…I mean, since a mating bite is, ya know, what it is…thought I’d get a tally, this cock, your hole, cause I love feelin’ you shatter, Cas. It’s…it’s just seriously fuckin’ incredibly. You’re a Goddamn drug – best feelin’ in the whole damn wide world. And as long as the tattoo is vague, it won’t mess with my job.” Castiel barked a surprised laugh. “Aw, come on – don’t laugh – see, you do think it’s stupid.”

“I don’t!” Castiel managed around laughter. “I was…I was also thinking of getting a tattoo.”

“Really? You?”

“Yes, Dean – really, me,” confirmed Castiel. Dean’s hand snaked down Castiel’s front, pressed against his belly and urged Castiel to pivot his hips back. Castiel obliged and Dean whimpered, shivering through a climax, and Castiel felt the pressure in him increase as Dean spurted.

*Just like that…oh God, that’s good…*

“That what you wanted, angel?” asked Dean huskily.

*…come again, Dean, come again and again…*

“I love your penis,” was the only reply that sprang to Castiel’s overstimulated mind.

“I love your asshole,” was the sincere response.

With a pleased sigh, Castiel went limp against the couch, replete, happy, warm and cherished and satisfied. His heart beat loud in his ears, pounded a staccato counterpoint to Dean’s heartbeat, reverberating where Dean’s chest pressed against Castiel’s back and where Dean’s cock rested swollen within his body. The room grew dark as dusk fell, the Christmas lights outside casting haloed, colorful shadows. Dean breathed slow and steady; Castiel thought him asleep and hoped his heat wouldn’t flare again for some time.

*Dean is working so hard, and now he’s going to help me through my heat…hopefully, this will be a light, easy heat, and he’ll be able to get some rest. He needs it.*

*But I need him to fuck me!*
A shiver ran through Castiel. To his surprise, Dean’s hand shifted and pulled a blanket over Castiel. 

*Not only can he magically produce lubricant and condoms, he can also generate blankets from thin air.*

*No, it must have been on the back of the couch…and I’m that oblivious…*

“What tattoo you want?” mumbled Dean.

“Your penis above a banner that reads ‘World’s Greatest Knot,’” Castiel replied blithely. Dean spluttered a shocked laugh, shaking against Castiel, dislodging the blanket.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” Dean managed.

“I love your penis,” Castiel repeated.

“I know you do…I know…”

Dean’s breathing went steady again and Castiel synced with him, lulled to a drowse by contentment.

“And it loves you,” Dean whispered, shimmying his hips and moaning soft and sweet in Castiel’s ear.

*Did he really say that, or did I imagine it?*

*It doesn’t matter.*

*This is enough – this is perfect – this is everything.*

“I’m gonna quit the bank and open a greenhouse,” Castiel breathed.

*I love him…and, in his way, he loves me.*

“Coo’,” Dean mumbled. “You do you, Cas. Whatever makes you happy.”

*I’m so happy.*

*So, so, so, so, so happy.*

Castiel cupped a hand over Dean’s where it rested on his belly and fell peacefully asleep.

Dean pressed a finger into Castiel’s hole alongside where Dean’s tongue lapped up the slick and lubricant and come that leaked continually from his over-used channel. Liquid spurted out and Dean hummed like he’d tasted ambrosia.

*That’s…that’s so disgusting…*

*…and it feels so incredible, so incredible, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t…*

“…stop, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop,” Castiel sang a hoarse litany, squirming down against Dean’s face as Dean lay beneath him. Dean grunted, groaned, slid a second finger into Castiel, rubbed his prostate, stroked his cock. With a broken, guttural groan, Castiel shook through his climax, spraying Dean’s bare chest with meager lines of come. Only with effort did he collapse against the bed’s head board instead of sitting on Dean’s face.

“Three,” Castiel thought he heard Dean gurgle around a mouthful of liquid.
Slumping to his side, Castiel blinked. A blurry vision of Dean scooped come from his nipple and slurped it off his finger, eyes slipping rapturously shut. Dean’s cock, flushed with arousal but yet limp, twitched.

Soon…soon he’ll be ready again…

Anticipation burned through Castiel. Taking a deep breath, Castiel let their combined scents soothe him. The aroma of fresh cut grass in summer combined with Castiel’s softened, earthier money smell to make something new and wonderful, simultaneously verdant and domestic.

Perfect, as everything about Dean is perfect…

I always thought our scents clashed but now…we smell like that school trip my class took to a farm in middle school, like fresh-tilled fields and livestock roaming…like the manor grounds after the groundskeepers have laid fresh cedar chips…it’s a weird smell but it’s…it’s good. It’s right.

I love it.

This is us.

I love ‘us.’

“Fuck, you taste good,” Dean whispered, sucking on his finger.

Castiel came again.

“Four.”

“Come on, Cas, you gotta eat something,” scolded Dean.

“No,” said Castiel petulantly, rocking back on his knees to emphasize his presented ass. He was wet enough that come-thickened slick beaded down his perineum and dripped from his balls, making a dark stain on the disheveled blankets of Dean’s bed. “I’m not hungry. I’m horny.”

Sighing, Dean set the plate and glass he held on the top of his chest of drawers and walked over.

Good, good, he’s going to fuck me, thank God, I’m not hungry, I’m not thirsty…I’m so hot, so hot, and there’s only one cure, and we both know it…

…why isn’t he touching me?

Incredulous, Castiel twisted so he could see Dean and wiggled his butt enticingly. Dean stood behind him, wearing a loose white undershirt – one of Castiel’s – and a pair of boxers, the front bulging around Dean’s cock. A finger rested over Dean’s lips, his hand beneath his chin, his expressive pensive.

“What are you waiting for?” Castiel grumbled.

“You haven’t had anything to eat or drink in twelve hours.”

“Not hungry. Not thirsty. What part of horny isn’t clear to you?”

“Let’s make a deal,” continued Dean as if Castiel hadn’t complained.

“Whatever you say, Pat Sajak.”
“…of course the only pop culture reference you would know is about a game show host.” Dean rolled his eyes. “But I think you mean Monty Hall.”

“I mean Dean Winchester, I mean now, and I mean your knot in my ass.”

Dean rolled his eyes again and, shaking his head, turned back to his chest of drawers. He dropped to his knees and pulled open the bottom drawer. Rustling spoke to him rifling through the contents and he grumbled under his breath until, with a triumphant crow, he leapt back to his feet holding…

…a cylinder and a remote control.

“That is not your penis,” Castiel snapped.

“No, it’s a remote controlled vibrator,” said Dean smugly. “Dude, you’re amazing, and the last day has been fantastic, but little Dean needs a break.”

“Little Dean??”

“Big, manly, knotful Dean,” Dean conceded with a shrug. Crossing to Castiel, Dean slid the vibrator into Castiel’s hole. Castiel moaned, shimmied back, rocked to simulate thrusts, but after the initial trickle of satisfaction that accompanied being filled, no further stimulation came.

“Dean…” he growled.

“Making a deal, remember?” said Dean, taking a step back. “This remote activates the vibrator…” Dean held up the controller and pressed a button. The toy shivered within him, spreading heat and bliss, and Castiel moaned and rocked back again. Pre-come dripped from the tip of his cock and the stain beneath him grew.

Something clicked.

The vibrator shut off.

Castiel moaned pitifully. His arms gave out and he rubbed his sweaty forehead against the blankets. He was light-headed, desperate, weak, and he knew exactly what you need.

“You need to eat,” Dean said.

“That’s not what I need!”

“So – I brought cereal and milk, just what a growing omega needs,” Dean continued. “You eat like a good boy—” Castiel shuddered. “—and take your vitamins and all that shit, and I turn this—” The vibrator clicked on, clicked off, and Castiel held back tears. “—on. You misbehave, you get nothing. Deal?”

But…but I need your dick, Dean, I need…

“If I’m good, you’ll fuck me?” asked Castiel plaintively, shifting to look at Dean once more. The front of Dean’s boxers twitched and bulged. Dean nodded. “Will you leave the vibrator in while you do?”

Dean’s cheeks flushed and his boxers shifted again. “Fuck, Cas…okay, yeah, that sounds fuckin’ incredible…”

“Then I’ll eat.”
It was a long, long time before Castiel – sated in every way – finally screamed out another climax
and Dean garbled “seven” as he sobbed through his own.

Nine was in the kitchen while Dean cooked eggs and bacon and pancakes – protein and fat and
carbs to get Castiel through the second day of his heat.

Twelve was draped over the couch, Castiel too exhausted to move, Dean humping against him,
snarling and clawing at his back, desperate and possessive.

Fifteen was while Dean was asleep and only half-hard. Castiel, awake and burning up, didn’t care.
He mounted Dean and fucked himself down, down, down, onto Dean’s cock until he came. Dean
didn’t wake up.

Nineteen was in the shower, Dean’s cock down Castiel’s throat, the vibrator wedged up Castiel’s
ass, as Castiel finally, finally, got to drink down Dean’s delicious come.

Twenty was minutes later. Dean wrapped his lips around Castiel’s dick for the first time, sucked and
licked and kissed and ticked and swallowed, and Castiel’s knot didn’t swell, he didn’t have
successive waves of climax, he didn’t come like an alpha and his dysphoria didn’t trigger because he
wasn’t an alpha and he knew he wasn’t and his body didn’t react like an alpha and it was glorious.

Twenty two was teased out by the largest dildo in Dean’s impressive collection, suction-cupped to
the wall of the bathroom, as Castiel desperately fucked back against it and tried to stay quiet so that
Dean – poor, dedicated, caring, loving, Dean – could finally sleep.

Twenty three was the proof that Castiel had failed, as Dean broke the bathroom lock, mounted him
and fucked him senseless. Castiel couldn’t bring himself to feel guilty for waking Dean up, not when
being with Dean felt glorious.

Dean’s knot slammed into him and Castiel broke. He couldn’t bear how glorious he felt, how happy
he was, how complete he felt.

He wasn’t complete.

He couldn’t bear that Dean wouldn’t complete him, wouldn’t mate him.

I shouldn’t care, but I do…

Sobbing, he collapsed against the hard tiles of the bathroom floor.

“Shh, babe, shh…” Dean’s voice was soothing. Dean’s scent was soothing. Dean’s presence was
soothing. Castiel tried to enfold himself in everything Dean but he couldn’t – he couldn’t move, he
couldn’t be any closer to his alpha than he already was.

A ragged cry muffled in the bedding.

That was me. That was my voice.

“I know you’re tired, but it’s been four days – you’re almost through this heat. I’ve got you. I won’t
let you go. I’ll take care of you. I promise, Cas…Castiel, my precious omega…”

I’m crying.

Again.
And I’m in bed.

Last thing I remember…

Time was meaningless, and trying to recall the recent past brought a flood of disjointed images and visceral sensations without context or meaning. Castiel shuddered and tried to shut the confusing, overwhelming memories away. He felt empty, cold yet feverish, and he couldn’t stop shaking.

“Can you tell me what you need, Cas?”

At least there was one constant in Castiel’s world.

“Dean.”

With a weak hand, Castiel patted across the bed sheets searching for his alpha. Dean’s hand clasped his and Dean’s warmth lined up with his side and Castiel sighed. He might have melted into the bedding, he was so exhausted, but the shivers plaguing the side opposite Dean kept ease at bay.

“Are you cold?”

“No,” said Castiel, teeth chattering. He was, but he wasn’t. He wasn’t sure what was wrong, nor what would cause the symptoms to abate.

Of course I don’t know – this is my first heat, my first heat at 31! Every nuance is new… unexpected…we have so much to learn…

...together…

I need…I need Dean…I need this connection between us to not end, to never end…

“Sex...?” Castiel asked.

He’s my mate. I know it. I feel it. I smell it…he must know…he must feel it too…why hasn’t he…why won’t he…I need…

…I asked him if he would be my mate and he said he’d think about it. To ask again would be inappropriate. And so…

Sex is what I’m entitled to have. And it’ll be wonderful and it will help, I know it will.

But it’s not what I want, and it's not what I need.

“Please, Dean?”

I’ll take what I can have, and accept and respect his decisions.

Or at least, I’ll try…if I work at it long enough, acceptance must be possible…I’ve tolerated far worse treatment in my life…

“Please?”

Lying on his belly, Castiel tried to heft his ass suggestively but his muscles wouldn’t engage; pain and aches compounded his chill and he shook, spasms overtaking each limb by turn.

“Okay,” Dean huffed out. “Okay…one more…I can…I think…can you come for a twenty fourth time, Cas?”
“Anything you want, Dean…everything…”

Please understand…please give me what I need…I don’t need you in return, but I want to be yours, need to be yours…”

“Okay,” Dean repeated. “Just…just take it easy…I’ve got you…”

Blankets shifted over and around them, Dean’s weight moving from alongside him to atop him. With Dean smothering him into the mattress, the shivers finally subsided. Dean was so hot, so gorgeous, smelled so good, felt so amazing. There wasn’t a hitch, a snag, the least obstruction by Castiel’s rim as Dean slid into his body. They’d both spent hours and days gross, filthy, exhausted, coated in come and lubricant and slick. They’d gone through multiple sets of sheets, showered five times, given up on wearing clothing. Only Dean’s count reminded Castiel how many times he’d come, and Dean’s orgasms were uncountable, alpha body surging with come time and time again until finally Dean, emptied, came dry, choking and gagging and sucking on Castiel’s skin. That Dean was capable of having sex again was incredible. If Castiel were in Dean’s position…

Castiel swallowed back the horrific thought.

“Still feels…so good…” Dean moaned.

Castiel nodded, speechless, as the blankets bunched in his clenched fists. Dean covered Castiel’s hands, covered Castiel’s body, mouthed wet against the curve of Castiel’s neck, hitched his hips up and eased them back down. Sensitive, overwrought, sore and raw from days exposed and naked and fucked, Castiel moaned, shimmied up against Dean, and let himself be ridden.

“My mine,” mumbled Dean. Teeth scraped against Castiel’s neck and he moaned again, tears pooling in his eyes.

Please, Dean!

A soft *whump* accompanied each shove of Dean’s hips against Castiel’s ass, knocked the headboard against the wall as the bed rocked like they were atsea. Dean hardly thrust, favoring slight movements that were all Castiel could tolerate, probably all Dean could tolerate, and each sway of their bodies together rubbed Castiel’s insides gloriously, rubbed his dick against the blankets, rubbed Dean’s chest against Castiel’s back, rubbed Dean’s mouth against Castiel’s shoulder.

No bite came.

“Yours,” Castiel agreed hopefully. Dean’s answering groan was deep and broken and pained. Dean’s nails dug into the back of Castiel’s hands, his knees shifted to spread Castiel’s legs wider apart, and he sank into Castiel deeper, smothered Castiel’s body with his own. Despite his rough touches, Dean’s thrusts stayed gentle, shallow, kind. Heat simmered in Castiel’s gut, in his chest, smoldered in his thoughts.

Dean’s teeth brushed over Castiel’s skin again.

“Mine,” Dean growled, mouthing at the crook of Castiel’s neck.

*This…this isn’t like him…but…*

“Please!” Castiel gasped.

No bite came.
Dean went still. Castiel sighed misery into the mattress.

“Cas…I can’t…”

“Nothing you don’t want,” Castiel said, forlorn.

No! He has to bite me! He has to continue making love to me! Please, Dean, please, take me, take me, take me, take me…

“Nothing you’re not comfortable with.” Forcing the words out flatly, he hoped Dean read his meaning and intent, didn’t take Castiel’s tone as contradiction of what he said. “I’m yours, Dean. I’m yours. That won’t change.”

“You can’t be sure…neither of us can…”

“You’re right, we can’t be,” said Castiel. Déjà vu swept through him. “And if I’m wrong, I’ll accept the consequences. I expect nothing from you in return. I need no return vow or declaration, no reciprocated bite. But please…Dean…my alpha…”

Dean’s only answer was a soft moan and the resumption of his steady thrusts. He withdrew so little with each rock of their bodies that only the stretching of Castiel’s insides told him that Dean’s knot was thickening. Dean mouthed and licked at Castiel’s shoulder, his neck, the top of his spine, tasting and sampling, and hope manifest as heat that cascaded through Castiel’s body and tingled through the tips of his fingers and the soles of his feet.

“Dean…”

A dominating growl vibrated Dean’s chest, reverberated through Castiel’s body, amplified his pleasure, made him want to present. Castiel tilted his head, bared his neck submissively, and Dean snarled, teeth pressing into flesh.

“Oh!”

Castiel’s fists balled so tightly his fingers hurt.

“Oh, God!”

Dean started to bite at the top of his arm, followed the line of his shoulder, and caught the front curve of Castiel’s neck inches from his scent gland.

“Please!”

Dean’s nails dug into Castiel’s hands, his hips slammed into Castiel’s ass, and he bit down.

“Do it!”

The skin didn’t break. Furious, Dean shook his head like a beast with uncooperative prey locked in its jaws, rocked hard against Castiel’s body again, again, opened inches between them, returned and snapped against Castiel’s neck.

Pain and bliss and shock and awe and joy swept through Castiel so profoundly that he screamed. Sensation, indescribable, from too many different stimuli, surged through him, surged again, again. Trying to process what he felt was too much; he went limp against the bed, awash in the pulse of his nerves. Only Dean’s voice grounded him, returned him to himself.

“Aw, fuck,” Dean moaned like the words were torn from him. Intense heat filled Castiel’s swollen,
aching channel, come splashing in him, leaking out around Dean’s knot.

Even after all the sex we’ve had the last few days, he came from biting me – mating me.

We both did.

“That was…” Dean choked on his attempt to speak, hips yet working against Castiel’s ass. “That was…"

Dean went silent.

Dean went still.

Dean collapsed atop him, smearing Castiel with sweat.

Castiel struggled to breathe, struggled to think, struggled to function.

An alpha can’t mate another alpha.

Dean just marked me as his mate. And a bond formed, I can feel it.

That’s impossible.

Except it’s not.

Because I’m not an alpha.

I’m an omega, and now I feel complete.

With a soft moan, another billowing wave of pleasure tumbled Castiel’s senses.

“Yours…” he mumbled.

“Yeah,” Dean mouthed against his neck. “Mine.” Gentle, wet touch and a soft sound followed, and Castiel belatedly realized Dean was licking the wound he’d made.

We really are like a couple from a romantic comedy…

…I am Julia Roberts…

…this really is Pretty Woman…

…with a few novel plot twists…

“This is okay…” murmured Dean. “This…this is good…you make me so happy, Cas… ‘m sorry if I don’t say lovey-dovey shit like that often enough…”

“You don’t need to say anything,” Castiel said. “It’s obvious in every action that I’m important to you. I’m happy, and I love you, and I don’t need more.”

“Dunno, you got kinda demanding about this bite,” Dean teased, tongue flicking over the mating mark again. Castiel shivered.

“You didn’t have to oblige me,” Castiel pointed out.

Dean didn’t answer. Castiel anticipated his anxiety flaring, but no worry or condemning voice intruded beyond his worry that he’d worry. His mind was quiet, his body sated.
He was content.

He was an omega.

He was a horticulturalist.

He was happy.

He was in love.

“I wanted to…” Dean breathed. “…wanted to bite you…”

And he was loved in return.

“I want you…”

Though Dean never spoke his feelings, Castiel didn’t harbor the least doubt in the strength of Dean’s affections.

“I need you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m yours.”

“Yeah…”

Their heartbeats synced, their breathing aligned, slow and steady and strong. Dean yet lay atop him, but wasn’t so heavy to make Castiel uncomfortable, and moving was inconceivable. Knotted, embraced, Castiel slid toward sleep.

Nothing more needed to be said.

“Twenty four,” Dean whispered.

One more thing had needed to be said.

*Now,* nothing more needed to be said.

Smiling, Castiel slipped into easy, restful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So this is the end of the "main story," and the next two chapters are more like...epilogues? time stamps? I mean, they're important, they show how things go later, but each is after a time jump, so just...be expecting that. :)


The urge to itch his healing tattoo was pervasive and irritating. Castiel struggled to ignore the sensation, but focusing on the twinge was all that distracted him from the throbbing pain of his dick. The surgery to remove his knot had been a week ago and, as promised, even with three doses daily of Oxycodone the recovery was excruciating. Only a sedative enabled him to sleep, and only constant activity got him through the day. Getting their tattoos subsequently had been Dean’s idea, a suggested distraction that Castiel had latched onto with the desperation of a dying man. He didn’t regret getting his knot removed and he appreciated that, in the long term, these days of pain would seem brief and worth it, but while he was experiencing constant agony it was hard to look on the bright side and project himself into that happy future. Their new tattoos helped. Dean’s elegant tally of 24 depicted as calligraphy lines on a painted parchment on his shoulder made a hilarious contrast to the commemorative dick spurting illusory come on Castiel’s lower back. Castiel couldn’t see his tattoo without contorting before a mirror but the sounds Dean made each time he saw it were exactly as enticing as Castiel had hoped.

*I can’t wait ‘til I can spatter that with my real come,* Dean had bemoaned.

*Me neither…but no erections, so no arousal, so no sex, until my penis is healed…*

Three to four weeks and he’d be good as new, the doctors had promised. Castiel had attended his first of weekly check-ups earlier that day. The timing was poor – though intentional – as it had required Castiel to open late less than a month after his greenhouse made its grand debut.

When he’d had the idea of opening the Greenthumb on the one year anniversary of the day April had attacked him, the day he’d rebuked his mother, the day he’d moved in with Dean, it had seemed like a brilliant plan and an excellent distraction from his impending surgery.

But now he had to work despite the continual throb between his legs.

*I should have gotten through the surgery and recovery, and then opened the business. What was I thinking?*

*No. Focus on the tattoo. It’s itchy. It’s annoying. It’s a picture of Dean’s dick. He likes it. I like it. But it’s really fucking itchy.*

Greenthumb had eight employees: three working the outside shrubberies, two working the indoor greenhouses, a cashier, a stock person, and a delivery driver. They’d had a promising opening week, new customers attracted by their advertising and the glamor of participating in a grand debut, but things had been slow since then. Ultimately, Greenthumb would require more staff – and a second manager; if Castiel continued to spend every waking minute working Dean would kill him – but until they had more business, more employees were a resource sink that Castiel couldn’t afford.

*Annual wages plus health insurance plus intangibles plus continuing education for even one new employee equals more money than I want to think about expending. Even the people we have now cost a fortune.*

*But I refuse to cut corners. If I can’t afford to pay a living wage, to hire people full time, to give people adequate hours, I don’t deserve to be in business.*

*If we can get things up and running, it’ll be worth it.*

*…but maybe I could take one intern on…even one unpaid employee would help…*
No. If I take an intern, they’ll get paid, too. It’s only right. I know the toll that working unpaid at IADB and other firms took on Dean. Thank God he’s quit stripping and no longer walks Raleigh for new prostitute clients. Thank God the Night Bank is doing well and he’s able to get a reasonable amount of sleep most nights. Thank God he’s done with school.

Thank God this tattoo itches to high heavens. Damn does my dick hurt.

And we haven’t had a customer in an hour.

“Why don’t you go home?” suggested Castiel, turning to his cashier Hanna. She turned to him uncertainly. “Don’t worry, I’ll pay you for the rest of the night. I doubt we’ll get a rush of business now, and didn’t you say you have a test on Monday? Go on home, I’ll handle things here.”

And Anna told me you and she have a date later. No reason to get bogged down here when you could be getting ready…

Hannah broke into her sweet smile. “Thanks, Cas. You sure?” Castiel quirked an eyebrow. “Fine, fine, I’m going – I’m gone!” She pulled her things from beneath the register, fiddled for something in her purse, and threw on a light jacket.

“Have fun,” he added. She looked back over her shoulder, flushed, winked, smirked, and headed out the door.

“Oh, excuse me!” she chirped, stepping out as Benny stepped in.

The reimagined Cajun Delights was a far cry from the old motel and Benny seemed thrilled by the transformation. The restaurant was doing fantastically, thanks to Benny’s leadership, his fantastic food, and some positive reviews in the Palmeton papers. A notable food critic whose name Castiel couldn’t recall despite how many times Benny had repeated it had even come down from Chicago and given Benny his highest rating. Castiel had connected Benny with Balthazar, which had also helped; Balthazar had proved an enthusiastic mentor, loaded with recommendations, warnings, and advice. The two had nearly gotten into a fistfight over who would get Alfie as a sous chef, but Benny had ultimately coaxed the chef with a better job offer. Benny’s success was part of why Castiel stayed open later than he would have otherwise; Greenthumb did a booming business in last-minute potted flower anniversary gifts, and a recently-added display of greeting cards was also selling well. If some of those customers eyed his shrubs and houseplants and said they’d be back… well, Greenthumb already had one landscaper ordering mulch and soil and outdoor plants from them. Another few long-term contracts, and some regular customers, and…

Slowly, Castiel, one customer at a time…three years to break even, five years to be profitable…

…that seems like such a long time…

…at least I’m not thinking about my dick right now…

Benny stared at him. “Uh huh…shouldn’t you be working?” With a wink, Benny mimicked Castiel, beaming, drawl comically thick.

“Right – of course,” said Castiel, rolling his eyes. “What’d you run out of at the last minute this time?”

“Eggs,” said Benny.
“Wasn’t there a soufflé special on the menu tonight?”

“Yeah, and the waiters pimped it at every table, and two-thirds of our first seating ordered it…”

“I’ve only got two dozen, but they’re yours,” said Castiel, heading to the cooler where he stored the eggs and some specialty seeds that needed to be kept cool.

“Should be enough,” Benny said, though he didn’t sound sure. “Heck, even with no additional eggs, I should have enough to get through the night…but better safe than sorry. It’d be shit for someone to order it and have to tell ’um we ran out.”

“A wise precaution,” said Castiel, grabbing the egg cartons and setting them down on the counter beside Benny. The bell over the door chimed as Castiel circled to the register, but he didn’t see his new customer before they passed out of sight. Greenthumb was large, the main building home to indoor plants and gardening accessories, four greenhouses out back, and an acre dedicated to ready take-and-plant shrubs and trees. A small enclosure housed twenty chickens. Two goats kept predators at bay and feasted on the clippings and plant detritus the business produced. Bees buzzed among the blooming flowers; the apiary was an indulgence that his only investor – the Night Bank – had advised against, but Castiel had given Gabriel a stern look and he’d relented. Muted voices from down the shop floor suggested one of Castiel’s employee greeting the customer and offering them help.

“Bag?” asked Castiel, taking Benny’s cash.

“Naw.” Benny shook his head. “By the way – when’s your honey due? I got plans.”

“It’ll be about two weeks before I have enough for a full jar,” said Castiel. “And I was hoping to keep that one and share it with Dean and Sam. But the second jar has your name on it. Once the bees settle in they should produce a few jars a week.”

“Might not be enough…”

“What kind of plans do you have?” Castiel laughed.

“Big ones – what other kinds’a plans do we make?” Benny winked. “It was Alfie’s idea – God he’s a gift, Balthie is still trying to poach him, English bastard…bread puddin’-flavored plans. He cooked me a sample and…” Benny lifted a hand to his mouth and kissed at the air, expression rapturous as if the flavor of Alfie’s delicious concoction yet lingered in his mouth. “Anyway, I do got work to do. And so do you. I’ll have your and Dean’s dinner ready at 8 – don’t be late!” With a wave, Benny took his eggs and left.

Castiel stood alone in the front area of the store.

Dean shouldn’t do dinner…he should rest…his schedule is hectic...between his hours at the Night Bank and his scheduled sex work clients …he’s my alpha. I should be taking care of him. Instead of buying him dinner, I should make him dinner and give him a massage and keep the house clean. Instead of hiring Sam to work at the Greenthumb, I should be helping him with his homework. They’re my family, and I’m letting them down by not being the omega they need, and…

What is with me tonight? I can’t focus. Maybe it’s a heat coming on? Or fatigue? Or…

No. Stop. No more self-blame. No more hypothesizing.

Benny’s right, I should be working. There’s always more to do…the table of miniature roses needs to be restocked…some of the seed packet slots are empty…I need to look at the catalog that Week’s
Roses sent and see what Seeds of Change has by way of heirloom breeds…and then there’s—

A thunk on the counter pulled Castiel from his thoughts. An orchid sat before him, delicate arced stem supporting a cluster of showy white and yellow blossoms.

“How much?” asked a male voice, eerily familiar. Castiel focused on the customer and…

…Charles Shurley.

Stunned, Castiel stared, mouth agape.

Anna had returned to Palmeton and co-opted a corner of Benny’s lot to open a small gallery with studio space in the back, but other than she and Gabriel, Castiel had seen no member of his family since he fled the mansion and Naomi’s control and April’s prison of an engagement.

Even before that…when was the last time I spoke with my father? And I don’t mean “been in the same room while he had a conversation with someone else.” When was the last time Charles and I…spoke? To each other? Directly?

Have we ever had a conversation?

“How much?” Charles repeated, smiling and holding his checkbook up suggestively.

And now he’s not even going to acknowledge that we know each other?

What is he doing here?

“$29.99 plus tax,” Castiel managed. He grabbed the scan gun, read the UPC, and hit the sale button on his point-of-sale system screen. “$31.86.”

Pen cap caught between his teeth, Charles wrote out the check, tore it from the book, set it on the counter, and stared at Castiel expectantly.

“Do you…do you need a bag?” Castiel asked.

“No,” said Charles. “Nor do I need a receipt.” He picked up the potted orchid, the arc of the flowers incongruently framing his plain features. “One of my neighbors has been discussing re-landscaping their property. I’ll send them your way.”

“Thank you” was all Castiel could say. He needed to take up the check, run the total, print a receipt, do his job, but his father was smiling at him, his father was there, and Castiel had no idea what to say.

“I’m proud of you, Cassie.”

Charles Shurley walked out the door.

Castiel stared after him.

“Father…”

A minute or more passed before Castiel shook off his confused reverie and took up the check.

He froze.

Again.
Even in Charles’ chicken scratch handwriting, the total was clear.
$1,000,031.86.

Castiel dropped to his butt on the soil-smudged floor.

…what?

...

...

...what???

A note was scrunched into the small space for comments, “My bankers know the draft is coming. My wife doesn’t. Be happy.” A word between “be” and “happy” had been scribbled out, but Castiel could make out the shape of the letters – “well.”

Better happy than well.

...

WHAT?

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” chirped Anna.

Castiel hadn’t heard the door open, hadn’t heard her approach, hadn’t noticed her leaning over the counter to stare down at him, hadn’t caught a whiff her oily, musky scent that had defied his description until he finally smelled her standing in her art studio and realized it was the smell of paint.

Not a ghost so much as a specter…an apparition…an illusion…a hallucination…

Shaking his head, Castiel held the check up. Her eyes popped.

“No way!”

Pulling himself back to his feet, Castiel shrugged.

“He didn’t! And mom doesn’t even know?” she laughed, blue eyes twinkling. “This is classic! How are you going to spend it? And why thirty one dollars and eighty six cents?”

“He bought an orchid,” Castiel explained numbly.

“Whaddaya want to bet it’s for Lucy’s greenhouse?” Anna crowed. “That’s classic! I didn’t know old Chuck had that kind of irony in him.”

“Did you…” The solemnity of Castiel’s voice brought Anna’s humor up short. “Did you ever talk to him?”

“I mean…he passed the salt…” Anna spread her hands in an uncertain gesture. “He never tried to talk to me.”

“Me neither,” said Castiel. “When I went to him for support he never had any to offer and I stopped approaching him. Now I wonder…”

“What?”
Castiel shook his head. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. If you’re looking for Hannah, she left.”

Graciously accepting the change in topic, Anna grinned. “Nope, I came ’cause she texted me that she was gone. Something something bad luck to see the girlfriend before the date something something. Since she’s gone I can go work on the back wall.”

“Bad luck?” said Castiel skeptically. “You made that up.”

“Cas, what happens if you see Dean before a date?” she said, giving him a pointed look.

Memories of a dozen or more nights flooded Castiel, times when, with the best of intentions and theater tickets or reservations in hand, Castiel and Dean had failed to make it out of the house.

“He looks really good in a suit,” Castiel mumbled, flushing.

“Exactly. Hannah is a beaut in a dress.” Anna winked. “Anyhoo, if I’m gonna get anything done, I’d better skedaddle.” She handed the check back to him, thumb tapping on the memo. “And this here – this is the best advice he’s ever given any of us.”

Be happy.

Castiel shook his head again, tried to formulate a response, but by the time anything sprang to mind she was gone, walking down the aisles of the store to access the back door and work on the mural she’d painted on the wall outside.

Happy…

I don’t really need the money, not this much. The nursery was expensive to open and we’re not breaking even yet but…

A three-way split with Gabriel and Anna seems appropriate. They’ll protest, especially Gabriel, who has plenty of his own money, but I don’t deserve this. I don’t need this. Whatever Charles owes me, he owes all of his children.

Why did Charles gift it to me specifically? He could as easily have walked into Anna’s gallery or into the Night Bank.

Naomi didn’t treat them the way she treated me. They’re both betas, and I’m an alpha. Or I was an alpha. Maybe it’s an apology for trying to force the alpha mold on me…or maybe it’s bias, because I am what I am – or at least, that’s probably what he still perceives me to be. His alpha son deserves monetary support, while his beta children shouldn’t be encouraged in their deviance…maybe…?

That doesn’t make any more or less sense than any of this…

I wish I’d told him, and the family, flat-out that I’m an omega. I wish I’d confronted them for how they treated all of us, not just me. I wish Gabriel had released his blackmail material and ruined them. If father thinks that a check and recommending my business to Palmeton’s wealthy is apology enough, he’s ultimately no different from Naomi. Atonement would have been saying he was sorry, would have been trying to build a relationship with me, instead of thinking he can buy me off as if there’s a price tag that’ll repair childhood of manipulation, repression, and emotional isolation.

…and still, a million dollars is better than nothing.

It’s more than I expected, more than it ever occurred to me I’d receive. We can put it to good use.

And at least the sentiment that he owed us something was there, even if he’s so dysfunctional that the
only way he can think of to fix a personal debt is with literal payment.

I’m better off without him or mother or Michael or Luke in my life.

Even so…

I wish I’d told him how incredibly happy I am.

Chop chop! Back to work Castiel!

Humming along to the tempo set by a nearby bee buzzing, Castiel grabbed his gardening gloves and his apron of tools and set about putting the Greenthumb in order.

God, I love it here…

…but there’s always more to do!
The bell above the door chimed and Castiel looked up from his POS system, automatically hitting control-s to save the work he’d done on reconciling the books for the day. Customer service smile coming habitually to his lips, he turned with a sorry, we’re closed for the evening ready when the words died unspoken.

Dean stood in the doorway, looking uncharacteristically bedraggled and sad.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asked, worry lending his feet speed as he headed out from behind the counter, arms already raised to embrace his…boyfriend? Mate? Husband? After a decade you’d think I’d have a word for this…the only one that’s literally true is…alpha, but Dean put up a hand and arrested him. Castiel obliged, stopping short. “Did Mr. C hurt you?” With the success of the Night Bank, Dean now saw only a few clients a week, by appointment, at ludicrous rates, and Castiel knew all of them by pseudonyms. Mr. C was, according to Dean, someone famous enough that Castiel would recognize him if they met, and inordinately fond of sex toys.

Yeah, and if I see him, and he did anything to hurt Dean, I will eviscerate him not matter how famous he is…

Dean shook his head.

“Did he cancel?” asked Castiel, anger dying, concern growing. Dean shook his head again. “Did you—”

“Just, uh, gimme a sec, okay?” Dean managed a wan smile.

The youthful, smooth-cheeked good looks that had first attracted Castiel to Dean had aged to perfection. Dean was so handsome that sometimes looking at him took Castiel’s breath away; he’d grown into stereotypical alpha handsomeness, broad-shouldered and bluff-faced. The boy he’d been was still evident in the plushness of his lips and the length of his eyelashes, though. Regardless, he was beautiful, even when, as now, his scent was jarringly twisted with the bitter tang of lemon. Jittery fingers tapping the countertop, Castiel waited for Dean to collect himself.

Catching his lip between his teeth, Dean stepped into the entryway, turned and locked the door. The Greenthumb had been closed for half an hour, the fences protecting the outside stock closed and chained, the other employees gone home, but Castiel worked late on Saturdays since Dean didn’t get home until the wee hours of Sunday morning. The solitude and quiet gave Castiel the opportunity to focus and get work done. Searching for a distraction from his anxiety and Dean’s continued reticence, Castiel ran through a mental list of what he’d planned to do and when he might do the most essential tasks instead.

And then, I’d better—

“Mr. C asked me to knot him,” Dean mumbled, blushing and staring at the floor.

Who is this nervous, uncertain boy? Where’s my dominating alpha who, from the first time we met, took control, took care of me, with authority and command?

And why would that of all things trigger the change?
Castiel waited but Dean didn’t continue.

“And…?” Castiel suggested.

“That doesn’t bother you?” asked Dean, glancing up at Castiel, looking away again.

“No,” said Castiel, puzzled. “Did you expect it would? After all these years, I thought we were past this issue. Is this the first time anyone has hired you for that? Other than me? It doesn’t surprise me that someone would ask – have you looked in a mirror recently?” Castiel offered a wry smile as Dean glanced up again, flush darkening, highlighting the freckles bridging his nose. He’s adorable when he’s this uncertain. But why is he this uncertain? “You’re gorgeous, Dean. The epitome of a masculine alpha. Who wouldn’t want you to knot them?”

*But he’s only ever knotted me!*

So? We might have lots of fantastic sex but our relationship isn’t about sex. Sex doesn’t mean anything to Dean. What means something to Dean, and to me, is that at the end of the day, at the end of the night, whenever he can, he comes to me and we sit and we talk and we cuddle and we watch Dr. Sexy’s umpteenth season and we visit Sam at Veterinary school and we attend Anna’s gallery openings arm in arm and we laugh over dinner at Benny’s when Alfie sends us the weirdest appetizers he can concoct and we travel together to consult new Night Bank investors and leave Gabriel and Meg to manage the Bank and Hannah and Bobby to manage the Greenthumb.

A knot is just a knot.

*But Dean is my mate, in every significant way save a single bite to his neck.*

“So you really don’t care?” Dean sounded…hurt?

*Seriously – what the hell is going on?*

“No…should I?”

“Dunno,” Dean shrugged. “I know you’re over the jealousy thing, and that’s awesome, and I trust you, and I believe you, but I still thought…maybe…”

“Why?”

“Because it bothered me, Cas,” Dean said in a rushed, inexplicably agonized confession. Why agonized? Why confession? What. Is. Going. On? “I, uh…” This isn’t like him. Maybe his rut suppressants failed? It wouldn’t be the first time. But when it’s happened before he got more aggressive, more dominant, more possessive, not…whatever he is now. “I said no. When he asked. I told him I’d bottom for him ‘til the cows came home but I wouldn’t top. And he terminated our relationship.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. He’s been a reliable client since before we met, hasn’t he?”

“Yes – no – it doesn’t matter, that’s not the point,” said Dean, frustration adding to the confusing combination of emotions Castiel heard in his voice. The lemon scent intensified so powerfully that Castiel’s nose stung. “I didn’t want to knot Mr. C. And…and I thought about it…I don’t care who knots me…but I don’t want to knot anyone. Except you. You’re it for me.”

Castiel’s heart skipped a beat, his eyes widening, but he forced himself to restraint, to calm.

*Why calm? Dean never makes romantic declarations. I’m allowed to be excited!*
Dean never makes romantic declarations because Dean’s feelings for me aren’t romantic and that’s fine because he loves me in every way that matters.

“And it makes no fucking sense!” Dean burst out.

Castiel spluttered an incredulous laugh. “That’s what I’ve been thinking, yes.”

“Yes! Exactly! What the fuck?” Raking a shaking hand through his hair, Dean spun on a heel and paced the length of the counter. “It’s just a knot! It’s just Mr. C’s alpha ass! It’s no big deal! He’s fucked me every week, regular as clockwork, for eleven years! He doesn’t care that he’s knotting someone other than his wife! And you don’t care that I’d be knotting someone other than you! I shouldn’t care! But God, thinking about fucking him makes me sick!” Dean froze, turned slowly, further disheveled his gelled, spiked hair, and gave Castiel an earnest, desperate look. “What does it mean, Cas?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Who the fuck else am I supposed to ask?”

Castiel shook his head, looking away. “I can’t tell you what it means, Dean. I don’t know.”

“How’d it feel when you…you know…when you were sure wanted me to…” Dean trailed off, bared his teeth, and chomped exaggeratedly. Castiel’s hand went to his neck and the faded, white scar of his mating bite. The raised bumps were a badge of honor, a mark of affection, a heartening reminder of the constancy of his relationship with Dean, there to buoy him on his best days and comfort him on his worst. He was rarely anxious enough these days to need the reminder – life was good, actually good, and he was happy – but even when he felt great, the reassurance offered by the bite scar made him feel even better.

Dean cares for me. I am committed to being with Dean, and he is committed to being with me. He is my alpha, and I’m his omega, and we belong to each other.

…except we don’t, because he’s never asked me to reciprocate the bite and the bond has never been completed. One-sided bonds can rebound if they’re broken.

But I don’t think Dean would break this bond.

Judging by the look of comprehension dawning on his face…he’s realizing that as well.

“It’s hard to explain,” said Castiel, dropping his hand to his side. “I could throw around words like ‘love’ and ‘devotion’ but they’re surprisingly empty. At the heart of the matter, I’d say…” Castiel took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts. Okay, time to try to explain the ineffable… “There were multiple factors that led me to want a bond with you. The sex was and is incredible, of course. Despite your intimations to the contrary, we scent bonded the first time we were together – right?” Dean nodded sheepish agreement. “So one factor in my decision was a biological impetus that defies description.”

“Ya don’t gotta describe it,” muttered Dean. “I feel it – I’ve always felt it.”

Castiel flushed and grinned with pleasure. “I know you have. And honestly, I appreciate that you didn’t just…give in to it. Too often, couples feel that lustful attraction and make poor choices – unplanned mating, for example, or getting with child – and when the initial scent compatibility fades they’re stuck with each other. No good outcomes result to anyone from such couplings. Despite our undeniable attraction, we took the emotional part of our relationship slowly and developed a friendship. The sex alone would never have compelled me to break with my family or pursue a
connection with you. Good sex, as you’ve amply taught me, can be easily obtained. But the personal connection we forged was special to me. When I imagined my future life with my family, working at IADB, married to April…I didn’t lament the possibility of losing out on having sex with you. I wouldn’t have had to lose out on having sex with you. But the friendship we shared, the time we spent together when we weren’t making love – that would have been lost. I didn’t want to lose that.

“As we got to know each other better, that feeling grew and amplified, and slowly I realized – I couldn’t imagine a time in the future when I wouldn’t want to see you. I couldn’t imagine ever growing bored of your companionship. I couldn’t imagine you doing anything to alienate me – not because it is inconceivable that one person might commit such actions against another, but because I couldn’t conceive of you, specifically, doing such things to me. You welcomed me into your life, trusted me with your brother, were communicative about your experiences and opened your happiest memories and darkest fears to my scrutiny. I wanted to know more and more about you. I wanted to help you achieve your dreams. I wanted to face good times and bad times with you. And I wanted to have large amounts of mind-blowing sex with you.”

Dean barked a startled laugh.

“Taken all together…I call that love, and while I understood, and still understand, that such feelings can fade with time, I was prepared to take that chance, provided you were willing to take it with me. We’ve had ten wonderful years, and while I hope for ten, and twenty, and fifty more, if we have only one more day…I will regret nothing. That is why I asked you to mate me – because, worst case scenario, my mating scar would serve as a visible reminder of a time when I was the happiest I’d ever been, a commemoration of what we shared, and a symbol of how I’ve grown and changed as a person. Even if we part ways, meeting you and being close to you is and will remain one of the most important events in my life. An early split could taint the memories bittersweet but regardless of how our future paths might diverge, our pasts remain entwined.”

Attentive throughout Castiel’s long speech, Dean nodded, lips pursed pensively.

“I don’t know if that answers your question, but it’s the best response I can offer.”

“It does…I think it does,” Dean murmured. He nodded again, turned from Castiel, took several steps further into the store, nodded a third time, then wheeled to face Castiel, raised a hand to his t-shirt collar, tilted his head to the side and bared his neck.

Instinct and need caused Castiel to take two long strides before he forced himself to a halt, a growl buzzing in his throat.

“Dean?!”

“Do it, Cas.”

“But…but your job! And you don’t…I mean…”

Why am I hesitating? Do it, do it, do it, do it, do it—

He doesn’t love me! He’s never said he…

…oh, be serious Castiel, he and I both know he loves me. It’s not the kind of love that plans candlelit dinners or surprises me with cut flowers…and that’s good. I don’t want candlelit dinners and God forbid he buy me cut flowers when I’m surrounded by verdant, healthy, living blossoms day in and day out. No, his love led him to invite me to live with him, brought us to invest in each other’s businesses, resulted in us buying a condo together. We’re not reciprocally mated, we’re not married,
and aside from the many forms we’ve cosigned we have no legally recognized relationship, and I
don’t care. We couldn’t be more closely bound if we were wed, and we’ve only grown more intimate
over the years.

Castiel took another step forward.

Dean met his eyes, deep green rimmed in fiery alpha red.

“Castiel,” he commanded. “Mate me.”

The feet between them melted away, Castiel’s thoughts muting to a buzz as instinct and desire and
lust and hope and adoration took command of his actions. Castiel stood behind Dean, pressed his
chest to Dean’s back, skimmed his fingers then his tongue over the muscular curve of Dean’s neck.
His skin tasted of grass and soil and sunlight and growing things, amplified by the pervasive natural
smell of the Greenthumb, with a lingering hint of lemon from Dean’s earlier disquiet. Aroused,
to intoxicate, Castiel sucked at the most flavorful spots, reveling in the taste, in Dean’s tense shivers, in
the moans that accentuated Dean’s hastening breaths. Castiel’s fingers curled around Dean’s
shoulde, his erection pressed against Dean’s ass, his eyes glowed red-gold and reflected brilliant off
the night-darkened glass of the front door, and his thoughts howled for him to bite.

Yet Castiel hesitated.

“Dean…”

Dean tilted his head farther to the side.

Castiel’s last self-restraint snapped.

Castiel bared his canines, nipped at his favorite spot, and snapped, teeth tearing into Dean’s skin.
Pungent blood flooded Castiel’s mouth, like drinking down Dean’s essence distilled to its purest
form, even more refined and delicious and irresistible than Dean’s come. Dean gasped, shuddered as
if experiencing climax, and fell to his knees, tearing Castiel’s teeth free with a splatter. Red made a
growing stain down the front of Dean’s shirt and with a snarl, Castiel dropped down behind him,
placed his mouth back over the bite and sucked hard. He threw a hand over Dean’s crotch and
kneaded at his cock, rutted his erection against Dean’s ass, but it wasn’t enough. Dean’s blood, hot
as it splashed down Castiel’s shirt and vest, pungent in his throat and stomach, made Castiel dizzy,
desperate. The more he drank, the better it tasted, and he needed. Slick oozed from his ass, soiled his
underwear. Even in heat Castiel didn’t usually make enough to leak, but now…now…something in
him shifted, as profound as if the earth quaked beneath them. Castiel had never felt more himself,
ever felt more comfortable in his own skin, as a feeling of completeness and balance settled on his
shoulders, lifted as if the chains binding him had fallen away.
With another snarl, Castiel shoved Dean to the floor, straddled his legs, pulled his buttoned jeans open, reached into his boxers and exposed his dick. Saliva pooled in Castiel’s mouth, hunger and desire combined, so thick it dripped from his chin and made diffuse red stains on Dean’s shirt.

“Shit, Cas…” Dean moaned, scrambling helplessly against the poured concrete floor, arching up toward him.

Castiel went to remove his pants but he’d planned poorly – in his current position, he couldn’t take them off, but Dean’s flushed cock stood before him like a beacon, hard and erect and leaking and irresistible. Dean’s scent permeated the room, Dean’s blood made what was likely a permanent stain on the floor, and Castiel could not wait. Every second’s delay was torture. Desperate, Castiel reached to his behind, grabbed the cloth over each ass cheek and tore. The first tug did nothing but with the
second the crotch of his pants gave way. Castiel cried out triumphantly and gave his underwear the same treatment as Dean goggled at him.

“What are you—!”

Exposed, ready, so wet, so hot, so needy, Castiel didn’t wait to hear what Dean said; he clutched Dean’s cock, lined their bodies up, and slid down in a single hard movement. Dean choked. Their gazes met, Dean’s incandescent red, Castiel’s gleaming so bright they cast shadows, and Dean smirked.

“Hey, Cas.”

“Hello, Dean.” Spit caught in Castiel’s throat made him guttural. Dean spread him open, so good, always so good, filling him, pleasuring him, completing him.

*My other half, in every sense…*

*My mate.*

“Did you have a good day?” asked Castiel.

“Not bad,” Dean replied, shrugging his unbitten shoulder. “Been getting steadily better. You?”

“I’d say one of the best of my life,” said Castiel, “but that would mean picking. So many of our days and nights together have been fantastic…how could I choose?”

Dean rolled his eyes but his smile softened tenderly…lovingly. He lifted his hands and settled them on Castiel’s hips. Leaning forward, Castiel brushed a kiss over Dean’s new mating bite, along his neck and the sharp cut of his jawbone, and licked at his lips. Sweetness and Dean’s fresh scent suffused his senses and he leaned up, expression soft with affection. Blood smeared red over Dean’s skin, and even that was endearing, a contrast to the glow of his eyes and the flush staining his cheeks.

“Are you ready?” asked Dean with a suggestive wiggle of his hips.

“I’m always ready for you, Dean,” Castiel replied with an equally suggestive wink. Castiel lifted his weight on his knees at the same moment Dean tightened his grip and urged him up. Pleasure billowed outwards as Dean rubbed through his channel, as good as the first time, the dozenth time, hundredth time – no, better, always better, inconceivably better. With a replete sigh, Castiel threw his head back, closed his eyes, settled his weight on his heels and sank back down.

“So good,” he breathed.

“I’m so here for fifty more years of this,” Dean breathed, nudging Castiel to lift himself again. Castiel obeyed, steadying himself by reaching behind himself and wrapping his hands around Dean’s thighs. “I’m not going anywhere. Ever. I’m here for you, Cas.”

*I love you, Cas.*

*So many ways he tells me, each more meaningful than if he casually threw the words out like so many do.*

*There’s no one else for me, and there’s no one else for him.*

“Me too, Dean…me too…I’m yours…”
“…yours…”

Moans filled the empty, quiet foyer. Pleasure pushed Castiel higher and higher, and he hoped for this rapture, this feeling, this love, to never end.

No.

He didn’t hope.

He knew it wouldn’t end.

Dean and he had found each other. Whatever the future held, what they’d had together could never be stolen away.

The sex was fantastic, their bodies rocking together for long minutes with only heavy breathing and satisfied sighs dissipating the silence, but the gentle, loving smile gracing Dean’s face when his knot caught in Castiel’s hole and Castiel’s come soaked through the front of his trousers was better.

And to think, one chance decision, one chance encounter led us here…if I’d not gone out that night, we might have never had this.

Castiel shifted forward, wrapped his arms beneath Dean’s head, pressed his mouth to Dean’s scabbed-over bite, and held Dean tight. Dean’s arms slid up his sides wrapped around his back, and drew him nearer.

“I’m here, Castiel. I’ll always be here.”

He knotted me, trusted me, taught me about myself, saved me, loved me…who would I be without Dean?

I’d be Castiel Novak-Shurley, son of Naomi Novak, husband of April Kelly, third in line to run International Angel Deposit Bank.

I am Castiel Winchester, mate of Dean Winchester, owner of the Greenthumb. My life is so much better, so much richer, than I ever dared dream it would be.

I didn’t do it alone, couldn’t have done it alone – without Benny and Gabriel and Anna and Sam, without Alfie and Dr. Barnes and Bobby, but most of all…Dean.

“Thank you,” murmured Castiel. Dean’s arms spasmed, tightening their embrace. “Th—”

“Thank you, Cas. I coulda done all this alone – built a life, launched a hedge fund, supported Sammy through college, all of it – but God, it’s been so much better doin’ it with you – doin’ it together.”

How does he echo my thoughts so accurately and effectively?

Do I really need to ask? Because we’re mates, true mates, and we’re together…always together…

“My omega.”

Castiel choked on a sob that rose through him unexpectedly, whatever he’d been about to say flitting from his mind.

“My alpha – my Dean!”

“Together.” Dean’s voice was thick with happy tears. 
I’m not sure how we arrived at this place, at this point, in our relationship or our lives, but I’m so glad…

“Together…”

With a content sigh, Castiel eased against Dean and reveled in his embrace, reveled in the joy his life had become.

I won’t pretend that the pain and repression of my first thirty years were worth it since they led me to this point. But I’m glad I’m here now. I’m glad we’re here now.

“Your floor is really uncomfortable,” mumbled Dean.

“It was your idea to have me give you a mating bite here.”

“You initiated sex!”

“What did you think would happen?”

“…that’s fair.”

“Thank you.”

“And hey, at least this time, we had our serious conversation before we got knotted! Progress!”

“You consider our habit of having vital heart-to-heart relationship building communication mid-coitus a problem?”

“You don’t?”

Castiel shrugged. “We manage. At least we communicate.”

“Alright – alright, here’s the plan – we expand your office and put in a cot. That way, next time we have sex at Greenthumb—”

“Next time?”

“—we won’t pound my coccyx into the pavement. I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“If you’re old what does that make me?”

“Course I’m old, you’re just older. And I don’t see you volunteering to get grinded into the pavement.”

“We shouldn’t be having a sex at the Greenthumb. There won’t be a next time.”

“You say that like this is the first time. Actually, now that I think about it, you said the same thing almost word for word last time…” Dean gave him a lascivious wink. Castiel rolled his eyes.

“…fine, we’ll get a cot.”

“Victory!”

“Anything for you, Dean…”

“Be careful, makin’ blanket offers like that? I might take ya up on it sometime…”
“Of course the cot would have blankets. Why wouldn't I offer blankets on a cot?"

“Dude don’t you know it makes me horny when you go all literal? Sends shivers down my spine…”

“We’re still knotted, if you’re horny you can hump me,” Castiel grinned. “And you can ask me for anything anytime…I’m here for you, too, Dean.”

“I know you are, angel. I know you are…you stupid, incredible son of a bitch.”

“I love you too.”

“Cas…don’t—”

“And my mother really was a bitch. Good riddance.”

“Amen, Cas. Amen.”

_This is my family now, and I couldn’t have found a better one._

_Thank God, and amen, Dean. Amen._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, everyone. I hope you enjoyed!

For updates, ficlets, art, or if you just want to chat, follow me on Tumblr at unforth-ninawaters.

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