Wooden Horses

by Katie (katieandsav)

Summary

Castiel is a veteran, recently returned from Afghanistan; unsure of where to take his life and verging on homeless, Cas falls deep into depression and is plagued by memories of his time at war--until he encounters a charming and unbelievably insistent bartender named Dean. Castiel's wary of allowing himself to get close to Dean, scared he'll do more damage than good--especially when an old war friend of Castiel's shows up looking to rekindle their companionship.

Notes

This story is being edited as I go along, so please bear with me if you find any grammatical/consistency errors--I'll fix them as soon as I can.
Chapter 1

The airport smells like sweat.

It’s a muggy, sour smell, trodden down into the worn carpets by muddied boots—it’s a stench Castiel’s used to. He wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s comforting, but it’s definitely familiar. It’s the smell he’s fallen asleep to and the smell he’s awoken to for almost two years exactly.

It’s a better smell than blood.

Castiel’s bag straps are digging into the well-worn spots on his shoulders. A blister on the side of his heel has just burst. A hangnail on his thumb catches on the material of his shirt.

And he’s home.

A hand claps his shoulder, snapping him out of his daze.

“Jeez, kid, you look like you’re gonna pass out. Do I hafta be ready to catch you?”

Castiel immediately stiffens, hand going to his gun. Panic shoots through his veins, ice cold and needling, when he finds no grip to wrap his fingers around. It takes him a moment to orientate himself, to remember that he’s safe, before he turns his gaze to Gabriel.

The other man’s caramel-coloured hair is greasy and cut short; lines that don’t belong are carved beneath his eyes and into his forehead, adding years to his appearance. Despite this, he’s wearing the same easy grin as ever, though it falters at Castiel’s expression.

“Whoa, cool it, pal—I ain’t no head-banger,” Gabriel says, and though his tone is reassuring, Castiel flinches.

“I’ve asked you not to use that term around me,” replies Castiel quietly, looking ahead. “It’s disrespectful toward Muslim culture.”

“Those damn Ragheads have been trying to kill us for the past two years and you’re worried about hurting their feelings?”

“Gabriel,” Castiel snaps.

Gabriel steps away and holds up his hands, mollifying. “Alright, alright, relax. I’ll shut up, Jesus. But seriously, you sure you ain’t gonna pull a…”—he twirls his finger around his ear, making a whistling noise—“…Patrick Bateman, right? You’ve been acting real weird ever since we got on the ’plane.”

“I’m fine, Gabriel.”

“I’m holding you to that. I dunno ’bout you, Cas, but I sure as hell don’t want you going all Reservoir Dogs on me and cutting off my ear or something—so if you try to stab me while I’m showering, I’m gonna be pissed.”

Castiel smiles, but can’t bring himself to reply. Instead, he allows Gabriel to continue talking about films until they reach the door to the pickup hall. The two slow to a halt and stand in silence for a moment. Castiel’s eyes find the grubby, mustard-coloured carpet and drag up the metal door. It’s covered in smudged handprints, all long and tapering off at the edge like the fingers attached
couldn’t wait to leave the door’s surface.

There’s no dirt on the other side of that door, Castiel thinks. There are no deserts or guns pointing at you. On the other side of that door are families awaiting their loved ones.

And he’s almost foolish enough to think that his family might be there too.

“...ghanistan can suck my dick!” Gabriel finishes off triumphantly as he shoves the door open and walks into the bright light, but Castiel doesn’t follow.

The memory hits him like a punch to the gut.

“I’m not related to a dirty fucking faggot!” Michael hisses vehemently. The sound of the vase crashing to the floor is almost deafening as Michael shoves it aside to storm up to Castiel.

Castiel scrubs a hand over his face, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Michael, please, you’re not listening to what I’m trying to say.”

“I’ve listened, Castiel, and I don’t want to hear anything more.”

There’s a high pitched wail from behind Michael. Castiel can’t see Rachel’s face, but he can hear her sobs. She’s repeating something about repentance; Castiel can’t make out her exact words, but she sounds like she’s begging something of him.

Castiel’s breaths are audible, short and fast and hard as Michael backs him up against the wall. A vein in his older brother’s temple is pulsating, worm-like and purple beneath his skin.

This is not how Castiel had planned for it to go.

“I’m still your brother,” Castiel chokes out thinly, bracing his hands against the wall behind himself. “Michael, I haven’t changed—”

Every sound in the world seems mute except for that of Michael’s hand colliding with Castiel’s cheek. The slap burns, hot and harsh, as if Michael’s handprint has been seared onto Castiel’s face.

There are several moments of silence as the two stare at each other—Castiel’s gaze shocked, Michael’s cold and angry.

“Get out,” says Michael quietly. His face is inches from Castiel’s now; his breath is wetly scorching against Castiel’s skin. He grabs Castiel’s wrist, digging blunt nails into his skin. “Get out and don’t you dare come back, or I’ll call the police—I oath it to the Lord. I don’t associate with damnable cocksuckers.”

Castiel’s mouth opens and closes as he tries to find something to say, but then Michael’s shoving him and Castiel stumbles, catching himself on the doorframe. He stops to look back at his family—Ion and Naomi, stoic and still. Hael comforting Rachel. Michael staring back at him with undisguised hatred.

Castiel turns and runs; despite the blood roaring in his ears, he somehow still manages to hear Michael telling the others that Castiel deserves to burn in Hell.
“Cas? Cas. Hey, Cas. Ground control to Major Tom.”

Castiel blinks, staring at Gabriel for a moment. “What?” he asks.

“You spaced out on me, kid,” says Gabriel skeptically. He waves a hand in front of Castiel’s face, as if trying to make sure he’s fully conscious.

“I…” Castiel pauses, inhaling deeply. “My apologies. I did not mean to… space out.”

“Uh, right, whatever you say, bucko.” Gabriel runs a hand through his messy hair, spinning in a little circle as he considers something. “Look,” he says, turning back to Castiel. “How’s about we go out for drinks, huh? Celebrate our freedom. Maybe get laid. Sound good?”

Gabriel’s plan is like a sip of cold water on a dizzyingly hot day; relief floods Castiel, grounding him.

For as long as home has had a fixed date, Castiel’s been ignoring the fact that he doesn’t exactly have anywhere to go. When he’d enlisted for the army, he was living on the streets, scrounging out of trashcans because his morals kept him from shoplifting; eventually, he’d thought it better to be at risk of not coming “home” each day than to have no home at all.

Now, he’s back to square one, and even though Gabriel’s suggestion is only short-term, it’s better than nothing.

“Yes,” Castiel says after a moment. “Yes, that sounds pleasant.”

The bar they arrive at is a perfect example of “skeezy”—dark lighting, smoggy air, women in brassieres serving the drinks. Castiel immediately feels claustrophobic, closed in by the thick mesh of sweaty bodies.

Gabriel, however, looks in his element.

Castiel draws in a breath, the thick, hot air tasting devoid of oxygen as it settles on his tongue. Gabriel shoots him a grin, white and sly and full of mischief, as he struts over to the counter at the back of the bar and pulls himself up onto a seat.

“Hey, angel,” he purrs to a pretty redhead behind the bar counter as Castiel comes up behind him. She raises her eyebrows at him.

“What can I get for you, Rambo?” she acknowledges with a half smile as she swipes a damp cloth across the scratched surface of the counter.

“A little slice of hot redhead in a blue bra?” Gabriel asks, all innocent smiles and big eyes.

“That’s only on the VIP menu—sorry, soldier boy.” The redhead winks and turns to the liquor store along the back wall. “Anything else for you and your friend?”

“Best beer there is, babe. Me and my pal Cas here just got outta Asscrapistan. Two year long tour. You know what you see out there in the shitbox?”

“Nope, never been,” says the redhead as she fills two mugs up with foaming, golden liquid. Her
green eyes are filled with light amusement as she watches Gabriel, who leans across the bar to talk to her. “Fill me in?”

Gabriel patters his hands on the counter like a drumroll before announcing, “Dirt. Fuckin’ dirt. Everywhere.”

Castiel’s vaguely aware of the redhead laughing, but his entire world narrows down to the mug of beer as it’s slid over to him. He clasps it in his hands, watching the foam recede millimeter by millimeter before he lifts the rim to his lips and drinks.

The beer’s warm and watery and it burns Castiel’s sore throat as it gushes down into the belly. He can feel some of it dribbling onto his chin as he continues to gulp the liquid down, but he doesn’t stop until the mug is empty.

By now, Castiel is aware of the way Gabriel and the barmaid are watching him. He slowly sets the mug down, cupping it in his palms, and strokes his thumb up and down the side of the chipped glass.

“Well,” Gabriel says after a moment. “Someone here’s drinkin’ to get drunk.”

“I would like another drink,” Castiel murmurs. “This one stronger, if possible.”

“We’ve got some Absolut here, if you’re up for it?” the redhead suggests. She pronounces the name of the liquor somewhat incorrectly, Castiel notices vaguely—she doesn’t round her a, rather letting herself say it as if it were an English word.

“That sounds suitable.” Castiel finally looks up, noticing the flicker of concern in the redhead’s eyes. He forces a slight smile to reassure her of his wellbeing; she doesn’t look totally convinced, though, as she turns away to retrieve the vodka and glass.

“So, anyway,” Gabriel continues after a moment, “you got a tattoo?”

“Hmm? Oh, this thing?” The redhead pauses in unscrewing the lid to the vodka bottle to touch a small, black tattoo on her hipbone. It’s a simple symbol—a circle sliced down the middle by a line and surrounded by a triangle. “I got it a couple years back.” She shrugs. “I was drunk. It was Comic Con.”

Castiel fidgets restlessly as she speaks, eyes fixed on the clear liquid in the vodka bottle. His fingers itch to curl around the cool glass of the bottle; to feel the smooth drag of the lettering against the pad of his thumb and the icy-hot rake of the liquid down his throat.

The redhead continues to talk, to laugh. Her face is animated and alive, Castiel’s drink completely forgotten about as she converses with Gabriel—

“Give me my drink,” Castiel bursts out, suddenly angry with the way he’s been disregarded. He went through hell for his country and this girl, this bubbly creature with her fiery hair and drunken tattoos, has the audacity to ignore him like none of it matters?

He can feel his face flushing with indignity, each stuttering thathump thathump thathump of his heart roaring above the music. He clenches his fists beneath the bar, short fingernails digging hard into his palms.

A sudden, sharp pain shoots up his right hand; Castiel can feel warm liquid pooling out his skin and dripping down his hand. He sucks in a quick breath, dropping his gaze to his hand. Crimson blood trickles out four fingernail-shaped cuts in his palms.
The red haze fades from Castiel’s vision as he wipes his hand on his pants, then looks up to see the twin shocked expressions on his friend and the barmaid’s faces. The way they stare at Castiel makes him shift uncomfortably and feel ill at ease; it occurs to him that the words may have come out louder than intended.

“I… I’m very thirsty,” Cas amends, stomach twisting.

“Right. Um. Sure, dude.” The redhead smiles at him, as if her discomfort isn’t blatantly obvious. She pushes the glass and vodka bottle toward him as she takes a step back. “On the house to make up for the inconvenience. I’ve got, um, some other customers to deal with. Give me a shout if you boys, um, need me.” She nods slightly, grabbing her cloth from earlier off the counter and wringing it in her hands before turning and hurrying away.

“See ya, cutie,” calls Gabriel. He watches her go, then, without turning to face Castiel, says, “Kid, what the hell’s up with you?”

“I’m fine,” replies Castiel as he removes the lid of the bottle and sets it on the counter. He briefly considers whether to use the glass the redhead had set out or the much bigger beer mug from earlier.

He opts for the latter.

“Bullshit,” Gabriel decides, leaning over to grab Castiel’s now overfull mug and cover the top with his hand. His honey-coloured eyes burn into Castiel’s face, scrutinizing. “What’s wrong with you, huh? What’s got you acting like this?”

“I’m celebrating,” Castiel replies tersely. “As per your suggestion. Now would you be so kind as to give me my drink?” Without waiting for a reply, he winds his fingers round the mug’s handle and tugs it back. There’s a brief moment of resistance, but Gabriel eventually relinquishes his hold.

“Just. Cool it, will ya? You’re freaking me out, kiddo. Known you for two years and now you’re going acting all American Psycho after a sip of beer. Keep this up and we’re outta here, got it?”

Castiel doesn’t say anything, rather concentrating on finishing the vodka as quickly as possible so he can refill his glass again.

Castiel’s seen Gabriel drunk before. He knows he’s a loud, flirty, cheerful drunk: one that boasts of his female conquests and happily seeks out more.

But this knowledge doesn’t stop Castiel from curling in on himself and fixing his attention on his drink, unable to watch Gabriel attempt to sleaze his way into another woman’s bed.

The girl Gabriel’s fixed his attention on now is older than the others, with feline eyes and wavy dark hair. She’s beautiful, radiating a mischievous energy that Castiel guesses is what draws Gabriel to her.

As Gabriel makes some sort of comment about the woman’s father being an astronaut, Castiel swills his liquor around in his glass, frowning down at it. He can’t remember exactly what it is that he’s drinking, but it’s potent. The viscous white liquid slides over brownish dregs of something at the bottom of his glass.
He makes a musing sound and tips the white liquid back, choking slightly on the sweetness. The glass clunks as he sets it down clumsily to wipe the liquor off his chin; it’s sticky, causing a squelching sound as his fingers part from the skin of his face.

“So. Paaam,” Gabriel drawls as he beams up at the woman. “You ever had a threesome?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, sweetcheeks,” replies the woman, pinching Gabriel’s cheek with a laugh. “Why, you got something in mind?”

Gabriel grins at Pam, then leans over to talk to Castiel. “Hey, Cas, whaddaya think of the whole it’s not gay if it’s a threeway thing, huh? I mean, usually I’d call BS, but if you’re up for it…”

“I’d rather not engage in coitus tonight,” mumbles Castiel, not sure if his reply is audible but not really caring either. He reaches over to grab one of the several bottles of liquor on the table of the booth they’d moved to; he doesn’t exactly know who’s paying for all these drinks, but he isn’t complaining. As he fills up his glass and takes another sip, he concludes that the source of the alcohol could be accredited to Gabriel’s apparent plethora of new friends.

“You’re not even fun when you’re drunk, Cas,” complains Gabriel. He turns to the woman—Pam. “This kid hasn’t done the horizontal tango for twenty four months, y’know. The fact that he ain’t itchin’ to get his load off is just further proof that he’s an alien, if ya ask me.”

Pam apparently asks about previous evidence, because then Gabriel’s going off on a dramatic tangent: “Well, first of all, he talks like he’s got a stick so far up his ass he’s gonna puncture a lung,” declares Gabriel. “Then, he has this thing where he sees religious sym… symbolosim… symbolickism…?”

“Symbolism?” suggests Pam bemusedly.

“Yeah, that ’un! He sees religious symbolism in freakin’ cartoons. It’s nuts!”

Castiel looks up, opening his mouth to reply, but is cut off by the bitter taste of bile gushing onto his tongue.

With a choked sound, he hauls himself to his feet and uncoordinatedly pushes through the throng of perspiring bodies, staggering as he tries to figure out where the bathroom is. He gulps down, trying to prevent the bile from resurfacing. Gabriel calls something after him, but he can’t make out what as his eyes focus on the exit sign, glowing green in the smoky air.

In a split second, he makes the decision to get out the bar as soon as possible—before all the alcohol he’s been consuming reappears.

Just as Castiel reaches the green sign, a fingers clasp around his arm. He freezes momentarily in terror, then, without thinking, whirls around and slams his fist into his attacker’s face. The assailant is knocked off their feet, crashing back into a table and taking it to the ground with them.

Castiel feels momentarily lightheaded with the relief of victory—until he notices that the bar’s gone silent, save for the tinny sound of some old rock song whining through the speakers of the rundown jukebox in the corner.

Slowly, Castiel realises who it is on the floor—the redheaded barmaid from earlier. She’s looking up at him now, green eyes wide and shining with tears about to brim over.

There’s blood, Castiel sees. It’s dripping off her cheekbone and smearing all over her hand when she touches the back of her head.
“I…” Castiel starts, but suddenly Gabriel’s in front of him, his golden eyes clear and sober. He looks between his friend and the girl on the floor, scrubbing a hand over his face before grabbing Castiel’s arm and yanking him away from the scene.

“Shit, kid, the hell did you do?” asks Gabriel lowly once they’re outside.

Castiel stares at him, uncomprehending. “She attacked me,” he says lamely.

“No, she didn’t, Einstein. She came over to our table to apologise for takin’ so long with your drink earlier and I told her you’d skedaddled off to pray or something. She wanted to say sorry, Cas—even though you’re the one that threw a bitchfit.”

“Oh,” is all Castiel can offer. And then he’s bent over, shoulders shaking with retches as he empties the contents of his stomach all over the ground. His gut roils with each breath he takes, the vomit burning his throat on the way up.

Gabriel swears behind him and gingerly lays a hand on his back, patting lightly until Castiel’s done.

Castiel inhales deeply and blinks down at the sick all over his shoes. A line of the stuff trails down the slight decline of the alleyway, watery from the lack of food in Castiel's stomach.

He swallows, then straightens up and leans back against the alley wall, relishing the cool air against his sweaty skin.

“Jesus Christ, kiddo,” murmurs Gabriel as he studies Castiel’s face. “I think you’d better crash at my place for the night.”

Castiel makes a vague sound of agreement.

“Okay. Okay, look.” Gabriel digs in his pocket, retrieving a keychain and a wad of cash, shoving the items into Castiel’s hand. “I’ll go inside and call a cab for you, then I’ll try to convince Charlie back there not to press charges or anything. Alright?”

“Y-yes,” Castiel gets out as he curls his fingers around the items.

“Right.” Gabriel nods, turning back to the door. He pauses. “Hey, Cas?”

Castiel glances at him, trying to ignore the bitter taste in his mouth.

“Just. Just promise me you’ll never drink again. Like, ever.”

Castiel doesn’t reply, instead just shutting his eyes and sliding down the wall to sit on the ground. A couple moments later, he can hear Gabriel walking inside and shutting the door behind himself.
Nine months later

Castiel’s head hurts. Badly. He wonders vaguely if he’s been shot during the night, or perhaps had part of his skull sawn off with a rusty butter knife.

He knows that neither scenarios are the case, of course, because he’s used to this feeling—in fact, it’s become an almost constant state of being for him.

Castiel hates hangovers.

He slowly opens his eyes. It’s early evening: weak, dusky grey light filters through the scraggly blankets taped over the window beside Castiel’s moth-bitten armchair. He watches dust motes dance in the pale wash of light for a couple moments, then exhales and slowly sits up in the chair, having slid down while he was sleeping. As he does so, it feels like all the blood drops out his head.

In his hand is crumpled a piece of paper; Castiel frowns down at it, unsure of its origins until he opens it up and stares at the picture within.

It’s difficult to make out at first—all sketchy blue lines and slightly smudged ink—but the image soon becomes visible: it’s a man screaming, his face contorted in pain. The features aren’t proportional—the man’s shut eyes are much too large for his face, as is his wide open mouth and its chipped teeth. He clutches a helmet to his chest, broken nails digging into the camouflage-patterned surface.

The image cuts off at the man’s hips, where the messy strokes become straight, orderly ones, organized in a grid-like pattern. Scribbled across the grid is a single word: Thursday.

Castiel sucks in a quiet breath and rips the drawing in half, then into quarters, eighths, sixteenths. The pieces flutter to the ground like a pathetic shower of confetti—but at least he doesn’t have to see the man’s twisted face again. He somewhat recalls drawing it in the early hours of the morning, being drunk to the point of later forgetting what prompted the drawing but sober enough not to lose memory of its origins entirely.

Castiel makes a quiet sound of discontentment and hauls himself to his feet, every one of his muscles aching with the movement. After a moment of lightheaded disorientation, Castiel staggers to the tiny bathroom attached to his bedroom and grabs the rim of the cracked, dirty sink to steady himself. The knob of the faucet whines in protest as he turns it and wets his toothbrush beneath the feeble dribble of water.

He ran out of toothpaste three days ago, so he doesn’t bother looking for the tube before he scrapes the fraying bristles of the brush against his fuzzy teeth in an attempt to get rid of the vile taste in his mouth. Castiel doesn’t look in the mirror, for he already knows what he’ll see: a pale, gaunt face; greasy, too-long hair; and sunken eyes cupped by almost theatrically dark rings.

He doesn’t like that face.

Castiel spits out the residual water in his mouth and rubs a hand over his jaw. He can see across the miniscule apartment to the door from where he stands beside the basin.
As he contemplates his coming course of action, a group of voices singing tunelessly rings in his head:

“Th’ only way t’cure hango’ers is t’get smashed again!
T’get smashed again!
T’get smashed again!
Th’ only way t’cure hango’ers is t’get smashed right off ya ass!”

Castiel’s gaze flits to the creased resume on his bed. It’s too late to go out job-hunting again, he reasons pathetically with himself as he walks over to the front door and grabs the dirty trench coat off the hook attached to it. He pulls the coat on, yanking open the door and stepping out into the hall. His apartment keys are still in jammed in the lock; he stuffs them into his pocket and shuts the door behind himself.

The hallway, like always, smells of urine and some other acidly sweet scent that Castiel doesn’t dare think too hard about. He hates his apartment building and its rude residents—particularly Gordon across the hall, who refers to Castiel as “the fucking useless drunk in 16B”—but he tries not to complain. After all, if it weren’t for this building, he’d be homeless once again.

It had been found by Gabriel, after he’d finally wheedled out Castiel’s admittance that he didn’t have anywhere to go.

“Okay, I know it’s kind of like… the fetid, sweaty crotch of the housing world,” Gabriel had pitched one afternoon, an ad clutched in hand, “but it’s only two-fifty dollars a month. Should be good till you get back on your feet, right?

It was, for a while, Castiel had to admit. The two-hundred and fifty dollars were easy to earn—cut some grass once a week and his lease payment would be in his hands, along with some cash to spare for other amenities. This, however, was while Castiel was still showering every day and sleeping each night.

Then, while he’d been falling asleep one night, a car had backfired—loud and sputtering. The following six hours had been spent in a haze of constant terror and memories of gunfire and blood and bodies. The next day, still on edge and exhausted from lack of sleep, was when his craving for alcohol had begun.

This was when his craving for alcohol had begun.

For the next four days Castiel had managed to keep his longing for the blessed oblivion of intoxication at bay. On the fifth, he’d spent all the money he’d earned that month—and some from the previous—at a bar.

This became his evening routine; every penny he’d earned on a day would have left his pocket by the time he’d stumbled out the bar.

And when people had stopped contacting him to mow their lawns or wash their windows, when they had stopped looking him in the eye and had crossed the street when they saw him coming—he hadn’t understood it at first. It had only occurred to him when the bartender at Castiel’s favourite haunt had politely told him, “Dios arriba, amigo, you look like shit.”

By that point, though, Castiel had stopped caring—he’d had a drink in his hand, and that was all that had mattered.

And now, as he trudges down the wet street, he still doesn’t care. The only difference is that he
doesn’t have a drink in hand at this moment—something he plans to remedy immediately.

Castiel’s jerked out his thoughts when he rounds the corner and sees the bar he’s headed for isn’t lit up like it usually is. He speeds up, his pace just shy of a jog by the time he reaches the bar.

Its doors are shut, planks of wood hammered up behind the windows—one of which holds a sign.

\[ \text{CLOSED:} \]
\[ \text{Out of business} \]
\[ \text{We apologize for any inconveniences caused} \]

Dean’s late.

That’s nothing new, of course; Dean’s always late for something. But today, he’s late for work at the bar, and that’s never a good thing because Crowley’s an asshole—and Dean sure as hell can’t afford to lose his job.

“Shit!” he exclaims, stumbling over his duffel bag as he jogs to his small bathroom. Hopping on one foot, he untangles the duffel’s strap from around his ankle and skids to a halt in front of the counter. Dean yanks a drawer open and digs around inside.

“Where the hell is—aha!” He lifts up the eyeliner pencil triumphantly, uncapping it and leaning forward to carefully trace his lower lash lines with black kohl. Dean feels a certain measure of pride when he doesn’t flinch—a problem he’d had for a good few weeks after he was told eyeliner was compulsory.

“Leaves are falling all around;
It’s time I was on my way.
Thanks to you, I’m much obliged for such a pleasant stay—
But now it’s time for me to go;
The autumn moon lights my way:
For now I smell the rain, and with it pain, and it’s headed my way…”

Dean jumps at the sound of his ringtone, accidentally poking himself in the right eye and smearing a black line in a graceful arc from the center of his cheek down to his jaw. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters as he hurries back out to his room and retrieves the buzzing Motorola from his bedside table. He glances at the caller ID then flips the phone open as he walks back to the bathroom.

“Whaddaya want, twerp?” Dean asks, pressing the speakerphone button and setting the phone down on the counter. He blinks a couple times at himself, the eye he poked earlier with the liner pencil still stinging.

“Hey, asshat,” comes Sam’s cheerful reply.

Dean raises an eyebrow as he plucks a tissue out the box, dampens it under the tap, and starts cleaning the smudge on his face. “Won’t Ellen, like, cut your dick off and feed it to you if she hears you speakin’ like that?”

“Uh. Maybe? I dunno, me and Jo make sure Ellen doesn’t hear us swear—” He pauses at the sound of a older female voice telling him, “Need to work on those sneaking-around skills then,
Dean can hear Sam’s nervous laugh and hurried apology to Ellen. He smirks a little, then says, “So, is there a reason why you called me or d’you just wanna have a girl talk session?”

The bitchface in Sam’s voice is audible. “Dean.”

“I kid, I kid.” Dean leans forward again, slowly reapplying his eyeliner, this time shading black along his upper lashes too. “Seriously, though, Sammy—what’s up? I gotta get to work in fifteen minutes and I’m already running late.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I just. Um. We’ve got to do this essay thing in one of my classes about our, uh, biggest inspiration, and everyone’s doing the obvious ones—you know, Einstein, Ghandi, Amelia Earhart—but I was, er, wondering if I could write about you?”

Dean’s hand stops midway between his face and the counter as he goes still. “Well, uh, jeez, Sammy, that’s real nice of you, but I dunno why you’d pick me as your topic. Why don’t you write about that Darwin guy? He seemed pretty neat.”

“Yeah, yeah, Darwin’s great. It’s just. You’re kinda amazing, too, Dean—you’re working two jobs and taking a firefighting course—”

“And whose fault is the last one?” Dean asks, half smiling.

“—and you took care of me when Dad went all weird after Mom died, and you pay for all my school bills and stuff, and… The point is, Dean—you’re sort of cool. So, uh, you wouldn’t mind if I wrote my essay about you, right?”

“Go right ahead. Good luck finding anything more to write than, ‘He likes pie and strippers,’ though.”

Sam laughs, earning a grin from Dean. “Thanks, Dean,” says Sam. “Enjoy work tonight. Kiss a cute girl for me, maybe.”

“We’ll see,” replies Dean, clipping the lid back on the kohl and dropping it in the drawer. “Now go do your homework or something.”

“Bye!”

There’s a beep as Sam hangs up. Dean studies the phone for a moment, then looks up to scrutinize himself in the mirror. The dark liner makes his eyes seem lighter, bigger—almost innocent; but at the same time, he looks alluringly wicked. It’s a paradoxical illusion, which is the exact reason Crowley has all the staff at Nine Circles wear the stuff.

His gaze travels downwards.

An olive utility jacket conceals the tight, leather waistcoat he wears beneath; black skinny jeans, adorned with thin silver chains, cling to his legs and ass. The only part of the ensemble that isn’t garishly provocative, save for the soon to be discarded jacket, is Dean’s scuffed pair of hiking boots.

It’s been four months, two weeks and three days, and Dean’s still procrastinating on telling Sam he works at a gay bar.

Dean sighs and scrapes his fingers through his hair, ruffling it up the way he’s been told to. It’s a
miracle Sam hasn’t insisted on visiting him at the bar yet—a miracle Dean’s grateful for. He’s still trying desperately to dodge the bullet of telling Sam what the bar’s called in case the kid tries to Google it.

Dean straightens up and looks himself over one more time.

There’s nothing inspirational about the man in the mirror who looks back at him with the same tired expression that seems to find its way onto his face whenever no one’s looking—even Shakespeare couldn’t write poetry or sonnets or classical prose about a guy who spends six out of seven nights a week faking smirks and winks and suggestive comments in the hopes of getting an extra tip.

The fact and the matter is that all those stories about the charming pauper winning over his princess and living happily ever after are complete and utter bullshit, because all those stories leave out the little brother that deserves far more than what the universe has dished out for him—the too-smart-for-his-own-good kid that could go so far in life if he wasn’t dependent on his older brother’s sleazily-earned tips and two measly paychecks each month.

The truth is, Dean thinks as he grabs his duffel and phone and heads for the door, there’s nothing romantic about barely scraping by.

Dean arrives fifteen minutes late for his shift.

He expects a berating from Crowley, some yelling and maybe a wage cut or demotion—but as he scrambles through the back door, sweaty and panting from his sprint to the bar, he’s met by a slyly smiling Benny Lafitte.

“Where’s—” Dean starts breathlessly.

“You been in that bathroom a real long time, brother,” Benny cuts in quietly, pulling his cap low over his twinkling eyes before returning his gaze to the glass he’s drying. He tips his head toward the door leading out the kitchen and into the main area of the bar. “You better hurry on out there if you don’t want Crowley thinking you were late or anything like that.”

It takes Dean a moment to register what the other man’s hinting at, then he drops his duffel and breaks out in a wide grin. “Benny, man, you’re a life saver.”

“Covering for your useless hide’s what I do, ain’t it?”

“I owe you one,” says Dean as he unzips his utility jacket and dumps it in the corner. The kitchen’s warm air is welcoming against his expanses of suddenly bare skin.

Benny huffs out a breath of laughter, setting down the glass. “By now, brother, you owe me fifty.”

Dean pauses, frowning a little as he reaches up to touch the back of his leather waistcoat. The strings are loose. With a sigh, he says, “Let’s make it fifty-one, then—you mind tying up the lacy shit at the back here? It’s come undone.”

Benny smirks and saunters over to Dean, skillfully weaving the strings at the back of his waistcoat together in a crisscross pattern and tying them at the bottom. His fingers move nimbly and quickly,
“This whole fake corset thing is BS,” grumbles Dean. “What’s the point?”

“Pretty ones like you suit the femme look,” drawls Benny, clapping Dean lightly on the shoulder and stepping back once he’s done. “Now go serve some drinks before Crowley comes a-knockin’ again.”

“Right, yeah, okay.” Dean strides over to the door, glancing over his shoulder at Benny. “Thanks again, man.”

Benny tips his cap at him and smiles.

The steady thumping of base that Dean could hear from the kitchen becomes almost deafening as he steps into the bar. Some dance song is blaring over the speakers, its unthe-unthe-unthe rhythm upbeat and buoying the mood.

Anyone would admit that Nine Circles has a good atmosphere—smoky and dark, it’s decorated in deep maroons and reds. Despite being a typical gay bar in some senses, it still manages to maintain some air of class with its crystal chandeliers and velvet furniture.

The bar is split into nine separate multilevel circles, keeping in theme with the name—the largest of the circles being the dance floor. Another, around half the size of the dance floor and set near the back of the room, is the bar itself. The other seven are full of large, plush couches and settees.

It’s a busy night, Dean notes as he makes his way over to the counter. He can count on good tips.

The first man he serves is short and scrawny, with curly hair and a beard. As he asks for his margarita, he looks ill at ease; Dean makes sure to throw in as many encouraging smiles and flirty remarks as he can to boost the poor guy’s confidence. No doubt, he’s only just accepted that he isn’t all that into girls.

The next customers Dean serves are the usual—built, shirtless guys that wink and drop crass hints. Half an hour in, he’s lost count of the amount of times someone’s asked him if he wants to “get out of here”—which also means he’s lost count of his promises to consider taking the proposer up on his offer once his shift’s over.

He never actually does, of course.

Dean’s nearing his break when he hears a quiet, gravelly voice talking to him.

“Excuse me if I’m interrupting,” says the voice, “but I would like to order a drink. If possible.”

“Sure thing, hot stuff,” replies Dean without looking up from the bottles he’s organizing. “What can I get for ya? How ’bout a Purple Nurple? I make a pretty mean one, if I do say so myself.”

“A ‘Purple Nurp—?’” A pause. “No. Just a beer will be fine, thank you.”

Dean glances up, detecting the uneasiness in the man’s voice, and is startled by the bluest eyes he’s ever seen.

Said blue eyes are wide, gaze flitting about the room nervously. Dean raises an eyebrow at the man, taking in his messy hair and scruffy jaw.

“You okay there?” Dean asks the man, retrieving a glass and placing it under the beer tap as he
twists the knob. He watches the golden liquid slowly fill the glass until it’s just about to brim over, then hands the mug to the man.

“I’m… fine,” says the man as he takes the beer and downs it all in one go.

Dean squints at him, then leans forward and rests his forearms on the counter. “For some reason, I ain’t buying that. You wanna talk it through?”

“I wouldn’t want to burden you with my troubles,” replies the man as he sets the glass down on the counter.

Dean snorts. “Everyone knows bartenders hear about more plights than therapists. C’mon, spill the beans—trouble with the boyfriend?” he asks.

“What?” The man looks startled for a moment, eyes fixing on Dean’s face, his brows pulling together. “Oh. No. I’m not in a relationship at present.”

Dean suppresses a smile at that. “Then what’s bitin’ at your ass?”

“I’m…” the man starts, staring down at his empty glass. “I suppose you could say I’m having difficulty finding a job—”

He’s cut off by a loud banging sound feeding over the speakers. Dean jumps, nearly knocking over a bottle of whisky by his elbow. He whirs around, frowning up at the speakers before asking one of the other bartenders, “The fuck was that?”

The other man shrugs and turns back to a customer.

Dean grunts irritably and looks back at the man. “Sorry ’bout that, I dunno what…”

He trails off at the sight of the man’s face.

The man’s eyes, still so ridiculously blue, are now feverishly bright and the size of plates. He’s sitting stiffly, but his entire form is quaking, his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths.

“Whoa,” Dean says, startled. “You don’t look so good.”

The man doesn’t reply.

“Uh, dude?” Dean asks, snapping his fingers in front of the man’s face, but still earning no response. “Oh, fuck,” breathes Dean, looking around as if the solution to the situation was taped to some shirtless guy’s chest.

“Okay,” he says after a moment, pulling himself over the counter to stand beside the man. “Okay, listen here, uh… buddy. I think you’re having a panic attack or something, so I’m gonna take you back there to the kitchen. Alright? It’s quieter in there, and maybe my friend Benny can help. Benny’s the cook,” he adds.

The man doesn’t look at Dean, his breath coming in short, fast gasps now, but he gives the slightest of nods.

Dean exhales in relief at the response and carefully helps the man up, touching the small of his back lightly and leading him back round the counter to the door. Dean shoves the door open with his shoulder, blinking in the bright white light.

Benny glances up from his station with a grin, faltering at the sight of the man half leaning against
“Whoa, someone ain’t looking too good,” says Benny, grabbing a chair from the corner of the room and pulling it up. Dean guides the man over to it and helps him sit down.

“I—I—I think he’s having a panic attack or something,” Dean says, looking down at the hyperventilating man.

“I figured that much,” Benny replies with a frown. “You know what triggered it?”

“Yeah, I think—there was this banging noise over the speakers. A sound error or something. And then this happened.” He gestures to the man.

“Crowley needs to get that thing fixed or so help me,” Benny replies, then kneels down in front of the man and touches his knee lightly. The man seizes up, clenching his fists so tightly his knuckles go white.

In the light, Dean can see how pale he is; he can see dark circles smudged beneath those cobalt eyes and how the man’s hair sticks to his face with perspiration.

“Wait, hold on,” Dean says, nudging Benny out the way so he can kneel in front of the man. He studies the man’s face for a couple moments, then says, softly, “My name’s Dean.”

The man blinks at him, silently, then manages to get out a choked, “Castiel.”

“Your name’s Castiel?”

The man nods slightly.

“Well, Castiel—I know you’re scared right now, but I promise you’re safe. Yeah? It was just a sound mistake. There’s no danger here.”

Castiel doesn’t respond, instead just watching Dean with ragged, uneven gasps of breath.

Dean furrows his brow slightly, trying to remember what Ellen had told him to do if Sam ever had an anxiety attack after their dad had died.

“Hey, Castiel, you think you can concentrate on your breathing for me?”

No response. Just wide eyes.

Dean continues anyway. “Look, what I need you to do is breathe in for… seven seconds, and out for eleven. Y’think you can try that?”

Castiel squeezes his eyes shut and nods again, just as slightly as before.

“Thanks, man. Okay. I’m gonna count with you. In—one, two, three, four, five…”

As Dean counts, Castiel measures his breaths accordingly. It’s obviously difficult for him; every now and then, Castiel’s breath hitches, but he rights himself in the end each time without fail.

Dean smiles slightly. “Good job,” he praises, tone soft, when Castiel’s breathing starts to slow down. “You’re doing great, Cas.” He glances over his shoulder at Benny. “Is there a damp cloth anywhere?”

Benny nods silently and grabs a dishtowel, dampening it under a tap and wringing it out before
handed it to Dean, who, in turn, gives it to Castiel.

“Press it to your face and neck and stuff to help you cool down,” Dean offers by way of explanation.

Castiel does as he’s told. His eyes are still shut, hands shaking slightly and skin a ghostly white, but he’s not perspiring or panting anymore.

“There ya go…” Dean murmurs, studying Castiel’s face.

Castiel slowly opens his eyes again to blink at Dean owlishly for a few moments, then look at Benny, too. “Thank you,” he manages roughly after a moment. “Thank you, Dean and Benny. I apologise for the trouble I’ve caused.”

“No problem, Cas,” Dean replies. “You wanna hang back here with us for a bit? No offence, dude, but I don’t think you should head back out into the main area for a while.”

“If it would not be too much of an inconvenience, I… I would like to stay here. Please.”

A moment later, Benny’s handed Castiel a glass of water. “Stay as long as you like,” says the cook, face somber but eyes warm.
“So, Blue Eyes, what brings you round these parts?” the apron wearing man—Benny—asks. Though he glances up, it’s obvious that his attention is fixed on the platter he’s laying out—Castiel can’t see exactly what food Benny’s setting on the tray, but it looks like an assortment of kebabs and mini hamburgers.

“My, er. My usual haunt of choice shut down. It was less crowded than this,” Castiel replies.

“You think that could be the reason why it shut up shop?” Dean hazards from where he sits on a counter, swinging his legs. As Castiel looks at him, he feels an odd sort of blustery feeling overtaking him.

Dean’s truly a sight to behold—wearing only a low-cut leather waistcoat and figure-hugging jeans, what seems like miles of tanned, freckled skin is revealed. He leans his weight back on his palms, the toned muscles of his arms flexing with the slight strain; in the light, his black-lined eyes are a shocking shade of green—a colour verging on unreal, it’s so bright—and Castiel can see that his hair isn’t brown but a dark, golden blonde.

“Possibly,” manages Castiel, noticing how Benny raises an eyebrow at his tone.

“So your quiet bar closed, and that’s what brought you to the rowdiest gay local in the freakin’ state,” Dean says. “Shit, Cas, no wonder you had a panic attack with a scenery change like that.”

Castiel sucks in a breath, feeling his face flush as he averts his gaze.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on, I didn’t mean it like that—” Dean starts to amend.

“No,” Castiel cuts in. “You’re right. It was a foolish decision on my part.”

There’s a moment of silence; Castiel notices the look Dean and Benny exchange. He watches them questioningly.

“I ain’t bothered, kid,” Benny says to Dean, concentrating on cutting a pineapple into small, precise cubes. “Your choice.”

Dean nods then peers at Castiel, examining him for a moment. “Okay, look, Cas. It sucks pretty bad that your bar’s closed down, so here’s a deal—whenever you want a drink at Nine Circles, you can sit back here in the kitchen so it don’t get too overwhelming. I work Mondays to Saturdays, sometimes a full shift and sometimes only a half, and Benny works Monday through Friday. S’long as one of us is here, you got the go ahead to hang out back here. You got yourself an all-purpose VIP pass, dude.”

“What’s my side of the deal?” asks Castiel cautiously.

“You,” Dean says, getting to his feet and hooking his thumbs in the pockets of his tight jeans, “gotta let me make you a Purple Nurple. I wasn’t kidding when I said I make a great one.” He grins, the crinkles at his eyes adding a boyishly genuine look to his smile.

Castiel can’t find it within himself to say no.
Dean gives him another bright look, then disappears into the bar for a couple minutes, leaving Benny and Castiel in silence. A short while later, he returns holding a tall glass full of violet liquid, which he hands to Castiel reverently.

“If your mind ain’t blown, it’s on the house,” Dean promises.

Castiel blinks down at the purple liquid, then gingerly takes a sip. A cool, saccharine flavour spreads over his tongue; the liqueur in the drink brinks on too sweet but is balanced out by the spice of some ingredient Castiel can’t pinpoint.

“Pretty good, huh—?” Dean starts, but Castiel doesn’t reply—he’s too busy gulping down the rest of the drink.

He lowers the glass again and licks his lips, chasing the remainder of the decadent flavour. “You are very talented in making... Purple Nurples,” Castiel affirms hesitantly at Dean and Benny’s surprised expressions.

“What’d I say?” replies Dean triumphantly. He takes the glass and sets it in the basin, earning a resentful glance from Benny to which he reassures, “I’ll clean it, man. Your plate’s full enough already.”

“You making chef puns now, brother?” Benny asks as he hoists up the platter and opens the door to the bar, letting in a brief blast of music. He whistles sharply and hands the plate to the waistcoat-wearing man that appears to take it. Benny shuts the door again.

Dean tells Benny something Castiel doesn’t really hear; he thinks it might have been a joke, since they’re both laughing—Benny’s laugh a quiet, smirky chuckle and Dean’s rich and full. Castiel finds himself transfixed by how animated Dean is—face open and lit up with a smile, his limbs loose and relaxed. Despite his provocative outfit, there’s something almost fairy tale-worthy about Dean: he looks like he belongs in a story as the charming prince that saves the day and wins the heart of the princess.

Something else occurs to Castiel as he’s thinking this, and he looks between Benny and Dean. It’s unlikely that either of them are a solid zero on the Kinsey Scale—Benny has the better chance between the two of being completely heterosexual, Castiel thinks, since he’s not up front and charming customers like Dean is. Still, there’s a certain... closeness between the two that suddenly makes Castiel feel very out of place.

He clears his throat and gets to his feet, standing in the center of the kitchen somewhat awkwardly. “I thank you for your hospitality,” Castiel says, “but it’s best that I depart now.”

“Uh, sure, man,” Dean says, appearing to be caught off guard. “I’ll get your check.”

Castiel’s momentary panic must reflect on his face, because Dean gives him an apologetic look. “Cas, I’d let you go without paying, but my boss’ll have my neck if I do that. And I kind of need this job.”

“I have no problem with paying for my expenses,” Castiel tries to assure him, but Dean still looks somewhat distressed by the situation.

“Give Blue Eyes a discount, Winchester,” Benny says from his station. “Crowley ain’t gonna make a fuss when he gets wind of how his faulty sound system caused Cas here’s panic attack. Thirty percent off, give or take, should do it.”
Dean’s entire form relaxes with relief at this suggestion, the concerned lines creasing his forehead melting away. “Yeah, that sounds good.” He disappears into the bar briefly and returns holding an ornate, red bowl with a receipt inside, which he hands to Castiel. “Thirty three dollars, twenty cents. Sorry, this place ain’t exactly cheap,” he adds ruefully.

Castiel stares down at the receipt and swallows hard, his mouth suddenly dry as he digs a hand into his coat pocket and fishes out a pathetic assortment of crumpled notes and coins. His hands shake very slightly as he counts out the amount and gently sets the money in the bowl. The coins make a pitiful clinking sound when they hit the glass.

Castiel looks away as he returns the rest of the money to his pocket, unable to bear the odd looks the other two are giving him. He turns wordlessly away and walks out the back door into the alleyway behind the bar.

He can hear the leftover money tinkling in his pocket; it’s obvious what he’s going to do with it. After the repeated embarrassments of the evening, Castiel can’t bear to ruminate any further in the shame that is already clinging to him like a wet woolen coat.

The money goes toward a cheap bottle of Georgi Vodka that he finishes in a series of deep slugs.

Castiel doesn’t make it home that night.

“If what’s going through your mind is what I’m guessing is, Winchester, you better reroute your mental train entirely. Thinking that way’s just gonna land you in all manner of trouble.”

Benny’s tone is low, warning; Dean glances up to see that the man has paused in his cleaning of the counter. Now, his pale eyes are fixed on Dean, piercing and intent.

The bar’s finally empty—although it officially closed nearly three hours ago, several party animals had decided the sun’s rising didn’t mean squat to them and that they were going to continue to drink well into the morning.

Crowley, never one to turn a customer away, had told Dean, Benny and a few others to stick around until their guests departed—which they’d finally done twenty minutes prior to now.

Dean looks away, busying himself with stacking plates up in a cupboard. “Think what way?”

“Think going all doe-eyed over Blue Eyes back there is a good idea.”

“I’m not. And even if I did, it wouldn’t make a difference.” Dean pauses, then adds, challenging, “Right?”

Benny sighs and drops his head, staring down at the counter for a couple moments. “I ain’t a professional, but even I can see that your new buddy’s… that he’s toxic, Dean.”

Dean feels his hackles rise; he shuts the cupboard door, unintentionally slamming it, and turns back to Benny. “Maybe wait till you get your psychology degree before you start goin’ ’round diagnosing people like that, ah? Just a thought.” He inhales deeply and strides over to his duffel,
which is still sitting in the corner dejectedly. Dean grabs his utility jacket and pulls it on, not looking at Benny as he says, “I’m not a dumbass, Benny. Cas seems like a good guy—he’s just… got it a little rough, from what I can see.”

“And that ain’t something you wanna stick your foot in, brother. You got more than enough junk on your plate. Metaphorically speaking,” says Benny as he gives the counter one final swipe with the cloth, then tosses the rag into the sink. He straightens up and hangs his apron up on the hook attached to the wall, not looking at Dean as he continues, “I ain’t gonna object to gettin’ more business, kid, but if Castiel buzzing ’round here means you gonna let your eye wander to places it shouldn’t…” He shakes his head. “Maybe he’d be better off at Starbucks.”

“Look, I don’t wanna pull the whole rebellious teenager thing and tell you I can take care of myself, but—I can take care of myself just great, thanks.” Dean slings the strap of his duffel over his shoulder and gives Benny a lazy salute without looking him in the eye. “Seeya tonight,” he says, walking out the door.

“Get home safe, brother.”

As Dean walks off, he can’t help but feel a certain level of annoyance. Benny’s his friend, not his parent. And either way—since when did being nice to someone after they’ve had a goddamn panic attack mean that you’re suddenly head over heels for them?

And Benny having the audacity to call Castiel toxic—Dean can feel his muscles stiffening at even the memory. If everyone who was a little down and out suddenly had a caution notice branded onto his or her forehead—Warning: Broke loser. Avoid like plague in case bad luck is infectious—Dean can’t imagine how screwed he would’ve been after his dad’s death.

Dean shoves his hands into his pockets, curving his shoulders and reminding himself that his irritation isn’t due to a sudden, irrational protectiveness of Castiel, but to how much of an asshat Benny seems to have decided to become.

It’s a wet morning, puddles of rain glistening in the dim light. Fat raindrops plop onto streets and nip at the nape of Dean’s neck. He hunches his shoulders further, trying to guard himself from the rain as it becomes heavier

There’s no shortage of drunks and hobos people on the streets today—in fact, maybe even a surplus. Dean’s unexpectedly overcome by shame—here he is, mentally preaching like a saint about helping the ones whose lots in life are worse than his, but he can’t manage to spare any change for the shivering bodies he walks past.

Dean tries to tell himself he doesn’t have the ability to throw his cash away—that doing so would wind him and possibly even Sam out on the streets too, pretty soon—but that doesn’t ease his conscience as it goes into overdrive.

At first, Dean doesn’t know what makes him stop walking. He scans the area, allowing his eyes to skim guiltily over a man slouched on the sidewalk, before his gaze snaps back to the figure again.

A tan trench coat. A mess of dark hair. A glimpse of a scruffy jaw and sharp features.

“Whoa,” Dean says, jogging over to the man and kneeling down in front of him. He ducks his head to look up at the man’s face, brow furrowing. “Whoa, Jesus Christ—Cas?”

Castiel makes a quiet groaning sound that’s somewhere between affirmation, discomfort and grogginess.
“Holy shit, Cas, what the hell happened?”

Castiel groans again; as he does so, Dean’s attention is drawn to the empty liquor bottle in his hand.

“Oh, fuck,” Dean breathes. He glances around briefly and considers his options.

He can’t leave Cas out here: there’s no telling if the steady showers raining down on them will become a full-blown storm. Dean could take Cas to a homeless shelter, but the guy might actually have a home to go to—in which case, Dean’s still screwed because he has no clue where said home is.

That leaves the last option.

Dean chews on his lower lip for a moment. “Alright, Cas, look—I can’t leave you out here ’cause it’s already starting to piss with rain and, well, you look like shit. So I’m gonna take you back to my place till you work through your hangover, okay?”

For the first time since Dean spotted him this morning, Cas opens his eyes. They’re bloodshot and foggy, but he seems to have some comprehension of what Dean’s saying because he gives a small nod.

Dean gets to his feet, carefully lifting Cas up off the ground and slinging the other man’s arm over his shoulder. Cas leans against him heavily, the bottle in his hand dropping to the ground with a crashing sound. Castiel winces and squeezes his eyes shut again.

“It’s just three blocks away,” Dean reassures as Cas staggers unevenly with his first step. “We’ll be there in no time.”

The walk does take a notable amount of time longer than it would’ve had Dean not been supporting a stumbling Castiel, but he manages to remain patient—after all, it’s not as if this is something he hasn’t done before, though the sharp tang of alcohol and cloying scent of vomit does recall memories of when Dean had had to walk his father home each night in this exact same way.

Dean and Cas have to take the elevator; usually, Dean avoids the things as much as possible—the ones in his apartment building have a distinct scent of urine, and the olive-coloured carpets are covered in small stains that he doesn’t want to think too hard about. But looking at the state Cas is in right now, there's no way he could force the poor guy to walk up the stairs.

It takes Dean a moment to unlock his apartment door—he has to dig for his keys in his duffel without dropping Castiel, who, by now, looks like the only reason he’s still on his feet is because Dean is supporting him. By the time Dean does manage to get inside, Cas is a sickly, pallid shade of green.

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean says under his breath as he helps the man over to a couch and coaxes him down onto it. “I’m gonna really need some background info how you ended up like this when you relearn how to speak.”

Castiel mumbles out a reply but his words are slurred with sleep. A moment later, his head’s lollèd to the side and his breathing has slowed to long, deep breaths.
The first thing Castiel’s aware of as he regains consciousness is that his head is throbbing again. The second thing is the fact that his nose is pressed into something smooth. The third becomes clear when he opens his eyes and sees the light brown leather in front of his face, and that the leather is part of the couch he’s sprawled on. The fourth and final realisation, upon finding no recollection of said couch at all, is that he has absolutely no idea where he is.

Castiel makes a perplexed sound and sits up, looking around with the feeling of uneasiness that fills one when they find themselves in unfamiliar territory. As he does so, a hand touches his shoulder lightly.

“Hey, take it easy there, man,” says a voice.

Jumping, Castiel twists at the waist to stare at the owner of the voice and is met by a green eyes and a placating smile.

“Dean?” Castiel asks confusedly after a moment.

“Mornin’, sleeping beauty,” replies Dean. He holds out a glass of blue liquid; Castiel looks at it incomprehendingly.

“What’s that?”

“Not Windex or anything like that, don’t worry. S’just Gatorade—have some. It’ll help with your hangover.”

“Oh.” Castiel carefully takes the glass from Dean, holding it in both hands in a way that feels almost childish. He takes a cautious sip, blinking at the overly sweet taste, and watches Dean as the man walks around the couch and comes fully into view.

Now that Dean isn't half hidden behind the couch, Castiel can see that he isn’t wearing the suggestive outfit he’d had at the bar—instead, he’s opted for a pair of torn blue jeans and a simple black t-shirt. A golden amulet of some sort hangs from a cord around his neck.

Dean sits on the coffee table opposite the couch, clasping his hands loosely between his legs and slouching very slightly to frown up at Castiel. “How’re you feeling?”

Castiel takes another sip of the Gatorade, then clears his throat. “I’ve… had better days,” he admits, then squints at Dean as he tries to remember what had happened before he woke up just now. “You brought me to your home.”

“Uh-huh,” says Dean, raking a hand through his hair.

“Why?”

“Found you passed out in a gutter. I couldn’t leave you out there, Cas. Wouldn’t have been right. So I, uh, brought you back here since it was only a few blocks away—just until you’d gotten through the brunt of your hangover.” He pauses, suddenly appearing embarrassed. “Hope you don’t mind. I promise I’m not a serial killer or anything.”

Castiel slowly allows himself to ease into the couch at the sight of Dean’s earnest expression. “How long was I asleep for?” he asks.

“Not too long. A couple hours—three, at most,” Dean informs with a shrug.
“Then I suppose I should leave. I wouldn’t want to impose—”

“Uh. Cas?”

Castiel stops in his motion to pull himself to his feet. “Yes, Dean?” he says hesitantly.

“You should probably, uh, shower before you leave. Because, no offence, but you smell pretty funky.”

There’s a moment of silence between the two till Castiel gets up and sets the still half-full glass of Gatorade on the coffee table. He nods, unsure of what else to do, and stiffly awaits further instruction from the man looking up at him.

Dean’s face relaxes into a relieved smile and he points at a door Castiel hasn’t noticed before. “The, ah. The bathroom’s that-a-way.”

Castiel nods again and unsteadily makes his way over to the door; it’s already ajar, so a light nudge is all it takes to get it to swing open and reveal a bedroom. He feels a rush of anxiety at the sight of a bed where there should be a bath, a wardrobe where there should be a basin, a duffel bag where there should be a toilet.

Castiel finds himself unable to drag his attention away from a crimson stain washing down the side of the bath—a waterfall of blood, frozen in time before it can meet the scarlet puddle below it; the last hints of life gushing out an already-dead soldier as he slumps to the ground.

Castiel sucks in a sharp breath and squeezes his eyes shut, hard, for a couple seconds. When he tentatively reopens them, there’s no collapsing soldier. The blood flowing down the side of the bath is just a folded towel and the puddle beneath it is simply a red mat that likely came in a set with the former.

He unclenches his fists slowly, flexing his stiff fingers. There’s a familiar stinging in his palms that tells him his nails have broken the skin there once again. He ignores the prickles of pain: they’re something he’s grown used to.

As his adrenaline fades, the effects of his hangover hit him like a wall again—he’s not sure how he’s managed to ignore them up until now, but Castiel feels precariously unsteady as he strips off his clothes and carefully clambers into the bath to switch on the shower.

The water hits him right in the face, cold and aggressive and unpleasantly reminiscent of early morning showers before heading out for the day—a day on the frontline.
Castiel releases a sound of alarm and stumbles backwards, waiting a couple minutes till the spray’s heated up to a suitable temperature before tentatively stepping forward again.

It’s not fantastic pressure—not by a long shot—but it’s luxurious compared to the weak trickle Castiel’s own shower excretes whenever the water actually works.

The droplets beat down lightly on his shoulders, sliding down his skin into little pools at his feet. The water turns brown with grime as soon as it touches him.

Castiel reaches up to run his hands through his greasy hair, fingers catching in the knots. After a brief moment of consideration, he reaches for a bottle of shampoo and squeezes a small amount into his palm. It has a vague apple-like scent and, for some reason, Cas finds himself smiling as he lathers the stuff into his hair—Dean, despite his tough appearance and risqué work outfits, buys apple-scented hair products.
It’s been at least twenty minutes already, Dean’s sure of it.

Dean cranes his neck to squint at the door of the bathroom and frowns. Getting to his feet, he slowly approaches it.

The shower’s still on: he can hear the gurgle of water in the pipes.

“Hey, uh, Cas?” calls Dean.

A thump.

The water’s shut off.

“De—ah, Dean?”

“You okay in there, buddy?”

“Yes. I just. Got distracted. By your bathroom. The décor’s very nice.”

Dean raises his eyebrows and steps back. “Uh, thanks, I guess.” He glances around his room, then, after a nanosecond of thought, grabs a pair of jeans and an AC/DC shirt from his cupboard and sets them on his bed. “There’re some spare clothes out here, if you want ’em,” he says as he ducks out his room and shuts the door behind himself.

This time, Cas seems to be wary of how long he takes; within a couple minutes, he’s peering into the main room with what looks like a touch of nervousness.

“I,” Cas starts slowly as he opens the door fully and steps into the room, “hope these are the clothes you were referring to.”

Dean leans back in his seat, allowing his gaze to flit over Castiel’s form.

Cas shoves a lock of wet hair out his face—now his hair isn’t tangled and stiff with sweat, it looks too long: a curtain of ebony, concealing Castiel’s face and cutting him off from the rest of the world.

His jeans hang loosely on his hips, and the thin fabric of the shirt hugs every show of bone—Cas is skinny, Dean notes, but it doesn’t look like he’s predisposed to be. His is the scrawniness that comes from not having had a good meal in far too long. It’s the kind Dean knows only too well; the kind that just looking at makes his belly ache with memories of hunger.

“You want something to eat?” Dean blurs without thinking. Cas pauses in his awkward tugging of the shirt, apparently aware of its ill fit, and stares at him like a deer in headlights.

Before Castiel can decline, Dean continues, “Who am I kidding? ’Course you are.” He leaps to his feet and scrambles to the kitchenette attached to the main room, opening the cupboard doors and grabbing whatever ingredients he sees. “Whaddaya want, Cas? How ’bout a microwave omelet?”

Cas hasn’t even had the chance to respond by the time Dean has cracked two eggs into a bowl and is stirring them hurriedly.
“Dean,” Castiel says.

Dean looks up. “Hm?”

“Please—I don’t want to overstay my welcome,” manages Castiel, eyes wide and bright with alarm. “And I certainly don’t wish to come off as expecting you to serve me food, after all you’ve done already…” He trails off as Dean shoves the omelet mixture in the microwave.

“Might as well,” Dean replies. “In for a penny, in for a pound and all that, right?” A beat. “C’mere. You look like a lost fart in a perfume factory just standin’ there like that.”

There’s a quiet padding of feet approaching Dean. He can smell the warm, clean scent of Castiel behind himself; letting out a quiet breath, he grips the edge of the counter hard enough for his knuckles to turn white.

“So, uh, Cas,” says Dean slowly, not looking away from the microwave. “I don’t wanna probe or anything, but, ah… you got some explaining to do.”

Silence.

Dean glances at him over his shoulder, catching and holding that intense gaze of Castiel’s. “You drank till you passed out last night, didn’t you.”

There’s a moment of hesitation. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“It… was an accident.” Castiel’s gaze flicks away, just momentarily, but long enough for Dean to sense the lie.

Relinquishing his hold on the counter, he turns to face Cas, studying him. “Cas,” he says, tone quieter than he’d intended, “I know it’s… literally none of my business, man, but I just. I want to make sure you’re okay, okay?”

Castiel fixes his eyes on Dean, his face expressionless save for the small crease between his brows and the slight downturn of the corners of his mouth, and now Dean’s almost painfully aware of how crisply sweet he smells and—

His thoughts are broken off by a high-pitched squeal. Castiel jumps back, hand catching on the cord of the kettle and yanking it with him. Dean releases startled sound and leaps forward to catch the kettle before it crashes to the ground.

There’s a moment in which nothing is said. In which Dean, hugging his kettle to his chest like it’s his lifeline, looks back at a wide-eyed Cas.

The whole situation seems so ridiculous that Dean can’t help but release a laugh, though he cuts himself off when Cas doesn’t join in.

“Uh,” Dean says, clearing his throat and setting the kettle down again. “Sorry about that. My microwave—I think it’s fucking possessed or something, Jesus.” He turns to the offending device and pops open the door, taking the bowl inside and setting it on the counter. “It’s always shrieking like that. I got half a mind to take it apart so I can figure out the source of that god-awful wail…” He trails off, his words melting into a mumble as he spoons the omelet onto a plate and pushes it toward Cas.
“There’s salt and pepper and, like, ham and stuff, if you want,” says Dean, not meeting the other man’s eyes.

Castiel clutches the plate, still wearing that vaguely stunned look, then gives his head a quick shake. “No. No, thank you—this is fine.”

“Sure.”

Again, silence falls as the two watch each other.

Dean pushes a fork into Castiel’s hands, trying his best to ignore the warmth of Cas’ fingers brushing against his own.

“Fork,” Dean says helpfully, on the off chance that Cas didn’t know. “To, y’know, help you eat.”

Castiel cocks his head to the side, curling his fingers around the metal of the handle and resting the prongs on his plate. A smile quirks one corner of his mouth—it’s small, but definite. “Thank you, Dean.”

Once Dean appears to gain enough presence of mind to hand Castiel a knife too, the most prominent sound is the quiet clinking of cutlery against the ceramic plate.

The two sit at opposite ends of the small table, which seems to be half kitchen island and half dinner table as it resides directly on the line between the kitchen and the living room.

Castiel keeps his gaze fixed firmly on his food, concentrating on cutting each omelet piece into a perfect square before lifting it into his mouth. The omelet is rich and flavourful—it’s a good meal, undeniably, but the hangover scraping across his brain like sandpaper makes his stomach churn every time he catches a waft of the greasy scent. Not wanting to offend Dean, however, Castiel instead concentrates on a rhythm the other man’s started to absently tap out on the table with his fingers.

“Do you have a song stuck in your head?” Cas asks, not looking up. His voice is quieter, shakier than he’s used to. Although he’s never been loud—he’s never been like Gabriel, who makes sure everyone knows what he thinks, or Balthazar, who—

Castiel winces and stops that thought before it can continue.

“Yeah,” Dean replies, providing a blessed distraction. “Some old Rolf Harris song—Two Little Boys. You know it?”

“I don’t recognise the name,” says Cas, glancing up at Dean briefly.

“It goes kind of like. Kind of like this.” Dean clears his throat, then, still drumming his fingers along to the beat, he’s singing:

“Two little boys had two little toys:  
Each had a wooden horse;  
Gaily, they played, each summer’s day—
His voice isn’t remarkable by any means—cracking on notes and wavering when he tries to hold them—but it has a sonorous quality to it. It’s warm and full of life, like everything else to do with Dean seems to be.

Castiel waits patiently, his quietness prompting Dean to continue with a chuckle.

“One little chap then had a mishap—
Broke off his horse’s head;
Wept for his toy, then cried with joy as his young playmate said:
‘Did you think I would leave you crying,
When there’s room on my horse for two?
Climb up here, Jack, and don’t be crying;
I can go just as fast with two.
When we grow up, we’ll both be soldiers,
And our horses will not be toys—
And I wonder if we’ll remember
When we were two little boys.’”

Dean shakes his head sheepishly. “I don’t know why it’s stuck in my head. It ain’t my usual genre, to say the least.”

“What is?” Castiel asks, hoping the conversation will allow him to stop eating for a bit.

“Classic rock,” says Dean, then he leans forward in his seat. “Now, Mr Twenty Questions, do I get to make a couple enquiries of my own?”

Cas hesitates, wary of what Dean would want to know about him. “Er. I suppose.”

“I don’t think I ever caught your full name. Or—wait, did I? You’re not called Cass Tielle are you?”

“No! No. No, Castiel is my first name. My surname is… Milton.”

The lie slips off his tongue with surprising ease, but guilt settles in his stomach as soon as he’s finished speaking—not only is he lying to Dean about his real name, he’s stealing Gabriel’s surname too.

Cas tries to excuse himself by remembering the time Gabriel came up with the idea of swapping names to keep themselves entertained, but it doesn’t make him feel any better. He just tiredly hopes this doesn’t qualify as identity theft.


Castiel’s jerked out of his quiet worrying by Dean’s reply. “Dean Winchester sounds like the name of a book character,” he comments.

“Well, I was named after my gran,” Dean grimaces, “but I’d like to think Dean Moriarty from Jack Kerouac’s On the Road helped in finalizing the decision. That guy had some real moves when it came to the ladies. And the dudes, too.”

Cas falters at Dean’s addition to the end of his statement, wondering if this was another hint toward his sexuality. Shaking off his curiousness toward the topic, he states, “You seem well-read.”
“Hey, hey, hey—don’t switch the topic back to me again. You asked me two questions. It’s only fair that I get to ask you the same amount, don’tcha think?”

“Er.”

Dean already seems to be considering his next question. “D’you live close by?”

“I wouldn’t know—where is this?”

“Three blocks away from the bar.”

“Then I live eight blocks away from here.”

Castiel shuts up abruptly before he can say anything more. Why did he tell Dean that? he asks himself, scolding. Why didn’t he just say he lives an hour, even two away? Telling Dean that he lives considerably close by has obliterated whatever amount of anonymity he’d been trying to maintain by using a fake name.

Dean raises his eyebrows slightly, scanning Castiel’s face, a cheeky light in his eyes. “Any chance I could drop by sometime, then?”

“That’s the third question you’ve asked,” Castiel objects. “You were entitled to only two.”

Laughing, Dean raises his hands in defeat. “Okay, okay, fair enough. You wanna ask me anything else?”

“I’m assuming you live alone,” ventures Castiel, glancing around the otherwise unoccupied room.

“What, you gonna ask if I’m dating anyone?” asks Dean, tilting his head to the side and crossing his arms with a smirk.

Cas stops, startled. “No… I was going to ask you if you had any other family.”

“Oh.” For some reason, Dean looks somewhat disappointed as he averts his eyes. Then, he answers, “Uh, yeah, I do. A shrimpy little brother, actually. Name’s Sam. He’s a good kid.” He chuckles, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck and fixing his attention on a small knot in the wood of the table. “A real good kid. Deserves better than what life’s handed him.” He glances up. “So am I gonna get an answer to my question or not?”

“Answer, yes, right. My answer is… Maybe,” Cas finally says.

“Good. So I can swing by tonight before work to pick up my clothes?” asks Dean, gesturing at Cas’ outfit.

“Could I come with you to the bar afterwards?”

“If you promise I can drop you home when my shift’s over.”

“Then yes.” Castiel almost laughs as he matches the fastness of Dean’s rapid-fire reply, barely taking note of the implications.

“I wasn’t done.” Dean smiles. “The second condition is that I can take you home now, too. Just so, you know, I’m… certain of the route.”

Cas chokes on a piece of omelet, realising exactly what that means. “My apartment is a mess,” he says hurriedly. “As is… as is the entire building itself.”
“That’s fine by me,” says Dean as he gets to his feet, reaching for Castiel’s plate. “You done?”

Castiel nods and pushes the plate toward Dean, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. As long as Dean doesn’t ask to escort him up to his apartment, he should be fine. Dean won’t think any less of him if he only sees the outside of his building.

Castiel’s not even sure why he’s so concerned about keeping face—Dean did, after all, find him passed out in a gutter after calming him down from a panic attack earlier that night.

But, he supposes as he stands up, that’s even better reason to ensure he doesn’t do anything more to make Dean further think he’s the scum of the earth.

While Dean puts away the cutlery, Cas heads off to the bathroom to retrieve his clothes, an odd sense of domesticity humming inside him. By the time he’s tucked the ball of garments under his arm and has headed out to the main room again, Dean’s leaning against the front door, twirling a set of keys around his index finger.

Dean gives him a half grin. “Ready to head home?”

“Yes,” Castiel replies as Dean opens the door and gestures for him to step out. The rest of the building, Cas realises, isn’t as nice as Dean’s apartment—the already-dingy hallways seem even darker due to the faeces-coloured paint peeling off them, and the dull carpet beneath his feet is frayed.

“See why I’m not gonna judge you if you ain’t living it up at The W?” Dean murmurs as he leads the way down the hall to a dim stairwell that smells of dank concrete.

“You must be very adept at maintenance and design if your apartment started out in this condition,” says Castiel, eyeing out a light bulb above them that flickers more and more precariously with every second that passes.

“I guess I know my way around a wrench good enough. The furnishing’s all Ellen and Jo, though. They’re, uh, family friends,” Dean adds, glancing back at Cas. “Sam stays with ’em since I live too far from his school.”

Castiel nods, not replying as they walk out the small lobby onto the street. He squints in the light, trying to ignore the renewed pang of pain in his head as he turns to Dean. “Pardon my asking, but what street are we on exactly?”

“Second.” He raises his eyebrows and rattles the keys at Cas. “But I have a car—so no matter how close you live, like hell am I gonna have you walking home with a hangover. I may not be perfect, but I don’t suck that much.”

“You have a car? I don’t recall seeing it this morning,” Cas says confusedly.

“I don’t take her to the bar anymore.” Dean turns and starts down the street. “As nice as the boss makes sure the inside of Nine Circles is, the amount dodgy characters hanging ’round outside would make your head spin. No way am I letting Baby’s hubcaps be stolen again,” he grumbles, his tone indicating that “Baby” has had her hubcaps taken more than once.

Castiel, at a loss for what else to do, follows Dean in silence as they walk along the parking bays till they reach a sleek black automobile whose roof Dean lays an affectionate hand upon.

“Chevrolet Impala. Guess what year.”
“I don’t know much about cars, Dean—”

“’67. Made in April of 1967, to be exact,” announces the other man proudly. “My dad got her back in ’73 and, if I do say so myself, she’s never looked better.” He walks around the car to open the passenger door. “Hop on in.”

After complimenting the Impala’s youthful appearance, Castiel slides into the seat, neatly setting his clothes in his lap. It’s obvious Dean spends a lot of time in the car: the interior smells of the same things he does—leather and body wash and whiskey and some other base scent that Cas can’t exactly pinpoint with a name but one he knows he hasn’t encountered before meeting Dean.

As Castiel is thinking this, Dean settles into the driver’s seat and pushes the key into the ignition, grinning as the engine purrs to life smoothly. “Wouldja listen to that,” he says happily, and the question doesn’t necessarily seem to be directed toward Castiel so he doesn’t reply.

Instead, he just gives Dean his address when asked for it and sits quietly, listening to the sound of some old rock song playing over the speakers. Dean taps his palms against the steering wheel in rhythm with the strains of guitar, shooting Cas sideways smiles as he does.

Before the song has even finished, they come to a halt outside Castiel’s decrepit building. He gets out the car, leaning down to look at Dean through the window once he’s shut the door. Dean reaches over to roll down the glass.

“Thank you for the lift home, Dean. It’s much appreciated,” Castiel says, tucking his clothes under his arm again.

“No problem, Cas. See you tonight?”

“Yes. I will see you tonight.” Castiel can’t help but return Dean’s grin, even if his own smile is notably smaller. Dean winks at him as the Impala cruises into motion again, soon turning the corner and disappearing out of sight.

Castiel’s smile fades and he turns to face his building, trudging inside and starting the trek up the several flights of stairs that will eventually bring him to his floor. He’s suddenly aware of the cool air biting at his mostly bare arms now that he isn’t beside Dean, who seems to radiate comfortable heat.

He thinks ahead enough to have his key ready in his hand by the time he reaches his door, so it doesn’t take long for him to get into the apartment. Castiel kicks the door shut with his foot, walking to the bathroom and dumping his clothes in the rust-stained bath. He’ll take them down to the Laundromat when he has the energy.

As Castiel moves to exit the bathroom, he pauses to stare at himself in the mirror—for the first time in weeks, it’s not just a fleeting glance to make sure there isn’t something on his face. For the first time in weeks, Castiel takes in every aspect of himself—scrutinizes all the lines, the dark rings beneath his eyes, the small cut on the underside of his jaw where he’d pressed the blunt blades of his razor a little too snug against his stubble in an attempt to shave it.

Cas’ attention fixes on a lock of still-damp hair falling in his eyes. Before he can change his mind, he yanks open the bathroom counter’s drawer and grabs a pair of scissors.

The blades clink together with a satisfying sound as pieces of too-long hair fall to the ground.
Dean is *not* excited.

His hands don’t shake as he washes his hair, his stomach doesn’t flutter as he applies his eyeliner extra carefully that evening, and he definitely doesn’t spend the walk to Castiel’s apartment building thinking about the man’s smile—because, like Benny said, that would be a bad idea.

But when he slows to a halt outside Castiel’s apartment building and Cas looks up from the bench he’s sitting on, Dean murmurs a quiet, “Oh, shit,” because the sight of Cas making his way over to him makes Dean’s heart hammer almost painfully against his ribcage.

The most obvious thing is that Cas is wearing his trench coat again—but this evening, it seems fresher, like it’s recently been washed. Beneath it is a black suit, paired with a crisp white shirt and a blue tie that, charmingly, appears to be on backwards.

Castiel stops to stand before him with a, “Hello, Dean,” and clasps his hands in front of himself.

“Did you get a haircut?” Dean asks abruptly.

Cas fidgets beneath his gaze and reaches up to tug at a lock of his ruffled hair. “Er, yes, I did—I thought it might be time for a, ah… a change.” He turns his face toward the street and gives Dean a sideways look. “It doesn’t look too bad, does it?”

“No! It—it looks awesome, Cas. Real awesome.” Unthinkingly, Dean reaches up to brush a piece of hair out Cas’ eyes, faltering when Cas stiffens but continuing after he relaxes. “Shorter hair suits you,” he says, voice soft.

Castiel gives him another one of those small, sheepish smiles. “Your kind words are much appreciated, Dean—you happen to be the first person to see my new hairstyle. I, ehm, had to cut it myself,” he adds as he moves to stand beside Dean.

“No shit!” says Dean, genuinely stunned. Cas’ hair, despite its messy style, is trimmed neatly—even at the back. Had he not been told it was a home-done job, Dean would’ve continued to believe a hairdresser had cut it. He cranes his neck to search for any errors: aside from one or two tufts that are slightly longer than the rest, it looks entirely professional.

“Uhm, yes, er, shit.”

“Jesus, remind me to call you up next time I need a haircut. If I have to go through Sam royally screwing up my hair ever again, I’m going to lose my shit. He’s my little brother and I love him, but, fucking hell, he has no clue how to give a haircut.” He shakes his head, looking forward again as he’s unpleasantly reminded of the bald spot Sam had left him with the first time he’d let the kid attack his hair with a clipper. “Ironic, considering the fact that the kid’s got five pineapples up his ass about his own hair.”

Dean can feel Cas peeking at him as he starts walking again. “You seem to care about your brother a great deal,” he observes.

“Eh, the kid’s alright.” Dean chuckles and hooks his thumbs in his jacket’s pockets. Despite the recently mild weather, it’s a chilly evening tonight; he can see his breath in the form of small,
cloudy puffs in front of his face. He blows the air out his lungs in one long stream, remembering how, as a boy, the effect used to make him feel like a dragon.

“D’you have any siblings?” Dean asks after a few moments of comfortable quiet. Feeling Cas tense beside him, he hurriedly says, “You don’t hafta answer that if you don’t want. It was just small talk—”

“Yes,” Cas says finally. “I do. Several, actually—Hael, Naomi, Rachel, Ion and Michael,” he counts off, stammering slightly over Michael’s name. “There’s also Lucifer.”

“Lucifer, huh? Ain’t that the name of the devil?” asks Dean.

“Lucifer was the most beautiful of God’s angels—the most breathtaking creation of all, in fact. My brother was named for him due to his own striking appearance, even as a newborn. His name turned out to be quite prophetic in the end.” Castiel tugs on his tie, gaze fixed firmly ahead. In the fading light, Dean can’t make out his exact expression. “He hasn’t been a topic of conversation since I was a child. However, I doubt I’m mentioned much nowadays either,” he finishes, a touch of sadness in his tone.

“Why not?”

Castiel smiles again, but this time it doesn’t reach his eyes. “My family… doesn’t quite agree with my lifestyle.”

“What, going to gay bars? ’Cause, I mean, there’s no shame in that,” Dean says, and he’s half trying to convince himself. As he speaks, a motorbike sails down the road beside them, making Cas jolt with its roaring engine.

“No, their objection is toward the fact that I’m part of said bars’ targeted demographic.”

Dean stops walking to stare at Castiel. The other man is wearing a blank expression but his eyes are shut, dark lashes splayed against his cheeks, his shaky breathing betraying his calm appearance.

“You don’t mean it’s because you’re gay, do you?” asks Dean, the bluntness of the question contrasting with the quietness of his voice. “Because that’s—that’s bullshit.”

“I suppose it is bullshit,” Castiel eventually replies, opening his eyes, “but there’s not much I can do about it.” He sighs and starts walking again, arms now stiff by his sides.

Dean doesn’t move for a short while, then he jogs a couple steps to draw level with Castiel and catches him by the shoulder. He turns Cas to face himself, hand lingering on his deltoid a few seconds longer than necessary. “You do know they’re assholes, right? And that if they… fuckin’ ostracise you for something as trivial as who you wanna bang, then they don’t deserve you?” Dean ducks his head slightly so he’s at exact eye-level with Cas. “Because thinking anything else is like saying horse crap tastes like crème brûlée if you put a teaspoon of sugar on it. Anything else is wrong.”

Castiel stares back at Dean, pupils huge in the dim light and lips parted slightly. “Thank you, Dean,” he says, sotto voce, and his breath smells sweet.
It’s not a bad night.

Dean tells Cas that he should lay off the alcohol, and, despite his initial discomfort, he manages to remain sober—an accomplishment he feels somewhat proud of.

Castiel spends the evening in the kitchen, occasionally talking to Benny and, at some points, peering out into the main area of the bar to see what Dean’s up to. However, most of his time is spent contentedly waiting for when the man strolls into the kitchen to share a story with him and Benny.

“This one dude tried to do a striptease on the counter,” Dean tells them incredulously during his break. He massages his bicep and leans against the island. Benny whacks him with a cloth and orders him to move his sweaty self away from the food.

Rolling his eyes somewhat dramatically, Dean does as he’s told, fixing his attention on Castiel instead. “It was insane, Cas, I swear. One moment, I was whipping up a Margarita for this sleazy old guy, the next I had an ass in my face. No warning. Just an eyeful of tighty-whiteys.” His freckles stand out against his flushed skin as he laughs disbelievingly and wipes away the light sheen of perspiration on his forehead. “Uriel got rid of him before he could lose the briefs, though, thank god.”

Dean reaches over to pluck a cocktail sausage from a plate of spare Hors d’Oeuvres Benny’s just set aside. Benny smacks his hand away. “You got a death wish, Winchester?” scolds the cook.

“Say you do murder me,” Dean contemplates as he successfully retrieves the sausage and pops it in his mouth, tongue darting out to swipe away a stray trickle of sauce on his lip, “would I be allowed to hook up with a cute someone beforehand? You know, go out with a bang.” He winks.

“Don’t ask me,” Benny replies, glowering at Dean as he covers the plate in saran wrap and hands it to Castiel, gesturing for him to put it in the fridge. “Why don’t you get your ass back to work and see if anyone’ll take you?”

As Cas carefully slots the plate into a space between a tub of asparagus and a bowl of some other food, he can hear Dean telling Benny it’s not a matter of if but a matter of whom. Then, he hears Dean calling his name.

“Hey, Cas.”

Castiel starts, shutting the fridge door and whirling around to face Dean in surprise. “Yes, Dean?” he asks after he gathers himself.

“You wanna donate to the Last Night on Earth charity, eh?” And Dean’s grinning again. “Since Mr Lafitte here’s apparently planned my execution for six in the A.M., how’s about you help make my last night one to remember.”

“I—I—” Castiel stutters, backing up against the fridge and pressing his palms against the cool metal as he anxiously tries to come up with a reply.

Before he can say anything more, Benny’s talking to Dean, whose smile has disappeared completely.

“You’re runnin’ overtime with your break, brother,” Benny says, voice quiet. “Perhaps you should get back on out there before the boss starts asking questions about your work ethic.”
“Good idea,” Dean mumbles in return, straightening his waistcoat and pushing the kitchen door open to slip back into the bar.

Benny doesn’t speak to Cas for the rest of the evening.

Since Dean’s shift starts early on a Wednesday, he knocks off at midnight. On the way home, he apologises to Castiel for the “Last Night on Earth thing”; Cas hurriedly accepts, unwilling to seem too affected by it, and the tension that’s been knotting Dean’s muscles since the incident seems to melt away immediately.

Despite his almost cheery goodbye to Dean and promise to see him the next evening, Cas feels shaky and on-edge by the time he shuts his apartment door behind himself.

So he finished what’s left of the cheap liquor stored under his sink and falls asleep in the empty bathtub because he doesn’t want to mess up his bed.

On Thursday morning, Cas is awoken by a call from Mrs Moseley, one of his old employers, asking him to cut her grass. As tough but kindly as ever, she informs him once the job’s done that it’s the finest her yard has ever looked and gives him a bonus for it—including a peach cobbler she got as a gift that she claims she can’t possibly finish herself. Wednesday evening sees Dean dropping by early in the Impala so he can show Cas the new hubcaps he’s got it—her—because the her previous ones went missing again. (Dean looks positively murderous as he tells Cas about his discovery of the theft.)

Friday morning, Cas works on his resumé and books a job interview at the local grocery store; Friday night, Dean asks for his number.

They text all day on Saturday, silly little exchanges about a bird that’s chirping outside Cas’ apartment window or the awkward sex Dean’s new neighbours have at the most random hours of the day.

Dean’s fingers, thick and calloused but surprisingly gentle, entwine with Castiel’s while they’re walking to the bar later on. Cas doesn’t let go till he remembers how Benny’s mood had declined after Dean’s flirtatious remark the other night.

Benny himself doesn’t work that night; the cook that takes his place seems somewhat irked by Castiel’s presence, so not much conversation is made aside from him occasionally telling Cas to move out his way.

Sunday is Dean’s day off, so it’s another lazy day spent texting him. He invites Castiel over once or twice, but each time, Cas politely declines—he’s wary of what might happen and what might not. He’s not sure which of the dozens of possibilities he’s thought up scares him more.

Castiel forces himself to remain sober, deciding the last thing he needs is to arrive at his job interview hungover. It’s an exhausting feat: by seven P.M., he’s fallen asleep, still holding his phone in his hand.

Sunday night, though, is when it happens.

Castiel dreams in snapshots. It’s not a linear story; just yells of Cas’ name and deafening gunshots and silvery blonde hair stained red with blood and pale blue eyes brimming over with tears.

Castiel’s own screams are what wake him up.

He sucks in a sharp breath, sitting bolt upright in his bed and clutching his legs to his chest; hot
tears sear trails down his cheeks as he gasps for breath.

He gropes for his phone in the dark, dialing Dean’s number before he can think his plan through.

It rings a couple times. Cas wipes his cheeks hurriedly, but they’re wet again soon enough.

“Mmf…” comes Dean’s sleepy voice over the line. “…Hullo?”

Cas doesn’t get the chance to reply before he lets loose another choked sob. “Dean—”

“Whoa, who is—” A pause, presumably as Dean checks the caller I.D. “Cas? Is that you?” Now, he sounds entirely awake.

“I—I apologise for waking you, b-b-but—” Castiel has to break off for a moment, burying his face in his knees.

“Hey, take a deep breath, buddy. It’s okay. What happened?”

“I had a—a nightmare, and—I—” He stops. “It’s ir-irrelevant,” he mumbles. “Sorry for the—the inconvenience; I’ll let you go back to sleep now. I didn’t realise how late it was…”

“Wait,” Dean interrupts. There’s a thunking sound, like he’s swinging himself out of bed. “I’ll be over in a couple minutes. Hold tight, Cas.”

In his haste to get downstairs, Dean forgets his car keys.

In fact, he’s still pulling on his jacket by the time he stumbles out onto the damp pavement, pyjama top crumpled from sleep beneath the worn mackinaw. By the time he realises his mistake, he knows it’ll take too long to hike up the stairs to his apartment, retrieve the keys and trek back down again.

So Dean runs.

His boots beat down on the sidewalk, occasionally splashing in puddles so the bottoms of his jeans are soon damp with spray. As he mentally maps out the route to Cas’ building, he replays the phone call in his head.

Cas had sounded absolutely wrecked. Not your run-of-the-mill, “Golly, that was a scary dream—I might’ve even peed myself a little!” No, Castiel’s terror had sounded concentrated, unadulterated, pure. The type of sobbed fear Dean had heard in his own voice as a child, when he woke from dreams that looped the moment his mother went up in flames over and over till the scene was burned onto the inside of his eyelids.

Eventually, Dean rounds the corner onto Castiel’s street. The apartment building stands like a landmark, its red brick exterior making it seem more notable than the structures beside it. Dean slows to a jog as he approaches the building with a measure of trepidation, almost feeling as if he’s not supposed to be there. Cas always seems so reluctant to let Dean any closer than twenty feet from the building.
He doesn’t take much note of his surroundings as he ducks inside, concentrating solely on the directions Cas had given him. He finds the apartment soon enough, having taken only one wrong turn.

Dean scrutinizes the number on the door—16B—for a moment, then lightly knocks. “Cas?” he calls.

“IT’s unlocked,” comes the hoarse reply.

Cautiously, Dean pushes the door open and steps into the room. “Hey, buddy,” he says softly, closing the door behind himself with a quiet click. He glances around, quickly locating Cas huddled on the bed on the far side of the room.

“Hello, Dean,” the other man replies, moving to get up. Dean shakes his head and indicates for Cas to stay sitting, which, with some reluctance, he does.

After pulling off his jacket and putting it aside, Dean approaches him, stepping over the piles of things scattered across the floor. He sits down on the edge of the bed and leans over to touch Castiel’s shoulder in what he hopes comes off as a reassuring manner. It’s too dark to make out the expression on Castiel’s face, but Dean can see those eyes fixed on him. “So I hear you had a bad dream?” says Dean

“It’s, um, it’s really not something I would wish to cause you any concern with—” Cas’ voice catches, and Dean can see the tear that rolls down his cheek catching the pale moonlight.

“Cut the crap, Cas,” Dean says, scooting over to Castiel and carefully wrapping his arms around him. Cas tenses for a moment, then melts into Dean, face nestling into the crook of his neck. “You wanna talk about it…?”

“No,” mumbles Castiel.

So they sit like that for a while. Dean only realises Cas is full-on crying again when he feels the tears soaking into his shirt; when he does, though, Dean lifts his legs onto the bed and settles back to lie beside Cas. Without a word, Cas curls into him, a skinny line of warmth pressed into Dean like a comma.

Dean tucks Castiel’s head under his chin for a moment, then opts to nuzzle his face into Castiel’s soft hair instead. He smells deceptively sweet—like dozy Saturday mornings, not someone who was awoken by a nightmare so horrifying his shoulders are still shaking with silent sobs.

“It’s okay, Cas,” Dean murmurs, gently rubbing circles on Cas’ back. “I got you. It’s okay.”

Cas only speaks again when Dean’s starting to fall asleep.

“Dean?”

“Mm?” Dean mumbles, face still pressed into Castiel’s mop of hair.

“How does the next verse of that song… ah… the one about the wooden horses… Two Little Boys. How does the next part go?”

“Eh? Oh, um.” Dean lifts his face so his words aren’t as muffled anymore and fixes his gaze on the wall parallel to them. “What was the last part you heard? The thing with the kid accidentally breaking off his horse’s head?”
“Yes. The other allowed him to play with his horse as a gesture of friendship.”

Dean can’t restrain his smile at Castiel’s summary. He wriggles down on the bed so he’s can see Cas’ face. His eyes are slightly red, and there are half-dried tear streaks on his face, but for the most part he doesn’t seem as upset anymore. “Yeah, and the one with the non-decapitated horse had a whole monologue about them growin’ up to be soldiers,” Dean adds.

“Yes, that was the last part I heard.”

“Right, okay, we’re on the same page,” Dean says, lifting his hand to brush away the moisture on Cas’ cheeks with his thumb. Once he’s done that, though, it doesn’t feel right to drop his hand to his side again; as Dean begins to sing, he maps out the contours of Castiel’s face with his fingertips.

“Long years passed,
War came so fast;
Bravely, they marched away.
Cannon roared loud,
And, in the mad crowd,
Wounded and dying lay…”

Dean trails the pad of his thumb down the bridge of Castiel’s nose and follows the lines of his cheekbones; loops up again and across his forehead, dipping down briefly in the center before curving back down to his chin to complete the vague heart shape he’s drawn across Cas’ features.

“Up goes a shout;
A horse dashes out—
Out from the ranks so blue—
Gallops away to where Joe lay,
Then came a voice he knew:”

Dean’s fingertips delicately graze over Castiel’s closed eyelids, trace his jaw and smooth across the premature lines cut into his face. He wonders where they’re from: if the loss of his family is what’s aged the young man so much.

“Did you think I would leave you dying,
When there’s room on my horse for two?
Climb up here, Joe—we’ll soon be flying;
I can go just as fast with two…”

His voice trails off as his thumb touches the corner of Cas’ mouth, the spot he’s rerouted several times to avoid. Castiel’s eyes flutter open, shocks of almost azure-blue studying Dean’s face.

Holding Castiel’s gaze, Dean allows his thumb to slowly stroke across Cas’ lower lip once, before moving to rest on the other man’s cheek when Dean cups his face with his hand. Cas doesn’t react, just continues to watch Dean in silence.

Dean hesitates momentarily, then ducks his head forward, pressing his forehead against Castiel’s and shutting his eyes. Cas parts his lips slightly, the breath of his quiet exhale hot and mixing with Dean’s own.

Gently, Dean tips Cas’ chin up so their lips, though not touching just yet, are close enough that Dean feels a small shiver running down his spine, branching out to the rest of his body like tiny sparks of lightning.
“You didn’t finish the song,” Castiel whispers, just as Dean’s about to kiss him. Cas pulls back, eyes opening again but not looking at Dean; instead, he fixes his attention on the logo embossed on Dean’s shirt.

The rejection stings like a slap, and Dean flinches as if it were one.

He pulls his hand back like he’s been burned, flattening his palm on the mattress behind himself to get it as far away from Cas’ face as possible. “Oh, um. Yeah,” Dean mutters, then gruffly gets out the last few lines lines:

“Did you say, Joe, I’m all a-tremble?
Perhaps it’s the battle’s noise—
But I think it’s that I remember
When we were two little boys.”

Dean sits up and rakes his hand through his hair, cheeks now burning hot as he avoids looking at Castiel. “Then it, um, repeats that end bit a couple times. From the Didja think I’d leave you dying thing to the last line, and Jack tells Joe they’ll be flying back to the ranks so blue, and, um, he asks Joe if he can feel that he’s all a-tremble—which is kind of idiotic, since Joe’s already told him he can—and. Yeah. That’s about it, really. It’s a just kids’ thing. Power of friendship through the years and all that hippy-dippy crap—”

“Dean, I think it’s best that you go,” says Cas in an undertone, cutting off Dean’s babble. “I appreciate your coming here, but…”

“Oh, yeah, good idea. I gotta work till the early hours of the morning tomorrow. Better catch what sleep I can when I have the chance,” Dean rambles, hauling himself off the bed and hurriedly making his way over to the door. He grabs his jacket off the floor and pulls it on, still not looking in Cas’ direction. Tugging the door open, he gets out a strained, “Have a good one, Cas.”

Dean doesn’t hear Castiel’s reply before he’s shut the door behind himself.
As Cas gains consciousness, the first thing he remembers from the previous night is Dean: Dean’s arms around him, Dean’s careful fingers outlining his features, Dean’s mouth millimeters from his own…

That’s when the next bit comes back to Castiel.

His eyes snap open; pushing himself into a sitting position, he recalls Dean’s hurt expression when Cas had pulled back. Even in memory, the look that had been on Dean’s face hits him like a punch to the gut. The confusion that’d been in the man’s eyes still makes Castiel feel like the worst person on earth.

“Damn it,” he hisses, dragging himself out of bed and unconsciously trying to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear. He releases a sigh of frustration when he remembers it’s shorter than he’s used to.

After a moment of indecisive hovering, Castiel picks his phone up from its spot on the small bedside table.

You have one new message.

He stares at the screen for a moment, nervous, then clicks the message open.

Need some INSTANT CA$H right now? Get up to $1000—TODAY! Reply YES for further info or N—

Castiel doesn’t finish reading the text before he throws the phone down on his bed with a growl of, “Goddammit!” because this isn’t what he wanted—hurting Dean was the last of his intentions. Avoiding doing so was the exact reason why hadn’t kissed Dean.

Dean, he thinks as he sits down heavily in the moth bitten armchair at the end of his bed, deserves more than him. Dean deserves more than a—

“Drunkard who spends more of his time inebriated and hysterical than doing anything useful,” Cas mutters aloud, then looks up abruptly when his phone buzzes. He reaches out and takes the old device, opening the message.

It’s from Dean.

hey

Hello, Dean.
sorry if i woke u or w/e but i was wondering if i could come over to pick up the clothes i leant u the other day? i think u forgot to give them back

Cas blinks down at the screen in surprise, then glances around his apartment in search of the clothes that Dean is referring to. He finds the pile sitting neatly folded in the corner of the room.

His cheeks are hot as he types his reply.

I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Please feel free to pick up your clothes at whatever time suits you – alternatively, I could deliver them to your apartment to save you the trouble.

ill be over in 15

As Castiel is about to reply, another message from Dean comes through:

do u mind if i come upstairs 2?
i kinda wanna talk to u abt last night

Cas stares down at the words, almost uncomprehendingly. On the one hand, he doesn’t want to face any questions Dean might have—because what will he say? I don’t want to hurt you sounds like something out of a cheesy romance film, and he can imagine Dean saying so.

But on the other, Cas wants to be reassured that he hasn’t upset Dean to the point of causing the man to hate him. He enjoys being around Dean, hearing his fruity laugh and basking in the complete joy in each of his smiles.

Castiel meekly reasons with himself that there’s a chance Dean’s going to tell him, with that boyish grin Cas has started to find creeping into his thoughts more and more, that there are no hard feelings. That he completely understands Castiel’s reasoning, and he wants to be friends even if they can’t have a romantic relationship.

It’s that chance that makes Cas reply with a deceivingly calm, Do as you wish.

Well, it’s that chance—and the guilty craving for Dean’s presence wriggling around restlessly in Castiel’s belly.

***

Castiel spends his time waiting by cleaning up his apartment, hoping that Dean couldn’t see how
messy it was in the dark of the previous night. Exactly fifteen minutes later, there’s a knock on the door.

Cas hesitates, hand hovering over the doorknob before he twists it and pulls the door open, stepping back immediately.

Dean is leaning his shoulder against the doorway, looking down at Cas with heavy-lidded eyes. His hair’s ruffled, sticking up in soft spikes like he hasn’t managed to get rid of all his bedhead; in the irregular cast of lighting, his freckles are more predominant than ever: splashed across the bridge of his nose and his cheeks like a galaxy of constellations marked on his skin.

Most notably of all, though, Dean appears uneasy as he catches his lower lip between his teeth and looks away. “Hey, Cas. Doin’ alright?”

“Much better than last night, yes.” Cas loiters momentarily, then hurriedly retrieves Dean’s clothes from the small coffee table and hands them to him. Dean examines the garments for a moment, like he’s trying to come up with something to say.

He finally lifts his gaze. “Cas, what’s going on in your head?

“What?” Cas says, startled.

“I don’t usually do this because it kinda takes the fun outta the whole thing, but I gotta know, Cas.” He stops for a moment, then catches Cas’ eye and says, voice slightly shaky, “Is this whole thing a…lost cause?” Dean makes a wide gesture. “You and me. You’re givin’ me mixed signals, man, and I just… I gotta know if there’s any use in me trying or if I should just give up before I embarrass myself even more.”

Castiel’s voice seems to have abandoned him as he half gapes at Dean. Eventually, he gets out a choked, “Uhm.”

A short burst of somewhat nervous laughter escapes Dean. “Who says there’s such a thing as being too forward?” He rubs a hand over the back of the neck and looks down at his boots, an uncharacteristically shy series of gestures. “Look, Cas, it’s just that I sorta like you. Which is why, I’m, heh, sounding like a moron, because, you—uh. You’re just. Fun to talk to. And being around you doesn’t actually suck. And, um, your new hairstyle looks real nice, and—Jesus, Cas, c’mon. I’m wearing my heart on my sleeve here. ’Least you could do is say something so I don’t look like a total moron.”

“Dean, I…” Cas starts. “I appreciate your compliments.”

The hopeful look in Dean’s eyes fades. “There’s a but coming up, isn’t there. Fuck. Fuck. I shouldn’t’ve come up here, Cas—I’m sorry.”

“But I don’t want to hurt you,” Castiel gets out, hearing how stupid he sounds as he says the words.

Dean stops and blinks at Cas, disbelieving. “You don’t want to hurt me? What is this, a bad Nicholas Sparks movie? Cas, you can do better than that, man. Don’t try to save my feelings or whatever the fuck, okay? If you think I’m an ass, say it. If you think I’m as ugly as an ass, say it. Just don’t… don’t lie to me, man. Don’t do that.”

“I’m not lying, Dean,” says Castiel, his tone surprisingly strong. “You’re not an ass, and you’re infinitely more attractive than one—but I’m…” He trails off, shaking his head.

“You’re—what? Kind? Intelligent? Funny? ’Cause those are some adjectives I can think of that
would work."

“I’m a mess,” Cas mumbles.

“Huh?” asks Dean, apparently caught off-guard by that.

“Dean.” He looks up to watch the other man’s face. “We’ve known each other just under a week, and in that time you’ve had to calm me down after a panic attack, found me unconscious in a gutter, and been made to come here in the middle of the night because I had a nightmare.”

“No one made me come here last night, Cas. I wanted to make sure you were okay. ’Cause, you know, that’s what friends do, ain’t it?”

Castiel flinches slightly at Dean’s interjection, voice wavering a bit as he continues. “As much as I’d enjoy a relationship with you—which I truly would, please believe me—it wouldn’t be fair to place such a continuous burden on you.”

He only notices Dean has stepped forward when he feels the fluttering in his stomach, onset by the closeness of the other man.

“Cas,” Dean says.

“Dean?” manages Castiel, worrying Dean can hear how hard his heart is slamming against his ribs. It’s almost deafening, he thinks.

“If I kissed you right now…” Dean pauses. “Forget all the crap about hurting me. If I kissed you right now, what would you do?”

“I… well… I suppose I’d kiss you back—”

There’s a faint thud as the clothes Dean’s holding drop to the ground, and then his lips are on Castiel’s. It’s only a light press of mouth, tentative, but Cas can’t help the soft sound that escapes him as he leans up into the kiss. There’s an awkward fumbling of hands as Dean tries to cup Castiel’s face while Cas attempts to do the same to him; with a quiet huff of laughter, Dean slides his hands to the back of Cas’ neck, gently running blunt fingernails through the short hair at the nape.

There’s a slight sugary taste to Dean’s lips, and the sweet, cherry scent to his breath further hints toward the idea that he’s been eating some sort of pastry lately. As Dean’s hands travel downwards, palms splaying delicately across the small of Castiel’s back, Cas wonders if the pastry Dean’s lips taste like had been made by Benny.

At that thought, he pulls back abruptly, met by Dean’s mossy-coloured eyes blinking at him dazedly.

“Cas?” Dean asks. “You okay?”

“Benny,” says Cas before he can fully think through exactly what he wants to say.

“Uh… What about him?” Dean asks in confusion.

Castiel stammers out a somewhat less than articulate, “He’s not… You’re not…?”

“Wait, you’re asking if me and Benny are a couple?”

Cas nods awkwardly, rousing a disbelieving bark of laughter from Dean.
“No! No, me and Benny… nah.” Dean chuckles, eyes fluttering shut again as he brushes a kiss to the spot between Cas’ eyes. “We discussed it, once, but… Yeah, nope. Better as friends and all that. So you don’t gotta worry about that ol’ teddy bear.”

“Oh.” Cas frowns, now unsure of the cause of Benny’s hostility toward him. Unconsciously, he shuffles a little closer into Dean’s embrace. At this close proximity, he can smell the faint scent of Dean’s apple shampoo and, as cliché as he knows it sounds, his stomach does a small, giddy flip. “He doesn’t seem to enjoy my presence much.”

Dean, ducking his face down—presumably to kiss Cas again—freezes. “He thinks this is a bad idea,” he gets out finally, voice nothing more than a mumble. “You and me, I mean. He doesn’t really… like us as a couple.”

The fuzzy feeling coursing through Cas’ veins dissipates in an instant—or, perhaps, it just solidifies into the heavy ball of lead that drops in his stomach straight afterwards. He steps back, feeling almost defenseless without Dean’s arms around him; forcing himself to keep his hands at his sides so he doesn’t hug himself, he says, “You should trust your friend’s word. As I’ve said, I’m not fit for a relationship—”

“Hey,” Dean says, moving forward and reaching up to brush his thumb along Castiel’s lower lip before tipping Cas’ chin up. “Benny doesn’t run my life, okay? He’s my friend, not my personal advisor. And—Cas? If you’re, you know, willing,” he continues, pressing his forehead against Castiel’s again, “we can work through whatever’s going on together. A problem shared is a problem halved, right?”

Cas hopes that the careful kiss he presses to Dean’s lips a few moments later is indicative enough of his reply.

Dean thinks the term “dizzy with happiness” might be applicable in this situation.

Barely having slept all night, he’d spent the entire morning pacing back and forth in his apartment, phone clutched in hand as he’d tried to figure out whether to text Cas or not. Hell, he’d even resorted to comfort eating, he was so distressed by the whole affair.

It was at that point that Dean had, apparently, regressed back to toddler years—because, attention still fixated on his phone’s screen, he’d managed to drop a large chunk of leftover cherry pie down his shirt.

A short (profanity-filled) while of searching for a change of shirt later was when he’d discovered that he’d never got the clothes that he’d leant Cas back—and had thereafter decided that this was obviously a message from whatever cosmic force ruled over the universe for him to text Castiel, so he had.

And now here he is, breathing the same air as Cas and fumbling with the buttons of the adorably ruffled dress shirt he’s wearing while trying his best not to break the kiss because he’s pretty sure he’s more intoxicated than any type of alcohol has ever made him and, by god, he’s never been more thankful for a pastry in his entire life than he is for that cherry pie.
Dean forgets about Castiel’s shirt, instead becoming more interested in tangling his hands in Cas’ soft, dark hair—and Jesus Christ, when he does, the hushed little moan that Castiel breathes into his mouth makes Dean harden so instantly he’s almost embarrassed by it.

Then Cas, who’s turning out to be a dominating sonuvabitch, grabs Dean’s shirt and pulls him down, pulls him closer; something he doesn’t seem to remember, though, is that Dean’s quite a bit bigger than him. To be fair, Dean doesn’t remember it either till they’ve overbalanced and toppled straight onto the bed.

The two look at each other for a moment, then Dean laughs and Cas laughs and he’s so, so beautiful with a genuine smile on his face that’s all crinkles by his eyes and flushed cheeks, and Dean can’t be blamed if he leans down to kiss him again—and this time, even if it’s shy rather than heated and sweet instead of passionate, Dean feels as jelly-limbed as he had during the first kiss of his life.

Then Cas is bucking his hips up into Dean’s, a drag of whatever the hell slacks are made of against denim that’s slow but all too quick at the same time, and, judging by the feels of things, Cas is enjoying this just as much as he is.

Dean’s fingers find Castiel’s shirt buttons again and Cas’ find the lapels of Dean’s jacket, and it’s a clumsy tangle of arms that leaves them laughing against each other’s lips; pulling away as briefly as possible, Dean slips off his jacket and tosses it aside (where it lands someplace on the floor judging by the light *thuff* that follows), and by the time he’s mouth has found Castiel’s again the other man has unbuttoned his shirt in what must be record time because suddenly there’s just *skin*.

Skin that, despite being pale from lack of sun, is still inherently golden; beneath it, Dean can see the lines of Cas’ collarbone and ribs and the tops of his sharp hipbones jutting out like the wings of a baby bird—and even though Castiel’s still gorgeous and sexy and beautiful, Dean can’t help but drag his lips away from Cas’ to press gentle kisses to each one of the too-prominent bones.

And, yeah, it’s ridiculous because they’ve just had their first kiss, but as Dean moves his lips over Castiel’s slightly perspiration-salty skin, he wants to love each of those bones. He wants to love everything about Cas, from his eyes to his lips to his neck to his just too-skinny chest and belly and whatever else lies beneath—and if given the chance, Dean decides while ghosting his lips lightly across one of Castiel’s ribs, he will.

Dean’s overwhelmed by fondness for the man beneath him as he lifts his mouth to Castiel’s neck again, kissing and sucking and nipping little shows of affection into the delicate skin.

“You have a nice smile,” Dean whispers, moving his kisses up to the bolt of Cas’ jaw. He feels rather than consciously causes the grin that spreads across his lips at the little shiver that goes through Castiel when Dean’s breath tickles his ear.

“As do you, Dean.” Cas’ voice is strained very slightly as he presses his forehead into the crook of Dean’s neck, releasing a quiet whimper of pleasure against his shoulder.

And it’s completely different to last night—because now, Cas is radiating happiness rather than fear, and Dean’s unable to stop the pride that wells up inside him at the thought that he’s the source of Cas’ happiness.

As Dean’s about to respond, he’s cut off by the jangly sound of a familiar guitar intro.

“Leaves are falling all around—”
“Jesus!” Dean says, startled. He sticks his hand in his pocket, groping for his phone. “Gonna put it on silent, hold on.”

“Don’t,” Cas murmurs breathlessly against Dean’s shoulder. “It could be your brother.”

“It’s not,” says Dean, brows pulling together as he squints at the caller ID. “It’s Benny. Even though he’s s’posed to be working. Hold on.”

Pressing the green answer button, Dean holds the phone to his ear and rolls off Cas. “Dude, what the hell? You’re gonna get in crap for shirking off—”

“Rich, comin’ from you, brother,” comes Benny’s mumbled reply. “Listen, that Tom jackass found your blue-eyed buddy’s coat and took it to Crowley, and, long story short, the big guy ain’t happy. You think you can get down here sometime soon? I’m already in the boss’ bad books; I don’t wanna get caught gabbing on the phone to you and lose my job altogether.”

“Oh, yeah, sure thing. I’ll be right over.”

“Goes without saying that you can’t bring Cas, but I’m gonna say it anyway. Don’t bring Cas,” Benny says in an undertone, then hangs up.

When Dean turns his attention back to Cas, the other is stumbling around the apartment, yanking on shoes and combing his hair. Dean blinks at him confusedly and asks, “Where’s the fire?”

“I just remembered,” Cas gasps between pulling off his crumpled shirt and tugging on a new one. Although Dean was covering every inch of that torso with kisses not five minutes prior, he still averts his gaze. It feels more polite.

“Job!” Cas mumbles. “For which I’m late.” He checks his fly, which has somehow come halfway undone (a mystery Dean may or may not have had something to do with while kissing Castiel’s hipbones)—“for which I’m late.” He opens his cupboard door, retrieving a blue tie and slinging it around his neck. He turns to face Dean, but gets too caught up in fiddling with his tie to speak. Castiel releases a frustrated sound when the piece of material ends up hanging backwards.

“Need some help?” Dean half smiles, getting to his feet and walking over to Cas. He reaches up to fix Castiel’s tie gingerly, unsure that the action is welcome.

Being faced by no objection, he undoes Castiel’s tie, easily redoing it. He’s been through enough job interviews himself to know how to work the damn things. “So what’s the interview for?” Dean asks to break the silence.

“Oh, it’s, uhm. The interview is for a position at a grocery store,” Cas mumbles. Dean can see the pink that floods his cheeks. “It’s not much, admittedly, but—it’s a start.”

Once he’s finished tightening the tie so it isn’t hanging too loosely, Dean tips Cas’ chin up, brushing a kiss to his lips. Whatever concern he has about that not being okay anymore disappears entirely when Cas leans into him, arms slung loosely around his waist.

“You’ll do great, Cas,” Dean says. Cas replies with something under his breath that Dean doesn’t quite catch, then turns to the door and stops.

“Dean,” he says, “have you seen my coat?”

Recollection of Benny’s phone call hits Dean instantly. “Uh, yeah, about that—that’s kinda why
Benny called. You left it at the bar. So, um, you head off to your interview and I’ll get your coat in the meanwhile, because I kinda gotta talk to him anyway.”

Before Cas can reply, Dean slips past him out the door and starts up a jog the moment he’s out of sight.

He’s grateful that he’d had the idea to drive the Impala to Castiel’s apartment building earlier that morning; even if it means defying his general rule of not letting her near Nine Circles, it’s better—and faster—than running. With the urgency that had been in Benny’s voice on the phone, Dean thinks speed is something he needs.

He spends the entirety of the drive scolding himself for getting distracted by Cas—again.

After a few eternity-long minutes, Dean finally skids to a halt a block shy of the bar. Shooting the Impala one last concerned glance, he heads ’round the corner and pushes the bar’s back door open when he comes to it.

As he’s greeted by the warm breeze of sweet-smelling air, Dean announces, “Here.”

Benny starts slightly, evidently surprised by the suddenness of Dean’s words, and looks over his shoulder to give him a glower. “Took ya long enough,” he growls, picking a folded trench coat off the counter and striding across the kitchen to shove it at Dean.

Dean grasps the coat, running his thumb along one of the seams as he meets Benny’s light eyes. “What happened? I mean, after Tom took Cas’ coat to Crowley. Jesus, that guy’s got his head so far up the boss’ asshole he’s making small talk with Crowley’s intestines—”

“Castiel ain’t allowed here anymore.”

“What?” Dean snaps.

Benny sighs and pulls his cap off, turning it in his hands. “Apparently, Blue Eyes has got a nametag on that coat somewhere—which is why Tom made haste to lick at Crowley’s ass a little more when he saw it. Castiel’s an unusual name; I ain’t never seen it before Blue Eyes showed up. So it didn’t take long for the boss man to start askin’ questions about who this Castiel Novak is.”

“Milton,” Dean interrupts. “His name is Castiel Milton.”

Benny gives him a weird look. “That ain’t the name in the coat, brother, but whatever you floats your boat. As I was sayin’, Crowley came in here, guns a-blazin’, and asked why I was letting every Tom, Dick and Harry into my kitchen.”

“‘Cause his fucking sound system’s shit, that’s why!”

“You don’t think I tried to tell him what happened with the sound system?” Benny sighs and puts his cap back on. He pulls out a chair and hooks his leg over the seat, arms folded atop the backrest. “Turns out, that wasn’t the best plan. Pushed my idea of tryna get Cas a job here straight off the table. Crowley doesn’t want”—he puts on an imitation of the man’s accent—“‘bloody insane riffraff loitering around his bar.’”

Dean’s fingers dig into the trench coat a little harder. The material smells of Cas, comforting him. “Cas is a paying customer. Crowley may be a dipshit, but he’s not dumb enough to turn away…” He trails off as Benny shakes his head.

“When was the last time he bought a drink?” Benny says. “That time you insisted on him trying a
Purple Nurple? Even that was a discount, Dean. He ain’t got a leg to stand on.”

Dean pushes his fingers through his hair, shutting his eyes briefly. *Shit.*

“Look on the bright side, brother,” says Benny after a bit. “Maybe this is a good thing. The way you were looking at that boy could only lead to troubl—”

At that, Dean’s eyes snap open. He glares at Benny. “The fuck you trying to say, Benny? I swear to god, if you did this on purpose ’cause you’re jealous or something—”

Then, before Dean can continue, Benny’s in front of him; barely a few inches from his face, the other man says sharply, “Don’t even start with that, Dean. You know full well not everyone thinks with their dick like you do—least of all, me.”

Dean is cowed into silence by the reminder, his burst of anger fading rapidly. “You know I didn’t mean it like that, Benny, c’mon. I wouldn’t take a dig at you for that.”

“Maybe not, but you were gettin’ dangerously close.” Benny stands down, stepping back to consider Dean in silence.

Dean squirms a little under the scrutiny, huffing out an irritable, “You gonna say something or should I just start stripping?”

“You slept with him, didn’t you?” Benny says softly. “You slept with Castiel.”

“Why d’you say that?” asks Dean, mouth suddenly very dry.

“I know you, brother. It ain’t like you to get this uppity over someone you don’t give a damn about. What in the hell did you do, Winchester?”

Dean doesn’t reply, hoping that something will distract Benny before he has to—he half wishes a meteor will collide with the earth before the subject can continue.

“I didn’t sleep with him,” Dean mumbles when the lack of world-ending meteors becomes apparent. He fixes his attention on the coat in his hands so he doesn’t have to see Benny’s reaction. “You, uh. You interrupted us with your phone call just before the pants came off.”
Dean is expecting anger. Yelling, maybe, or even some things being thrown around. It’s only logical for such reactions to occur on Benny’s behalf given the situation—which is why Dean is utterly bewildered when Benny just shakes his head and turns away.

Reluctant to provoke him, Dean doesn’t say anything until Benny’s continued to go about his usual business of cleaning counters so long that it’s starting to get weird.

“Benny?”

Benny—and Dean doesn’t know if it’s a response or just a way to shut him down—starts whistling to himself as he continues to scrub at a particular spot on the shiny metal island with increasing ferocity.

“Benny, you planning on ever replying or can I go home n—”

There’s a sharp thwack as Benny slaps the cloth down on the counter, and he hunches his shoulders over, back muscles tense enough that Dean can see them through the thin material of his shirt.

“What d’you want me to say, brother?” Benny mutters, still facing away from Dean. “You want me to vocalize the fact that I think you’re a moron? ’Cause I was going on the idea that that was a given.”

Dean recoils a little at that, looking down at the coat in his hands like a schoolboy being scolded. “I asked you to say something, not to act like a disappointed parent,” he grouses, though the complaint lacks the sardonic tone he’d have liked for it to hold.

“Well, lord, that just sucks for you, don’t it? But it’s real hard to avoid ‘acting like a disappointed parent’ when you’re makin’ me feel like one, Dean,” Benny snaps in his direction, turning to face him. “You know, I wouldn’t put it past you to sleep with Castiel just to get back at me for telling you not to.”

“Jesus Christ, you gotta be kidding me,” Dean exclaims, somewhat stunned but still rising to the challenge written plain on Benny’s face. “I like Cas. He likes me. And if there’s even a snowball’s chance we can make it work, I’m gonna try. That’s it. You don’t feature in the equation, you bigheaded son of a bitch. Y’understand?”

Benny raises his eyebrows, leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms. “So, you plannin’ on telling everyone who recognises you two ain’t even in the same ballpark as healthy relationships to get bent? Great way to lose every friend you ever made, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Dean growls, walking back over to the door. “You know, Benny, this whole, I’m the ultimate romance guru and you’re just a dumb kid act you’re pulling’s starting to get real old real quick.”

“I’ll stop treatin’ you like a dumb kid the moment you stop acting like one, Dean,” Benny says, the exasperation clear in his tone.

Dean stops at that, looking over his shoulder at the chef. “Benny, from the sincerest depths of my heart: go fuck yourself.” And, with a beaming smile, he steps out into the alleyway and slams the door behind himself.
Before Dean knows exactly where he’s driving, he winds up outside Castiel’s apartment building. Not wanting to come off as a creep by just sitting there staring at it, he climbs out the car and eyes the building, trying to figure out if Castiel would be back from his interview yet.

Deciding he might as well take Cas’ coat up for him anyway, Dean walks into the building. For the first time since he’s been in the place, he’s not too caught up in his own thoughts to take in his surroundings.

Dean has never really liked his own building. It’s skeevy and cramped, and he still feels ashamed whenever Sam comes over—but compared to Castiel’s, Dean’s apartment building looks fit for Paris Hilton.

The lobby of Cas’ building—whose name Dean still doesn’t really know, since more than half the letters have fallen off the sign outside and left it with only ___L_I_LIT_H—is small, with a grimy and unattended counter in one corner and a frayed Persian rug in the center of the floor.

He’s known from the get-go that Castiel has some trouble with cash; after all, one of the first things he’d learnt about Cas was the man’s lack of employment. But, for some reason, that hadn’t automatically equated to this in Dean’s mind. For the first time, Dean starts to question just how long Cas has been out of a job for.

He pushes the sudden almost-accusatory doubt out his mind.

As Dean walks up the stairs, he’s met by the muffled sound of breathy, porn star moans; avoiding looking directly at the door from behind which the moans are emanating, he grumbles, “Make sure to wrap your whacker before you attack her,” under his breath and speeds up his pace.

Despite everything that has gone wrong today, Dean can’t help the grin that creeps onto his lips when he reaches the door. Thankfully, he manages to school his face into a slightly less goofy expression before he knocks.

No reply.

Dean lets out a disappointed sound, giving the door a nudge. It had been a far stretch anyway, expecting Cas to be home already; Dean couldn’t have been gone more than half an hour, and—

The door squeaks on its hinges as it swings inward, only a little, but even that comes as a surprise.

Dean pushes the door again, experimentally, and, yep, there it’s swinging wide open, giving Dean a full view of Cas’ small apartment. Cas must’ve forgotten to lock it before he’d gone to his interview.

Upon considering the situation, Dean decides to leave the coat inside and shut the door properly behind himself. He can’t lock it, of course, but at least he’ll be able to make sure the door isn’t ajar enough to swing open under the lightest touch.

There’s some sort of alcoholic scent to the air when Dean walks into the apartment—not overbearing, only noticeable now that Dean’s thinking about it, but it’s stagnant and trapped in the room and it makes Dean’s stomach turn a little. It’s too much of a reminder of his dad—or, more, finding his dad a pile of loose limbs in an armchair, slurred words spilling out of him like the rotgut dribbling out of the bottle clenched in his hand.

Dean shudders at the sudden memory and tries to turn his thoughts elsewhere, looking around the
room. It’s smaller than his own apartment by quite a bit: one side holds a tiny kitchenette and a
bathroom with what looks to only contain a toilet, shower and basin; the other displays a single bed
pushed beneath a window, at the end of which is a moth-bitten armchair. There’s a little round
table, like the types you see at bars only shorter, in the middle of the room, and the single window
is covered with a blanket of some sort.

Dean frowns, baffled that he hasn’t taken in the details of this place before. Granted, it’s not like he
was exactly paying attention to the décor last time he’d been here, but still.

After checking the coat isn’t in desperate need of being refolded, he sets it on the table and roots
around in his pocket for a notepad and pen to leave Cas a message. Unsurprisingly, he doesn’t find
them—Crowley has this sort of weirdly uptight rule about leaving stationery and such at the bar.
According to Benny, some dude named Ian who’d preceded even his time at the bar had been such
a subtle thief that he’d ended up snaking more than sixty percent of Nine Circles’ pens before
Crowley even figured out what was going on. Apparently, when he did figure it out, Crowley had
blown his top so immensely that the Legend of Ian still lives on as a cautionary tale among the
bar’s staff.

Dean stops himself from chuckling at the recollection of the story just in time, mentally scolding
himself for allowing Benny to intrude upon his thoughts despite the cook’s massive assholery.

He gives the apartment a onceover to distract himself, now intent on leaving a note for Cas. He’s
just set his sights on a set of cupboards and drawers beneath the sink when his phone starts ringing.

“You sound like you’re in a good mood,” says Dean guardedly, and he hopes to god that’s all it is.
But he’s practically raised the kid, and knows Sam better than anyone else. Which means he knows
all the tricks Sam employs when he wants something he’s not likely to get.

“My, I? Huh,” Sam says, a bit too chipper for Dean’s tastes. “Go figure. Anyway, Dean, I wanted to
ask you something.”

Dean’s instantly wary.

“He sound like you’re in a good mood,” says Dean guardedly, and he hopes to god that’s all it is.
But he’s practically raised the kid, and knows Sam better than anyone else. Which means he knows
all the tricks Sam employs when he wants something he’s not likely to get.

“So I? Huh,” Sam says, a bit too chipper for Dean’s tastes. “Go figure. Anyway, Dean, I wanted to
ask you something.”

Dean holds back a groan. Here it comes. “What?”

He hesitates before looking through Castiel’s drawers, feeling slightly guilty in advance, but he
guesses that Cas wouldn’t mind too much. After all, the guy had been making out with Dean not
forty-five minutes before.

“I’m working on my essay—you know, the one in which I list you as my biggest inspiration?” Sam
lathers emphasis on the last two words, and that’s when Dean knows he’s in for it.

“Rings a bell,” Dean grunts reluctantly, peering into the last of the drawers.

Sam continues as if he didn’t just leave a pause for Dean to confirm that, yeah, he’s aware that
Sam’s making it known to the world (or, at least, his teacher) that Dean’s his biggest inspiration.
“And I’m getting to the part about how you’re working to support some of my school fees—the
ones Ellen lets you pay, I mean—and I know you clock in some hours at Bobby’s place every now
and then but I don’t think you’ve ever told me which bar you work at—”
Dean’s chest constricts, his hand hovering on the knob of the drawer. “Why can’t you just say I work at a bar?”

“Imagery,” Sam states, a little too quickly. “Putting in the exact name of the bar you work at will build a better image of you in the readers’ minds—”

“Bull,” Dean cuts in, shutting the drawer again and crouching down in front of the cupboards under the sink. “You can do just fine without. Won’t putting in the name of the bar qualify as advertising or something anyway?”

Sam says something, and he’s got that tone of voice that tells Dean he’s got some major puppy dog eyes going on, but Dean’s not listening anymore because he’s just opened the cupboard.

There are bottles crowded in the cupboard, lots of them. He recognises some of the brands—they’re cheap stuff, the type of booze Crowley wouldn’t let within a mile of his bar, and they’re all empty. It’s too similar to Dad’s old stashes, too much of a jerky, sickening flashback to what Dean would find hidden around the house even though John had sworn once again that he would lay off the juice for real this time, Dean, I promise, and suddenly Dean feels like he’s going to be sick as the reality of just how tremendously he’d underestimated Castiel’s little drinking binge hits him.

“What? Dean, are you okay?”

Dean doesn’t reply, just snaps the phone shut and pushes it into his pocket; he slams the cupboard doors shut with more force than strictly necessary and backs away from them like they’re animals crouching to attack him.

He needs to get out of here now before he does something he’s going to regret.

Turning to leave, he catches a glimpse of the clothes he’d leant Cas sitting in a forlorn pile beside the bed. He scoops up the worn-soft grey shirt and blue jeans with trembling hands. They smell like Dean does—after all, Cas had used Dean’s body wash and shampoo before wearing them—but there’s still some sort of Castiel’s essence woven into the fabric. They remind Dean of what it’s like to laugh with Cas and be close to Cas and kiss Cas, and he’s almost slapped in the face with the knowledge that Castiel’s too special to let go over something as small as whatever the hell is back there in the cupboard.

They can fix this. Dean can fix this. It’s his second shot, his chance to not-fuck up at saving someone like he fucked up with saving his father.

He’ll do it right this time, he knows it. He’ll get Cas to go to AA meetings and whatever the hell else is necessary for helping an alcoholic recover. The world alcoholic is bitter and stings and sounds like what’s used to describe ugly, fat men with loud laughs and a penchant for telling Dean what pretty lips he has; it’s not Cas, not beautiful Cas with his blue eyes and careful smile, and Dean’s going to make damn sure it’s a term that can’t be applied to the Castiel for much longer.

Dean’s thoughts race through his head, tripping over each other like a hysterical mob rushing around his mind, because this is his chance. He’ll prove it to himself and to Sam and to Ellen and Jo and Bobby and Benny and Castiel, Castiel most of all, because he’s not letting Cas go. He’s not going to let what happened to his father happen to Castiel.

Dean hauls himself out the apartment and shuts the door behind himself, leaning back against it and retrieving his phone. Clumsily, hands still shaking, he types out a text to Cas and sends it.
This is his chance. And he’s not going to fuck it up.

Castiel’s legs are still wobbling slightly from nerves by the time he’s walking home. He’s not entirely sure if it was a perfect interview, because his résumé had had some crumples in it and he’d stumbled over his words occasionally, but the person who had interviewed him—a young, black man with a neat beard who’d introduced himself as Victor Henriksen—had been nice and seemed to like Castiel well enough.

Henriksen had even smoothed over Cas’ freezing up when asked about serving in Afghanistan and had smiled like he understood, which Castiel reasons to himself is a good sign. But he can’t help feeling as if that was just the calm before the storm.

As if everything that’s happened today is the calm before the storm, Dean especially. Good things don’t exactly make a habit of happening to Castiel, and it’s all he can do not to mull over it like the world’s greatest pessimist in the meantime.

Before he can start batting about doomsday theories, though, his phone buzzes somewhere in his pocket. It’s a text message from Dean.

*got ur coat & dropped it off at ur apartment (which is unlocked btw so u may want 2 fix that). swing by my place asap so we can have dinner & u can tell me abt how u aced ur interview ;)*

The winky face makes Cas laugh a little, and he finds himself unable to control the small grin that’s broken out on his lips, because this is Dean. Dean wants to have dinner with him and Dean thinks his interview must’ve gone well, and Dean has somehow found something within Castiel to like despite everything that’s wrong with him.

It’s all he can do not to flat-out run to Dean’s apartment, and he’s still bouncing on the balls of his feet with excess energy when Dean answers the door—but something about the fakeness to Dean’s cheery expression makes the smile fall from Castiel’s face.

“Something’s wrong,” Cas says.

“Nah, nothing bad,” replies Dean too quickly. “Just—you know what, I’m about to grill the burger patties for dinner, so if you want something to eat sometime sooner than Christ’s next coming we’d better get inside.” He reaches out, tugging at Castiel’s shirtsleeve and pulling him inside.

Castiel follows his lead—but, not so easily deterred, he probes again: “What happened?”

“Just the usual crap, you know—the economy’s crashing, you’re not allowed at the bar anymore, my brother’s continuing the family tradition of being a pain in the ass—”

Cas comes to an abrupt halt, tipping his head to the side as he frowns at Dean. “Repeat that.”

Dean seems to have some difficulty forcing himself to meet Castiel’s intent stare, and his too-bright smile has switched to a look of forced confusion. “Huh? Oh, Sam’s decided he’s gonna compete for the title of World’s Nosiest Little Brother, so—”
“Dean.”

Dean withers a bit under Castiel’s scrutinizing attention and gives up the act, pushing his hand through his hair and looking away. “Uh, you meant the bar thing, right.” He coughs. “Er, yeah, Crowley—my boss. Short ponce of a guy, massive douchebag—he, uh, he bust Operation Cas Hideaway. See, Benny—he’s got this mini kitchen completely devoted to his freakin’ Hors d’Oeuvres and shit ’cause Crowley’s got a crush on him or something, but the catch is that he ain’t exactly allowed to let many people outside himself in there. Hell, I’m barely even allowed in there, so, uh, when Crowley got wind that some dude who’s not even a regular is kicking back and relaxing in Benny’s kitchen… It sorta pissed him off. And since the bar’s income has been steady for about as long as it’s been running, he’s not too worried about kicking one newbie to the curb. It’s a dumbass decision if you ask me, but there’s no reasoning with a guy like that, you know?”

“So Crowley does not wish for me to come to the bar anymore,” Castiel concludes slowly.

“That’s the gist of it, yeah,” Dean says, then hurriedly adds, “But it’s not that much of a problem. I mean, you know where I live and I know where you live, and we have each other’s phone numbers, so it’s not like we’re stuck in the middle ages with no way of communicating that we want to hang out when we want to hang out—”

Castiel steps forward, pressing his lips to Dean’s to shut the other man up. “Dean. It’s okay.”

Dean’s eyes drift open again to watch Cas, and for the first time Castiel sees the dark rings smudged beneath them, telling the story of a restless night. “You sure about that?” Dean asks, obviously still uneasy despite Castiel’s reassurance.

“It’s… unpleasant to have been barred from Nine Circles in such a way,” Cas admits, dropping his hand to loosely entwine his fingers with Dean’s, “but as you say—we have other places to see each other if we so wish.”

The tension drains out of Dean like a switch has been flipped, and this time his grin is easy and genuine as he dips down past Castiel’s lips to plop a kiss on the bolt of his jaw and peppers a couple more in a quick, playful line down the column of Cas’ neck. Each press of his mouth feels like it’s sending whites of electricity threading through Castiel’s veins, and Cas, finding this more pleasurable than he probably should, presses his face into Dean’s soft spikes of hair.

“Awesome,” Dean says against the dip of Castiel’s collarbone before looking up through his blonde lashes, a trace of joking seductiveness in his eyes as he asks, “So, you think you could stuff down a burger or two?”

And Dean is light and warmth, all cheeky grins and bright eyes, and Castiel doesn’t think he could refuse even if he wanted to.
Hey, everyone, just posting to let you know that I **won't be updating this fic anymore**. I'm really sorry to do this, since the story was just getting started, but I want to focus on my original writing and characters for a while rather than a fanfic that I've, quite frankly, run out of steam for. Maybe one day I'll pick it up again, but for now, the story has been abandoned.

Otherwise, thank you to all who have read this far! You guys are always welcome to hit me up on [my tumblr](http://example.tumblr.com). But for now—

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://exampleArchive.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!