The State of You

by TrenchcoatBaby

Summary

Castiel Novak is a New York based, no-nonsense book editor avoiding his southern roots. Dean Winchester is a born-and-raised farmer and budding novelist with a terrible case of writer’s block. When Dean finally admits that he needs help, Castiel is given a plane ticket and a mission: help Dean meet his deadline—by any means necessary.

But what happens when Dean and Castiel are immediately enemies...and immediately attracted to each other? Will they come together and learn from one another? Or will adversity and circumstance keep them apart?
Hi, friends! Welcome to my first WIP, which I plan to update once a week. I'm super into this story and the direction it's going, so I should be able to maintain a weekly schedule.

So, a little background that might (hopefully) give this story more creditability. I actually work in publishing as a book editor, and I've always thought the relationship between the writer and the editor has the potential to be incredibly intimate...and contentious. Which is how this idea was born! This story might provide a behind-the-scenes peak into the publishing process, though obviously, that's not the point here. (The point is to get these two gorgeous idiots together.)

I also live in the South, so I did that typical move of setting the story in a place I know because it's easier and fun (whoops). Also it's hot as hell outside right now—this summer might kill me—so I set this story in autumn. Basically I enjoy providing myself with wish fulfillment whenever I can. (#treatyoself)

Five zillions thanks to my editor EllenOfOz, who always makes time for me and my work. (She also made the amazing piece of art below of my gorgeous editor!Cas, and I love her so much I could burst.) Also endless thanks to my beta-readers, book club babes, and general cheerleaders WaywardAF67, WaywardJenn, and CBFirestarter. Y'all are all my favorite people in cyberspace (and also, IRL).

See the end of the work for more notes.
Dean Winchester stretched and yawned, the hammock swaying beneath him. Through closed eyes, he heard the rustling of leaves swayed by the sudden autumn chill. It was late afternoon, and though the morning had been warm, the temperature was dropping steadily. Still, life on Winchester Farms was operating as it always did. The chickens were squawking, the goats inhaling their grain, and Dean—a fantasy novelist with a six-month-long writer’s block—was doing absolutely anything but writing.

“Found him!” a voice called loudly. Dean cracked his eyes open, stomach full of dread, wondering who had discovered him. His brother, Sam, was standing in the dusty path outside their vegetable garden. The sleeves of his button-up were rolled to his elbows—probably just left his office for the day—and he was holding Dean’s cell phone to his ear, flashing his brother a scowl. *Oh great. Just when I thought I might go one day without seeing Sam’s bitch face…*

“Here he is,” Sam said, taking wide steps before thrusting Dean’s cell phone into his hand.
“Who is it?” Dean demanded, eyes narrowing in irritation. He and Jess, Sam’s wife, had tended to the animals all day...and Dean was really looking forward to his well-deserved nap, dammit.

“Anna,” his brother answered, his voice firm. “She’s been calling nonstop, Dean. This has to end.” He was right, of course. Dean had been avoiding his editor for the better part of three months...ever since it became clear that his writer’s block wasn’t going anywhere. But talking to Anna—even though their relationship was more than professional, having morphed into a long-distance friendship over the years—meant discussing his new book.

Or, as Dean had been calling it, the thing that we no longer speak of.

“Uh, can you tell her—”

“Nope,” Sam said, already turning on his heels and walking away. “You’ve procrastinated enough, Dean. Grow a pair and talk to her already.”

“Bitch,” Dean mumbled, staring at the phone in his hand. The call had been going for ten minutes already—holy crap. What had Anna and Sam been talking about?

“Jerk,” Sam replied, smirking, opening the side door and entering the kitchen, in search of Jess.

Dean sighed, closing his eyes and reminding himself to breathe. He leaned deeper into his hammock, hoping it would transport him somewhere else, anywhere else. He peeked an eye open. Nope, still here. Fuck.

He lifted his phone to his ear and tentatively mumbled, “Uh, hey Anna.”

“’Uh, hey’? Seriously?” Anna’s voice was shrill, louder than Dean had ever heard it. “Three months, Dean. Three months. We used to talk every day, remember that? Then, out of nowhere, you ghosted me.”

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“I didn’t ghost you,” Dean said defensively. “I sent you some emails.”

“Oh, right. I’m glad you brought that up. Let me read some of those excellent, eloquent emails you sent me.” Dean could hear Anna’s computer mouse scrolling frantically. This lecture wouldn’t be over anytime soon. “On July 23, I wrote, ‘Hi Dean, how’s the book coming along?’ You wrote, ‘It’s going.’ On August 8, I wrote, ‘Hey Dean, hope things are going well on the farm! I’ve missed your updates lately. Got any new chapters for me to read? Three weeks until deadline!’ And you said, ‘Nope, sorry, not yet.’ On September 1, I wrote, ‘Hey, it’s deadline day! Can’t wait to read your manuscript! Don’t forget to send it as a .doc file. Let me know if I can help with anything.’ You said, ‘Sorry, it’s gonna be late.’ Then radio silence for six weeks. Six weeks.”

Dean winced, cheeks flushed in embarrassment. He owed Anna a million apologies, he knew. But when he said he was having writer’s block, he meant it in every sense of the word. Even his emails and text messages had lost their usual charm lately. Everything around Dean—including Dean—seemed lackluster and gray.

Looking back now, writing the first three installments of The Impala Chronicles seemed almost too easy. At the time, he was a twenty-seven-year-old farmer living in rural, middle Tennessee, content to keep tending to the family farm. But then his best friend from high school, Charlie Bradbury, convinced him to sign-up for NaNoWriMo—National Novel Writing Month in November. “You were always so freakin’ awesome in creative writing class,” she had said. “Miss Braeden was obsessed with your writing. And you already have the perfect idea lined up. All you need to do is write it!”

Dean had scoffed at the compliments, but Charlie was right about one thing. Dean had been
brainstorming the events of *The Impala Chronicles* for years. The series was based loosely on his childhood: in the books, a young widow named Mary Campbell travels across the country, hunting down the demon that killed her husband. Meanwhile, she’s raising her two sons, Luke and Mike (short for Lucifer and Michael, biblical names Dean found appropriate in this universe) to become supernatural hunters. Luke and Mike were already in their twenties by the start of the first book, and once Dean finally relented and joined Charlie for NaNoWriMo, he realized how similar the characters were to him and Sam. Luke was smart and skeptical, but kind and compassionate. Mike was headstrong and stubborn, but loyal and brave. Dean had written his family into his fantasy world without even trying.

In reality, of course, there were no such things as demons. But sometimes, Dean liked to think that a demon *did* kill John Winchester—whiskey, Dean knew, was a demon of its own. He had been four years old when John had drunkenly wrapped his car around a pole. One month later, Mary and her sons left Kansas and bought farmland in Tennessee, hoping to reconnect with old family friends. It was a decision none of them had ever regretted.

Dean had never regretted *The Impala Chronicles* either...not until recently, at least. After he finished the first book, *Devil's Trap*, he couldn’t seem to stop writing. Ten months later, he had finished the second book in the series, *All Hell Breaks Loose*. He finally let Charlie read and edit them—though he had to withstand her squeals of delight, which was a punishment in itself—but thanks to her help and encouragement, his writing improved.

Then Dean spent nearly three, grueling years submitting *Devil's Trap* to various agents and publishers of fantasy fiction. After a half-dozen false starts, something finally stuck: the publisher of Sacred Sun Press, Chuck Shurley, had taken an interest in his books. Dean signed on for a full series, promising to write at least three additional installments after *All Hell Breaks Loose*. Anna was assigned his primary editor, and he worked closely with her during the eight-month process of writing his third book, *No Rest for the Wicked*. Meanwhile, his royalty checks were steadily increasing. The series had a small, but incredibly dedicated, fanbase. Dean spent the first year of his writing career in a permanent state of shock and awe. He got to do *this* for a living? Holy fucking shit.

But then, six months ago, Dean had started his first draft of *Lucifer Rising*. He had barely gotten through the third chapter before closing his computer, stepping away from his desk, and taking an unofficial sabbatical from writing. Or was it a resignation? A renouncement? He wasn’t quite sure.

Swaying now in the hammock, Dean was trying to think of a reasonable explanation for why he had been ignoring Anna so tremendously. Eventually he realized he didn’t have one. Apart from signing a new contract she had emailed him, he hadn’t engaged with her in months.

“What do you think the problem is?”

Anna breathed deeply into the receiver, her next words cautious and measured. “What do you think the problem is?”

Dean had an idea. Well, okay, he had *more* than an idea. He knew exactly why his fourth novel had suddenly halted at the beginning. He had deep suspicions for why the appearance of a certain character had sent him—and his fictional identity, Mike—into a tailspin.

But he couldn’t tell Anna—not yet. It was still too fresh and too personal. He hadn’t told anyone, not even Sam.
“No clue,” he mumbled instead. “I know you’re disappointed, and hell, I am too. But I really think *The Impala Chronicles* is over.” He paused, waiting for her react or interrupt. When she didn’t, he continued. “I don’t think, actually. I know. Time to pack it in, Anna.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said, and Dean laughed hollowly. *Why isn’t she getting it? This book is over. My writing career is over.* “Laugh all you want, Dean,” Anna continued fiercely, “but you and your family have always beat impossible odds. I know your history, and I know what you’ve been through. You’re a fighter, okay? Don’t you dare quit on me now.”

Dean’s mouth hung open, absorbing Anna’s words. His throat felt tight, and he pulled the phone away for a minute, attempting to calm down. He tugged at the sleeves of his flannel, wrapping the fabric around him tightly, shivering in the October evening air. Eventually, he pulled the receiver back to his ear. Anna remained on the line, waiting patiently.

“You’re right. I don’t want to give up,” Dean whispered. “But...what else can I do?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Anna said, sounding almost chipper. “We can do exactly what I would’ve suggested *six months ago* if you had been honest about your writer’s block.”

“Is that so?” Dean smiled softly, wondering if Anna’s newfound attitude was contagious. *Hypnosis? Ghost writer? Sell my soul to the devil?*

“Nothing quite that easy,” she said, and Dean chuckled. “I’m assigning you a new editor.”

Dean sat up in his hammock, instantly flooded with panic. “What the hell? You’re just gonna drop me? I know I’ve been an asshole lately, and you’re right, I totally ghosted you. But I can’t do this without you. Well, okay. That’s not totally true. Apparently I can’t even do this with you, but that’s my dumbass fault, Anna, not yours—”

“Dean,” she interrupted. “Chill, okay? I’ll still be your copyeditor, and managing editor, and biggest fan. We can stay in touch during the whole process, if you want. But what you need right now is a developmental editor. Someone who’s tough and discerning, who’s good at breaking down walls and can talk you through the narrative arc...really identify the problems you’re having with *Lucifer Rising*. It’s the only guaranteed way—that I know of, at least—to get you past your writer’s block.”

Dean swung his legs over the side of the hammock and swallowed. “You really think it’ll help?” He tried to ignore the newfound hope in his voice.

“I really do,” Anna said. “And I have the perfect person in mind—Castiel Novak. He’s a great editor and a co-worker of mine. I’ll book his flight right now.”

“Flight?” Dean repeated, standing up abruptly. “Wait—what? This guy will fly down from New York and...what? Lock me in a barn with my computer? Make jokes about the little redneck writer from the sticks?”

“I can promise you he won’t make many jokes. Well, unless you count sarcasm. And he’s actually from Tennessee originally, so he shouldn’t have any problem navigating the area. Or your farm, I imagine.”

“Good for him. Make sure he packs his Stetson and boots,” Dean mumbled.

Anna sighed, sounding impatient. Dean didn’t blame her—he wondered why he was being so sensitive about this.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Why are you so turned off by this idea?”
Good fucking question. I wish I knew. After a moment of pacing, Dean finally said, “I’m just surprised that this editor—Castiel? What the hell kind of name is that, by the way?—I’m surprised he’s willing to come here. Couldn’t we just, I don’t know. Skype?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Dean, because I think you’re brilliant and charismatic and very talented. But—”

“Always a ‘but,’” Dean said grumpily.

“But... at best, you’re creatively unpredictable. But lately you’ve been—negligent. You’ve ignored me for months, you’re missing deadlines, you’re not writing...and, Sam said you haven’t been taking care of yourself.” Dean turned, squinting his eyes towards the kitchen window, searching for Sam’s silhouette through the glass. So, that was what Sam and Anna had discussed earlier on the phone. Well, thanks for fucking nothing, Sam. So much for sibling loyalty.

Still, it was all true. For the past six months he hadn't had much of an appetite. He struggled every night to fall asleep, even though he spent ten hours a day helping Jess with farmwork. His impulse to create and imagine, to craft and manipulate language, hadn’t been fulfilled in so long that it was making him stir crazy. As a result, he had started drinking in the evenings, something that always made Sam nervous...considering their dad’s history.

But despite all this, or maybe because of it, Dean still couldn’t bring himself to return to his writing. Not after what he had realized about Mike...and himself. He just needed more time to process, to understand, to accept himself for who he was.

But hey, if this Castiel guy could put him on the road to redemption and kick his ass in gear, Dean had to try.

He had nothing left to lose.

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Castiel checked his watch and sighed. It was nearly seven o’clock, and if he didn’t leave the office soon, he would miss his bus. Most days he biked to work, but the temperatures were already dropping in New York, some evenings on the cusp of freezing. He closed his laptop and tucked it safely into his messenger bag, then tossed on his trench coat. On his way out the door, he noticed his friend and fellow editor, Anna, was still in her office. He approached her open door—intending to chastise her for not having a life on a Friday night, though Castiel had little room to talk—whenever he heard her mentioning his name. He squinted to himself in the empty hallway, figuring he should definitely wait now and speak with her. She might have something urgent to run by him, a last minute editorial question or a book suddenly behind on its to-printer date. He checked his watch again, picturing his tiny apartment twenty blocks away. Well, there goes my bus.

He walked further down the hallway, trying not to eavesdrop on Anna’s call. His eyes landed on a framed photo on the wall that he hadn’t noticed in a while, taken fifteen years ago, the day Chuck Shurley had cut the ribbon (so to speak) on Sacred Sun Press. He had forgotten how young Chuck had been back then, how youthful he appeared when he wasn’t being ravaged by cancer. Castiel cast his eyes down, resisting the urge to spiral into melancholy. He reminded himself that Chuck was getting the best treatment available in the country. And he was still young, barely pushing sixty. If anyone had a chance of beating this thing, it was him.

But there was also Zachariah to consider, Chuck’s eldest son, who had been taking over many of Chuck’s responsibilities during his medical treatments. Zachariah was frowning in the photo and wearing a heavily starched suit, looking out of place next to his carefree father (who was sporting a
rumpled button-up and making a peace sign with his fingers). Castiel smiled, suddenly missing his eccentric and affable friend. He needed to visit Chuck soon. Maybe this weekend…

His eyes returned to the photo, and he spotted a handful of others faces he recognized—Hannah, their dedicated royalties analyst; Balthazar, the in-house publicist dripping with persuasive charm. Finally, in the corner—practically hiding from the camera—were the two interns: Anna and Castiel, both only eighteen years old. Castiel touched the framed glass and peered down at his younger self, practically still a child, remembering the initial relief of finally being on his own...of not being judged by his family for his lifestyle, of finally being able to date and pursue other men publicly, escaping the shadows of a church pew. Fleeing eight hundred miles north the moment he graduated high school had changed the trajectory of his life forever.

“Cas?” Anna called out. Castiel turned and spotted Anna in the doorway, an amused expression on her face. “Going down memory lane?” She tilted her head towards the photo.

Castiel shrugged sheepishly. “It’s just...we’ve worked here our entire adult lives. Sometimes I forget.”

“Me too,” she agreed softly. They shared a moment of comfortable silence, listening to the ancient furnace creak to life, the wind gusts outside shrill as a whistle.

“I have a project for you,” Anna said finally, “and you're gonna hate me for it.”

“Fantastic,” Castiel mumbled, sliding his hands into his pockets.

“You know our Impala Chronicles author? Dean Winchester?”

Castiel nodded. He wasn’t familiar with Dean’s work, but had seen his author photo once on the inside flap of his book jacket, and...well. Dean had a face that wasn’t easily forgotten.

“I know the name,” he said mildly.

“You mean, you know the face,” Anna corrected with a smirk. “I remember last year, when the All Hell Breaks Loose hardcovers were shipped to the office. You practically pinned his author photo to your bulletin board—”

“Okay, okay,” he interrupted, blushing with embarrassment. At the time, Castiel had harbored a small crush on the guy, sure. But it was purely cosmetic. Castiel could appreciate a beautiful soul...or, in Dean’s case, a beautiful body. But once Anna told him that Dean was “incredibly straight”—whatever that meant—Castiel had dismissed any fantasies involving their most eligible author. Even if he was ridiculously attractive. “Weren’t you about to ask me for a favor?”

“Right,” she agreed, seeming to realize she had wandered off track. “He needs help. Your help, specifically. He’s a month behind on his deadline, and I don’t need to tell you how bad that is for us. Or him.”

Castiel nodded, knowing how regimented their publishing process was. If the manuscript was late, then the edit and proofread would be late, too, and the designer would be rushed, and they would be delayed sending the files to the printer, and the book might miss its sell date...and then Balthazar would kick their asses for ruining his publicity materials.

“What can I do?” he asked curiously. “You’re his editor, Anna. He’s never worked with anyone else.”

“That’s why I wanna do this,” she said firmly. “He has major writer’s block, but he’s not opening up
to me anymore. He’s spiraling...and I don’t know how to help him.” She frowned, and Castiel mirrored her expression. After fifteen years in the industry, he could certainly empathize. He knew how close a writer and editor could become.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help,” Castiel said, feeling honored that Anna trusted him this much...and a little uneasy at the thought of corresponding with Dean. If he really was struggling, they might have to exchange phone calls or do some video conferencing. How could Castiel maintain his professionalism with someone that fucking attractive?

Anna sighed, beaming with relief. “I’m glad to hear you say that. You remember where he lives, right? Near Nashville, on his family’s farm?”

Castiel fought the urge to shiver. Castiel hadn’t returned to Tennessee in fifteen years, not even for his mother’s funeral. Anna knew his history, and was well-aware of how Castiel tensed up anytime his home state was mentioned. “What about it?” he choked out.

“I’ve talked it over with Zachariah, and he’s agreed…” She bit the inside of her cheek nervously. “You fly out Sunday morning.”

For several minutes Castiel lost track of time. Everything felt surreal—as if he were watching himself blink, then pace, then stare at Anna with a hardened expression. And then, it hit him... **there’s no way my oldest friend is sending me back home by accident.**

“This is an intervention,” he said flatly.

“No—”

“This is you, trying to fix me.” Castiel said the words hard and biting, full of resentment. “What, you think I’ll touch down on Tennessee soil again and finally start facing my demons?”

“God, you’re both unbelievably dramatic,” she huffed. Castiel tilted his head in confusion, momentarily halting his pacing.

“Who?” he demanded.

“You and Dean. What’s that saying—‘cut from the same cloth’? Jesus... I just got off the phone with him, Cas, and he’s in rough shape. I know this is hard for you, too, but—”

“I won’t do it,” he snapped, though he already felt his resolve slipping. “We have other editors, Anna.”

“No one as good as you,” she said simply. She took a step forward, eyes fixed and unyielding. “I don’t need to remind you what will happen if Dean fails to submit his manuscript...do I? Or have you already forgotten Zachariah’s new contract, the one he made all our authors sign—the outrageous termination fees? The publisher’s retention of rights? It’s bullshit, Cas. It’s highway robbery at best. Dean could lose everything.”

Castiel leaned over a nearby table, spreading his long fingers across the surface. He ducked his head, heart pounding. “Does he know what’s at stake?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“I begged him to have Sam—that’s his brother, who’s a defense lawyer—look the contract over. But Dean was already so...despondent.” She bit her lip anxiously. “I don’t think he even read the terms before signing.”

He exhaled, shaking his head. “I want to help, I do, but...”
“Then do it, Castiel.” He glanced up, startled by Anna’s use of his full name. “Help him, rescue him. And maybe, while you’re there…” She leaned against the wall, tears forming in her eyes. “Rescue yourself, too.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dean checked his folder once, then twice, and if he was being honest, a third time. Inside was his book outline for *Lucifer Rising*, as well as the first three drafted chapters of the novel...neither of which he had touched since April. Anna had challenged him to put the exact issues he was having—during the writing process, not to mention his surmounting anxiety about his writer’s block—into words. It wasn’t much, just a few sentences, but it was a confession more vulnerable than Dean ever allowed himself to be. He folded that particular sheet of writing and hid it in the back of the folder, uncertain about sharing that much of himself with Castiel.

It was Sunday afternoon, and according to Anna, his new editor had landed in Nashville two hours ago. They were meeting for coffee in an hour, at a Nashville spot Dean enjoyed called Frothy Monkey. Sitting at his desk at home, he scanned the pages for errors and typos, nervous about the upcoming meeting. If he didn’t put his best foot forward, Castiel might dismiss him as an illiterate country pumpkin...and the book would never be resurrected.

After Dean had sufficiently—or, you know, obsessively—proofread his pages, he went to his bedroom and peeled off his sweaty farm clothes. Sam and Jess had claimed the master bedroom and bathroom last summer, shortly after getting married, so Dean was allotted the smaller bedroom and guest bath. He didn’t mind, really, though it was strange to be a thirty-one-year-old man living in your childhood bedroom. They had tossed the idea around of building a second home on the property, a cozy cabin so Dean could have more space and privacy. But building his dream cabin wasn’t quite as appealing to Dean if he had to live alone.

He took a quick shower, washing away the morning’s dust and dirt, then stood in front of his closet. For this meeting, he certainly couldn’t wear work clothes—denim, t-shirt, and boots—which made-up about ninety percent of his wardrobe. What should a fantasy author, living on a farm, wear to a coffee meeting with his swanky, New York editor? Dean shook his head, reminding himself that Castiel was from the South, too. He might show up wearing overalls and cowboy boots, for all Dean knew.

That reminded him—how was he going to spot Castiel in the coffee shop, if he had no clue what the dude looked like? Towel still wrapped around his hips, he pulled up his laptop, opened a browser and searched Sacred Sun Press. He couldn’t remember if the website had staff photos, he hadn’t visited the site in years. But he should check, just in case…

*Holy shit.*

There were photos. Good god were there photos.

Castiel was quite possibly the most gorgeous man Dean had ever seen. He was nearly Dean’s height and leaned against a brick wall, though not posing for the camera—just staring carelessly ahead. And Jesus, what a gaze it was. His eyes were blue, mesmerizing and impossible, with his eyebrow arched high. His expression was lax yet intimidating, as if he couldn’t be bothered with you, but if he did—you’d be in hot water. Jesus Christ. His hair was dark and his scruff was evocative as hell and Dean was totally screwed. How was he supposed to focus on writing with a goddamn Greek god looking over his shoulder?

“Jeez, that guy is handsome,” Jess said from the doorway. Dean jumped in surprise, nearly dropping
his laptop.

“Jesus, Jess. Ever heard of knocking?” he grumbled, heart racing, wrapping his towel more tightly around him. Jess, in her exercise pants and loose tank top, just rolled her eyes at his nakedness.

“Oh, please. I knew you as a teenager. Small town, remember? I have vivid memories of the streaking—”

“Only twice....okay, three times. But that third time was a dare—”

“And the cross-dressing—”

“That was for charity!” Dean huffed. “You and Sam swore to never mention it!”

“And worst of all—I can never forget what Rhonda Hurley told me, the first summer after college. All I can say is...there’s a reason I keep my Victoria Secret’s credit card hidden.” Jess was smirking, clearly pleased with herself, and Dean shot her an exasperated glare.

“Go on,” he goaded, waving a nonchalant hand, “get it all out of your system before my editor comes. Cause if you or Sammy embarrass me in front of him, I will murder you. Slowly. With torture.”

“I can see why,” she said, raising her eyebrow suggestively, tilting her head towards the computer. “I’d wanna impress my new crush, too.”

“New crush?” Dean’s cheeks grew warm and he ducked his head away, rubbing his neck absently with his hand. “That’s ridiculous,” he mumbled.

Jess leaned further into the doorway, scoffing. “He’s totally your type, Dean. I mean...as far as you know. Right?”

Dean turned back to his closet, unsure of what to say. He still felt awkward discussing his newfound sexuality with anyone, much less his family. But Sam and Jess were the only ones who knew.

It had been a totally unremarkable Saturday night, three weeks ago, when Dean suggested they have a cowboy movie marathon. He had been struggling for weeks about coming out as bisexual—did it even matter if he had never acted on any of those feelings? And who the hell had a sexual awakening in their thirties?—but all three of them were sitting on the couch, fully pajamed, Dean wolfing down his favorite chilli lime beef jerky. By the time they started the third movie, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Jess declared a young Robert Redford to be the sexiest on-screen cowboy. Before Sam even had time to scoff or feign offense, Dean was speaking, waving his hands enthusiastically. Maybe it was the twelve pack he had just polished off—much to Sam’s chagrin—but Dean felt words tumbling out of his mouth.

“No way! Were you asleep during The Good, the Bad and the Ugly? Clint Eastwood is easily the sexiest fucking cowboy alive.” It was something Dean had always thought, but never shared with anyone. His casual confession turned things awkward, though, and prompted Sam to corner him in the kitchen the next morning, asking questions about Dean’s thoughts and feelings and if he had anything he wanted to talk about. Jesus fucking Christ. Things had spiraled from there, of course, morphing into a full-blown chick-flick moment that Dean blamed entirely on the hangover. Now that Sam and Jess both knew, they kept bringing it up casually, hoping Dean would open up. But he wasn’t quite ready.

Dean heard Jess shift under the hardwood, heading for the kitchen and the back door. “Hey,” he called out, not realizing she had left his bedroom, “where you headed?”
“The back fence,” she replied, “some posts have gotten loose.”

“Need some help?” Dean asked. Jess hadn’t been raised on a farm like Sam and Dean, but damn if she wasn’t a natural. Since taking a break from writing, he had gotten used to working alongside her everyday while Sam went to the office. Even on Sundays, apparently— _wow, that kid is a workaholic._

“Nah, it’ll go quick,” she said. “Besides, you have an... _appointment..._ to get to.” Dean rolled his eyes at the implication, but waved her off anyways, watching from the window as she walked towards the fence. He turned back to his closet, feeling more and more uneasy the longer he stood there in his towel...with only Castiel’s sexy ass photo for company. He reach forward and shut his laptop closed, then regarded his closet again, sighing. If he didn’t leave soon for Frothy Monkey, he might be late for his appointment with Castiel.

That, of course, was when he heard shouting from the window. Jess was on her knees in the grass, clutching her hand. There was a heavy mallet at her feet, and she was doubled-over, calling Dean’s name.

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Castiel entered the coffee shop feeling drained and tired. The past few days had been a whirlwind, considering he only had Saturday to pack for his trip, cancel any upcoming plans he had scheduled (there weren’t many), and let his other authors know he would be out-of-office for a while. He had somehow managed to squeeze in a visit with Chuck, who was in unusually high-spirits that Saturday, so they split a pack of cigarettes and a six pack and spent the afternoon on Chuck’s apartment balcony.

“Zachariah will be angry with me for supplying you with contraband,” Castiel commented, but he didn’t particularly care. Chuck had his vices, which his son was trying to withhold during the cancer treatments. But the fact that Chuck even _felt_ like smoking or drinking actually encouraged Castiel. Chuck had spent the past few months too sick to do anything but rest.

“Zach, god love him, needs to get that stick out of his ass,” Chuck remarked.

“No disagreements here,” Castiel mumbled, and they clinked their beer cans, drinking in silence. After a while, Castiel told Chuck about his upcoming trip to Nashville and the frantic deadline to finish Dean Winchester’s book. Chuck knew Castiel’s history and subsequent hesitation to return, but unlike Anna, he didn’t press the matter further. “I’m glad you’re helping Dean,” he said instead, smiling. “As the publisher, I shouldn’t play favorites, but—hell, who cares anymore. Dean is definitely my favorite.”

Castiel’s curiosity was building, wondering what made this man so special that both Anna and Chuck were rallying behind him. His series had a loyal fanbase, but his numbers were modest at best.

“Why?” Castiel asked genuinely.

Chuck considered the question for a minute, coughing until Castiel went inside, retrieving a glass of water. _Maybe that third cigarette was a mistake,_ he thought guilty. Chuck sipped the water slowly, smiling in thanks. Finally, he said, “Dean is good a man. His writing process is chaotic as hell, from what Anna told me, but he’s very hardworking and dependable.” Chuck wrinkled his forehead, seeming concerned. “Which is why it worries me—him missing deadlines and having writer’s block. That doesn’t sound like him. I hope he’s all right...”
Standing in the coffee shop now, Castiel shook his head, attempting to clear his mind. Just being in Nashville meant he was incredibly close to his hometown, just a small farming city forty miles south. The possibility of running into someone he knew—someone from his past—was significantly high. On top of all that he was nervous about meeting Dean, wondering if he would look as handsome in person...but didn’t allow himself to follow that train of thought for long. Instead, he stood in line at Frothy Monkey and ordered himself a large coffee. He wondered absently what kind of coffee drinker Dean would be—dark roast? Cappuccino? Why was he so curious about this man? The coffee shop was busy, but he managed to claim a small table by the window. He spread out his notepad and laptop, in case Dean had some pages or files ready for his review, and waited.

After ten minutes he ordered himself a pastry, hoping it would keep him distracted. Dean was a little late, obviously, but not terribly so. Parking was always difficult in the city, that was probably all. After twenty minutes he checked his watch, wondering if he was following the wrong time zone—it was an hour later in New York, after all—but no, he was on central time. He shot Anna a text, asking for Dean’s cell number, but she didn’t respond. Castiel sighed again, wondering if he should just open up a blank document and take this time to write...but shook his head. He wrote primarily creative nonfiction, and was in the middle of a difficult essay he needed to finish. It wasn’t something he could jump into casually, especially not on-edge and anxious, waiting for Dean. Instead, he reread the first ten pages of his draft and did some line-editing, catching a few typos here and there.

When he glanced up, it was nearly three o’clock. Wow. Dean was almost an hour late to their meeting. Was he standing Castiel up? He pulled out his phone again and called Anna, but he only got her voicemail. Ten more minutes passed and Castiel was officially annoyed. He had flown from New York and he was on time...early, even. Clearly Dean wasn’t serious about finishing his book. Castiel liked schedules, liked staying organized so things could be done correctly. Clearly Dean had little respect for Castiel and how far he’d traveled to be here...not to mention that he had never intended to return to Tennessee, and only agreed because Anna and Chuck spoke so highly of Dean. But Castiel was forming a different opinion. Either Dean was a rude asshole, or he was in such a state of disorder that he had forgotten about their meeting. Whatever it was had Castiel fuming. He packed up his computer, slung his messenger bag over his shoulder, and walked towards the door.

On the way out, he bumped into a man who was practically running inside. He was slightly taller than Castiel, more muscular in the arms and shoulders. They collided hard, and Castiel’s cup of coffee got caught between them, the lid popping off and the contents spilling down the front of Castiel’s white button-up. He looked up, frustrated and sticky, searching for the person to confront. The man looking back at him was Dean Winchester.

He was even more attractive in-person, because God hated Castiel and wanted him to suffer. Dean had short, sandy brown hair that still looked wet from the shower; he was wearing torn and stained jeans and a threadbare t-shirt; in fact, apart from the folder in his hand, he looked completely unprepared for this meeting. His eyes grew wide as he considered Castiel, perhaps realizing who he had just spilled coffee on. Castiel only stared back, still infuriated by the coffee and the lateness, but equally transfixed by Dean’s eyes. His author photo really did not do them justice. The color was green and vivid, yet earthy and grounding, and Castiel’s brain grew fuzzy, trying to sort out all the emotions he was feeling—irritation and exasperation, mostly, but also a surge of tension, even attraction…

“Are-are you Castiel?” Dean asked in a small voice, and Castiel nodded.

“Well...shit,” Dean mumbled.
Dean didn’t know why he was surprised. Of course Jess had her first ever farming accident—pounding her finger roughly with a mallet, fracturing a bone in her pointer finger—on one of the most important days of his writing career. Of course he hadn’t been dressed yet, so he had grabbed whatever was on the top of his overflowing laundry bin and ran outside, calling Sam, who of course was at the office a half-hour away, so Dean had to drive Jess to the hospital and wait for Sam to meet them there. He had been an hour late getting into Nashville, and Anna wasn’t answering any of his frantic calls or texts, and Dean was kicking himself for never getting Castiel’s number or email. And then, in his rush to get inside, he had accidental decorated Castiel’s shirt with a cup of coffee, only to look up and realize that the dude was a thousand percent hotter in real life. Dean was practically drooling over the guy because of fucking course he was.

Dean didn’t like to be dramatic, but this was maybe the worst day of his life.

“I’m Dean,” he said, and Castiel only nodded. Obviously he knows that, dummy. Say something else! “I’m sorry, like, seriously sorry. Not just about the coffee—” He reached forward and pulled out a stack of paper napkins, dabbing them to Castiel’s ruined shirt and wincing. “—but also for being so late. I’m never late—okay, well, that’s not totally true. I can lose track of time easily, you know? But never about stuff that matters and this...this mattered to me. Matters. It’s just, my sister-in-law—how my big ‘ole moose of a little brother got a girl like her, I’ll never know—well, we all live on a farm, and Jess had an accident when she was repairing the fence out back, and Sam wasn’t there, and then—”

Dean stopped when he felt fingers wrapped around his wrist. Castiel’s finger. Oh. He had been so forcefully rubbing a napkin against Castiel’s coffee-stained shirt, he was practically kneading right through the cotton.

“Do you always ramble?” Castiel asked, his voice low and gravely, and what the fuck, how could someone that attractive also have a voice like that? “Or is this just a nervous habit?”

Dean pulled away sheepishly, throwing the crumbled napkins into a nearby trash can. “A nervous habit,” he admitted, stuffing his hands in his back pockets. He cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. “I’d still really like to have our meeting if you’re willing...but if not, I understand.”

“I’m willing,” Castiel said carefully, and Dean could tell by his tone that he was definitely still angry. Anna had mentioned that Castiel was an orderly kind of guy, so being an hour late and then dowsing his shirt with coffee was probably the worst thing Dean could’ve done. Great.

Castiel walked stiffly to the back, slinging his bag on a table. Dean waited in line for coffee, hoping that if he ordered Castiel the biggest size available, and maybe even threw in a cookie or something, he might win his new editor over. Based on the frown he was met with, though, once he finally came back with coffee and cookies, that ship had already sailed.

Dean took a seat across from him, shuffling awkwardly when he realized their knees were touching. He cleared his throat and took a long sip of coffee, trying to think of something conversational to say.

“Why do you have writer’s block?” Castiel asked candidly, his eyes searching Dean’s face. Dean was so caught off-guard that he sipped his coffee for too long and accidentally burnt his tongue.

“Wow, you don’t waste any time. All business, huh?” Dean meant it as a joke, but realized his reaction might sounded critical.

Castiel narrowed his eyes. “If you wanted time for small talk, you should’ve been on time,” he said cooly, and wow, this guy is a major dick. Dean was tempted to go through the whole spiel again, explaining Jess’s broken finger and the twenty minute drive to the hospital, but it was clear Castiel
didn’t want to hear his—incredibly fucking reasonable—excuse. Dean was starting to get irritated. What was this guy’s deal?

Instead of showing his frustration, Dean leaned into his chair, forcing an unpleasant grin on his face. “My apologies, Mr. Novak.”

If Castiel noticed the change in title, he didn’t comment on it. He just stared at Dean, and while his expression was hostile, his eyes were...what, exactly? Purposefully aloof? He was watching Dean closely, as if he was interesting but dangerous, a bomb that could go off at any moment.

“Your writer’s block?” Castiel repeated, and Dean blinked, looking away from his gaze.

“Right. Um...no idea, really.”

“That’s not true,” Castiel said evenly, and while Dean gaped at him, he took a measured sip of coffee. “There’s obviously something going on. Maybe with the plot, characterization, or thematic meaning. In good writing, all three elements are connected.” He placed his cup back on the table with a gentle thud. “So, which is it?”

“Characterization,” Dean heard himself say, and damn, was he really going to bare his soul just because this guy was a tad bossy?

“Characterization,” Dean heard himself say, and damn, was he really going to bare his soul just because this guy was a tad bossy? “My protagonist, Mike, I...don’t know that I understand him. Something’s changed and I don’t know how to write from his perspective anymore, which is a big damn problem, since he’s the narrator.”

Castiel nodded, seeming almost pleased with Dean’s answer. His eyes flickered down to Dean’s folder. “You have some pages for me?”

Dean nodded, passing the folder over. Castiel opened it and scanned the pages. He pulled out the book outline and examined it closely, laying it on top of his laptop. “Your difficulty with Mike’s voice,” he said, “would it have anything to do with the introduction of this new character? Angel?”

“That’s not his name—that’s way too much of Buffy reference for me, even though my friend Charlie would literally die if I planted that easter egg in—”

“Dean...”

“Right, um, rambling. Sorry.” He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, focusing on the warmth. “Angel is just...an angel. Obviously. I haven’t named him yet. But he’s a great character, he’s really expanding the mythology of the series. It’s surprising me how integral to the story he feels already.”

Castiel raised an eyebrow. “Then what’s the issue?”

Dean scratched the back of his neck, avoiding the scrutiny of Castiel’s gaze. Could he really do this? “It’s...um, well, the effect Angel has on Mike,” he mumbled, cheeks burning red.

“The ‘effect’?” Castiel repeated.

*Just say it. It’s not like he knows you picture yourself as Mike. Outing Mike won’t out you. Just be honest...*

“Mike is bisexual,” Dean blurted out, and Castiel leaned back in chair.

“Is that...a problem?” he asked, in that same careful tone from earlier.

“Um, well...” Dean ran his hands through hair, tugging at the ends anxiously. “I didn’t know Mike
was bi until Angel appeared, and then I realized I was writing their scenes like...you know. With sexual tension or subtext or whatever the hell you wanna call it. They’re two dudes who wanna bone and I can’t seem to stop it. I’ve always been—I mean, Mike, has always been...a more masculine guy. Totally ladies’ man and whatnot. So I have no idea what to do with this development. So I kind of flipped out and stopped writing.”

He slumped into his chair, feeling drained but relieved at finally sharing his conundrum with someone. Even though that someone was staring at him with something like anger in his eyes…

“Let me get this straight,” Castiel said, voice lower and gruffer than usual, and fuck that should not be sexy because he’s clearly about to yell at me. “Writing your main character as bisexual was, what? Exactly? Too much for you?” Dean instinctively wanted to agree, but this felt like trap. There was so much accusation in Castiel’s tone that he decided not to say anything.

“I knew you were having personal issues, but this…” Castiel shook his head in aggravation. “There’s a lot of things I could fix, but a straight man being homophobic isn’t one of them.”


Castiel stood up abruptly, collecting his laptop and papers, sliding them into his bag. “I’m afraid Anna was wrong. I’m not the right editor for this project. Good luck, Dean.”

He maneuvered around their table and passed Dean without a second glance. Dean’s heart raced with confusion and adrenaline. What the fuck had just happened?

He didn’t fully recognize that he was running until he was stumbling out the front door, chasing Castiel onto the sidewalk. Dean shouldn’t have bothered running, though—Castiel was just outside scrolling on his phone, likely hailing an uber for a ride back to the airport.

“Hey, asshole,” Dean called, and Castiel glanced up in shock. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re pretentious and judgmental, and...just so you know...flat-out fucking wrong about me?”

Castiel’s gaping mouth snapped shut, his jaw set hard. He took long steps towards Dean, crowding his personal space. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re reckless, juvenile, and incredibly frustrating?”

“Regularly,” Dean said dryly.

“Somehow I don’t doubt that,” Castiel said, and Dean chuckled.

“You know what? I don’t care anymore that Anna vouches for you. Or that this probably means the end of my writing career. Or that you’re the sexiest fucking man I’ve ever seen.” Fuck, that last one was an accident...but what the hell. I’m never seeing this guy again. “Fuck you, Castiel.”

Castiel crowded against him, eyes narrowed and sparked darkly with rage. “Don’t misinterpret my cool demeanor for control, Dean,” he rumbled, so close that Dean could practically feel the reverberation in his chest. “You should show me some respect.”

He was so close that Dean worried Castiel might hit him—or worse, kiss him? Which honestly should’ve repulsed Dean, given what a jackass this guy was, but there was something about his commanding tone and body language that made Dean feel insanely turned on and pissed off. Somehow in equal measure. He closed his eyes, ready for the impact of whatever Castiel planned to give him…

Instead, Castiel took a firm step backwards. He started walking, quickly and with his hands in the
pockets of his trench coat, as if nothing had happened. Eventually, he was just another body in the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, so sorry for the sorta cliffhanger. Next chapter is already in-progress, though!
Hooray!

Feel free to drop me questions and thoughts in the comments. I LOVE hearing from you guys!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Y’all, look at me, already working ahead of schedule! Ah! This chapter is super essential and I’m so glad to have it ready for you guys. Things are really starting to heat up...

Castiel watched the sunrise the next day, legs crossed in a patio chair, smoking on the balcony of his hotel room. He was still in Nashville, but had booked himself a flight for later in the afternoon. He couldn’t wait to leave this godforsaken state, filled almost entirely with bad memories. Castiel took another drag of his cigarette, inhaling deeply, realizing he had added another negative interaction to his association with Tennessee: his confrontation yesterday with Dean Winchester.

Castiel had never met anyone who could anger him so fiercely. And yet...Dean’s nervousness, his shy smiles and silly rambling, had almost been endearing. Almost. Castiel reminded himself, not for the first time, that Dean had only been nervous because he was revealing his own prejudice. Dean was just another straight, southern guy (an insanely attractive straight, southern guy, but who cared? Castiel didn’t…) who couldn’t keep his bad opinions to himself.

Still, it was strange that Dean would even allow himself to imagine his protagonist as queer, especially if he was actually a bigot...wouldn’t he just suppress that idea? Or dismiss it altogether? What was it that Dean had said yesterday...you’re “flat-out fucking wrong about me”?

Castiel shook his head, trying to quell any incoming doubts. You made the right decision. You left this place for a reason. The people here clearly haven’t changed. He stood up and stretched, then crossed back into his hotel room, sliding the balcony door behind him. He checked his phone, rolling his eyes at Anna’s texts from the night before. She was angry with him for leaving, and kept demanding to know what had caused Dean and Castiel to have such a severe falling out in only twenty minutes’ time. Castiel had been vague, internally debating if he should tell anyone at all. Though he found Dean insufferable, it wasn’t his place to tarnish the author’s relationship with Chuck or Anna.

Castiel tossed his pajamas off and took a quick shower, lathering his hair with the cheap, hotel shampoo. Yesterday he had planned to spend the morning purchasing a small amount of toiletries—not to mention food and snacks to fill his mini-fridge with—but that had been before. What had come over him?

The way Dean challenged him, bold and unafraid, stirred something in Castiel that he wasn’t sure how to identify. No matter what Castiel’s opinion was, Dean was obviously a complex person. It was bizarre how quickly his mood could switch from insecure uncertainty to swaggering and smug. Even stranger, when Castiel crowded against him, close enough to brush noses, Dean had seemed breathless and awestruck. Castiel had experienced a similar energy before, but only with men he had slept with, and even then—it had never felt so electric, so heated. That was impossible, though... Anna said Dean was heterosexual, and Dean’s little panic about his character’s sexuality had confirmed that. But Dean had also said...you’re the sexiest fucking man I’ve ever seen. Why on earth would he say that? Who was this man, and why was he so difficult for Castiel to understand?

Standing in the shower, soap suds running down his thighs, Castiel noticed he had become hard.
Strange...he hadn’t been thinking about anything particularly erotic, only imagining his interaction yesterday with Dean. And, sure, while Dean was physically appealing, Castiel cared more about his personality and beliefs...which were obviously lacking. He adjusted the temperature, standing under the freezing water long enough to calm his erection, then turned the shower off and grabbed a towel.

Twenty minutes later Castiel was clothed again, selecting a more comfortable outfit for the plane ride home—faded jeans, a form-fitting baseball tee, and a maroon hoodie. Afterwards he emptied his messenger bag, dumping the contents and searching for his notebook. Instead of finding his note, though, his eyes found Dean’s folder... oh. Castiel must’ve accidentally swiped it in his rush to exit the coffee shop.

He sat on the edge of his bed—which he had made immediately after waking up; even if it was a hotel, he liked maintaining his morning routine—and leafed through Dean’s folder. He had a solid book outline, it turned out. *Lucifer Rising* sounded like the most complex, yet interesting, addition to the series so far. It seemed Dean planned to expand the universe significantly in the fourth installment—heaven and angels, demons and hell. It was ambitious, Castiel would give him that.

He shook his head and stood up, closing the folder. But when he did, a single, folded sheet of paper flew from the top and landed at Castiel’s feet. He picked it up curiously, not realizing anything else had been tucked inside. He unfolded the paper and read:

*Castiel,*

Anna asked me to put my writer’s block into words. Which is so freaking ironic—me writing about having writer’s block. But this is the first thing I’ve written in months, so dude, if you’re reading this, don’t judge me too harshly. Anyways, I guess to understand my situation, I need to go back a few years.

I started *The Impala Chronicles* as a tribute to my mom, Mary. Most of my readers know that, so it’s not exactly a secret. Every single novel has been dedicated to her. Here’s what everyone else doesn’t know: I was only four years old when we left Lawrence, Kansas, and moved to Tennessee, where Mom started the farm. She raised me and Sammy on her own after Dad drank himself into an early grave. She was tough, an honest-to-god badass, so when she died, I wanted to find a way to keep her alive somehow. So I started this book series and based some of the events on our real lives. Except, you know, angels and demons or whatever. That shit ain’t real, no matter what Dan Brown wants everyone to believe.

Anyways, if anyone cared enough to compare Mike and Luke to me and my little brother, well, they’d realize we’re one and the same. It just happened naturally, you know, cause everyone always says to “write what you know” and me and Sammy, that’s the only thing I know. It’s weird, but there are things I’ve learned about myself just from writing Mike. I have a new self-awareness that I never had before I started writing.

Which I guess brings us to my writer’s block. When it became obvious to me that Mike is bi, or at least—would swing that way for Angel in a heartbeat—I realized I was discovering something about myself. Apparently I’m bi, too, and it’s put me in an impossible situation, really. I won’t be ready to write from Mike’s perspective again until I accept myself... and I’ve been struggling like hell to do that.

I know you don’t care about my personal crap and I’m sorry to burden you with this. All we need is a book, or at least a halfway decent manuscript, and I wanna give my readers that. I really fucking do. Sam thinks I should do counseling or something, and I don’t know man, maybe it would help. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get past all this shit and finish the series.
I may just need your help to get there.

Yours,

Dean M. Winchester

Castiel swayed, suddenly lightheaded. He read the letter again, heart racing, before reaching across the table and pulling out his phone.

***

Dean couldn’t sleep. Even after knocking out a half-fifth of whiskey—sneaking it into his bedroom so Sam couldn’t shoot him disapproving looks—he still tossed and turned all night. In his mind he kept replaying his run-in with Castiel, trying to understand how he had been so disastrously misjudged. By three o’clock, still wide awake and flooded with aggravation, he decided to search for his folder. He intended to take all the materials he had accumulated for Lucifer Rising—the printed chapters, the book outline—and douse them in gasoline, drop his zippo, and set them on fire. Not his most sober or level-headed idea, he knew, but it had been a hard fucking day. He knew now that his writing career was over.

But he never found the folder...which either meant he’d left it at Frothy Monkey, or Castiel had taken it. The thought of Castiel reading the very private and very vulnerable letter he had tucked inside made Dean feel nauseous. Eventually he did get sick, though the cause was likely drinking liquor on an empty stomach. Afterwards, clammy and sweating on the bathroom floor, he felt strangely calm. He reasoned that even if Castiel had the folder, there’s no way he’d ever open it. After all, he had taken all of five minutes to get to know Dean and get the wrong goddamn impression. He was probably already back in New York, telling Anna and Chuck that Dean was a homophobic asshole. The thought made waves of queasiness crash through him again. He had considered his longtime editor and publisher to be his friends, but that would probably come to an end now, too.

By sunrise he felt energized, knowing the likelihood of sleep had dwindled to zero. Instead he showered, dressed—it was an unusually warm morning, so he slipped on loose jeans, boots, and a worn tank top—and was in the barn working by the time Jess and Sam came outside. Dean had already fed the chickens and collected eggs, replenished their water, and was tending to the goats when he noticed Sam wasn’t wearing his standard monkey suit.

“Didn’t know the firm did ‘Casual Monday,’” he said, giving Sam’s outfit a once-over.

“I called in,” he said, exchanging a look with Jess. They put their elbows on the fence, the metal splint on Jess’s finger tapping against the wood.

Dean turned around, searching for the rake. Damn fall, with its damn trees and damn leaves and damn sky and… “What for?” he asked, purposefully not turning around. He could feel a chick-flick moment coming on and didn’t think he could handle that today.

“Well…” Sam awkwardly brushed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. “I’m worried about you.”

“We’re worried about you,” Jess interjected, and Sam nodded.

Dean turned around, expanding his arms nonchalantly. “Thanks, I guess, but there’s nothing to be worried about.”

“But your book...and what happened yesterday with that editor. Dean, you have to talk about this—”
“I don’t have to do shit today but rake these leaves, give the goats their hay, tend the garden, then go to the store and sell some eggs and turnip greens. Then get up tomorrow and do it all again. That’s my agenda—got it, Sammy? Hop on or hop off, doesn’t matter to me.” Finally, he spotted the rake leaned against the barn. He opened the gate, careful not to let the goats out.

“So, what?” Sam said, voice rising and skeptical, following Dean towards the barn. “You’re not a writer anymore? Just a full-time farmer?”

“It was good enough for Mom,” he said, snatching the rake more forcefully than he intended.

“Mom loved the farm,” Sam conceded, his tone cautious now, “but she never wanted us to have this life—our livelihood being unpredictable, everything tied to the harvest. Don’t you remember the months she had to waitress part-time, just to make ends meet? We were dirt-poor, Dean. For years. She wanted more for both of us.”

Dean rounded sharply on his brother, a surge of emotion coursing through him. He thought about his book series, a labor of love for Mary, that would now remain unfinished. Would she be disappointed? If she were still alive, would she consider him a failure?

“Congrats on making Mom proud,” he said finally. “Good thing one of us did.”

“Dean—”

“Sam,” Jess said firmly, feet still planted by the fence. “Why don’t you and I go check the garden?”

Sam sighed and nodded, shooting Dean a look of apprehension. “No matter what you do, Mom will always be proud,” he said, placing a tentative hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Farm, write, exotic dance—whatever. No one cares as long as you’re happy.”

Dean gripped the rake handle, trying to fight the lump in his throat. He gave Sam a small nod, but didn’t trust himself to speak. Sam gave his shoulder a final squeeze before turning and joining Jess, the pair of them walking towards the garden and whispering together. Dean shook his head, wishing he had someone to lean on like that...someone to share everything with. He loved Sam and Jess, maybe depended on them more than he should, but they were their own team now. Sometimes Dean felt like a third wheel in his own family.

Still, he appreciated the time alone. He needed to do something physical, to clear his mind and focus on problems he could actually solve—leaves, hay, harvest. His mind certainly didn’t wander to Castiel or the intensity of his gaze, those eyes bluer than anything had a right to be. And Jesus, how commanding his body was, pressing Dean against the wall without apology. Over the past few months, Dean had imagined what it would be like, being with a man for the first time. The situation with Castiel might’ve been a reoccurring daydream, maybe even a spank-bank scenario. Would Castiel be a top? Or maybe he liked switching? Dean could certainly get on board with either possibility…

And then he stopped that train of thought, reminding himself that, A) he didn’t even know if Castiel was into dudes, and B) what he did know was that the guy was definitely not into him, having mistaken Dean for a homophobic piece of garbage. So, yeah. It figured that the first man Dean considered drop-dead gorgeous would hate him. After everything that happened yesterday—the feeling was pretty much mutual. It was time to push Castiel completely out his mind.

By the time Dean had raked all the leaves, his spirits were a little higher. He could actually appreciate their color, the various shades of red and orange that he looked forward to every year. He gathered them up into jumbo-sized trash bags and piled them outside the barn, knowing Jess might use the
leaves for mulch or compost. By the time he was ready to tackle the hay, the sun was high and bright and he was sweating profusely. He needed a coffee break, but he dreaded the goats having to wait for their breakfast any longer—they were bleating unusually loud, and the sound was setting Dean on-edge—so he climbed up the barn’s hayloft ladder and dropped two bales into the goat pen. The goats’ sounds of excitement made Dean smile instinctively, and he almost managed to forget how exceptionally fucked-up his life was at the moment. He left the barn and opened the fence, knowing the goats wouldn’t wait long before digging in. The poly twine was dangerous if they ingested it, so he would need to remove that soon. As soon as he opened the fence, however, he heard a car driving up the gravel driveway.

He squinted, a hand covering his forehead. He was still disassembling the hay, his body on autopilot, but felt confused about why a pimpmobile was pulling up to his farm. Who would he even know that would drive a ’78 Lincoln Continental? Jesus…

That’s when the passenger door opened. Dean’s mouth hung open. He couldn’t look away. Castiel fucking Novak was walking towards him.

***

Castiel struggled to find a ride that would take him this far outside the city. It seemed his only option was a Lyft driver named Alfie, who had been weirdly accommodating considering the thirty mile drive. Castiel had thanked him repeatedly, and after a while, the strange little man had started to grow on him. Castiel tried to distract himself by making conversation, and later, by staring out the window, appreciating the sourwoods and maples and their colorful offerings. New York was beautiful in the fall, but Castiel had to admit, there was something distinct about autumn in the country. Everything felt unpredictable and wild.

An hour earlier, Anna had texted Castiel the address to Dean’s farm, seeming as surprised as Castiel by his sudden change of heart. But Anna hadn’t read that letter, hadn’t felt the vulnerability in Dean’s confession...the shame and confusion, the desire to move forward. Though he still found Dean difficult—something about his laissez faire attitude irritated Castiel—he couldn’t believe he had misread the man so harshly. He thought back to his high school years, when he had been outed as gay in a small southern town, just like this one...it was no wonder Dean was struggling, both personally and creatively. Castiel could only pray his outburst hadn’t caused irreversible damage.

Once the car finally pulled into Dean’s gravel driveway, however, Castiel wondered if he had made a terrible mistake. The two men hadn’t parted on amicable terms, and there was a significant chance Dean might throw him a right-hook as soon as Castiel approached him.

Despite his nerves, he couldn’t help but but admire the beauty of the place—the small farmhouse, with its painted shutters and potted plants, looking well-lived in and well-loved. The was a large, fenced-in chicken coop on the top of the hill, with at least two dozen clucking chickens wandering around. Castiel spotted frizzles, with fluffy brown and white feathers, and white silkie, graceful and fluffy as a poodle, alongside classic breeds—Welsummer, Rhode Island Red. The farm had goats too, wandering under towering, exquisite trees—one of which had an old tire-swing tied to a sturdy branch. By the look of it, it might’ve been around since Dean was a child. There was also a barn, paint chipping and red, and a shed behind the vegetable garden. The farm was expansive in acreage but still warm and inviting. To his utter confusion, Castiel felt drawn to the place.

He exited Alfie’s car but asked him to wait in the driveway. He knew this conversation could go several different ways, and he might need a quick getaway if Dean chased him off the farm with a shotgun. Not that he could entirely blame him, but still. He scanned the area, looking for Dean. His eyes finally settled on the goat pen, and there he was—handling bales of hay effortlessly, shoulders
wide and sheening sweat. The front of tank top was clinging to his torso, and his loose jeans were snug around his hips. Castiel’s mind went blank, his mouth fuzzy and dry. There was so many reasons that he should turn back now, send Dean a written apology once he was safely back in New York, and recommend another editor for the project.

But Castiel was too invested now.

He tried not to think too closely about why that was.

The walk across the farm was agonizing. Dean still hadn’t left the goat pen, and was leaning against the fence, as if the barrier might help protect him against Castiel. Dean was staring at him, hard, his expression cold and guarded. For his part, Castiel didn’t flinch or look away. He tried to convey as much remorse as he could, simply with his eyes, but knew it wouldn’t be enough.

When he finally reached Dean, he cleared his throat and said, quietly, “Hello, Dean.”

“Uhh,” Dean began, then turned his head, breaking their eye contact. “Hey?” he said incredulously, as if he couldn’t believe Castiel was in the same zip code as him, much less standing one foot away.

“You here to call me a homophobe again? Or slam me up against a wall?”

Castiel cringed. “No, I’m…” He heard voices behind him, and turned, spotting a tall man and a woman, her hair tossed into a tight ponytail. They were obviously Dean’s family—what were their names again? Sam and Jess? They stayed on the other side of the barn, safely out of earshot, looking at Castiel curiously. Dean held-up his pointer finger at them, the universal sign for give me a minute. Then he set his eyes back to Castiel.

“Why the hell are you here?” he asked directly, and Castiel shuffled awkwardly, staring at his feet. “Cause, I gotta be honest—I’m not exactly thrilled to see you.”

“I understand,” Castiel said, his voice low and pained. “I just—I came here to apologize. I made a grave mistake yesterday, not only in my assumptions but in my treatment of you. You deserve an apology and I wanted to give you one.”

“Huh. Is that so?” Dean’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “Why’s that? If I remember correctly, yesterday, you were ready to tear my throat out.”

The thought of Dean’s throat made Castiel’s eyes wander, and oh no, that was a mistake. Dean’s skin was flushed from exertion, chest rising and falling irregularly. His skin was tan and golden, likely from long hours of farmwork, and Castiel could make out freckles on cheeks. He was, without a doubt, the most stunning man Castiel had ever seen.

“Well, I…” Castiel reached into his back pocket. He pulled out the letter, folded and wrinkled from the drive. “I read your letter.”

Dean’s eyes grew wide. “You had no right—”

“I know, I’m sorry…I didn’t know. It was addressed to me,” Castiel said. He passed the letter to Dean, who snatched it back quickly. Dean looked down, cheeks burning, clearly embarrassed.

“I don’t plan to tell anyone,” Castiel continued, head tilted down, trying to catch Dean’s eye, “if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Oh, well, that’s a relief,” Dean said sarcastically, chuckling and shaking his head. “If that’s all, I got work to do.”
Dean began pulling poly twine from the bales of hay, the motion angry and jerked.

“Of course.” Castiel nodded solemnly. “A new editor from Sacred Sun will contact you soon.”

“I don’t need a new editor,” Dean said dismissively. “I’m done.”

“Dean, if I—”

“This has nothing to do with you, Castiel. Go back that fancy, New York office and tell everyone that the writer from the sticks is dumb or homophobic or whatever the fuck floats your boat. Either way, I’m out.”

Castiel took another step forward, hands wrapping around the fence that separated them. He thought of Zachariah’s new contract, about everything that was at stake for Dean...though he didn’t seem to realize it. Still, telling Dean the truth would only add more stress, which would be detrimental to the writing process. Castiel sighed. He owed Dean this much.

“You know,” he said, attempting to sound casual, “I grew up in Nickel Springs. That’s only two towns over.”

Dean eyed him warily. “Congratulations.”

Castiel took a deep breath, deciding not to let Dean’s attitude deter him. “When I was fifteen, my mother, Naomi, found my diary. And read it.” Dean stayed silent, but Castiel knew he had piqued the man’s interest. “I had written all about my first boyfriend, Raphael.”

Dean’s guarded expression faded for a moment, replaced with...well, it was difficult to decipher. Surprised? Excitement? “Raphael,” Dean repeated. “Dude. You dated a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle?”

“No, but I might’ve been better off if I had,” Castiel said, and Dean squinted his eyes in confusion. “When my mother found out about us, she made me confess to the church. Publically,” Castiel explained, and Dean’s eyes widened. “After that, Raphael distanced himself from me. He joined in with the other kids, teasing me, ostracizing me...” He smiled with a tight lip. “Anyways, I just wanted to say—I know what it’s like when someone takes away your privacy, your agency...your voice. I’m sorry if it makes you uncomfortable that I know about you, and Mike, and the whole situation you’re in. But I promise that no one else will know, not if you don’t want them to. You have my word.”

Dean tucked his hands into his pockets. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “That’s...uhh, decent of you.”

Castiel nodded, and Dean glanced up, his expression considerably softer. “Why did you come here?” he asked, and his voice was raw, not shrouded with sarcasm or feigned indifference. “I know you feel bad about yesterday, and, yeah, I get it. But...”

“I do feel bad,” Castiel agreed, speaking carefully. Dean was watching him intently, as if whatever Castiel had to say might be life-changing. “But I also feel...confident.”

“Confident,” Dean repeatedly blankly, obviously not the word he was expecting.

“Confident,” Castiel continued, “that with a little work—okay, a lot of work—you can write this book. You can do it a month. We can still publish it by the spring of next year, as planned.” He took a deep breath. “And you can do it with my help.”

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Dean didn’t know what had possessed him, but suddenly, he was standing in the kitchen pouring coffee for a guy that—only twenty minutes ago—he was convinced he hated. Wait, he did still hate Castiel. Right? I mean, sure, the guy had apologized and tried to bond with Dean by sharing his coming-out story. Which had prompted Dean to have an internal freak-out in his head—*holy shit, he’s gay he’s gay he’s gay!* And he did seem sincere about helping Dean with his book. Plus there was that whole, six-feet-of-delicious-dark-headed-greek-god vibe going on. But whatever. Dean knew he had to sustain the hatred. If he didn’t, a feeling far more disastrous might take its place.

“How does that sound?” Castiel said, his computer and notepad stretched across the kitchen table like he owned the place.

“Uhh…” Dean turned from the coffee pot, realizing he hadn’t been paying attention. “Yeah.”

“Dean,” Castiel sighed, “you haven’t been paying attention, have you?”

“Apologies, professor,” he grumbled, pouring coffee into two mugs and joining Castiel at the table. Castiel cut his eyes at Dean, but took the coffee anyways. By now it was nearly lunchtime, a little late for a morning jolt, but Dean hadn’t slept or ate much lately. He needed something to keep him upright, and figured his new editor might disapprove of whiskey before noon.

“I was doing the math on your word count. Your first three books have been roughly one-hundred thousand words. For fantasy fiction, that’s the sweet spot.”

Dean had the impulse to make a “that’s what she said” joke—or even better, considering his audience—a “that’s what *he* said” joke. But Castiel seemed to be in a stern mood, so he sipped his coffee and said, “Jesus, that seems daunting.”

Castiel nodded sympathetically. “And we need your locked manuscript in a month…which means, writing an average of four thousand words a day.”

Dean nearly spit out his coffee. “A day? For a month?” He shook his head in disbelief. “You do know I run a farm, right?”

“Not for the next month, you don’t,” he said airly, eyes locked on his computer. Dean scoffed, but then Castiel shifted the screen of his laptop, showing Dean a calendar he had designed.

“Here’s a way for you to keep track of your daily and weekly goals. Once you hit your word count, you can do whatever you’d like for the remainder of the day. Though I’d recommend exercising, napping, and reading.”

“Cool. Afterwards I’ll stop by the senior citizen center for some bingo,” Dean quipped, and Castiel rolled his eyes. They were huddled together around Castiel’s computer. Dean tried not to think about how close their forearms were to touching.

“Dean,” Castiel said. Dean already knew that hearing his name spoken in that exasperated, impatient tone, *Dean*—disapproving, deep as a sigh—would become a tradition between him and Castiel. And it definitely was not endearing. Nope, not at all. “You have to practice self-care. Writing can be very draining, and if you don’t replenish your energy, you’ll get fatigued.” Before Dean could argue that he had never practiced any hippie-dippie “self-care” and was perfectly fine without it, thank you very much, Castiel continued. “Even more importantly, we need to discuss something you mentioned in your letter.”

Dean felt his body grow tense, his shoulders suddenly rigid. “Yeah?”

“You said you wouldn’t be opposed to therapy,” Castiel said gingerly, “and I think that would be
wise. Your writer’s block is a personal issue, and if we’re going to push past it, we need to accost the issue from all angles.”

Dean nodded numbly, knowing Castiel was right, damn him, but the last thing Dean wanted was to sit with a stranger and talk about his feelings. Well, unless he could lay on a couch and just ramble. Betty Draper made that look fun as hell on Mad Men.

“Speaking of,” Dean said, attempting to avoid all talk of having his head examined, “my writer’s block. You’re super confident about squashing it, and that’s great and all, but what exactly is the game plan there?”

“Don’t worry,” Castiel said, voice low and foreboding, “I have my methods.” Dean flashed back to the image of Castiel pushing him up against and wall, invading his personal space, overwhelming Dean completely, and…

Yeah, dude had his methods all right. The kind that made all the blood in Dean’s body rush down south.

He took their empty coffee mugs to the kitchen sink, rinsing them out quietly. Dean just prayed he wouldn’t spend the next month hunched over his computer, looking at Castiel and banishing annoying, hate-filled boners. Because that’s all he felt towards his new editor. Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

He shook his head, the steam from the faucet rising, making him feel flushed. He needed to concentrate, to refocus. Tomorrow they would start chipping away at his writer’s block. Tomorrow his book, his writing, his life, would no longer be on pause. It was quite possibly the most important day of his life, and whether he liked it or not, Castiel wasn’t going anywhere.
The next morning Castiel entered the shed, surprised by the crispness in the air. Though it was still warmer here than it was in New York, autumn was certainly in full swing. He leaned against the wall and checked his watch. He had asked Dean to meet him promptly at seven, but clearly, that had been too much to ask. Castiel sighed, trying not to get worked up. He was hoping to call a truce with Dean, simply on a professional level, but that would be difficult if Dean constantly ignored the rules.

Castiel just waited, wandering around the newly refurbished shed. Yesterday when he had asked where Dean primarily did his writing, he had shrugged and said wherever. Wherever. The thought had stunned Castiel. A serious writer required an allocated space, a private area all their own. Particularly when a writer needed to write one hundred thousand words in four weeks. Castiel had explored the inside of Dean’s house, searching for a spot of seclusion—but with three adults coexisting in an 800 square foot farmhouse, it was cramped enough already. The possibility of the shed had actually been Jessica’s idea, and she had led Castiel to the top of the hill to show him around. She seemed curious about him, asking questions about his life in New York and his position at Sacred Sun Press. He hadn’t had the opportunity to speak much with Sam, but the brief conversation they did exchange had gone well. It seemed everyone in Dean’s family had respectable manners except, well...Dean.

Dean—who threw open the shed door ten minutes late, boots still wet and muddy from the dew. He whistled, looking inside. “Wow,” he said, tone light and awed. “Look who’s been watching too much HGTV.”

Castiel rolled his eyes and smiled. All he had done was sweep out the cobwebs—against Jessica’s wishes, but she hadn’t minded—and headed to the local donation center, then the hardware store, picking up a few essentials: a hand-me-down desk, a whiteboard, a chalkboard. There was a large window that had been blocked by a piece of furniture, and Castiel had pushed it into the corner, cleaning the glass and letting natural light in. Maybe he had gone a little crazy after that—the rug and lamp, the small coffee maker, the various pens and paper supplies. He had even snagged an antique oil lamp that Dean could use at night, when walking between the house and the shed. There was a small generator, though it couldn’t power Dean’s computer or brew a pot of coffee all the same, but still. It would work for now.

“Is it...okay?” Castiel asked tentatively. The shed restoration was a surprise to Dean, since he had been given his own to-do list to complete yesterday—scheduling a therapy appointment, brainstorming, reading, getting a decent night’s sleep. Sam had chided Dean for “taking it easy,” but Castiel had dismissed the joke. Creative work took an overwhelming amount of mental energy, and though writing could be exhilarating and fun, Castiel was concerned about burnout. For the next month, whether Dean liked it or not, he would have Castiel watching over him.

“This is awesome,” Dean said, hands roaming the antique desk. His eyes fell on the studded leather chair, then turned to Castiel, mouth hung open. “How…?”

“Sam suggested it,” Castiel said. The chair had belonged to Dean’s grandfather, Samuel. Castiel
couldn’t believe they had tucked something so elegant—and surprising durable—away in storage. Sam had explained that there wasn’t enough space in the house. “He mentioned that you had a fondness for it.”

“Yeah, wow,” Dean muttered, distracted, hands examining the worn leather. He looked up with gratitude in his eyes. “Thanks.”

Castiel cleared his throat, looking away. If Dean continued looking at him like that—as if Castiel was the singular, most admirable human being on the planet—every shred of professionalism would fly out the window.

“So, what’ll we call this place?” Dean continued, walking around every corner of the shed, hands raised in excitement. “How ‘bout...the ‘Dean Cave’?”

Castiel made an effort not to snort. How a man this gorgeous could also be this dorky totally escaped his understanding.

“Call it whatever you want,” he answered, “as long as you’re ready to work.”

On the first day, Castiel’s approach was simple: he had to get Dean comfortable with writing again. Dean’s writer’s block had been focused on one issue, painstakingly so, and he needed to separate himself from that concern and concentrate instead on his love for language and storytelling. Reaching into his messenger bag, Castiel pulled out a stack of magazines and handed Dean a pair of scissors. “Cut out words that excite you,” he instructed, and while Dean made crack about being back in kindergarten, he seemed surprised by how enjoyable the activity was. Once Dean had ambassaded a word blank—including some articles, prepositions, and verbs that Castiel had pragmatically tossed in—he was directed to write something from those words alone.

Afterwards Dean did a similar exercise, only in reverse. He was given a sharpie and the front-page spread of the local newspaper, and used the marker to redact all the words….except the ones that continued a coherent narrative.

In both exercises, Dean produced playful—but largely inconsequential—snippets and ponderings. But the quality of the work wasn’t what mattered here...it was all about the excitability, the pleasure in finding new ways to amplify and manipulate language.

Finally he handed Dean a bag, filled to the brim with notecards. Dean pulled stack after stack of notecards to his desk, looking suspicious. “Nothing good can come from this,” he mumbled.

“Each bundle has fifty cards,” Castiel said, holding one and demonstrating. This was by far his favorite exercise of all them, and he was excited to share it with Dean. “Every day, I want you to keep these with you. And a pen or pencil. At all times.”

“You this bossy with all your friends, or am I just lucky?” Dean said, though good-humoredly. Castiel ignored him.

“On every card, I want you to write down one thing. An image, a thought, a description, an observation. Whatever comes to mind. The quality doesn’t matter, just the amount. Fifty cards a day.”

“That sounds great and all,” Dean said, “but won’t I be spending every waking hour locked in this shed? With you?”

Castiel tried not to notice the tone of Dean’s voice, tried not to replay the sound of— with you. Not annoyed or exasperated, as Castiel had expected, but...eager.
“You won’t stay here all day. Just until you hit your word count,” Castiel explained. “And I won’t be staring at you, reading over your shoulder all day, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Then what will you be doing?” Dean asked curiously.

Castiel looked down, wondering how he could avoid answering the question. He had planned to write on his laptop—using a makeshift card table and chair he had set-up in the corner—while Dean wrote. But he hadn’t intended to draw attention to that fact. He didn’t like for his authors to know he was also a writer, especially one who wrote exclusively about his own life. Whenever someone read his work, which was often intimate and personal, things had a tendency to shift, to become less professional. The last thing he needed was to develop a profound bond with someone he was supposed to be guiding. Particularly someone as physically stunning—but somewhat closeted—as Dean Winchester.

“I’ll keep myself busy,” Castiel said vaguely. “Now, go for a quick walk and take your notecards. Write down anything you see or any thoughts you have. When you get back, let’s try writing a scene for *Lucifer Rising.*” Dean visibly tensed, so Castiel quickly clarified. “Anything you want—beginning, middle, end. You don’t have to write this book in chronological order, Dean. Write whatever comes easiest to you right now. That’s where we’ll start.”

Dean still looked panicked, but stood up, walking slowly to the door. Before leaving, he looked over his shoulder. “You coming?”

“I thought I would give you privacy,” Castiel replied, while also thinking, *I’m pretty sure you hate me and I won’t force you to spend any time with me that’s not necessary.*

“Nope, not an option.” Dean pulled notecards and a pen from his desk, thrusting them into Castiel’s hands. “If I’m going on a hippie-dippie, literary nature walk, I’m sure as hell not doing it alone.”

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The first day was the hardest. Castiel’s writing exercises had made Dean *want* to write, which was encouraging, since he had lost his motivation to create months ago. But they still hadn’t addressed his primary problem—that he no longer knew *how* to write in the voice of his protagonist. Sure, he could jot down the bones of a few scenes, maybe even produce a few paragraphs of decent description or exposition, but he felt hesitant and ill-equipped to narrate in Mike’s voice. By noon, he had only written a hundred words. By dinner, only a thousand.

At midnight (with a word count of roughly two thousand) Castiel suggested they call it quits. His expression was full of empathy, which had surprised Dean, though he wasn’t sure why it startled him to realize that Castiel had good qualities—like his thoughtfulness in renovating Dean’s shed; or his unwavering confidence in Dean’s writing abilities; or the way he had casually fetched Dean a glass of iced tea and a sandwich, his tone completely genuine as he mumbled, “Please accept this sandwich as a gesture of solidarity.” It was becoming harder and harder to remember why Dean hated him, or how they had started off on the wrong foot to begin with.

But despite Castiel’s offer, Dean had refused to leave the shed until he’d hit his daily word count. He wanted to prove to himself—and maybe Castiel, too—that he could do it. It was three o’clock in the morning when his document finally displayed the desired total, and Dean turned towards the corner to announce his success...only to discover that Castiel was leaned against the wall, a book in his lap, snoring. Dean smiled, noticing the flutter of long eyelashes, the way his head tilted naturally to the side. He grabbed a handful of his notecards and lost himself in Castiel, jotting down brief descriptions like *long, slender fingers wrapped around a paperback* alongside more significant thoughts, like a paragraph-long pondering on *la petite mort,* a phrase he had read once in a Thomas
Hardy novel that connected the void of sleep to the unconsciousness of sex. Around this time he started noticing Castiel’s full pink lips and how he licked them absent as he breathed; or how his hair was ruffled on the sides, wind-swept like he had been riding in a convertible. Not to mention his palm, which was lying absent over his zipper, and that initiated such a filthy train of thought that Dean was too embarrassed to write it down...

Eventually he realized he was being creepy as hell and stashed the notecards in his back pocket, then squatted beside Castiel and gently shook him awake. Castiel groggily accepted the offer to crash on Dean’s couch, a proximity that excited Dean in a way that he fought hard to suppress. But by the time Dean had woken up a few hours later, the only thing on the couch was a note: *I’ll be back after your appointment. Good luck, and great job yesterday.* -Castiel

Sitting now in the waiting room, shuffling in his chair and trying to avoid thinking words like *psychiatrist* or *therapy* or *why the hell did I agree to do this*, Dean couldn’t keep his mind from wandering to Castiel. So much so, that he almost didn’t hear when the receptionist said his name. He silently followed her down a hallway and through an open door, then stood in the doorway for a moment, suddenly remembering where he was and why. Every cell in body told him to turn around, to flee.

“Gonna stand there all day?” a man called out. Dean’s therapist was sitting in a leather recliner, his office saturated in dark wood with tones of brown and green. The man himself looked the opposite of any psychiatrist Dean had ever seen, though his only point of reference was TV. This man was dressed similarly to Dean, at least when he was working on the farm—worn denim, flannel, threadbare t-shirts, dirty boots.

“Uhh,” Dean mumbled uncertainly, “I was thinking about it.”

“Well, think about it over here,” the psychiatrist said grumpily, pointing to the nearby couch. “You know ghosts hover in doorways.”

Dean walked slowly and sat down, his eyebrows raised. “You believe in ghosts?”

The man waited for the receptionist to close his door, then turned his attention back to Dean. “Hell no. Who do I look like—the Long Island Medium?” He adjusted his baseball cap, looking agitated. “I just needed an excuse to get you to sit down, and look, it worked.”

Dean snorted. This shrink definitely wasn’t what he had expected, but maybe that could work to Dean’s benefit. “What’s your name?” he asked, wondering how he didn’t know.

“Bobby Singer, MD. Only licensed psychiatrist in Grundy county, though we got more cows than people, so that ain’t saying much.” Bobby leaned forward, eyes wrinkled in confusion. “Wait—don’t the people up front usually tell you all that crap whenever you call in?”

“My brother made the appointment,” Dean admitted. “I’ve been—uhh, hesitant. I guess. To do it myself.”

“Hesitant,” Bobby repeated, and Dean only nodded. “Well, I guess that’s another word for it.”

This was a trap, Dean knew, but he couldn’t help falling into it. “Another word for what?”

“Misinformed. Ignorant. Take your pick,” he said flippantly, and Dean’s eyes widened. “Oh, don’t pretend to be offended. We both know you got thicker skin than that.”

“You don’t know me,” Dean said, though he was starting to doubt that fact more and more.
Bobby put his elbows on his knees, leaning in closer. “I know you came here with the lowest possible opinion of what we’re doing here and why. You obviously only agreed to come here because someone asked you to—your brother, I’d guess, which might hint at some co-dependency issues. I know the way you feel about yourself ain’t exactly spectacular.” Dean felt frozen with shock and astonishment, and simply sat there, listening. “And I know you’re harboring a secret so tight it’s liable to split you in two.”

Dean drew his eyes to the floor, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of him. Bobby eventually withdrew his elbows, sinking back into his recliner. “Or maybe I’m just a natural born idjit. Either way, I checked your chart and you’re signed up for bi-weekly appointments. What’s the urgency here, son?”

Dean cleared his throat, hoping that by the time he started speaking, he might actually have regained his composure. How far back should he go—Castiel and the book deadline? The writer’s block? His mom’s death? The memory of himself at four, realizing his daddy had an addiction that no amount of love could fix?

“It’s complicated,” he said instead.

“Well,” Bobby answered, rocking in his recliner, “I believe that’s a damn good place to start.”

Castiel checked into a bed and breakfast only a few miles from the farm. While he appreciated Dean’s hospitality in allowing him to sleep on the couch last night—or, rather, early this morning—he certainly didn’t intend to make it a habit. He needed to maintain a professional distance from Dean, not only for the quality of his edit to remain unbiased, but so things didn’t get...complicated. Even sleeping in Dean’s living room, with his bedroom door in view, made Castiel antsy. His imagination had started to stray, wondering if Dean slept in pajama bottoms, or boxers, or...dare he even allow himself to wonder...something ridiculously hot, like panties? No, there was no way. Dean was a closeted farmer living in Tennessee. It was very unlikely that he would have any secret kinks, at least compared to Castiel.

Still, the energy around them always felt charged, which wasn’t surprising, considering how good-looking Dean was. Castiel had been around other incredibly attractive men in New York and even dated a few. But no one made him feel quite so uneasy, or enthusiastic, or aroused. No one held a candle to Dean. He knew he had the potential to develop a serious crush...and he couldn’t allow that to happen.

The bed and breakfast was small but charming, and Castiel’s room had a queen-sized bed and a large window overlooking a wheat field. The house had been well renovated, the plumbing and fixtures still antique but clearly cared for, including the clawfoot bathtub that Castiel couldn’t wait to use. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Stover, were friends of Sam and Dean. He was greeted by an outgoing woman name Donna, with a thick accent Castiel suspected placed her somewhere in Minnesota; and her husband, Doug, who had insisted on carrying Castiel’s luggage up the stairs. Donna had been thrilled to meet Castiel, even gifted him the friends-and-family discount, which he initially resisted—Sacred Sun Press was covering the bill, after all—but Donna wouldn’t hear of it. She asked Castiel a variety of questions, ranging from plot points in Dean’s forthcoming book to Castiel’s thoughts on scones versus bagels for tomorrow’s breakfast. It turned out they had a few spare bicycles that the guests often borrowed, and Doug arranged for Castiel to have their newest, high-speed model—perfect for the two mile ride back and forth from Dean’s farm.

As thankful as he was for their generosity, he had slipped away as quickly as he courteously could, hoping a nap and a shower might revive him before Dean returned from his appointment. But before
he even had time to unpack, his phone was ringing. He checked the screen and sighed, flopping
carelessly onto the bed.

“Hello, Anna,” he said grumpily.

“Did I wake you?” she said, her voice amused. “It’s ten o’clock, Cas. I thought country folk woke
with the sun, or rose with the rooster, or...whatever.”

Despite his exhaustion, Castiel found himself smiling. “We do, even when we shouldn’t. Dean and I
had a late night.”

“I hope you’re not cracking the whip too hard,” she said, a warning in her voice.

“Depends on how you define ‘hard,’” Castiel mumbled, ignoring the innuendo. Anna breathed
sharply into the receiver.

“Cas, come on. I know you don’t like Dean, for reasons you still won’t explain, but please try to
show a little benevolence.”

Castiel rolled onto his side, cellphone wedged under his ear. He still hadn’t told Anna the whole
story, including Castiel assuming Dean was a judgmental homophobe, when in reality, Dean was a
freshly closeted bisexual. But he had promised Dean to keep his sexual identity a secret, which
meant he couldn’t properly explain their misunderstanding at the coffee shop, or why he had
changed his mind and decided to work with Dean again. Anna was (perhaps rightfully) worried that
Castiel would act rude or unforgiving towards Dean, but Castiel worried the opposite would occur.
He was already becoming too tender, too quick to concede, whenever it came to Dean and his needs.

“I’ve been nothing but benevolent,” Castiel argued, the words pouring out of him. “In the rare
moments when Dean stops joking around, and doesn’t allow his self-consciousness to get in the way,
he’s extremely creative and hardworking. You should’ve seen him yesterday—so persistent, so
engrossed with his writing. He’s still struggling to produce at a reasonable pace, so the writer’s block
isn’t lifted quite yet. But Dean is intelligent and incredibly stubborn. I have faith in his abilities.”

Castiel inhaled and rolled onto his back, surprised by how long he had spoken...not to mention how
many complementary traits he had given Dean. Whoops. Anna seemed to share his observation,
because her next words made Castiel cover his face with a pillow.

“Oh my god,” she said, “you have a crush on him.”

“I do not,” he grumbled.

“Yes you do!” she exclaimed. “I’ve known you for fifteen years, and I’ve never heard you go on
about anyone like that.”

“I was just trying to reassure you,” he said, and she hummed in disbelief, so Castiel changed tactics.
“He’s still the same childish, annoying, infuriating person that he’s always been.”

“He is,” Anna agreed, then her tone turned suggestive again. “And you love it. It’s too bad he
doesn’t bat for your team...but you’re handsome enough, maybe you could persuade him.”

Castiel pulled the phone away, trying to ignore the nervous flips in his stomach. He mumbled, “I’m
hanging up now...” and Anna finally relented, asking more detailed questions about the book and the
outline, then complaining at length about Zachariah. By the time Castiel hung up, it was noon and
his schedule with Dean was way off-track. He sighed, skipping the shower and opting for a baseball
cap and fresh hoodie. Part of him wanted to look his best for Dean, but that was totally inappropriate,
and he fought to urge to prep and preen in front of the mirror. He didn’t even allow himself to shave before heading outside. He kicked his borrowed bicycle off the stand and headed straight towards the farm.

He was surprised to find Dean was already in the shed, laptop on the desk, hands hovering above the keys. When Castiel opened the door Dean’s eyes seem to wander, first over Castiel’s clothes and then his face, lingering on his lips and stubbled chin with such intensity, Castiel could’ve sworn Dean was checking him out…

And then Dean cleared his throat, and Castiel sat down in his designated corner. The moment was broken.

“I’m surprised you’re here,” Castiel said, and Dean looked at him, confused.

“What? You said we’d get started at noon.”

“I did,” Castiel agreed, pulling his own laptop and notebook out, “I just didn’t expect...I mean, you often run late.” His cheeks flushed, and he glanced down nervously. There were moments now when he was hesitant to seem critical of Dean. Given their disastrous introduction, he felt like he was still trying to smooth things over.

Dean chuckled, sounding exasperated but amused. “It’s okay, man. I’m not gonna fly off the handle if you call me out on shit. That’s kinda your job, right?”

“I suppose,” Castiel said carefully, knowing he should change the subject now, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop. “It’s just—I still feel awful about our misunderstanding. I know forgiveness is too much to ask, but I’m going to do everything I can to help your book...and you.”

Their eyes met and fell into a concentrated gaze. Dean’s facial features were light, full of surprise and gratitude, and he stared back without any reservation. Castiel knew he should look away, but he loved the expression on Dean’s face—the vibrancy in his eyes, the hope he found there. For someone who seemed to prefer his emotions stay buried, Dean had an intensely expressive face. Castiel could stare at this man for hours and never look away.

But he did, eventually, thanks to one of the goats shrieking loudly from down the hill. Dean blinked and looked away, forcing a small, awkward chuckle from his lips. “Jess must be slacking,” he said, attempting nonchalance. “Someone sounds hungry.”

Castiel nodded kindly and agreed, and they both returned to their work in silence. Castiel was editing Dean’s pages from yesterday, providing notes and suggestions for potential developments. Dean seemed to be having much better luck today, establishing a steady rhythm on his keyboard. Castiel wondered if the therapy appointment had been helpful in easing Dean writer’s block, but didn’t ask. Even though Castiel had encouraged Dean to seek counseling, asking details about it felt like crossing a boundary...one he might never stop crossing, if given the chance.

To Castiel’s surprise, Dean met his word count by dinnertime. He sent the file to Castiel, who planned on reading and editing the pages back in his room at the B&B. They walked towards the house and made companionable small-talk, both smiling and laughing, until they saw the scene unfolding in Dean’s backyard.

There was a fire pit stacked with wood, flames rising steadily out of the center. Surrounding the campfire was a dozen people, at least, sitting in folding chairs or on the tailgates of flatbed trucks. Sam and Jess were stationed at the patio table, prepping hot dogs and s’mores. Apart from Dean’s family, the only people Castiel recognized were Donna and Doug, who waved at him.
“What the hell?” Dean said, though he was smiling, his tone cheerful. “Y’all decided to throw a party at my house and not invite me?”

“Blame Sam,” a mid-twenties, blonde girl said. Castiel wondered absently if Dean found her attractive. There was no question about her finding Dean attractive— everyone found Dean attractive. Everyone with functioning eyesight, anyways. “He was all secretive, claiming he had a ‘big announcement’.”

From the patio, Sam narrowed his eyes. “Thanks, Jo,” he said sarcastically.

Dean looked at his brother, his expression turning sour and suspicious. Castiel was tense, watching the scene unfold, but strangely pleased to discover he could already read Dean so well.

“Big announcement, huh?” Dean repeated, and left Castiel there by the bonfire, joining Sam by the farmhouse and whispering. Castiel frowned, feeling concern for Dean in spite of himself. He should leave now—this was a surprise event for friends and family. Whatever Sam’s announcement was, Dean could handle it without him. He glanced at his bike, leaning against the nearby barn, when a short redhead grabbed his elbow.

“No so fast, Mr. Super Hot City Slicker Guy,” she said, pulling Castiel down and onto a bench. “No need for introductions—you’re Castiel, Dean’s new editor. Dean might’ve mentioned me, probably a thousand times by now. I’m Charlie, his BFF from high school.”

Castiel squirmed awkwardly. “Um…”

She gasped audibly. “You are kidding me. Winchester!” she shouted, and Dean jerked his head around. “You’ve got some explaining to do!”

“To be fair,” Castiel interjected, searching for a way to smooth things over and shooting Dean a sympathetic look, “we haven’t had much time for…pleasantries. Dean is very busy writing.”

“So we’ve heard,” another woman said, slightly older than Castiel, ruffling a hand through her short dark hair. She reached her hand down, and Castiel shook it. “Jody Mills. This is my daughter, Claire, and her boyfriend, Kevin.”

Castiel was introduced to others, including the feisty blonde (who he learned was Jo) and her equally feisty mother, Ellen. The man with the mullet was Ash, who was in deep debate with a skinny guy named Garth (“‘Poison’ is not quality driving music, no matter how hot the girls in the music video are!”). At some point Donna and Doug came over, and then someone thrust a beer in Castiel’s hand, and then another. He was enjoying the company, unexpected as it was, but he kept his eyes trained on Dean.

Dean had finally pulled away from Sam and was carrying metal pokers and a package of hot dogs, taking a close seat by Castiel. He knew Dean was only being polite by rejoining him—he barely knew anyone else here, after all—but it thrilled him all the same. A backyard full of his closest friends, and Dean wanted to keep Castiel company.

“Are you okay, Dean?” Castiel said quietly. He was still sitting on the same bench, though Charlie had abandoned her seat twenty minutes ago, making the rounds. Dean scooted in closer, their knees almost touching.

“I’m okay, Cas,” he said, and Castiel tried not to react too much to the nickname. Cas. Only his closest friends called him that, and Dean was doing it after only three days. “It’s good news, for once.” He speared their hotdogs and grinned, passing Castiel a poker. “Things are about to change
around here, though. That’s for damn sure.” There was a hint of wistfulness in his voice, but Castiel didn’t press the matter further.

They roasted their hotdogs side by side and Castiel leaned forward, listening to the fire crackle. The sun had set nearly two hours ago, and the air was turning increasingly chilly. Castiel shivered involuntarily, cursing himself for not bringing his trenchcoat with him. Dean tensed beside him, moving closer.

“Hey Jo,” Dean called out, and Jo turned from her conversation with Kevin and Claire, “pass me a blanket?”

Jo rolled her eyes and pulled a quilt from the tailgate, dropping it into Dean’s laps. Dean balanced his poker between his legs and opened the quilt, draping it over Castiel’s shoulders tenderly, though he avoided eye contact. All Castiel could do was gape, ignoring the curious looks he was receiving from Dean’s friends. He resisted the urge to smile and instead, pulled the quilt closer, thinking this was quite possibly the most romantic gesture he had ever experienced. *Romantic*. Where had that come from? Castiel had just been cold, and Dean was just being a good host. That was it...

Thankfully, before Castiel could analyze the situation further, Sam and Jess were standing in front of the group, both smiling wide. “We wanted to say again—thank you everyone for coming,” Jess said. “We are so thankful to have friends like you.”

“Friends that are more like family,” Sam added, and several people raised their beers.

“Which is why…”

“We’re very excited to announce…”

“Jesus, this is like watching paint dry,” Ellen said. “Get on with it!”

“We’re having a baby!” they announced, somehow in perfect sync, and everyone reacted all at once—smiling and rushing forward, clapping them on the back, sharing congratulatory shouts.

But Castiel wasn’t watching the commotion. He was watching Dean, who was beaming and smiling, then turned slightly and faced Castiel, staring into his eyes.

Castiel found it impossible to look away.

***

Dean was sweating in the shed, hot rays of sun streaming through his window. He was irritated, tense. There were pages strewn everywhere, on the desk and the floor, excerpts of his novel they had used as evidence during their argument.

Castiel was standing over him, his face dark and thunderous and ridiculously sexy.

“I don’t get why you’re so worked up about this,” Dean said, throwing his hands up.

“I don’t get how you can be so obtuse about this,” Castiel replied, hands gripping the desk tightly. Dean looked at Castiel’s long, thin fingers, the strength pulsating beneath his grip, imagining of all the things he could do to Dean with hands like those...

Dean stood up abruptly, and fuck it was hot in this shed. Why the hell was it this hot? It was October! “It’s my book, it’s my decision.” He felt his chest swell with irritation. “If you’re not on board with that, then screw you, Cas.”
“Dean,” Castiel said, breathing heavy and sweet, tickling Dean’s skin. He shifted his head, bringing his lips to Dean’s ear. Dean froze, his heart racing. “If we can’t agree, then we need to come to some sort of compromise.”

“Don’t think that’s possible,” Dean replied, and he was being honest. He was still furious with Cas for trying to tell him what to do, and talking it out right now wouldn’t help. But more than that, much, much more, he was getting hard simply by having Castiel’s body weight pushed against him. He was suddenly—and utterly—debilitated with want. He wanted Castiel. To touch him, his face and hips and bare chest, to kiss him, to unzip his pants and...

“There’s another way to work out our problems,” Dean whispered, and he rested his hands on Castiel’s hips suggestively. Castiel exhaled slowly, apparently struggling to breath.

“Dean, we couldn’t—we shouldn’t—”

“Want you, Cas.” Dean licked his lips and placed them on Castiel’s neck, leaving a trail of wet, sucking kisses. He dragged his stubble across Castiel’s skin and breathed out softly. Castiel shuddered at the contact but didn’t move. “Cas...” Dean teasingly palmed the front of the other man’s jeans, and yep, bingo. Castiel was undeniably erect, straining against his zipper. Dean unbuttoned his jeans and dropped to his knees, allusively looking up beneath his eyelashes. Castiel stared back, eyes hungry and dark. Dean’s hands slid beneath the band on Castiel’s underwear—boxer briefs, Dean noticed—but before he continued, before he allowed himself the sight of Castiel’s aching cock, he had to know Castiel was on-board.

“Is this...okay?” Dean asked tentatively, trying not to focus on the feeling of Castiel’s bare skin—warm and tight and muscular—beneath his fingertips.

“Dean...fuck...” Castiel rarely swore, and Dean wondered absently if he was the dirty-talk-during-sex kind of guy. If so, that was definitely a turn-on. He wove his long fingers into Dean’s hair and pulled, and the simple action made Dean moan. God, he wanted Castiel. He wanted him more than he had ever wanted anyone.

Castiel bent over, cupping Dean’s chin, and kissed him hard and wet and powerfully. He fell to his knees, wrapping himself around Dean’s neck and shoulders, and licked into his mouth. His hands searched Dean’s body relentlessly, hands moving under Dean’s shirt, exploring his chest and back with urgency. He went to talk Dean’s shirt off and Dean complied instantly, heart pounding, unable to believe his luck. Castiel’s hands then went to the front of Dean’s jeans, but Dean grabbed his hands instinctively, halting him.

Castiel pulled back and tilted his forehead against Dean’s, both breathing heavy. “You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” Dean’s dick was straining against the denim and he wanted relief so badly, just the thought of Castiel touching him made harder. But he was worried about what Castiel would think of him, once he knew... “I have this thing, and I totally get it if you’re not into it, but...”

Castiel fondled the zipper. “Whatever it is, I won’t care, Dean.” He took a deep breath, his voice shaking. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”

Dean closed his eyes and nodded, and then Castiel was unzipping him and sliding his hips off the floor, pulling his jeans to knee-length in one fluid motion. Dean’s head met the floor and then his body was laid out, on display for Castiel. He kept his eyes closed, worried about the expression he might find on Castiel’s face. Everything was so still, Dean wondered if Castiel had found a way to
silently exit, escape through the window or something, and who could blame him—

And that’s when Dean felt a hot, wet mouth against his satin red panties. His eyes flew open, his hips lifting involuntarily because fuck, that felt amazing. Castiel was moaning against the fabric, tongue expertly stimulating Dean’s straining dick, and Dean couldn’t hold it in anymore. He whimpered loudly, reaching down and weaving his hands into Castiel’s now disheveled hair. He tugged and Castiel moaned, continuing to make Dean slowly unravel, dousing his panties and cock with desperate flicks of his tongue.

“Cas, are you sure...I mean, this is okay?” Dean didn’t know why Castiel’s physical response—which had been pretty fucking awesome—wasn’t enough right now. But he was feeling vulnerable and needed to hear the words.

Castiel pulled his lips back, then slipped a hand into the side of Dean’s panties, making direct contact with his dick. Dean trembled under the touch.

“It’s more than okay, Dean,” he said, stroking the head of Dean’s cock slowly, spreading precome down his shaft. “You alone are the most sensual, astonishing sight I’ve ever seen.” He bent his head down again, licking at the head, and Dean tried to remember to breathe. “But you in panties? You’re like a dream.”

A dream…

Why did Dean feel like there was something obvious that he had forgotten. Something he needed to remember…

A dream. Dreaming. His stomach turned violently. Was he dreaming?

Dean’s eyes opened in the dark. He had left the warmth and sunshine of the shed, of Castiel’s hands and lips and body, and was alone in bed—shivering under the covers. He was panting, his heart racing, his erection curled against his belly. Jesus Christ. He’d had sex dreams before, of course, but nothing that felt so realistic.

He stood up quietly and walked to his dresser, opening the top drawer. He looked at the rows of panties—satin, silk, cotton—and breathed a sigh of relief. It was still a secret. It would be difficult to face Castiel tomorrow after the intensity of that dream, obviously, but maybe he could preserve some of his dignity.

Well, if he didn’t get random boners now just from being alone in the shed with Castiel. Which he would be doing for another three-and-a-half weeks straight...

Fuck. Dean was totally and irrevocably fucked.
A few days later, Castiel was sitting outside on a bench. Dean was close beside him with a stack of notecards in his lap, scribbling away, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. It was a busy day at Centennial Park, all 132-acres filled with tourists snapping photos of the iconic structure—a full-scale replica of the original Parthenon in Athens, all marble and pillars and ornate carvings. It was still an impressive sight for Castiel, despite growing up in the area. But they weren’t here to admire the architecture.

Today their task was people watching.

“Look at them,” Castiel pointed, and Dean raised his eyes from his writing, covering the words with his hands. Dean was being secretive lately about the content of his fifty daily notecards, always screening them from Castiel’s view. He didn’t mind. The exercise was only meant to inspire Dean, not satisfy Castiel’s curiosity...though, there was curiosity. He was always curious when it came to Dean.

“Who—the teen lovebirds over there?” Dean squinted, trying to get a better look. There was a couple leaning against a nearby pillar, whispering into each other’s ears.

“Yes. Do you see how they’re standing?” Castiel leaned in closer, trying not to notice how his hand accidentally brushed Dean’s thighs, and how Dean didn’t pull away. “You see how the guy has his hands on his hips? With his arms out to the side?”

“And he’s angled in, towards the girl,” Dean noted, and Castiel nodded in agreement.

“Yes, exactly. He’s subconsciously trying to take up more space, to make her notice him.”

Dean snorted. “I dunno, she did just have her tongue down the dude’s throat. I’d say she’s noticed him.”

Castiel ignored Dean and scanned the area again. He spotted a middle-aged couple down by the pond, holding hands. “These two have been together a while. You can tell because they match each other’s pace, and—see that? When they’re stepping over tree roots, they reach for each other.”

“Or maybe they’re just clumsy,” Dean grumbled, and Castiel sighed.

“Dean,” he said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice, “you asked me to help you with this. Remember?”

Dean had finally felt confident enough yesterday to write a scene between Mike and Angel—the budding relationship that had initiated Dean’s writer’s block. But he had quickly discovered that he struggled to capture their body language, to provide those non-verbal cues that the characters wouldn’t necessarily realize were significant, but the reader certainly would. It was vital to make their chemistry believable on the page, so once they finally did get together, the development would be more satisfying.

“I know, I know. I just feel like a creeper, staring at strangers like this.”

“Writers have always been avid observers,” Castiel said reasonably. “People-watching is like research for us.”

“Us’?” Dean repeated, turning his body towards Castiel. Their knees touched and neither of them
pulled away. Castiel blamed it on the small bench, clearly not made with two grown men in mind. “You’re a writer, Cas?”

“Um...I dabble,” Castiel said, trying to keep his tone light and noncommittal. He couldn’t believe he had slipped up like that. “Look, there’s another.” He tilted his head towards the trail, where two women were walking towards the entrance. “Okay, look at them and tell me the non-verbal cues that they’re together.”

Dean raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised by the same-sex development, but focused his gaze on them and stared. While he observed the strangers, Castiel observed Dean.

There was a breeze in the air, and Dean’s hair was elegantly disheveled. There was bright light shining on his face, making his freckles appear more pronounced, and Castiel wanted to lean forward and count them with his fingertips. And then there were his eyes, vivid green with flecks of gold, absolutely memorizing in the afternoon sun. He was wearing his favorite outfit (or that’s what Castiel assumed, considering how he wore it every time they left the farm) consisting of dark jeans and a light brown leather jacket, the collar flipped high because of the wind. His chest was puffed out slightly, his breath shallow and quick, and Castiel found himself matching the rhythm.

“Whenever they speak, they fully face each other,” Dean mumbled, turning his head towards Castiel. “Um...they touch a lot. Elbows, hands. Their hips and thighs brush a lot. They don’t give each other any personal space.”

Castiel nodded. “Notice how they keep touching their faces? And licking their lips, while the other one follows the movement? That’s a subconscious invitation.”

“Maybe...but it seems really fucking obvious to me. They’re about two seconds away from making out behind that bush.”

“That’s very likely,” Castiel agreed, putting his arm behind the bench. Dean leaned back, his shoulder brushing Castiel’s hand. “It’s different though, watching body language from the outside. Things may seem obvious to us, but we’re not in the situation. Those two look like they’re still trying to define their relationship, so they’re likely filled with apprehension. That’s why our bodies give off non-verbal cues to begin with—we’re trying to measure the other person’s interest, to prevent ourselves from experiencing rejection. Once a perceived rejection happens, the body becomes very closed off.”

“I’m surprised you know what that looks like,” Dean muttered, face flushed once the words left his mouth.

Castiel moved closer, head tilted in confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Uhh,” Dean said, leaning forward and rubbing the back of his neck. “Nothing, Cas. It’s just—I’m sure dudes are always lining up for you. And that’s great. Awesome. Hell, I bet you even have some fancy ass boyfriend in New York with a loft apartment in a skyscraper or some shit. You deserve it.”

Dean’s shoulders were suddenly tense, his thumbs nervously fiddling. Castiel knew he shouldn’t be enjoying this, but it sounded like Dean was both complimenting him and subtly (or not so subtly, depending on your perspective) asking Castiel if he was single. He thought about what Dean had said during their first meeting. You’re the sexiest fucking man I’ve ever seen. At the time Castiel had been confused by that statement, assuming A) Dean was straight, and B) Dean hated him. But now it seemed like neither of those assumptions were true.

What the hell was Castiel supposed to do about that?
He took a deep breath and decided to take a risk. He reached his hand towards Dean’s chin, tilting his face up. Dean looked at him with wide eyes, but Castiel didn’t take his hand away. They stared at each other for a moment before Castiel finally spoke.

“Dean,” he said, letting the word hang meaningfully in the air.

Dean breathed heavily, waiting for Castiel to continue. Finally, he whispered, “Yeah, Cas?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but...” Castiel’s voice dropped, low and rumbling. “I do not have a fancy ass boyfriend in New York with a loft apartment in a skyscraper.”

Dean smiled broadly, shaking his head and chuckling, and Castiel laughed with him. Before either of them could speak again, the women they’d been watching a moment ago approached their bench, asking if they would take their photograph. Castiel agreed, already knowing he was better at technology than Dean, and stood up. He snapped a few photos and handed the phone back to the women.

“Thanks again,” she said. “We can return the favor, and take y’all’s picture now?”

“Yeah,” the other one said happily, “you two are such a cute couple!”

Castiel didn’t bother correcting her.

***

Later that afternoon, Dean found himself in Bobby’s office for his second session. He wasn’t doing it intentionally, but he was definitely deflecting. He spent the first half-hour talking about Jess and Sam’s big announcement, which he had learned just moments before they had shared it with the group. Apparently they’d known for almost a week, since Jess had broken her finger the day of Dean and Castiel’s disastrous coffee date. At the hospital before treatment, they had asked her the routine question—*was there a possibility she could be pregnant?* Turns out, she had been planning to buy a test that same day, so...the rest was history. They had waited to tell Dean because he was such a mess after the confrontation with Castiel. But now that things had calmed down and Dean and Castiel were working well together, the timing had finally seemed right.

Dean was stupidly excited for his brother. He knew Sam and Jess would make fantastic parents—they were both such intelligent, kind, resourceful people. But there was another side of Dean that was deeply insecure and worried, realizing he would have to move out now so the second bedroom in the farmhouse could be converted into a nursery. Sam hadn’t asked yet—Jess was barely eight weeks pregnant—but Dean would have to start looking into other options. Maybe renting his own house nearby? Or getting an apartment in the city? His real dream, of course, was to build a cabin on the property. But he had always pictured himself with a family there, not living alone.

After he had ranted an adequate amount of time, Dean leaned forward on the couch in Bobby’s office, staring at the clock on the wall. His therapist watched him impassively, looking between him and the clock, both of them silent. Finally, he leaned back into his recliner said, “Got somewhere better to be, son?”

“Nope,” Dean answered cheekily, and Bobby shot him a doubtful look, so he cleared his throat and nodded. “Just, uh...you know, writing. I haven’t met my word count today.”

“I see,” he muttered. “Well, if you’re gonna worry about it here, might as well talk about it.” Bobby seemed willing to discuss whatever made Dean comfortable, which he certainly appreciated. “How’s the book going? And what about that new editor of yours—uh, Cassiel?”
“Castiel,” Dean corrected, perhaps a little too quickly. “And things are good. Hard, kicking my ass, but good.”

“What’s his deal—your editor? Snooty city type?”

“Who? Cas?” Bobby nodded, so Dean took a deep breath, trying to find the words. “Nah, not snooty. He’s actually from around here. He’s, uh...interesting. I guess. Like no one I’ve ever met. Smart and thoughtful and annoying as hell sometimes. I like him, even though I hated him at first.” Bobby shot him an interested look, and Dean shook his head. “It’s a long story. Really fucking complicated.”

“Sounds like a theme of yours,” Bobby grumbled, though good-naturedly.

“Yeah,” Dean said, chuckling. “He has this weird way of talking—kinda formal and stiff, but when you get him going, dude’s super witty and funny.” He felt energized again, talking about Castiel. He had spent almost every waking hour with him this week, but now that he finally had an afternoon to himself, he missed Castiel’s company. Dean hadn’t experienced any other sex dreams, panty-related or otherwise, thank the fucking lord. But lately, he still thought almost daily—or, to be honest, hourly—about what it would be like to be with Castiel. As in, no clothes or inhibitions. Just the two of them naked, rolling around in Dean’s bed, hands exploring each other’s bodies.

Dean’s imagination was becoming very...vivid.

But even more concerning was how Dean was developing feelings. A physical attraction was one thing, that was biological, practically out of his control. Now that he was trying to embrace his new status as bi, he probably should hook-up with a dude soon, just for the experience. A no-strings-attached fuck. That would be ideal.

But feelings? Liking Castiel for his personality? That was a mistake. That was dangerous.

And yet, he didn’t wanna stop.

Dean didn’t realize he was smiling, just thinking about Castiel, until Bobby leaned forward.

“Y’all spend a lot of time together?” he asked curiously.

“Yeah, but only ‘cause of the book,” Dean said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Yeah, but only ‘cause of the book,” Dean said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“The book, got it,” Bobby repeated, and Dean could hear the skepticism in his voice. “Has he helped you with your writer’s block?”

“Some,” Dean said, shifting nervously on the couch. This was only their second session, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to explain everything just yet. After all, Bobby was as country as they came. There was little to no chance he’d approve of Dean’s newfound sexual orientation, and Dean was still so hesitant, scared he might crumble at the smallest amount of resistance. “Meeting with you...that’s the other part of it. Of breaking the writer’s block. I guess.”

“Is it?” Bobby raised an eyebrow. “I guess I’m just confused, then.”

“Why’s that?” Dean asked, already dreading the answer.

“Well, son.” Bobby paused, as if trying to figure out the best way to phrase his words. “How am I supposed to help you with your writer’s block if I don’t know yet what caused it? It’s plain as day that you know and just haven’t told me yet. I get that you like your privacy, and don’t wanna air your dirty laundry around town. I respect the hell out of that. But if you wanna move forward, these four...
walls right here? They ain’t the place for secrets, Dean.”

Dean didn’t respond. He knew his therapist was right, but he couldn’t tell Bobby everything, not yet. “I’m just not ready,” he admitted, staring down at his hands.

Bobby looked back at him, his expression softer than Dean had ever seen it. “That’s all right. Then you have a homework assignment, okay?” Dean nodded mutely, his stomach churning at the possibilities.

“You don’t have to tell me today. Or ever. But tell someone. Even if you’ve already told other people, it’s obviously not enough. Find someone new to confide in, all right? Someone you trust like family.”

“Don’t got much in that department,” Dean answered, trying not to think of his parents—his dad buried out in Lawrence, his mom resting in a cemetery near the farm. His only family now was Sam and Jess, but they were about to start their own family…and Dean would be alone, stuck in the past.

Bobby shook his head. “Family don’t end with blood, boy.”

Dean nodded, thinking of all the friends he and Sam had amassed over the years—Charlie, Jody, Donna, Doug, Ellen, Jo, Garth, Ash—and knew Bobby was right. He would confide in one of them soon. He owed it to himself to be open and honest for once.

Fifteen minutes later, leaving Bobby’s office and heading down the block where his ’67 Impala was parked, Dean’s cell phone started buzzing. He pulled it from his pocket, feeling a sudden flurry of nerves, but shrugged. Now or fucking never, Winchester.

“Hey bitch!” Charlie said, greeting him warmly, and Dean grinned. “Whatcha doing tomorrow?”

“Writing. And then writing. And maybe afterwards some…writing.”

“Oh, sorry,” Charlie answered, matching Dean’s sarcasm. “When I asked what you’re doing tomorrow, I meant to tell you what you’re doing tomorrow. The answer to this question is easy. You’re spending your Saturday hanging out with me!”

Dean laughed and unlocked his Baby, sliding into the driver’s seat. He balanced his phone on his shoulder as he put the key in the ignition. “I’ll see what I can, all right? But Cas has me on a pretty tight schedule.”

“Oh, it’s ‘Cas’ now, is it?” Charlie said smugly. “Well, you’re in luck. Invite him along! You’ll need a partner.”

“A partner for what?” Dean asked suspiciously.

“Canoeing the Red River. Dorothy’s uncle owns a place—we got it all worked out. Two canoes and a five-mile trek. We’ll pack a picnic, a cooler, make a whole day out of it.”

Dean put the car into drive and swallowed. Hang out with Cas? Without the guise of book writing or research? Just...spend time together because they enjoyed it? Because they could?

He hummed doubtfully at the thought, not believing he could justify taking off all morning and afternoon.

“C’mon. Winchester. You promised me some solid wingman action this year and have yet to deliver.”
That was true enough. Charlie had spent practically the whole year flirting relentlessly with Dorothy, the paralegal at Sam’s firm. Dean had promised to orchestrate more group events for Charlie to make her move, but then had fallen into his writer’s block and subsequent identity crisis. He hadn’t been a very attentive friend to Charlie lately, and it was time to remedy that.

“I’ll try,” he said, and she immediately started squealing. “As long as Cas says it’s cool.”

Dean could practically hear Charlie rolling her eyes. “Your boyfriend has you on a tight leash, huh?”

Dean stopped his car abruptly at a stop sign, nearly dropping his phone. “He’s not my boyfriend,” he mumbled, heart racing at the thought. “He could do much better than me.”

“Dean,” Charlie sighed, “I dunno why you act like such a Neville when you’re clearly Harry fucking Potter and everyone wants to bone you.”

Dean snorted, glad to have a change in subject. “Well, I have been told my wand work is quite skillful,” he said, and Charlie groaned and chuckled. She opened her mouth again, likely to continue with more *Harry Potter* innueduos, when it seemed like something suddenly occurred to her.

“Wait a minute,” she said slowly. “I called Castiel your boyfriend and…you only said no because he’s ‘better’ than you, or whatever.”

Dean pulled onto his street, the current conversation making him speed around curves faster than he should. He gripped the steering wheel until his hands turned white. He could deny what Charlie was implying, change the subject, and never discuss it with her again. But if there was anyone he could confide in, like Bobby had suggested, then his totally gay, high school BFF was probably a good place to start.

“Yeah, I, uh…” Dean pulled into his driveway and parked, but kept the car idling. “I think I have a crush. On Cas, I mean.”


Dean grinned at her enthusiasm. “Well, okay. First things first. I’m bi—”

“Um, duh,” she interrupted.

“Hey!” he said defensively. “Can a guy ‘come out’ in peace? It’s taken six months for me to say that out loud.”

“Sorry, it’s just—well, I’ve known you for fifteen years. And I’ve got the gaydar of a lesbian, which is like, the strongest in the world. So this isn’t exactly a surprise.”

Dean narrowed his eyebrows, surprised by her reaction, when he spotted Castiel biking up his driveway. Jesus, the guy was wearing framed sunglasses and a windbreaker with headphones in his ears, and hadn’t noticed Dean yet, since he was in his car. Dean could finally just stare openly at him, admiring his strong nose and pink lips, watching his reflection get closer and closer…

“Calling Planet Dean, calling Planet Dean,” Charlie intoned in a robot voice.

“Ah, sorry,” Dean said, shaking his head. He opened the car door and turned to Cas, waving. “Cas just got here—gotta go!”

“Look at that, you’re bi all of five minutes and you’re already abandoning me for some guy,” she
joked. Castiel spotted him and smiled, stopping his bike in front of Dean. Dean smiled back, waves of nervous energy flipping through his stomach. Castiel was standing close now, like personal space was just a suggestion. “All right, fine,” Charlie said loudly, “go makeout with your boyfriend—”

Dean ended the call frantically, but Castiel was already tilting his head.

“Boyfriend?” Castiel repeated, hands gripping his handlebars.

“Uh, no—”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t pry,” he said quickly, and Dean swore he was blushing.

“It’s cool, I was just talking to Charlie. She likes to give me a hard time.” Dean inhaled, hoping it would give him the momentum he needed. “She...uh, invited us to hangout tomorrow.”

“Us?” Castiel said, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, canoeing. With Charlie and her friend Dorothy. Well, I say friend, but really, Charlie is trying her damndest to get into Dorothy’s pants. It’s pretty impressive, really, how she’s pulling out all the stops. Anyways...” Dean had no idea how he had ended up discussing Charlie’s sex life, of all fucking things. He was floundering. “Uh, back to the point. She wants us to come. You and me. Whaddya think?”

Castiel looked down at his hands, biting his lip, deliberating on something. Then he sighed. “Dean, I don’t think—”

The front door of the house squeaked opened, jolting them out of conversation, and they turned towards the source of the noise. Awesome, Dean thought. At least this way I won’t have to hear Cas reject me...it’ll just be implied. Jess was standing on the porch now, talking loudly to a stocky, muscular man. He had dark hair, a beard, and a wool coat on. When he spotted Dean, his eyes turned wide and warm, clearly checking him out. Two weeks ago Dean might’ve been flattered, maybe even considered him a decent candidate in taking Dean’s metaphorical, gay “virginity.” But now...

“Dean, Castiel!” Jess called out sweetly, waving them towards the porch. They shrugged at each other and starting walking—Castiel pushing his bike, Dean with his hands in pockets. They walked close together but didn’t touch, didn’t speak, filled with a tension that Dean couldn’t identify.

Jess and the stranger met them halfway, both smiling cheerfully.

“Guys, meet our new farmhand, Benny Lafitte,” Jess said.

“Mighty nice to meet you, Dean,” Benny said in a thick, Louisiana accent. He stretched his hand forward and shook Dean’s hand for longer than was strictly necessarily.

“Likewise,” Dean said casually, taking his hand back. He looked to Jess, eyebrows creased. “Uh, Jess—not that I mind, but—new farmhand?”

“Just a few hours a week. Is that okay?” Her tone was questioning, but Dean could tell she had already made up her mind. “It was actually Castiel’s idea.” Castiel shifted on his feet, looking deeply uncomfortable, and Dean would have smiled at how endearing it was...if he wasn’t so confused. He looked at Jess again, ignoring Benny’s eager eyes on him.

“You’re taking farming advice from Cas now?” Dean shot Castiel an apologetic look. “No offense, buddy.”
“None taken,” Castiel said. “I merely suggested that—with you writing full-time, and Jessica newly pregnant, perhaps some help might be warranted.” Castiel looked miserable, though, and Dean didn’t understand why. He wanted to touch his elbow, rouse him from whatever mood had struck him, but standing in front of Jess and Benny probably wasn’t the time.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Jess said. “Just to help out. You still on-board, Benny?”

Before Benny could reply, Castiel was clearing his throat. “I assume you have previous farming experience, Mr. Lafitte?”

Dean’s eyes widened, intending to give Cas a dude, back off expression. But Castiel was staring straight ahead at Benny, eyes locked and jaw tense, and fuck, Cas being a dick shouldn’t be this sexy but it always fucking is.

“Apologies, brother, didn’t realize I’d be getting a second interview today,” Benny chuckled. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I haven’t always been this cute and cuddly.” He patted his stomach, which was slightly round, though he certainly wasn’t out-of-shape. “I’ve been farming for two decades, tobacco and corn, mostly. But I know my way around.” With that last statement, he looked at Dean pointedly, the suggestion clear-as-day. Dean fought the urge to take a step closer to Cas.

“Right, well,” Jess said awkwardly. Dean had no idea if she was observant enough to notice what was happening, but Dean was thankful for her all the same. “Benny can come back tomorrow, Dean, if you have a few hours to help train him?”

“Well, actually—”

“Dean and I have plans tomorrow,” Castiel announced, and Dean’s jaw nearly dropped. Castiel gave Jess a sympathetic frown. “Sorry to ask, but think you could manage to train Mr. Lafitte by yourself?”

“No problem,” Jess said breezily. “You two have fun doing...whatever...you’re doing.” By her tone alone, Dean could tell she had correctly read the growing tension in the group. Fucking swell.

“We will, thank you,” Castiel said formally, pushing his bike towards the shed. Dean watched him go, feeling impressed, annoyed, and turned on—somehow in equal measure.

"Catch you next time, brother,” Benny called, flashing a wink in Dean's direction. Dean smiled thinly and turned around, following Cas up the hill.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Whew! There in a pine fest headed your way, folks. Take a deep breath and dive on in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later that night Castiel entered the farmhouse. Dean was still up the hill, hammering away on his latest chapter, just a thousand words shy of his daily goal. They had missed dinner by an hour, and in the quiet of the shed, Castiel heard Dean’s stomach growl. “I’ll go get provisions,” he had mumbled, the first thing he had said all evening. He shut the door and fled before Dean could reply. He was still dreadfully embarrassed by how he had acted towards Benny earlier—territorial, irritated that anyone would show an interest in Dean. Or worse, irritated that Dean might actually be receptive towards it. Against his better judgment, Castiel had thought there was a connection growing between him and Dean, one that wasn’t totally unrequited... but he had misread signals before.

And tomorrow, thanks to Castiel’s big mouth, he would be stuck on the river all day with Dean—Dean, who he badly wanted, apparently to the point of making an ass of himself. He sighed and opened the back door, heading to the kitchen where Jessica had been keeping the leftovers warm. Castiel smiled when he saw two plates in the microwave, and heated them up for a few minutes while grabbing a few bottles of water.

He spotted Sam sitting on the couch, his lap filled with case files, and they made small talk. When he turned around, Jessica was barreling down the hallway, an oversized hamper in her arms. “Can you believe two people can have this much laundry?” she laughed, heading towards the washing machine. Castiel smiled, looking between Sam and Jessica, loving the domesticity of it all. Back in New York he would be reading on his couch, eating a frozen meal, occasionally checking his work email because he didn’t have anything better to do.

While the food was reheating, Castiel walked over to Jessica, who was still loading the washing machine. Over the past week he had come to think highly of Dean’s family, and felt particularly guilty at the thought that his behavior today had ruined that good relationship.

“Thank you very much for dinner,” he said, realizing he sounded formal, but not knowing how to bridge the gap just yet.

Jessica smiled, waving her hand affably. “It’s nothing, really. I’m not exactly the chef in the family.” She started separating her colors and whites, making piles on top of the dryer. “The kitchen is usually Dean’s domain.”

“Oh?” Castiel tried not to sound too interested, but it was difficult to sound disinterested where Dean was concerned.

Jessica grinned. “Oh, yeah. You have no idea. His burgers are to die for.” She squinted her eyes, looking behind Castiel’s feet. “Would you mind tossing me that?”

“Of course.” Castiel took a wide step backwards and bent over, retrieving a wadded up towel on the floor. “Can I help you do anything else?”
“No, no...well, actually,” she said, her eyes shifting in thought, “would you mind grabbing the laundry basket from Dean’s room? He always does his own laundry, stubborn as he is. But with him writing all day and night, I doubt he’s had the time.”

“You would be correct,” Castiel said matter-of-factly. “He’s now worn the same pair of jeans four days in a row.”

Jessica laughed, her face theatrically dismayed. “Sam, your brother is a disgusting pig!” she called out.

“Tell me something I don’t know!” he called back. Castiel walked down the hallway and gave them both a closed-mouth smile, feeling strangely at home here. Once he crossed the threshold into Dean’s bedroom, however, his ease disappeared.

Like the rest of the house, Dean’s room was small but cozy, with shades of beige and gray accenting the walls. The room was dark apart from one lamp, which cast a yellow glow on the bed—a memory foam mattress, Castiel noticed. In the corner there was a stereo system buried beneath Black Sabbath and Metallica cassettes, with a Motorhead record wedged between tape boxes. Castiel shook his head, chuckling. If Dean did have a flaw, of course it was something as strange and endearing as mullet rock.

There was an antique revolver in a glass case—a Colt, it seemed, with a narrow barrel—hanging on the wall. Dean’s desk was covered with half-open books and old cups of coffee. The whole room smelled like him...leather and sun, dusty books and sweat. It was palpable, intoxicating. Castiel found himself distracted by it.

It took some searching to find his laundry basket, which was tucked far inside his armoire, hidden from sight. That placement had been intentional, though...Castiel realized a moment too late. Because inside Dean’s wicker basket were jeans, flannel, t-shirts, socks, and...panties. Two weeks worth of panties, in fact. Silk and green, black and cotton, red and sheer. They were mixed together in outfits Castiel had seen Dean wearing earlier this week, which meant...he wore them during the day. Possibly all day, every day. Sitting in the same room as Castiel. He felt blood pumping in his ears, felt his pulse begin to quicken, his cock already semi-hard just from the sudden realization that Dean...Dean wore...

“Cas?” Dean called from the kitchen, and Castiel’s eyes became wide and frantic. He dropped the basket and swung the armoire open, stuffing the evidence of his discovery deep into the back. He had just managed to shut the armoire door, hands shaking, when Dean rounded the corner.

He stood in the doorway, looking at Cas cautiously. “Uh, hey. Whatcha doing in here?”

Oh god. Castiel wished desperately to disappear into the floorboards.

“Jessica asked me to fetch your laundry basket,” he said, trying to keep his voice level, willing his semi to flag. Dean’s face looked panicked, so Castiel added, “But I...I couldn’t find it. Sorry.”

Dean sighed, looking relieved, then cleared his throat. “Yeah, well...no worries. Jess knows I like to do my own laundry.” When Castiel didn’t respond, Dean continued nervously. “It’s just like, she puts everything in the dryer, you know? And some things are delicate.”

Delicate, like the black silk thong Castiel had spotted on top of the pile...

“Cas?” Dean took a step forward, placing a hand on Castiel’s arm. “You okay?”

“Sorry, I’m just...” Castiel realized he was sweating. Dean still had a hand on Castiel’s arm, and it
would’ve been easy, so easy, to place a hand on Dean’s hip, to draw him closer, to lift his chin and kiss him—

“Can I ask you a question?” Dean said, interrupting Castiel’s daydream, standing so close that their feet were touching. Dean dropped his hand and Castiel didn’t trust himself to speak, worried his voice would be steeped with longing. He nodded instead. “Why did you act that way towards Benny earlier?”

Castiel winced, stomach filled with dread, but there was no accusation in Dean’s voice—just curiosity.

“That was...unfortunate,” Castiel said truthfully, because he had already told Dean a white lie earlier about finding the panties—Dean’s panties—and he hated to be dishonest again. “I’m sorry to have behaved so unprofessionally.”

“Dude,” Dean said incredulously, “that’s the last thing I care about. Like, literally. I care more about trying Sam’s rabbit food—which I have zero fucking interest in, by the way.”

Castiel smiled, thankful Dean had broken the tension. Well, at least some of it. Because Dean was still standing very, very close and they were alone in his bedroom, and…

Castiel’s phone began to vibrate in his coat pocket, and Dean looked down in surprise.

“Thought you didn’t get reception here,” he said.

“It seems your room is the exception,” Castiel said grumbly, checking the screen. “This is Ellen. I should probably take this.”

“Ellen? Like—my Ellen? Roadhouse Ellen?”

“That’s the one.” Dean raised an eyebrow, questioning, and Castiel tapped his arm, propelling him forward. “I’ll explain after. Meet you in the kitchen?”

Five minutes later Castiel joined Dean at the kitchen table. Dean had set the table—green plaid placemats, napkins folded, two beers perfectly poured, leftovers reheated and plated.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” he said, a little stunned, and Dean shrugged.

“You were already going to,” he said, picking up his fork and spearing whatever meat was on their plate—roast beef? “I just finished my chapter early and beat you to it.”

Castiel was tempted to point out that he had only intended to carry their plates up the hill, to eat in silence so Dean could finish, but he didn’t want to disrupt the intimacy of the moment.

Dean took a bite from his plate and visibly grimaced, chugging his beer. “Jess has a lot going for her, but...cooking ain’t on the list,” he said, and Castiel laughed, taking a bite himself. The meat was dry and heavily salted, but the company was good, so he couldn’t complain.

“You’ll have to come back over soon so I can cook,” Dean said evenly, staring at his plate.

“You want to cook for me?” Castiel hadn’t intended to sound so astonished, but he wasn’t used to offers like this. Sure, Anna would invite him over, but they would just get Chinese takeout and marathon something on Netflix. No one had cooked for Castiel in a very long time.

“Why does that surprise you?” Dean asked, spearing his green beans and looking up.
“Well,” Castiel followed suit and took another bite, “about a week ago you hated me.”

Dean snorted and shook his head, obviously not expecting such an honest answer.

“About a week ago, you hated me, too,” Dean pointed out, and Castiel didn’t deny it.

“And now…” Castiel wasn’t sure how, but this conversation had nose-dived into dangerous territory. He stared down at his hands, not sure what to say. The pause in conversation was significant, revealing. Dean put his fork down on the table and Castiel glanced up at the noise. Dean cleared his throat and changed the subject.

“So, uhh, anyways. Ellen. What’s the story there?”

“Right,” Castiel said, thankful for the distraction. “She told me about a reading series they’re doing down at the Roadhouse—"

“Yeah, I usually go,” Dean said, picking up his fork again and twirling it between his knuckles. “Books and booze. That combo is hard to resist.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, because their headliner pulled out for Monday’s event.” Castiel took a long sip of beer before continuing, “and I told her you’d fill in.”

Dean lunged forward, almost spilling his beer. “Dude, what the hell! You can’t just sign people up for shit without their permission!”

Castiel was expecting this reaction, and tried to keep his tone of voice level. “Apologies, Dean. But she needed an answer and I knew you’d say no.”

“Let me get this straight. You knew I’d say no...and so you said yes?” Dean threw his hands up in feigned surrender. “All right, that’s it. We can go back to hating each other.”

“Not a chance,” he said, chuckling. *How could I go back to hating you when I’m practically in love with—* no, no, no. There’s no way. Castiel was not going to finish that sentence.

“You’re welcome to call Ellen and cancel, if that’s what you really want. But I think this’ll be a great experience for you, Dean. Reading your own work out loud is very helpful. Creative writing began as a auditory art, you know.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Thanks for the rhetoric lesson, Professor Novak.”

“Rhetoric, exactly! I’m glad you mentioned that.” Castiel could hear the enthusiasm rising in his voice, but he couldn’t seem to stop. “Traditionally, orators would perform their works in front of an audience, so that example is perfect. Now, assuming you’ve read the works of Pericles—"

“Sam,” Dean interrupted, cupping his hands around his mouth so his voice could travel down the hallway. “Come nerd out with Cas, for the love of god, before I make him eat more of Jess’ roast beef.”

***

The next morning Dean woke up early, planning to make him and Cas a solid breakfast before they met up with Charlie and Dorothy. They weren’t due on the river until later in the day, since it would be warmer around lunchtime, much more enjoyable than the frigid temperatures they were confronted by each morning. He might have had time to squeeze in some writing, too...if he hadn’t gone so overboard on breakfast. By the time Castiel entered through the back door, wearing loose
jeans and a blue pullover with boots (looking like he just walked out of a damn catalog), Dean had prepared eggs, bacon, and waffles. Castiel smiled at the spread, seeming equally eager and sheepish that such a display was meant for him. Dean ducked his head and waved off the praise, muttering something about being really, really hungry. That was all.

The meal started off quietly enough, though Dean was morally offended by Cas’ preference for pancakes (“What psycho doesn’t love waffles?”). Eventually Sam and Jess joined them, and the intimacy of the moment was broken, though somehow replaced with something equally profound. The conversation between the four of them flowed effortlessly, with Sam and Cas rattling off intellectual thoughts while Dean and Jess took playful jabs at their shared expense. Dean didn’t know how, but having Cas here made their family dynamic somehow whole.

After a while Dean packed them a quick picnic lunch and a cooler full of beer, and they loaded up the Impala and headed towards the river. The moment they were alone again Dean felt a buzz of tension, the same feeling as standing in his bedroom last night with Cas, an undeniable electricity. Though the night before they couldn’t stop staring, couldn’t stop subtly touching each other, and now it was the exact opposite. They were purposefully avoiding each other’s gaze, only sneaking glances when the other looked away. There was a shyness between them that Dean had never experienced with anyone else. It was as if their bodies were trying to connect, but they were too hesitant and self-conscious to follow through.

Dean was filled with relief when they finally reached the river, chuckling when he spotted the canoe rental sign. Castiel tilted his head, searching for whatever Dean was seeing. There an old chipped sign in front of the office, and in green letters, it read “Uncle Wiz’s Canoe & Kayak Rental.”

“Dean,” Castiel said gravely, after reading the sign, “I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Dean snorted and opened his car door, Castiel following. “Dorothy and Uncle Wiz are bad enough,” Dean said, unlocking the trunk, “but the minute I see flying monkeys, we’re getting the hell outta dodge.”

“Give it a chance,” Castiel said with feigned optimism, “the Emerald City has its advantages.”

Dean laughed, shaking his head. Sometimes Cas’ quick-witted humor took him by surprise, but he enjoyed bantering with Cas. Before he could reply, though, Charlie’s yellow car pulled into the gravel lot. She parked sharply and swung her door open.

“What’s up, bitches!” she shouted. Dorothy came around the passenger side, brown hair twisted into a braid. Dean reached out to hug Charlie, but she went straight for Cas, wrapping her arms around his neck and whispering something in his ear. If Dean had forgotten about their impromptu meeting at the bonfire last week, he damn well remembered now. He leaned forward, trying to eavesdrop, but they were being too stealthily.

“All right, all right,” he called out, waving his hands impatiently. “Gossip on your own time, ladies.”

Charlie pulled away and grinned. “Don’t mind Dean,” she told Cas, then flashed her eyes at Dean, face full of mischief. “He’s been known to get a little cranky when sexually frustrated—”

“And now Charlie’s dead to me,” Dean said loudly, trying to mask his humiliation with humor. Because... what the literal fuck. He was totally mortified, avoiding Cas’ eyes. What the hell was up with Charlie? Usually she wouldn’t embarrass him this badly. “I got an opening for a new best friend if anyone’s interested.”

Everyone chuckled, helping to ease the tension.
“What are the benefits of this position?” Cas asked lightly. He came to Dean’s side, and they walked together closely and started unpacking the trunk.

“Well,” Dean considered, pausing and thinking, relieved that Cas wasn’t planning to address what Charlie had implied a moment ago. He lifted the cooler from the trunk. “First of all, I’m a semi-famous author.”

“Hmph,” Castiel said, his tone exaggerated, tilting his head as if he were mulling it over. “Not impressed. I know plenty of those already.”

Dean raised his eyebrows, chuckling. “Well damn. Guess that makes sense in your line of work, but still...that usually impresses people more.” He slammed the trunk and they filled their arms with provisions, Charlie and Dorothy behind them, their own hands full.

“You’re gonna have to try harder to impress Cas,” Charlie called from behind. “He could have his pick of best friends, you know.”

Dean’s mouth went dry, understanding the implication of Charlie’s words. All the sudden, best friend was a euphemism for fuck buddy, or lover, or long-distance boyfriend, or potential soulmate... Dean shook his head. He couldn’t consider any of those options. Sure, maybe there was somewhat of a mutual attraction going on. Maybe. But Cas was all about professionalism, almost to a fault. He would never cross that line with Dean, no matter how badly Dean wanted him to, because Cas was intelligent and worldly and adorable and hot as fuck...

Thanks to that train of thought Dean was quietly spiraling, officially aware that he wasn’t good enough to even be Cas’ friend, let alone cross the boundary into romantic territory.

“Dean has many fine qualities,” Cas protested, and Dean looked down, feeling sheepish and undeserving of the compliment. Being direct wasn’t how he and Cas interacted, at least not lately. Since they had transitioned from enemies to friends, their conversations were lighter, with more joking and bantering, but rarely did they say what they were actually thinking. Well, at least Dean sure as hell didn’t. Dean thought Cas was bold, unafraid to share his opinions...if his strange distaste for Benny was any indication.

“Well,” Cas continued, his eyes light with humor. Dean snapped out of his thoughts, promising himself to pay more attention to Cas. “At least, that’s what I’ve been told... I’m still waiting for confirmation.”

Dean scoffed, bumping into Cas’ elbow playfully. After that, it became Dean’s mission to “prove” himself and his worthiness through random, ridiculous facts. Once they had successfully rented their canoe and carried it together towards the river’s edge, he said, “Okay, how about this? I’ve seen every Clint Eastwood movie ever made.”

“No way,” Castiel said mockingly, whistling and shaking his head. For that comment, Dean reached a mischievous hand into the river and flicked water in Cas’ face. Castiel laughed and flailed slightly, pushing against Dean’s shoulder. Charlie watched them together and exchanged smirks with Dorothy, but Dean ignored them. They were just friends making jokes, shootin’ the shit, playing in the river. There was nothing unusual about this. Not at all.

Once both canoes were in the water, they all paddled leisurely, attempting to keep their boats together. Between both pairs Dean and Dorothy were the more experienced canoers, so they sat at the stern, steering each canoe and calling out the occasional paddle-switch to Cas and Charlie. Even though Charlie was over eager today—her every word was seemingly suggestive towards Dean’s crush on Cas, which was making him impatient and embarrassed—Dean did feel guilty about not
being a very effective wingman.

So while they floated downstream, Dean told stories about Charlie—like how she once hacked into a video game (“The Red Scare,” their favorite, from high school) reprogramed it, and released it for free. Or the long, drunken story behind her Princess Leia, slave-girl-bikini tattoo, which she had gotten last year at Comic Con. Dorothy and Cas were shaking their heads and laughing, but Charlie looked slightly miffed, as if those were stories she would rather tell Dorothy at a *much* later date, thank you very much. Dean just shot Charlie a wide, fake-ass grin. If she wanted to “help” Dean with his crush by embarrassing him all afternoon, well, it was his obligation to return the favor.

About halfway through the five-mile trek, they pulled up to a pebbly bank to stretch their legs and share a late lunch. While Cas spread out a large quilt and Dorothy sorted through the picnic baskets, Charlie grabbed Dean by the shirt and pointed up the hill. “You, me. Let’s go.”


“Now, Winchester,” she hissed. Dean turned to Castiel and shrugged apologetically, then followed. Charlie waited until they were safely out of earshot before rounding on Dean, hands flung wide and incredulous.

“Dude! What the hell!”

“What’s up?” he said, trying to sound innocent.

“You do know that, as my BFF and wingman, you’re supposed to help Dorothy *like* me, right?”

“She already does,” Dean answered dismissively. It was true—though she was quiet and unassuming, she looked at Charlie with obvious adoration, as if the petite redhead were a force to be reckoned with. *That she is,* Dean thought.

“No thanks to you!” she said impatiently.

“Hey, if you can’t take it, don’t dish it out.” Dean hadn’t planned on calling her out here, but hell, she had already opened this can of awkward fucking worms.

Charlie sighed. “Dean, I love you, but you’re an idiot.” She ran a hand through her hair and glared at him. “You’re crushing on Cas, obvi-freaking-ly—”

“You already knew that,” Dean argued. “Doesn’t mean you gotta broadcast it.”

“Yeah, well. You know what else I know?” She leaned in closely. “Cas is just as into you. Like, crazy into you. You big idiot.”

Dean felt his face and neck grow red. “That’s-uh...no. Nope. Charlie, there’s no way.”

She rolled her eyes dramatically and looked down the hill. Dean followed her gaze, noticing Cas and Dorothy sitting on the bank, looking quietly uncomfortable.

“We gotta get back, Dean. There’s no time to explain. But he is. He really fucking is. And he’s helpful and dreamy, so—” She searched Dean’s face, apparently summoning the right words of motivation. “Nut up, Winchester!”

She stalked away and down the hill, and Dean shook his head and followed, feeling dazed.

Lunchtime passed in a blur. Dean was aware of the ongoing conversation, of Charlie telling Cas
about her new job as an IT analyst while they munched on sandwiches and chips. Cas complained about the constant noise of the city, and how much better he was sleeping in country. Dean smiled at the thought and sipped his beer, distracted, Charlie’s words playing on a loop. *Cas is just as into you. Like, crazy into you.*

That couldn’t be true...could it?

“Dean,” Charlie said, voice amused, slowly waving a hand in front of Dean’s face and attempting to get his attention...apparently not for the first time. He cleared his throat and looked up, everyone’s eyes collectively on him.

“Uhh, yeah?”

Charlie and Dorothy were standing up, climbing into their canoe. Cas, thankfully, was still sitting next to him on the quilt. “Dorothy and I are heading out,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, and angled his head towards Castiel. “Should we…”

“We can wait,” Cas said, cool and casual. His eyes flickered to the bottle in Dean’s hand. “You haven’t finished your beer.”

Dean looked down at his barely-touched drink, just now remembering he had opened another one. How long ago had that been—ten, twenty minutes? Damn. Thinking about Cas was making him absent-minded as hell.

“Yeah, we’ll catch up,” Dean said, trying to match Cas’ nonchalance. In reality, he was absorbing everything about this moment—the possibility of being alone on the river bank, drinking beer and sharing a quilt with Cas. Charlie’s words were still ringing in his ears. He heard their canoe propel itself back into the water, but he didn’t even look their way. He was too busy staring at Cas, the blue of his pullover, the blue of his eyes, the colors of the leaves falling around him.

“You belong out here,” Dean said without thinking.

Castiel looked at Dean with his nose crinkled. “Here?” he said, sweeping a long finger towards the river and the trees, and Dean nodded. “Why?”

Dean propped himself up on his elbow, lying sideways on the quilt. Cas adjusted his own torso, mirroring Dean, their hands only itches apart. “Hmm,” he said slowly, staring down at his hands. “I dunno.”

Castiel nudged Dean’s foot gently with his own. “Come on,” he whispered. “Indulge me.”

Dean drew in a sharp breath, imagining the many, many ways he’d like to indulge Cas...fuck. This conversation was not helping him maintain a clear head.

“I dunno, Cas. Sometimes you’re...intense. Like a literal force of nature.”

Castiel searched his eyes for a long time. Eventually he mumbled, “Is that a good thing?”

“It’s an overwhelming thing,” Dean admitted, and all at once, he realized the gravity of his words. His heart was pounding, Cas’ eyes wide and searching. “But at the same time, you’re calming. Peaceful, even.” He took a deep breath. “How can you be both? Be all these things at once?”

What he was really asking was... *how the hell can I be falling for you after two weeks?*
The realization made him nauseous and thrilled and completely terrified. He was convinced now that Castiel knew about his feelings, and he felt panic swirl inside his stomach. If Cas hadn't carried suspicions before being compared to the majesty of the fucking earth, well. He must know now.

“Sorry, that’s a weird question.” Dean tore his eyes from Cas and laid down, flat on his back, closing his eyes. He knew Cas’ eyes were still on him, could feel the intensity of his gaze, but refused to open his eyes. He felt Cas shift on the quilt, lying on his back beside Dean, their shoulders touching.

“Dean…”

“Yeah, Cas?”

“Look at me.” Maybe it was the command in his voice, which apparently was a real fucking turn-on, surprise surprise, but Dean cracked his eyes open and tilted his head. Their faces had never been so close. Against his shoulder, Dean could feel the rise and fall of Cas’ chest, the labored breathing. He wondered if his heart was racing too.

“You never finished,” Castiel whispered, and when Dean squinted his eyes in confusion, he continued, “telling me what your other ‘fine qualities’ are.”

Dean stared at his lips, barely comprehending a word he was saying. “What, my...oh. Right.” Being this close together, smelling the earth and the river and Castiel’s detergent, was making him feel dizzy. “All tapped out on those, sorry.”

“Then let me finish it for you.” Castiel’s voice was a low, cracking grumble. “You are kind and attentive. A great cook and skilled mechanic. It is possible that you own every classic rock album ever created. When you’re writing, you throw yourself into it head-first. You almost always lose to Sam when you play rock, paper, scissors, but you keep trying anyways.” Castiel’s voice had turned amused, as if he found Dean endearing. “Sometimes you’re mischievous and immature. Sometimes you’re reckless. But through everything, Dean, you are…”

Dean swallowed, barely breathing. He knew that if he didn’t touch Cas, and soon, his heart might burst. If Cas already thought he was reckless, maybe it was time to prove it. Keeping his head angled, both of them still lying shoulder-to-shoulder on the ground, he reached for Castiel’s hand. Their fingers intertwined instinctively, as if they had always done this, as if every moment they had spent together was building up to this. The expression on Castiel’s face was difficult to decipher. Surprised? Excited? Afraid? Either way, he tightened his long fingers around Dean’s and they shifted their bodies closer, desperate for more contact. Finally touching Cas after weeks of resisting was intoxicating.

“Yeah, Cas?” Dean’s voice was low and breaking. They still hadn’t looked away. Dean knew this amount of eye contact was unusual, was significant somehow. But goddamn it, he couldn’t stop.

“You’re...quite possibly the best, most interesting, most challenging man I’ve ever met,” Castiel admitted quietly. Dean was motionless while the words sunk in, terrified of moving or speaking and breaking the spell. Normally he would refuse compliments like these, would shake them off with a joke, but he didn’t want to do that anymore. Not right now. Not with Cas.

“Right back at you,” he breathed, meaning every word of it, shifting his legs so their thighs were touching. Castiel was staring at his mouth, pupils dilated, and Dean licked his lips without thinking. The movement made Castiel lean in closer, their feet touching, ankles rubbing against each other in slow circles. Dean lifted his other hand and wrapped it around the collar of Cas’ pullover, willing him closer.
“Dean…” Their lips were circling, the energy between them heavy and tense, the yearning for contact overwhelming Dean. They were so close now, both tilting their heads, coming closer and closer, wetting their lips, taking a breath and—

That’s when the rain came, heavy and in sheets. They jumped up frantically, grabbing the cooler and the quilt and the leftover food. They found shelter under trees, remarking on the sudden rain and the possibility of storms, hoping Charlie and Dorothy were all right. But Dean could barely concentrate, could barely hold a sensible conversation right now.

Because two minutes ago they been holding hands. Two minutes ago their legs and feet and arms had been pressed together. Two minutes ago, after weeks of tension that felt like it lasted a lifetime, they had almost kissed.

And there was nothing in the world Dean wanted to do more.

Chapter End Notes

You can thank (or blame?) this chapter's sexual tension on spicebomb, aka Jensen's cologne, which WaywardAF67 gave me a sample of and NOW I SPRAY IT WHENEVER I WRITE DESTIEL AND IT'S KIND OF MY NEW OBSESSION.

Also: huge thanks to everyone who's been reading every week! I promise I have good, sexy things on the horizon for you.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I AM SO EXCITED ABOUT THIS CHAPTER. This has been a long time coming, and I'm so glad we've finally arrived. If my betas' reactions are any indication, heh, you guys are gonna love it. This one is on the longer side, and I nearly split it into two chapters, but I decided I wasn't THAT evil, and should just go on and share.

Please be aware of some recently added tags, some that are more intense than others.

Can't wait to hear y'all's thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Castiel took his time in the shower. It was early evening, and he peered through the small frosted window, admiring the trees and hills below. It had been two straight days of nonstop writing for Dean—his novel now over halfway finished—and hours of editing for Castiel. Dean had been so prolific lately that it was honestly surprising. After the almost kiss they had shared, Castiel had been unable to think about little else, barely able to add anything to the current essay he was working on. To his credit, though, Dean did seem equally affected by the heated moment they had shared—staring hard when he thought Castiel wasn’t looking, finding excuses to brush elbows or pull lint from the front of Castiel’s sweater. It had been an apprehensive few days for them both. They seemed to be holding their breath, wondering what would happen next.

What did Castiel want to happen? That was the question he had been asking himself over and over since first laying eyes on Dean. He had always expected to find him attractive...after all, he had discovered that years ago, simply from Dean’s author photo. But he never expected to develop feelings for Dean, to find him kind and endearing, to laugh at his sarcastic comments or feel at peace sitting together in the quiet. Most of all, he had never expected to feel at home in the South again, not after all the bad memories. But spending time on the farm with Dean—and Sam and Jessica, he reminded himself—well, it was the most welcome he had felt anywhere.

And if that were true, didn’t he owe it to himself to pursue things with Dean? To break his staunch rule of not “fraternizing” with the writers, or whatever, which had certainly never been one of Chuck’s rules, anyways? (Though Zachariah, who Castiel suspected was homophobic, would be a different story.) During the canoe trip, Dean had been pretty forward with his intentions, and the memory made Castiel feel warm all over. He wanted so badly to take that leap, to cross his carefully guarded boundaries and never look back. Castiel thought, not for the first time, about the possibility of being Dean’s first sexual experience with a man...and how insanely hot that would be. Dean would doubtlessly want to take things slow, and if they ever did go all the way, he’d surely want to top...which wasn’t Castiel’s preference of the two, but for Dean, he’d do anything. The thought was more than enough to get Castiel aroused, and he felt a familiar tingle in his stomach, his cock semi-hard just from the thought of kissing Dean, pushing him onto the bed, unzipping his pants…

Castiel lathered his hand with shampoo and closed his eyes, giving himself over to the fantasy. He pulled Dean’s jeans off slowly, reverently, admiring every naked inch. Then he noticed the panties. Oh god, oh god, oh god. Black and lacey boyshorts, one of the pairs Castiel spotted in Dean’s laundry basket. His thighs were toned and tan and his cock was peeking out under the lace, and he
looked up at Castiel, grinning… Castiel brought his hand to his dick but stroked himself slowly, trying to make this last. He stood staring, awed and worshiping the man beneath him, hands rubbing Dean tenderly and teasingly through the gorgeous panties. Eventually, once Dean became fully erect and desperately turned on, Castiel dropped to his knees, slipped the panties to the side, and took Dean’s full length into his mouth. Dean leaned into the bed and moaned, hands wandering to Castiel’s hair, gripping and tugging hard. Dean’s dick was so full and long and Castiel swallowed down, the back of his throat humming and vibrating with pleasure, and Dean moaned even louder, panting hard, hips raised, fighting the urge to fuck into Castiel’s mouth…

Castiel was uncomfortably hard now, the head of his cock pink and shiny with precome. Forgetting his plan to slowly enjoy this, his hand increased speed, approaching a frantic pace, cock bouncing wildly in his fist. “I’m so fucking close,” Dean said, a warning for Castiel to pull away if he wished. He popped off for a moment to lick Dean’s balls, and Dean whimpered, a string of profanities falling from his mouth. Castiel swirled his tongue around the head before taking Dean’s full length into his mouth again, bobbing rhythmically on Dean’s cock, and Dean came with a cry, his mouth wide and his eyes closed, his body shuddering while come filled Castiel’s mouth—

Castiel came forcefully then, painting his fist and stifling a moan. He leaned into the hot spray of the water and washed himself off, hoping the whole floor of the B&B hadn’t heard him shout Dean’s name.

He felt sheepish afterwards, toweling off and getting dressed, buzzing with anticipation. Tonight was Dean’s book reading at the Roadhouse—Ellen and Jo’s bar that Castiel had yet to visit. He was looking forward to having a few drinks and chatting with Dean’s friends, who were quickly becoming his friends, strangely enough. And even though he had seen Dean practically every waking hour of the day, he was eager to spend time with him when they both weren’t working, zeroed in on their laptops. He dressed in tight, dark jeans and a warm, but forming-fitting, black button-up. He even grabbed his trenchcoat on the way out, just in case. Autumn was now in full swing, and the nights were getting increasingly colder. The B&B was old and drafty, and often at night he woke up shivering, imagining himself lounging in front of a fireplace with Dean… He shook the thought from his head. He was catching a ride with Donna and Doug to the Roadhouse and the last thing he needed was an erection, especially in these jeans.

During the drive he made polite conversation with the Stovers, comparing the New York and Nashville weather patterns and discussing their favorite local restaurants. The Roadhouse wasn’t known for the food, apparently, but Castiel was fine with that. Dean was cooking for him so often now, such thoughtful and lavish meals, that he sometimes skipped his next meal altogether.

The bar was as much of a dive as Castiel expected, with wood-paneled siding and vaguely western decor. The parking lot was full, however, so they obviously didn’t have any shortage of customers. Castiel smiled when he spotted Dean’s Impala, wondering if he was nervous. Dean had given plenty of book readings while promoting the first three installments of The Impala Chronicles, according to Donna, and was known to be a captivating reader. Still, if something went wrong tonight, Castiel would feel terribly guilty…having signed Dean up for this event in the first place.

Everyone Castiel knew in town was in attendance tonight, it seemed. Only Kevin and Claire were absent—because of their age, Castiel assumed—which apparently freed Jody to flirt with a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man (who Donna later said was Crowley), currently buying her a drink. Ash and Garth were on a wooden, makeshift stage, clearly helping the set-up of tonight’s reading. Jo and Ellen were predictably working behind the bar, slammed with a line full of a customers. Castiel frowned, figuring he should get in line soon. Dean was nowhere to be found, though Castiel continued to scan the crowd, looking intently. Was he in a back room somewhere, preparing for the reading? Was he nervous, angry that Castiel had volunteered him for this? Should Castiel go find
At that moment, he spotted Sam and Jess sitting side-by-side in a booth, chatting with a man who had his back turned. The couple waved Cas over, and he took a step towards them as the third man spun around, eyes searching for the newcomer. Benny. Castiel felt his smile slip, hit with a sudden wave of irritation. He fought the urge to spin on his heels and leave, but Sam and Jess had already spotted him, and he couldn’t stand the thought of being rude to them. There was no way out but forward. He sighed, trying to keep his temper in check. He had behaved badly last time he had encountered the flirty farmhand, who had awakened some primal, possessive part of Castiel’s brain he hadn’t known existed. He had never been territorial or jealous, not even with actual boyfriends. But he had felt that way towards Dean almost instantly.

He tried not to wonder what that might mean.

Thankfully, at least in this circumstance, Dean was nowhere in sight. Maybe Castiel wouldn’t give Benny a repeat performance from last week. Maybe.

“Howdy there,” Benny said casually, while Sam and Jess shared similar greetings. He scooted down the bench, making room for Castiel, and patted the cushion beside him. “Well, come on now. Don’t leave a brother hanging.”

Castiel hesitated. “No thank you,” he said coolly, intending to mention that he planned on getting in line for a drink, but Benny interrupted him.

“If you’re looking for our boy, he’s in the bathroom with a bad case of nerves,” Benny said, and Castiel’s heart raced at the thought. He should’ve called Dean as soon as he got here, should’ve texted him some words of encouragement throughout the day. “He wouldn’t even take me up on the offer of a drink...or a quickie.” He winked at Castiel, who felt fire flood his veins. Sam scrunched up his nose and Jess’ mouth hung wide, neither of them knowing how to respond to such a statement.

Castiel, however, was not quite so tongue-tied.

He leaned forward, planting his hand firmly on the table, his other arm landing against the side of the booth. In this position, he towered over Benny like a crouching animal ready to pounce.

“I would think very carefully about what you say next,” he said, voice measured and quiet, but deeply threatening. “Mr. Winchester co-owns the farm that currently employees you. You should show him some respect.”

Benny huffed loudly and moved forward, either heading for Castiel or trying to push his way out of the booth. “Oh really?” he challenged, words starting to slur. Castiel looked down at the table—there were a half-dozen lowball glasses, all empty, none seeming to be Sam’s. Benny wrapped his hands around the front of Castiel’s trenchcoat, and he could smell the liquor. “Or what? Big bad city boy is gonna throw me out?”

Castiel pushed his hands away, breathing in and out, attempting to calm himself down and not make a scene. He wouldn’t fight Benny here and now, especially not while he was drunk. “Yes,” he said, voice coming out as an inadvertent growl. “I would suggest you leave.”

Benny chuckled darkly. He stepped close to Castiel, his voice a whisper. “All this over one hot piece of ass? I’ll tell you what, brother, you oughta lighten up. Here’s an idea—maybe bending Pretty Boy over this table and fucking his brains out would help.”

Castiel surged forward without another thought, fueled by rage and adrenaline, arms positioned and
ready to strike. He swung his fist wildly, desperate to make contact with Benny’s jaw, but before he could properly throttle the Louisianian pervert who clearly had a death wish, there were hands holding him back. Castiel innately knew it was Dean behind him, hands pulling him by the elbow, repeating Castiel’s name over and over again in an attempt to calm him down. By this time, the whole bar seemed fascinated by the spectacle, and Ash and Garth came over to help Sam take hold of Benny. Castiel kept his eyes fixated on the man until they were out the door, but even then, his whole body was stiff with anger and rage.

“Cas,” Dean said softly, likely for the twentieth time. He tried spinning Castiel around, but he resisted, stubbornly wanting to stay furious. Dean would only calm him down, which he didn’t want, not yet anyways. His hands were shaking and his heart was pounding, and he needed some kind of release before he accidentally punched someone.

Eventually, though, Dean managed to turn him around until they were face to face. He cupped Castiel’s chin, thumb stroking his cheek gently, and Castiel leaned into the contact. He looked into Dean’s eyes, the man’s expression full of curiosity and tenderness, and Castiel felt his fury begin to evaporate.

“You okay?” Dean whispered, and Castiel nodded mutely. He wondered if Dean would be self-conscious later about holding his face this intimately in public, in front of all his friends and a few-dozen of his readers, none who knew yet that Dean was bisexual. Castiel should’ve been thoughtful enough to subtly push Dean away, and have this discussion later in privacy, saving Dean from potential embarrassment. But he had yearned for this so badly and Dean was comforting him so perfectly, and he couldn’t find the strength to disentangle himself. Instead, he put his hands on the small of Dean’s back and leaned in for an embrace.

They hugged longer than two men should, given the environment, until Dean slowly pulled away.

“What exactly did he say you?” There was a warning in Dean’s voice—an anger.

Castiel, feeling immeasurably calmer now, tried to shrug it off. “Nothing that hasn’t been taken care of.”

“Cas…”

Castiel sighed, knowing Dean wasn’t going to relent. “He made some...derogatory comments,” he mumbled, then added, “about you.”

“Huh.” Dean put his hands on his hips, and slung his head down, thinking. “Yeah, he tried cornering me earlier. Dude’s got the best gay-dar in the damn county. I haven’t been hit on like that in...I’ve never been hit on like that.”

Castiel snorted and they wandered over to the bar, which wasn’t quite as busy now, thankfully. Sam, Ash, and Garth hadn’t returned yet from outside, and Castiel wondered if Benny had given them any trouble.“You get used to the aggression in New York,” he said conversationally. “Some gay men can be very...forthcoming.”

“Yeah?” Dean’s shoulders tensed up, as if he were imagining Castiel being constantly harassed, and didn’t like the sound of that one bit.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t happen much anymore.” Castiel squinted his eyes, trying to read the drink menu. “I don’t go out much and I’m not exactly approachable.”

“Uh, yeah...you do give an interesting first impression,” Dean laughed, and eventually Castiel did
too, remembering their disastrous coffee meeting. Dean elbowed him playfully and added, “But you do grow on people…”

By then it was finally time to order. When Ellen spotted them she halted her dishtowel mid-wipe, her eyes wide and concerned. She had gotten glimpses of the altercation but still wanted all the details, which Castiel quietly gave, considering she was Dean’s friend and the owner. Ellen had some colorful words in return, some truly inventive obscenities towards Benny that even Dean seemed impressed by. She eventually grabbed the whiskey and poured their drinks, making casual conversation with Dean while Castiel politely stood beside him.

“Tell Jess to stop by tomorrow. I got some old baby furniture she can go through.” Dean nodded, thanked her, and took a long swig of his whiskey. Castiel reached for his glass and followed suit. “Oh, by the way,” Ellen added, as an afterthought, eyes on Dean. “You seeing anybody?”

The question was evidently such a surprise that Dean choked on his drink, coughing until Castiel had to lightly pat his back.

“Uh...why do you ask?” he finally managed.

“Jo’s got this new friend, Tessa. Cute girl. Thought you two might hit it off.” She shrugged, eyeing Dean’s panicked face with suspicion. Castiel felt a ping of jealousy course through him, and took a step away from the bar, hoping to mask his expression.

“Unless you’re already interested in someone?” Ellen’s tone was prying, her interest clearly piqued.

Dean downed the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. Then he put the glass down with a sigh, as if he had just made a decision.

“Actually, yeah. I am interested in someone.” He looked at Castiel then, his expression open and inviting. Castiel looked back but gripped his glass tightly, trying not to look shocked and flustered. Could it be—was Dean saying that he was interested in—

“What about you, Castiel?” Ellen asked, either oblivious to the moment they were sharing, or unconcerned about interrupting it. “Single? I bet the ladies line right up.”

Castiel took a deep breath and followed Dean’s lead, inhaling the rest of his whiskey. “Thank you, Ellen, but…” Usually, this was when he would explain that he was gay. He had been out of the closet for fifteen years, after all, and was no longer shy about sharing that part of his identity. But Dean had laid his feelings out there, so...shouldn’t he reciprocate?

“I’m interested in someone, too,” Castiel said. He looked down at the floor, not trusting himself to look up right now. If Dean looked half as inviting as Castiel imagined, then he might end up pushed against the bar, being kissing senselessly in front of the entire bar. Which Ellen might not appreciate. Or find very sanitary.

“Suit yourselves,” she responded with a shrug, then laughed, like something had just occurred to her. “You two aren’t gunning for the same girl, are you?”

“I can guarantee you,” Dean said, his tone slightly mischievous, “that is definitely not the case.”

***

Dean hadn’t read publicly in over year, not since No Rest for the Wicked had gone on book tour. Though he had acted upset when Castiel had volunteered him for the reading, and fought a case of nerves earlier in the evening, Dean was ready now. Charismatic. Cocky even. He felt amazing,
because the impossible had happened.

Cas liked him.

Or, at least Dean was ninety-nine percent sure. And he had moments ago decided that—by the end of the night—he was going to kiss Castiel.

Full. On the lips.

It depended on how many more whiskeys he had, if the kiss would be timid or passionate, messy or precise, but one way or another that man was getting goddamn kissed.

Over the past few months, when Dean had thought about kissing a man for the first time, he had been turned-on but worried. What if the brush of stubble scratched his skin and felt weird? What if the dude was super-dominant and Dean wasn’t aroused by it? Though, he didn’t imagine either would be the case. With all his previous hookups, he had found it sexy whenever the girl took charge. And there was his whole secret panty obsession, including the red silky bikini-cuts he was currently wearing, so yeah…

The odds of his first kiss with a dude being fucking awesome were well in Dean’s favor.

But kissing Castiel would be something else. A kiss wouldn’t just be the product of a physical attraction, though... Jesus fucking Christ was there a physical attraction. There was a magnetism between them that Dean had never felt before, and he had experienced some damn good sex in his thirty-one years. But goddamn, the thought of kissing Cas, of holding him, of slowly taking off his clothes and touching his bare skin…Dean wanted more than physical connection with Cas.

He wanted intimacy.

Standing there on stage, microphone in hand, he somehow managed to channel all these distracting thoughts into his performance. He was subtly trying to entice Cas, who was sitting at the nearest table with Sam and Jess, those impossible eyes hanging onto his every word. But Dean accidentally enticed the whole bar instead. He made his voice low and alluring, and read a scene from the first chapter of his new novel (much to the excitement of the few super fans in attendance). Dean’s eyes inevitably wandered to Cas as he read the first scene between Mike and Angel—the intense, emotionally charged rescue from Hell. Dean had never read it aloud before, having just written it a few weeks ago, and the impact of the scene made his voice begin to shake. He had come so far in just a few weeks. He’d started therapy and was making steady progress; broken through his writer’s block in a tremendously prolific way; and met a man he could no longer imagine his life without…

Dean only realized that the chapter was over because of the applause, which was thunderously kind. He smiled broadly, still holding the microphone and waiting for the audience to finish.

“Thanks, thanks so much,” he said into the mic, when the clapping finally died down. “You can read the rest of the story whenever my fourth novel, Lucifer Rising, hits bookshelves. Which’ll be—when, Cas?”

Cas whipped his head around, apparently surprised at being summoned. “Next spring,” he called, “if you meet your deadline.”

Dean laughed, shaking his head. “Y’all hear the doubt in his voice?” he said, wandering around the stage.

“It’s well-deserved!” Ellen shouted, and the audience chuckled. Dean thought there must be at least sixty people in attendance, many who he didn’t know at all.
“By the way, this is my editor, Cas,” Dean said, pointing to the gorgeous man at the nearest table. The man who he currently wanted to run his hands all over, but now was not the time to think about that... “And just so everyone knows, he’s basically the only fucking reason this book is being written.”

Ash leaned against the wall, whistling and hooting in encouragement. Dean pointed at him excitedly. “Dude, exactly. Everyone give Cas some love. He literally brought this book back from the dead.”

Dean slid the microphone into the holster and began clapping wildly, the rest of the bar following suit. Castiel look flushed but delighted, as he did anytime Dean complimented him...like he couldn’t quite believe his luck.

“Let me tell you a secret, though,” Dean said, once the room was mildly quiet again. “He signed me up for this reading without my permission. Which, no offense man, is kind of a dick move. Right?”

Dean had no idea why or how he was still talking, but at this point, it was essentially a stream of consciousness he couldn’t prevent from coming out.

“So...a thought just occurred to me. I think I should do the same to him .” Dean grinned as Castiel eyed him suspiciously. “Cas is a writer too, though he won’t admit it. He’s always typing away whenever I’m not looking. And I guarantee he’s got something he could whip out right now, on the fucking fly, and come up here and read it. And it would blow everyone’s goddamn mind.”

“Let’s hear it, then!” Jo yelled from the back, and several other audience members agreed, whistling and hollering. It was nearly ten o’clock now, and the reading should’ve been over a while ago, but Dean was being propelled forward by some sort of self-assured performance high.

Meanwhile, Cas looked absolutely floored, shaking his head resolutely. “No, Dean, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Let’s give Cas a little encouragement, y’all.” Dean put the microphone back in place and began clapping again, this time hard and deafening, and the whole bar followed. Eventually fists were pounding rhythmically on tables, half the bar chanting Cas’ name. After a while Jess shoved Castiel on stage, and then he was standing beside Dean, stunned by the sudden turn of events. With the room still chaotic and loud, an overwhelming cacophony of clapping and shouting, Dean leaned into Castiel’s ear.

Maybe it was the confidence boost he had received from the reading. Or his newfound assurance that Cas would be receptive towards his feelings. But whatever it was, Dean brushed his lips against Castiel’s ear and whispered, “Go get ‘em, handsome.”

***

Castiel held the microphone, his heart pounding erratically in his chest. He couldn’t believe Dean had put him on the spot like this...though he supposed it was payback, a playful retaliation he should’ve expected. Clearly this man would never stop finding ways to drive him crazy—in the best and worst ways. He coughed quietly, his throat feeling dry.

“Umm,” he mumbled into the microphone. He swiped through his phone, scrolling through his Google Docs app. “Well, I guess I might have something I could read…”

The patrons hooted and hollered again, most of them likely more drunk than excited to experience Castiel’s creative writing. Still, he thanked them, pointedly avoiding Dean’s gaze below. If he risked looking down, he might lose his nerve.
“I should mention that I write creative nonfiction, which some people don’t find exciting, but I do, and that’s all that matters.” There were a few chuckles in the crowd. “For those of you who don’t know, creative nonfiction is much more than autobiography. The events are entirely true, but borrows the craft associated with fiction and applies it to nonfiction, allowing for more creativity and poetic license—”

“Just read it already!” someone shouted in the back. Dean turned and glared at the man in irritation.

“Apolologies.” Castel cleared his throat, steadying himself. “Um, okay. Here goes. This is the draft of a flash essay I wrote earlier this week.” He took a deep breath and read:

In the spring of 1996, my mother brought home a box.
Not just any box.

“It’s langstroth,” she said proudly.

At age eleven, this meant very little to me. I eyed the box with indifference, fighting the urge to shrug. The box was newly assembled from slabs of sugar pine, the smell of fresh wood sharp and sweet, distinct as a Christmas tree. The box had an inner cover board, a bottom board and entrance, and most peculiarly, vertically hanging frames. Mother demonstrated how they slid in and out of their hinges, and I watched, genuinely interested in the contraption by now.

Before her arrival I had been sitting on the porch swing, a fantasy novel in my lap, happily alone. I would have much preferred to stay there, between the pages of my book. Lately, for reasons I was still too young to understand, my fantasy world was becoming my only world. And I liked it that way.

I tucked the paperback into my pocket, hoping Mother didn’t notice. She didn’t like when I read, especially fantasy or supernatural stories. What would happen if I read something that challenged my upbringing, uprooted my mother’s overzealous religious beliefs?

I walked down the porch steps to join her on the lawn. It was unusually warm for spring, but then again, growing up in middle Tennessee had prepared me for seasons like this. By the time summer rolled around, my scrawny arms and legs would be tan and sunkissed.

“What is it?” My voice hadn’t started to drop yet, not like the other boys in my class. I would feel self-conscious about it all year, as embarrassed by it as all the awkward moments I’d have in the boy’s locker room at school. All the involuntary erections I couldn’t explain.

“Castiel.” Mother used that crisp, clarifying voice, the one that implied I should pay attention and abandon whatever daydream I was having. A tone she loved to use. A tone I loved to hate.

“This is a beehive.”

“A beehive?” I repeated, a question in my voice.

“A beehive.” Her voice was impatient now. “Here—grab this end. And roll up your sleeves. We have work to do.”

Much to my disappointment, setting up the beehive took all weekend. I never spent this much time with my mother, not if I could help it. By now I was at the age where I realized I had little in common with her, but was still young enough to blame myself for that. She had an office job and
wore business suits constantly, usually in shades of gray, and kept her dark brown hair in a tight ponytail. She was a leader in our southern baptist church—or rather—as much as she was allowed to be, as a woman in the faith.

I was endlessly curious about my mother’s history. I knew she had lived a salacious life once, simply from snooping in the attic and reading the letters written in her yearbook. But I would never know that side of my mother, not really. Those secrets became part of her “testimony”, spoken of only in the vaguest of terms. Her approach to life now was orderly, disciplined, even merciless if necessary.

I know now we had much more in common than I initially thought.

The realization terrifies me.

There was a lot of gear associated with beekeeping. Nickel Springs, population eighty-three, was too small and rural to sell any of the required accessories. A trip to Nashville was necessary and the list was long. Eventually we came home with two suits, complete with hoods and gloves, a smoker, and a hive tool—a mini pry bar I would learn to use well.

The nuc came a few days later, a box filled with three pounds of worker bees—nearly ten thousand in total—with one inseminated queen tucked inside a cage. When Mother wasn’t around, I took to calling her Lucifer, the fallen angel our pastor said was imprisoned in the pits of hell. It seemed to me they lived parallel lives somehow—the queen and her colony, hundreds of drones buzzing around her, everyone wanting her but no one understanding her; and Lucifer, rebellious in ways I could only dream of. Powerful but utterly alone.

We harvested honey each fall. The first batch you’re supposed to leave, in order for the bees to self-sustain, but once we started tasting it we couldn’t seem to stop. We scooped out honeycombs with clumsy, gloved fingers, eating raw sugar and wax together, the saccharine sticky, tongues clicking against the palate of our mouths. We tasted that first harvest and giggled, reaching for more. It was one of the only times Mother and I experienced true joy together.

“Miracles, really,” she whispered to herself later that night. She was hunched over her Bible, deep in thought. I was trying to escape to my bedroom, preoccupied by the novel I was currently reading.

“What’s that?” I asked, though I didn’t want to know the answer.

She looked up at me, as if the answer was obvious. “Bees,” she said, and she glanced down again, returning to her scripture. In my own way, I agreed with her. Bees, honey, harvest. It was the only common ground we ever found.

Seven years later I left home and never returned. I’ve dreamed about bees ever since. Usually in the dream, I’m tending to the hive when a bee infiltrates my suit, nesting itself into the folds of my clothes. Whenever I start moving, the bee flies around desperately, trapped and scared. Honeybees are very docile, only attacking as a last resort. But inevitably it stings me. Ignoring the burn, the discomfort of the puncture mark, I hold the dead bee in my palm. It’s a fact every beekeeper knows well. Once a honey bee stings, it dies.

I wake up from this dream and feel like weeping. I wonder—am I the queen, the fallen angel, the demon my mother would believe me to be? Or am I still the honeybee, the silent worker, the soldier who follows orders even to my death?

At thirty-three years old all I know is this. I have lived both in the cage and the hive. I am a gay man who grew up in the South, who left home too young, who’s never truly had a home.
Cas turned off his phone, fumbling with the lock button. He sighed, finally daring to look up. The bar had grown immensely quiet, an awed hush sweeping the Roadhouse patrons. He spotted at least one woman in a booth, crying, and he gulped nervously. His writing had been a real mood-killer, obviously, but what choice did he have? He had a difficult upbringing and that’s what he wrote about. He didn’t write thrilling, supernatural drama like Dean. Speaking of...

Dean had been staring at him relentlessly, not only during the reading but after, as Castiel scrambled to return the microphone to its holder. Castiel finally risked looking down, meeting eyes with him again, and he nearly gasped. There was a new sort of admiration in Dean’s expression, full of so much—dare he even think it, love. Castiel found it overwhelming, suddenly unable to breathe. He forced himself to look away, scanning the rest of the crowd for their reaction to his reading.

That’s when he saw her.

It was only a flash: brown hair in an uncomfortably tight ponytail, a charcoal gray suit, a disapproving frown on her face. Naomi. It was his mother, exactly as she had looked in 1996. But that was impossible. She was dead. Right? The funeral details had been printed in the paper. Castiel had the announcement in his apartment, old worn newspaper folded into a photo album. No, no, no. It wasn’t her. She couldn’t hurt him anymore. Hurt him. The memories came flooding back. She had hurt him when she found out about Raphael, when she read his diary and knew he was gay, and threw him to the ground and hovered on him, belt in hand, swinging and swinging, punishing him for something he couldn’t control, and he was too shocked to fight back, too ashamed to admit that he loved his mother despite her shortcomings, despite her abuse, but this was impossible, she couldn’t be standing right in front of him—

He didn’t realize he had run off stage until he heard Dean calling his name, worry in his voice. But Castiel kept running, his head swimming and dizzy, like trying to hear while your head was underwater. He walked towards his mother but her face was all wrong—nose too thin, eyes dark brown. This wasn’t his mother, just a woman who strongly resembled her. A woman who was now staring back at Castiel in confusion.

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself say. The words were involuntary, as if he had no control over them. “I...I thought you were someone else.”

And then a wave of nausea overcame him, a shaky uneasy traveling through his body, accompanied by sudden frustration and rage. He hadn’t seen his mother for fifteen years. She had been been dead for five. Yet even the thought of her presence could still affect him this way. He hated how powerless he felt. He hated her, he hated this town, he hated this state. The only thing he didn’t hate, the only thing he just might love...no. Dean didn’t deserve this kind of baggage. He had barely taken one step out of the closet, and now Castiel was going to overload him with his childhood trauma? How was that fair to Dean?

He searched for the exit and ran towards it, throwing the door open and sliding his trench coat on. Then he vanished from sight.

***

Dean left the Roadhouse and drove around the block, searching for a man in a trench coat walking away on foot. After twenty minutes with no luck—it seemed Cas was surprisingly stealthy when he wanted to be—he drove to Cas’ bed and breakfast, pushing his foot on the pedal, running a red light
or two. He didn’t know what had happened to Cas, what had made him freak-out so badly. Though, based on how similar that woman looked to his mother—or at least, Cas’ description of her—Dean could make an educated guess.

“Fuck,” he mumbled to himself, slamming his palm against the steering wheel. This was all his fault. He had pressured Cas into reading on stage, and while it had been amazing, and he had no fucking clue Cas could write like that, his insistence had opened up all kinds of old wounds…

He could only pray that Cas was in bed, sleeping it off. He gripped the steering wheel tight, imagining all the other scenarios. No, no, no fucking way. Cas would be okay. He had to be.

But he wasn’t. Asleep in his bed, that was. The night clerk had opened his door—partly from Dean’s hysterical pleas, but mostly, because he had called Donna and she had vouched for him. But apart from his laptop on the desk, and the familiar array of clothes hanging in the closet, the room was empty.

Where the hell was Cas?

He drove all around town, scanning grocery store parking lots and empty park benches, eyes narrowed. He even when back to the Roadhouse, wondering if his initial search around the building had been too sloppy. Most of his friends were still inside, though it was nearing midnight at this point, and they would be leaving soon. While everyone was concerned for Cas, none of this friends shared or understood Dean’s panic, not even Sam.

“He’s a grown man, Dean,” Sam said, not for the first time, and Dean scowled at him. “Look.” Sam’s tone of voice changed, clearly trying to be helpful. “If Cas is upset, he might wanna talk it out, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean replied flatly, not understanding his point. Sam sighed and rolled his eyes.

“He probably wants to talk to you, dummy. You’re his closest friend here. If you guys are still just friends, that is…”

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, avoiding Sam’s gaze. “So not the fucking time, Sammy.”

“Yeah, you’re right, my bad,” he said, frowning sympathetically.

“But if Cas wants to talk, why hasn’t he answered my calls? Or texts?”

Sam shrugged helplessly. “All I’m saying is—check the farm. Okay?”

Dean nodded, feeling a renewed sense of hope. The farm was about four miles from town, but Cas was in great shape, always biking and running in his free time. It was possible he had made it there in thirty or forty minutes, an hour tops, and had just been waiting for Dean to come home…

He checked inside the house first—Castiel knew where they kept the spare key—then the barn, then every inch of the property. Eventually Dean’s shed was the last place left unexamined, and the epiphany hit Dean square in the chest. Of course. That was their place. It was exactly where Castiel would go.

Dean ran up the hill, out of breath by the time he swung the door open. Cas was sitting on the floor, in the dark, arms wrapped around his knees.

“Cas…” Dean went to him, crouching down low, placing his hands on Castiel’s shoulders. “Cas, look at me.”
“I can’t,” Castiel mumbled, staring down into his lap. “I-I’m too embarrassed.”

Dean put a hand under his chin, lifting it slowly until their eyes met. Castiel’s eyes were wide and searching, full of so much apprehension that it made Dean’s heart ache.

“Don’t be,” he said firmly. “I mean it, okay? There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Before he could consider the decision too closely, he leaned against the wall and pulled Castiel to him in one fluid motion. Cas buried his face into the collar of Dean’s flannel and Dean rubbed soft soothing circles against his back. They stayed like that for several minutes, just breathing deeply and holding each other, Dean savoring the touch after so many weeks of pent-up tension.

“I almost left,” Castiel whispered, and Dean’s arms stiffened around him. “I meant to go back to my room. To pack my suitcase and leave. But I couldn’t.”

Dean felt his heartbeat quicken, his breathing shallow. “Why didn’t you?”

“When I thought about leaving you again...I couldn’t.” Dean could feel Castiel exhale, the airflow tickling Dean’s neck. Dean’s hands gripped Cas’ wrist, rubbing his thumb absently, his heartbeat pulsing loudly in his ears.

“Cas,” he whispered. “Fuck, I...I’m about to kiss the hell out of you, okay? And if that’s not something you’re interested in, now would be the time to tell me.”

He waited one second, then two, and when Cas didn’t pull away, he gripped his chin with both hands, bringing their lips an inch apart.

“Dean…” There was so much longing, so much heat, in Castiel’s low rumble of a voice, that Dean could no longer see, could no longer hear. All he felt was the brush of lips against his, an overwhelming sensation in the pit of his stomach. There were hands grasping his neck and back, Castiel’s long fingers touching every uncovered inch of skin, and before Dean knew it he was sitting in Castiel’s lap, being kissed within an inch of his life.

Castiel was a strong and assertive kisser, surprise surprise, and he took control, sucking on Dean’s lower lip sensually and running his hands inside Dean’s shirt. Not one to be outdone, especially when it came to kissing, Dean allowed a few closed-mouth kisses to pass before he flicked his tongue teasingly into Castiel’s mouth. The response was immediate—Cas’ grip tightened, hands roaming down to his thighs, and Dean opened his mouth instinctively, deepening the kiss. He lost all of sense of time then, the world revolving around Castiel’s lips and hands and body, and within minutes he was writhing on Castiel’s lap, panting. Castiel left wet, bruising kisses on his neck, the kind that would undoubtedly turn into hickeys, and he moaned when Castiel nipped his ear, tugging playfully with his teeth.

“Jesus fuck, Cas,” Dean sighed. He was still straddling Castiel’s lap and rutting his painfully hard erection against the man beneath him, desperate for relief.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for a very long time,” Castiel answered, kissing his neck again, voice so low he practically growled. Dean felt his dick twitch impatiently in his jeans.

He ran his fingers through Cas’ hair, bringing their foreheads together. “Sam and Jess will be home any minute, but…’” He took a deep breath. “We could go to your room?”

“We...we don’t have to move too fast, Dean. I know this is new for you.” Castiel’s tone was cautious, but his body told a different story. Dean could feel his growing erection, and was rubbing it intentionally against his thigh.
Dean considered Castiel’s words. Strangely enough, he hadn’t been focusing on the fact that he had kissed a man for the first time, but rather, he had kissed Cas. Cas, who he wanted desperately, more and more every day. He leaned forward and kissed him slowly, with less heat but more emotion, wanting to convey everything he hadn’t yet said. When he pulled away, Castiel was breathless, hands grasping at Dean’s waist.

“I want you,” Dean breathed, because he couldn’t say the other thing that was on the tip of his tongue…

Castiel’s pupils were dilated, his forehead sweating, his hands searching for more of Dean to hold. “How fast can we be there?”

Chapter End Notes

Y’all, the smut is coming. Holy mother of Chuck. I am so damn excited.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thought I'd give a gift to those of you who love smut as much as I do: this story's first official smutty chapter!! One whole day early, too!

Of course, there will be fluff and plot and other things. But right now, let's get these two gorgeous idiots together, shall we?

Castiel’s hand was on the inside of Dean’s thigh, his mouth trailing soft kisses on his neck. Dean squeezed the steering wheel hard, struggling to keep his eyes on the road.

“Jesus Cas, you’re making it real hard to concentrate,” he said, teeth clenched as Castiel’s hand moved further up on his thigh.

Castiel continued pecking lovingly, occasionally tossing in a heated, bruising kiss. By the tension in his shoulders, Castiel suspected the unpredictability was keeping Dean on-edge. Good… He got a thrill from ruffling Dean’s feathers.

“Isn’t that the point?” Cas answered, unable to prevent himself from grinning. Erections were straining both of their jeans by now, but Castiel was adamant about not touching either of them, going so far as swatting Dean’s hand away earlier. His first time with Dean he wanted to worship his body, lay him out on the bed and take his time, watch him slowly come undone.

But the more attention Castiel showed him, the faster Dean drove, softly cursing Castiel and begging for more. He knew these back-roads well, having grown up here, so Castiel didn’t worry about distracting him too much. It was strange—Castiel felt reckless and irresponsible around Dean, as if he was struggling not to lose control, to give into his desire. But at the same time, Dean made him feel safe and protected. It was a peculiar combination that made Castiel realize his feelings had grown stronger with just a handful of kisses.

However, when they turned onto the correct street, the B&B finally in sight, a realization hit him.

“Park a street over,” he instructed, pointing to a side street he knew had a parking lot. “We should walk the rest of the way.”

Dean looked at him, eyes squinting. “Why’s that?”

“Your car, everyone in town knows it,” Castiel said reasonably. “Do you really want to explain to Donna and Doug why you stayed overnight?” He hated to even consider it, especially after being out for so many years, but Dean was still closeted. Castiel wanted to be sensitive of that fact.

Unfortunately, Dean’s raised eyebrows and generally flabbergasted expression told Castiel he had interpreted something wrong. “Not that you have to stay the night. Obviously. Just if you’re tired, and need a place to crash, but it’s not a long drive back, so I totally understand if you want to head home—”

Dean slammed the brakes suddenly, stopping in the middle of the street. He wrapped his hands around Castiel’s neck, drawing him close and kissing him lightly, just enough to reassure him. Then
he whispered, “I appreciate the thoughtfulness, okay? But I don’t want to start this off with secrets. I’m gonna park at the B&B, and fuck what anyone else thinks.” He paused for a second, and Castiel let the words sink in, flooded with relief. “Also, if you think I’m not gonna stick around to take you out to breakfast in the morning, then you clearly don’t know how much I fucking love breakfast food.”

Castiel smiled widely, and Dean squeezed his hand and pulled the Impala into the parking lot. They rushed out of the car and gravitated towards each other as they walked, hands and arms brushing, a nervous energy flowing between them. The lobby was quiet when they entered; the night attendant was behind the desk, and nodded at Dean. Castiel looked between them, an amused question on his face.

“I was here about two hours ago,” Dean admitted, cheeks flushing. “I, uh, made the night guy open up your room. Pretty sure he thought I was a nut job, but whatever.”

When they walked up the staircase and out of sight, Castiel put his hand on Dean’s waist. It still felt forbidden, touching him in this way, even with no one looking. His heart began to race. “I’m sorry I worried you,” he said genuinely, but Dean shook his head.

“It’s fine, Cas. But we are gonna talk about it later, okay? About what happened and what is...happening. I’m not asking for a chick flick moment here, but—”

“We should talk,” Cas agreed neutrally, opening up his room with the antique key. The room was mostly dark, the streetlight from the opened curtains painting the walls in an orange glow. As soon as the door latched, Castiel put his hands on Dean’s shoulders and shoved him against the wall. “But we’ll talk later,” he growled, “much, much later.”

Dean inhaled sharply. “Jesus, Cas. Your voice is so fucking sexy.”

“Maybe I should keep talking, then,” Castiel grumbled in Dean’s ear, making his voice purposefully low. “Dean, I’m going to take your clothes off now.” Dean shuddered beneath him and Castiel kissed his jaw roughly, marking him with kisses while his hand slipped around Dean’s flannel, pushing it off and letting it drop to the floor. He gripped the thin material of Dean’s undershirt, pausing his ministrations briefly as he raised the shirt up and over Dean’s head. And then, finally, his hands were touching bare skin. The defined muscle of Dean’s chest was unbearable and stunning, more of a turn-on than Castiel ever imagined.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said breathlessly, pleased that he no longer had to keep such thoughts to himself. Dean pulled him in for a crushing kiss, sucking unexpectedly hard on Castiel’s lower lip. He instinctively moaned in response, wrapping his hands around Dean’s bare waist and leading him to the bed. Dean scooted to the center of the bed, eyes wide with lust, erection looking painful his jeans, and Castiel nearly gasped at the sight. How many times had he imagined, had he dreamed of, this exact scenario? What had he done to possibly deserve this?

“You’re gorgeous,” he said breathlessly, pleased that he no longer had to keep such thoughts to himself. Dean pulled him in for a crushing kiss, sucking unexpectedly hard on Castiel’s lower lip. He instinctively moaned in response, wrapping his hands around Dean’s bare waist and leading him to the bed. Dean scooted to the center of the bed, eyes wide with lust, erection looking painful his jeans, and Castiel nearly gasped at the sight. How many times had he imagined, had he dreamed of, this exact scenario? What had he done to possibly deserve this?

“Let me see you,” Dean implored, eyes raking over Castiel, palming himself against his zipper. Castiel took his time, slipping off the trench coat first, then the black button-up and undershirt, then his jeans, maintaining eye contact the whole time. Dean rutted desperately against his jeans until Castiel stood in front of him, only in his boxers, both of them breathing heavily and staring at each other. Noticing the wild look in Dean’s eyes, Castiel fought the urge to jack himself off right then...but knew it would be even better if he waited.

He approached the bed slowly, teasingly, until he finally reached Dean’s outstretched arms. The heat between them was immediate. They shared a searing kiss, slow and carnal, tongues touching, teeth grazing lips. Dean panted and rubbed Castiel’s back, his chest, painstaking in his touch, light
caresses that gave Castiel goosebumps. There were so many sensations happening at once—erotic and heavy kisses, light and teasing touches, and the unpredictability of it all made Castiel feel dizzy and aroused. He needed Dean’s cock in-hand, right now.

His hands went to the front button on Dean’s jeans, but hands stopped him. He looked into Dean’s eyes and saw desire, incredible desire, but slight hesitation as well. As excruciating as it was, Castiel withdrew, lips pursed with concern. Dean wouldn’t be the first person to get nervous during their first “gay” experience. I should’ve known better than to move too quickly.

“I’m sorry,” he said earnestly. “I got carried away, and didn’t mean to move too fast—”

“No, no, fuck no.” Dean put his hands on Castiel’s neck, trying to comfort him. “I want this with you. It’s honestly kinda ridiculous how much I want this.”

“Then...what’s wrong?” Dean dropped his hands and Castiel found them in the air, entwining their fingers together.

“I, uh, just never showed anyone this before. And it’s totally cool if you’re not into it, we can skip right over it, but...” He took Castiel’s hand and slipped it under the waistband of his jeans and boxers. The texture was slightly scratchy, likely sheer, and Castiel couldn’t believe his discovery in Dean’s laundry basket had momentarily slipped his mind.

“You’re wearing panties,” he breathed, and Dean nodded below him, waiting for his reaction. “Can I see them?”

Dean looked vulnerable and raw, but still lifted his hips and shimmied his pants down to the ankles. Castiel finished the job, gently tugging the pants down and off, dropping them on the side of the bed. When he looked down at Dean, he could no longer breathe.

The panties were black lace with embroidered white flowers on the side, boyshorts slung low on his hips. Dean’s dick was compressed inside the fabric, the outline of his erection huge and heavy and absolutely obscene, and Castiel put his mouth against it without a moment’s warning. Dean moaned from the shock of it, thrashing and gripping the bedspread as if hanging on for dear life.

Castiel lavished him with open-mouth kisses, his tongue tracing Dean’s cock along the fabric. The lace was so delicate that Castiel could taste Dean’s precome soaking through, could feel the push of his dick against his tongue. It made a burning coil twist inside Castiel’s stomach, and for the second time tonight, he had to resist the urge to jack himself off right that very second.

“So sexy for me, Dean.” He reached his hand inside and wrapped a hand around Dean’s dick, stroking him slowly, running a finger over the head.

“Jesus fuck...” Dean’s voice was rough and wrecked and Castiel pumped him faster, watching Dean’s reaction and getting even more turned on by it. “Please don’t stop.”

“Don’t worry. I have better plans for you...” A few seconds later he freed Dean’s dick from the panties, though kept them on otherwise, and brought his mouth down. He licked the underside of Dean’s dick, then took the head into his mouth and sucked. Dean cried out in surprise. “Cas, holy shit, Cas...” Castiel steadied himself and took the entire length of Dean’s dick into his mouth, moaning when it hit the back of his throat, then looked up at Dean as he bobbed up and down. Dean was staring down with debauched, hooded eyes, reaching his hands into Castiel’s hair and pulling tightly. “So good, oh god, Cas, so good...”

Purely on instinct, Castiel reached forward and put a finger in Dean’s mouth, who sucked it dutifully,
twirling his tongue around Castiel’s fingertip. He reached underneath and massaged Dean’s ass under the panties, savoring the tightness, before fingering along Dean’s crack and slipping the tip and knuckle of his wet finger into Dean’s hole. Dean moaned and bucked his hips while Castiel swallowed around his dick, everything between them hot and hard and frantic, and then Dean was shouting, “Gonna come, Cas, oh fuck, oh fuck—” and Castiel’s mouth was suddenly full and dripping. He gulped down, milking Dean’s dick and swirling his tongue for any remaining drops, and Dean trembled at the overstimulation. Finally, Castiel pulled off and landed beside Dean in bed, reaching for his hand and entwining their fingers.

Dean breathed heavily, eyes closed, before turning to Castiel and staring. It had been a long time since Castiel had been within a newbie, and he found himself feeling nervous about Dean’s reaction.

‘Was...that okay?’ he whispered.

Dean looked at him, expression incredulous. “Uhh, if by ‘okay’ you mean, ‘best blowjob of my fucking life’ then yeah, it was ‘okay.’”

Castiel grinned, reaching his free hand to Dean’s cheek. “Even when I put my finger, you know…”

“That was unexpected, but freaking awesome,” Dean answered, face radiant in the afterglow. He reached a hand towards Castiel’s boxers, stretching the elastic waistband and reaching inside.

Castiel’s breath hitched. “Dean, you don’t have to—”

“No, please.” He kissed Castiel gently, his lips and then his jaw. “I wanna feel you so damn bad. Lube?”

“Nightstand,” Castiel answered, voice breaking. Dean turned away and started rummaging, returning to Castiel a moment later and rubbing his generously lubed hand up and down the shaft. Castiel closed his eyes and leaned into the bed, knowing he wouldn’t last long, simply because it was Dean who was touching him. Dean, who he had wanted badly for so long. His wrist was quick and practiced, giving long and sensual strokes, paying particular attention to the head before gradually increasing speed along the shaft. Castiel gripped his shoulder tightly. “Oh, Dean, just like that…”

“So fucking hot, Cas, so gorgeous like this.” Dean’s other hand cradled Castiel’s balls, and he gasped out.

“So close—”

Dean pumped his cock faster and faster, moaning at the sight and telling Cas over and over how good he looked, and Castiel closed his eyes, forcing himself to feel everything, to ride the pleasure as long as he could, and then he was shouting Dean’s name and seeing white hot sparks and—

He came over Dean’s fist with a shudder, panting hard, too overcome to open his eyes. Dean dropped his hand and kissed Castiel’s forehead before heading to the bathroom, coming back with his hands freshly washed and a warm washcloth to clean Cas with.

“I should be the one doing this,” Castiel mumbled, with a smile. “You’re my guest, after all.”

“I like taking care of people,” Dean said, then added, softly, “I like taking care of you.”

Castiel thought of all the dinners Dean had made him lately, all the times Dean had held doors open for him or poured him a cup of coffee without asking, and felt a rush of emotion. He remembered months ago, when Anna told him Dean was a lady killer, practically a carousel of random hookups. But maybe that was no longer the case.
“Come here,” Castiel whispered, and they folded down the blankets and sheets, sliding underneath the cool cotton together. They faced each other, hands on hips, legs tangled together. They kissed slowly, gently, until they fell asleep.

***

The first thing Dean noticed when he woke up was the empty bed. His eyes were still closed, hand outstretched, searching blindly for Cas. Cas. Holy shit, they had hooked up last night! Cas had given him the best blowjob of his life! Also, he apparently found it super sexy that Dean wore panties! What the actual fuck kind of dream was Dean having? Had any of it actually happened?

His eyes flew open. He was in Cas’ room, that was a good sign. He examined his surroundings—yep, he was naked under the covers, and his black lace panties and the rest of his clothes were abandoned on the floor. Check, check, check. Maybe last night hadn’t been a dream. But if Dean wasn’t dreaming, then where was Cas?

As if on cue, the door from the hallway opened and there he was, still shirtless, a pair of low-hanging sweatpants on his hips. Dean was torn between staring his face, those blue eyes that were so goddamn piercing, and the mouth-watering sight of his bare torso. He locked the door behind him, hooked his phone up to the charger, then slid his sweatpants off. He was naked. Again.

Dean gulped, unable to look away. Last night they had held each other in the dark, which was super-sexy at the time, ‘cause he never really knew where Cas’ hands or mouth were, and the anticipation was incredible. But now, sunlight streaming in through the curtains, he had the opportunity to examine Cas fully…

That Greek god metaphor he made, the first time he ever saw Cas? It sure as hell wasn’t wrong.

“So I wasn’t dreaming,” Dean blurted out, and Castiel smiled, looking surprised by the compliment. He slid back under the covers, wrapping his arms around Dean’s waist, their noses touching.

“Is this something you’ve dreamed about?” he asked, his voice reverberating so deeply, Dean could practically feel it against his chest. His dick perked up then—at the question, at the sound of Cas’ voice, at the memory of everything they had done last night.

“Maybe,” he said sheepishly, embarrassed that this was the first honest conversation they were going to have as a couple. Or a two-week, super-intense sexual awakening. Whatever. Though the idea of this being a fleeting thing made Dean’s stomach flip.

Cas leaned forward, leaving light kisses all over his face. “Tell me about it,” he said.

“The dream?” he asked, and Castiel nodded.

“Uhh...we were in the shed. We were having a fight about the book, of course.” He felt his cheeks turn red, two seconds from backing out of this confession. But then Castiel started to kiss his neck, no longer soft and sweet but forcefully, sucking hard and grazing Dean’s skin with his teeth. Dean was distracted by the sensention and found the words pouring out him.

“I came onto you, but you took some convincing—”

“That’s how we know it was dream,” Cas mused. He was now straddling Dean, their cocks almost aligned, his lips brushing Dean’s collar bones. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I saw you.”
Dean blushed at the statement, running his hands through Cas’ hair. “Eventually I talked you into it, though. Dream-Dean is charming as fuck. And after we got to the taking pants off portion of the evening, you saw my panties and—ah—Cas…” Castiel had taken his nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around, biting lightly.

“Go on,” Castiel said, looking up with a mischievous expression.

“I don’t know who’s more distracting,” Dean mumbled, “Dream-Cas or Real-Cas.”

“I’m doing my best to live up to my dream persona,” Castiel said friskily, licking Dean’s nipple with a flat tongue. “Tell me about your panties.”

“They were red satin,” Dean breathed. Cas had traveled down to his hips and thighs, lavishing him with wet kisses. Dean focused on breathing.

“Is this a pair you have already?” Castiel asked conversationally, as if he weren’t slowly taking Dean apart inch by fucking inch.

“N-no.” Castiel’s mouth was dangerously close to Dean’s dick, and he was so totally on-board for a repeat of last night.

“We’ll have to fix that.” Without warning, he began licking Dean’s cock, from every available angle, slow and merciless. Dean moaned instinctively, cock so hard from Castiel’s attention and the dirty dream talk, he was practically busting.

“What happened next?” Castiel’s eyes were on him, wide and full of lust, waiting for Dean to continue.

“You, uh...liked them,” Dean said lamely, too distracted by the presence of Cas near his dick to string words together.

“I’m gonna need more details.” Castiel kissed the inside of Dean’s thighs lightly, purposefully avoiding his cock. “You do want to motivate me, don’t you?”

Dean looked at him incredulously. “Seriously?”

“You’re a writer,” he responded, smiling, “paint me a picture, Dean.”

Dean leaned into the pillow, trying to form coherent thoughts. “You’re a dick,” he mumbled, though his tone was playful. So far, he loved the game they were playing, however unexpected it was. Castiel was already the sexiest, most surprising person he had ever slept with. The thought now of having sex with anyone else not only felt boring...it felt wrong.

Castiel sat up, pointing at Dean’s nude lower half and eyeing his erect cock. “Present company included?”

“Jesus, that was terrible,” Dean said, chuckling. He wanted to kiss Castiel right then, the adorable dork that he was, but he also really wanted some friction against his erection...so he returned to the game. “Ready for more?”

“Please,” Castiel said, eyes turning dark.

“You-you started mouthing at the panties—big, sloppy kisses. Then you used your tongue to trace the outline of my dick.”
He had never spoken this kind of dirty talk out loud before, and felt a little foolish doing so...that was, until Castiel moved his lips from Dean’s thigh, then swallowed him down suddenly, stroking Dean’s cock up and down in rhythm with his mouth. Dean fought the urge to move, to moan, to shout.

“Then you...you put your hand on my cock and jacked me off.” Castiel’s mouth pulled away with a pop, hand stroking Dean’s length.

“How did it feel?”

“Amazing,” Dean breathed. He closed his eyes, trying to remember the exact details, but all he felt was Cas’ hands on him right fucking now, no dream required. “Your fingers were long and strong and I was so close to coming, shouting your name, but then I woke up with the biggest pair of fucking blue balls.”

“Let’s remedy that ending,” Cas said suggestively, leaning his head down to take Dean into his mouth again, but Dean pulled gently as his neck.

“No, I-I wanna come with you,” he said, gasping. “Come here.”

Castiel’s face softened, clearly not predicting this change of events. But he went willing, wrapping his arms around Dean, who kissed him softly. They stayed like that for a while, the urgency of orgasm momentarily abandoned in the sweetness of the moment, until their erections naturally aligned and holy fucking shit Dean needed to feel that again.

They rutted against each other frantically, kisses now erratic and desperate, tongues searching each other’s mouths while they gasped at the contact between their cocks. Castiel broke the kiss, panting heavily and licking Dean’s neck, breathing lightly over the skin and making Dean tremble. He was already so close, but he refused to come without touching Castiel’s cock in the daylight, long and pink and shiny with precome. He started with slow strokes and looked up at Castiel’s face, enjoying the sight, his gorgeous eyes overtaken with desire. Castiel reached down for Dean and then they were both stroking one another, matching speed and rhythm, looking into each other’s eyes. Dean leaned up and kissed whatever part of Cas was in his reach—chin, neck, lips. He could never seem to get enough.

Dean came first, though he supposed that was expected, given Cas’ enticing little dirty-talk tease. Castiel came soon after, both of them dropping their load on Dean’s stomach, their come mixing together. Castiel breath was still labored, not at all recovered from his recent orgasm, when Dean tipped a finger into their come and sucked it obscenely off his finger, staring at Cas all the while.

Castiel drew in breath. “Fuck, Dean,” he said, unable to look away. For some reason, Dean loved it when Cas used profanity. It felt like some kind of victory. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“I just wanted to know what it tasted like,” Dean said, trying to sound innocent, but he removed his finger slowly, brushing his lower lip and biting seductively. Hey, he might be new at this whole, two-dicks situation, but he still knew a thing or two about sex.

Castiel fell into the bed, hands cupping Dean’s face. “Well, if you ever want to leave this room again, I suggest we curb your appetite another way.” He kissed his nose gently and said, “I believe I was promised breakfast?”

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Castiel had expected the morning-after to include some awkwardness—not only from personal
experience, but because Dean might be suppressing panic or regret. He certainly would not be the first, and Castiel wouldn’t have taken it personally. Well...at least he would have tried not to. Still, he was pleasantly surprised when they enjoyed a hot shower together, washing each other’s backs and laughing at the small size of the clawfoot, maintaining their natural ease and newfound intimacy all morning long. Dean put his jeans on from yesterday (tossing the stained panties, much to Castiel’s dismay) and borrowed a flannel from the closet. Dean easily made the checkered red pattern look ten times better—according to Castiel, anyways. They managed to make it through the lobby without running into Donna or Doug, something he was immensely thankful for. Even though Dean claimed he didn’t care what his friends thought, Castiel knew firsthand how difficult the coming-out process could be.

Once they were in the Impala, Dean looking immeasurably content behind the wheel, they shared a kiss before heading into town. Dean wanted to take Castiel to his favorite local diner, explaining the whole way there that he rarely got to come here anymore since Sam was on another rabbit-food kick. Castiel listened to him speak about his family with interest, asking questions about Sam’s law practice and Jess’ enthusiasm for farming. Dean was full of stories, and was sharing a particularly embarrassing recollection of Sam’s fear of clowns as they exited the Impala and walked towards the diner door.

Castiel knew they would have to get back to work soon—not only Dean with his writing, but Castiel with his editing. His inbox was flooded with emails from Anna, who was keeping him up to speed on all her latest encounters with Zachariah, a quantity that seemed endless. Their associate publisher was getting worse by the day, it seemed, and Castiel was a little relieved he had been absent in the office lately.

It was a cold morning, sun muted by gray clouds, and Castiel wished he had grabbed his trenchcoat before leaving. Dean automatically walked closely beside him, shoulders and arms brushing. He opened the door and Dean smiled at him, squeezing gently on his wrist. He was surprised by how affectionate Dean was being, even when they were in public. It was certainly not the reaction he had been expecting, though he supposed Dean had spent the last six months coming to terms with his sexuality. Perhaps his official coming-out would be less dramatic than Castiel’s...one could only hope.

On the outside, the diner wasn’t very remarkable, with dingy white wallpaper and worn leather booths. But it felt charming in an unassuming way, which reminded him of Dean. He smiled, looking forward to a plate of greasy eggs and hashbrowns.

“It’s not much,” Dean mumbled, leaning close towards Castiel’s ear, hand casually on his back. “Not a lot of options in town, you know? But the best damn cup of coffee in the county, I swear.”

“Dean,” Castiel said, finding the man’s self-consciousness strangely adorable. “It’ll be great. I’m just happy to be here.” With you, he thought longingly.

Dean looked up, smiling, and Castiel couldn’t help but mirror his expression. The way they were touching, bodies turned in, staring at each other with grins plastered wide...was it obvious they had slept together the night before?

“Dean?” called a man, probably in his fifties, with short black hair and a goatee.

“Rufus?” Dean answered, sounding thrilled to see him. The man—Rufus, apparently—looked between the pair, eyes searching Castiel’s face with sudden recognition. How did this stranger know him? Castiel took an instinctual step away from Dean, thinking it was best to give him personal space, to allow him discretion in front of someone he knew. It had barely been one step, but Castiel’s movement was instantly noticed. A flicker of disappointment crossed Dean’s face, but it was so
quickly replaced with a smile (and subsequent handshake) for Rufus, that Castiel thought he might’ve dreamed it.

*Dean may not want space right now*, Castiel thought, *but he’ll thank me for it later*. After all, this was the man who had experienced months and months of writer’s block because of *this* very thing. There was little chance one night with Castiel would change all that.

It turned out that Rufus was a regular at the Roadhouse, and had been there last night for Dean and Castiel’s readings. He asked Dean questions about what happened next in his fourth book, unashamedly fishing for spoilers, but Dean held firm and didn’t give too much away. Castiel just observed the conversation, pleased to know that Dean had so many friends who read and enjoyed his work. He had a genuine support system here, and Castiel was thankful to see the benefits firsthand.

“And you,” Rufus said, turning his eyes on Castiel, “you’re damn brave, you know that?”

Castiel’s face flushed, uncomfortable with the attention being turned on him. “I just do what I can, like any other writer,” he mumbled.

“Well, what you wrote left me speechless, and Dean here knows that’s a miracle...cause I talk too damn much.” He clasped Dean’s shoulder and laughed, and Castiel smiled and thanked him. Even though he worked in publishing, Castiel never shared his own writing with anyone, apart from Anna and occasionally Chuck. Baring his soul in front of sixty strangers was not what he expected from this trip, but then, had anything gone the way Castiel imagined it would? Glancing at Dean, who was giving Rufus an exuberant *don’t be a stranger now*, his hair still wet from their earlier shower, Castiel knew what was happening now with Dean was far exceeding his imagination.

He also knew this: going back to his empty, one-bedroom apartment in New York without Dean...it would, without a doubt, be the worst heartbreak of his life. He forced the thought from his mind.

They decided on a corner booth, ordering coffee to start. After a few minutes of silence Dean eyed him curiously. “Whatcha thinking ‘bout, Cas?”

Castiel looked away from his menu. “The oatmeal here—think it’s instant?”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, dude, probably. I’d get the pancakes instead.”

Silence stretched on again and Castiel felt himself grow uncomfortable...which was strange, considering they sat in a shed together practically every day and worked, side by side, without speaking. But this was different, Castiel supposed, because they had come here to talk. Despite their active evening...and morning...activities, there were a variety of things between them still left unspoken. Castiel wished he could reach across the table, close the distance between them and hold Dean’s hand. But they were in public now and things were different. In a small town like this, they had to be.

He envisioned how much better the circumstances would be, were they in New York right now. Though Castiel had certainly experienced some harassment in the city, it was nothing compared to a small southern town like this. In the city he would’ve been bold enough to reach for Dean’s hand, offer him a small smile, maybe even peck him on the lips on a time or two…

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking about oatmeal again,” Dean said dryly. Castiel was so startled from his thoughts, he said the first thing that came to mind.

“I was thinking about New York,” he said.

Dean looked at him thoughtfully, if not a little disappointed. “Missing home?”
“Parts of it,” Castiel admitted, though he didn’t elaborate.

“Yeah, I...I get it. After hearing you read, I mean. Why you wouldn’t wanna hang around here long.” Dean stared down at the table and spoke quietly, as if saddened by this development.

“It has been challenging, at times.” The waitress poured their coffee and Castiel wrapped his hands around the mug, warmth coursing through him. She took their order and left again, winking at Dean in a way that Castiel tried not to feel jealous about.

“I didn’t expect for the reading to end that way,” he said, once they were alone again. Castiel had grieved for hours last night, crying and raging alone in the shed, undergoing a flood of emotions he had been suppressing for over a decade. But once Dean had arrived everything was better. Forgotten, at least for the moment, though not confronted. He knew there would be a reckoning eventually.

“I’m sorry I made you do it. I’m really, fucking sorry Cas. I was just messing around, but I never thought about what might come of it. The whole thing was freaking idiotic on my part. I can’t even tell you how much I regret doing that to you—”

“I don’t regret it,” Castiel interrupted firmly. To emphasize his point, he reached forward on the table, brushing hands with Dean. Dean stared at the simply touch, seeming to finally take a breath. “Everything that happened afterwards...made it worth it. Okay?”

Dean nodded slowly. Castiel withdrew his hand, fearful someone might spot them, but Dean followed the movement and sighed.

“If that’s true, Cas, then…” He leaned forward, face full of nerves. “Why do you keep pulling away from me?”

“I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Castiel answered, surprised Dean didn’t hadn’t surmised this already. He took his voice to a whisper. “You’re not out, Dean. I didn’t want to assume anything —”

“Dude, I know it comes from a good place, but seriously, stop.” Dean was speaking quickly, his tone exasperated, words coming out in a torrential rush. “Stop assuming what I want, okay? ’Cause to be honest, the only thing I want right now is you.”

The way he said, the tone and feeling behind it, it was obvious Dean didn’t just mean sex. He wanted more from Castiel, more of whatever was growing between them. Castiel could only gape at Dean, watching his expression grow panicked as the confession hung in the air, heavy between them. Castiel cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure, aware that they had been staring at each other for quite some time.

“Do you mean that?” he asked, trying to keep the hope out of his voice. While Dean was clearly fine with the new physical aspects of their relationship, there was still a possibility that he considered Castiel just a hook-up, someone passing through that he could explore his sexuality with. If that was what Dean wanted, Castiel was willing to put on a brave face and deal with the consequences later. Anything to be with Dean, even temporarily.

“Yeah,” Dean mumbled, not meeting Castiel’s eyes. “But, uh, listen...I know you’re only around for two more weeks, and you probably don’t want something this complicated, so if you wanna go back to being...uh, whatever we were before...”

“Now who’s assuming?” Castiel said, a breathless edge to his voice. Despite the cool weather
outside, and the drafty diner making the temperature drop, Castiel was sweating against his collar. The waitress dropped their plates off and smiled, but neither reached for their forks or even acknowledged her. Castiel was trying very hard to find the right words, to not mess this up. Dean was staring down at his untouched food.

“All those years we kept bees, there was one thing about them I never really understood,” Castiel said quietly.

“Why the worker bees are all women, while the dudes just buzz around, getting their rocks off?”

“Uh...no.” Castiel tilted his head, confused by the unexpected turn the conversation was taking.


“I know, just—let me say this.” Castiel took a deep breath, grasping the table. “I never understood how the queen could have so many lovers. I mean, thousands. Even back then I knew I would be like most birds, because they mate for life.”

“Cas...if the next words outta your mouth are ‘if I’m bird, you’re a bird’ I swear to fucking god—”

“All I’m saying is that I’m in this.” He reached his palm forward on the table, open and exposed. “If you’ll have me.”

Dean bit his lip, seeming to deliberate, and Castiel wondered if he had misread the whole situation. Still, Dean was staring at his open hand like it was an invitation, a metaphor. Maybe it was.

“I’ll do you one better,” he whispered. He pulled Castiel’s hands to him, knocking their plates together carelessly. Lips brushed Castiel’s knuckles, soft kisses pressed against his skin, and he gasped faintly at the contact. Dean looked into his eyes, unwavering and open and full of affection. Castiel thought of all the kisses they had exchanged in the last twelve hours—short and long, heated and gentle, all of them practically mind-blowing. But this kiss was, by far, the most meaningful.

Eventually they pulled away, both their stomachs rumbling.

“Well,” Dean said, clearing his throat and picking up his fork. “Now that that’s settled. I’m definitely stealing a bite of those pancakes.”
Chapter 9

Dean spent the next few days establishing a new routine with Castiel, including nightly sleepovers at the bed and breakfast, mornings and afternoons writing and editing in the shed (with the occasional make-out session, which Dean reckoned showed a good amount of constraint, considering his new boyfriend was hot as fucking hell) and evenings spent with Sam and Jess, playing games and watching movies. Despite all the work he was doing in frantic attempts to meet his manuscript deadline, this was the happiest Dean could ever remember being. He tried not to watch the calendar, to countdown how many days he had left with Cas before they became long-distance. Or...what, exactly? Just friends again? Strangers? The uncertainty of it all caused Dean to worry, though just privately, since moments without Cas were becoming few-and-far between. He tried not to get used to Cas’ constant company, his comfort and companionship. Everyone he cared about had a tendency to eventually leave him or move on with their lives. Odds were, Cas would one day do the same.

But most nights he successfully pushed those thoughts away, content to just exist in Castiel’s orbit. He fit into every part of Dean’s life flawlessly—a firm and discerning editor, a witty and reassuring friend, a breathtakingly insatiable lover. They still hadn’t gone all the way yet, partly because Cas wanted to make sure Dean didn’t feel rushed, but in all honesty, the culprit was Cas. And his hands. And his mouth. He gave such mind-blowing hand and blowjobs that Dean could never last long, not that that would be important if he bottomed. “You’ll probably want to top your first time, Dean,” Castiel advised, curled up together one night in bed. Dean wasn’t convinced, considering his most powerful orgasms had been the result of having one or two of Cas’ deft fingers doing amazing things to his nether regions. But whatever. Either way, they were still discussing the whole penetrative sex thing, and Dean was having at least two orgasms a day, so...nothing to complain about on that front. It was already the best sex of his life and they hadn’t done much.

On Wednesday night, after a long day of writing, Dean drove out to the grocery store. It was a rare occurrence to have Sam leave the office early, so Cas stayed behind to geek-out over Sam’s library, pointing out which volumes he already had first editions of. Dean rolled his eyes at them playfully, squeezed Cas’ shoulders and headed out to the Impala. It felt strange leaving Cas without a goodbye kiss, something they were used to doing now in private, but Sam still didn’t know they were dating. Dean hadn’t dropped the news simply from a lack of opportunity, since Jess or Cas seemed to be around every evening. But Dean knew his brother had been suspecting for a while. He only needed the chance to get him alone and share the good news.

He came back hauling tons of groceries, which Cas dutifully helped him carry in without asking, because apparently he was perfect in every fucking way. Outside the air was crisp, the trees gorgeous with foliage, and Dean started unpacking his ingredients for a big pot of chilli. Meanwhile, Sam changed his clothes and went outside to help Jess do some last minute farm chores. Dean felt guilty that they had lost their part-time help thanks to him and his irresistible ass (Cas never laughed whenever he made that joke). But Benny was a natural flirt, obviously, so Dean didn’t feel particularly special. More than anything, it seemed like he had a drinking problem, and Dean knew what that looked like. Hopefully he would get cleaned up soon.

Dean started dinner and hummed along to Metallica, Ride the Lightning spinning on his record player. Dean sang loudly (and badly) while he swung his hips in the air. After ten full minutes of this, Castiel’s deadpan expression dissolved and he finally chuckled at the spectacle, smiling so wide his gums showed. Dean began browning the ground beef, and Castiel asked to help so many times that Dean eventually relented, allowing him to chop up onions. They traded light kisses as they cooked and prepped, nothing heated since Sam and Jess were right outside, but it all felt so natural and blissful and wonderfully domestic. Dean had spent his life being scared of commitment...but a
commitment to Cas? *That* would be something else entirely.

The realization made Dean drop the wooden spoon he was holding, the utensil sliding haphazardly into the soup pot. He grabbed Cas by the shoulder, spinning him around, then cupped his chin with both hands and kissed him fiercely. Cas was taken back, apparently in the middle of saying something—words like *Paradiso* and *Dante's nine spheres of Heaven* came to mind—though Dean figured he couldn’t be blamed for zoning out during *that* particular conversation, right? Either way they were kissing now, the collision of lips wet and firm, and once Cas recovered from the spontaneity of it all, he opened his mouth and allowed Dean more access. The kiss was deepened then, Cas wrapping his arms around Dean’s waist and allowing Dean more access. The kiss was deepened, and sucked mercilessly on Cas’ tongue, pressing his thighs against Cas’ sides. Whether it was the heat of the kitchen or the heat of their kiss, Dean was lightheaded and sweaty, wishing they could just forget about dinner and take each other apart for hours on end…

That’s why he didn’t register the sound of the screen door opening and closing—until it was too late. It was a straight shot from the opened door to the kitchen, and when Dean pulled away to catch his breath, he saw Sam standing in the doorway. Smirking.

Cas spun around, dropping his hands from Dean’s thighs and taking a step back. “I’ll...go see if Jessica requires assistance,” he mumbled.

“You and your brother should talk,” he added lightly, giving Sam a nervous smile before opening the door and exiting.

“See if you’re getting laid tonight,” Dean grumbled half-heartedly, though he didn’t mean it. Honestly, Cas would likely have much easier time withholding sex than Dean would. Damn. They had been official for like, three whole days, and Dean was already whipped. He slid off the counter and stirred his simmering chilli, estimating it would be ready in about ten minutes, staring down at the mixture and avoiding Sam’s gaze.

“Dude, it’s my counter too. And don’t act like you and Jess haven’t christened every free surface of this place. I spent the first year of y’all’s marriage skittish as a damn dog.”

While Sam blushed, *rightfully fucking so*, Dean cracked open the oven, checking the pan of cornbread baking in his mother’s old cast iron skillet.

“Still doesn’t cover why you didn’t tell me, though,” Sam pointed out, and Dean sighed, knocking the spoon clean and resting it on the stove. He turned and finally faced his brother.

“I meant to, Sammy, I really did. But we don’t exactly have bro bonding penciled in these days, we’re both so busy. And things with Cas are new...I don’t know, dude. It doesn’t even feel real. Like
“talking about it will jinx it or something.”

“Wow,” Sam breathed, lips pursed, looking at Dean with awe. “That’s serious coming from you.”

Dean shrugged noncommittally, hoping to seem nonchalant. Sam narrowed his eyes excitedly. “Dude, you are serious about him!”

“If you plan on eating tonight,” Dean pointed to the pot of chilli, which was bubbling and red and making his stomach growl, “then cut the chick flick crap, capiche?”

Sam smirked. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say.” He went to the cabinets and started gathering bowls and utensils, setting the kitchen table. “And don’t think I didn’t catch your little comment about bro bonding. Jess wants to go visit her mom soon, so once you’re finished with the book, we’ll have a weekend of pizza and beer. Got it?”

“Got it,” Dean said, relieved that the worst of the Cas-related teasing might be over. But then Sam looked up at him somberly.

“But...when you do finish the book, what happens? Does Cas go back to New York?” Sam’s voice was small and quiet, as if the realization might devastate Dean. He’s not wrong, a part of Dean’s brain reminded him.

“Yeah, not like I can ask him to stay.” Especially since he hates this town, this state, the entire South.

“So, will you break up or do long distance?” Sam put his hands on his hips, mouth agape, as if another option just occurred to him. “Or...will you move to New York?”

“Dunno, we’re just seeing how things go, dude.” Dean pulled the cornbread from the oven, happy to keep his hands busy, especially since Sam was really starting to dampen his mood. There would be a time to think about all this, to freak out about it, but now wasn’t the time.

“But what happens if—”

The screen door opened and Jess and Cas returned, both shedding their coats by the front door and wringing their hands together from the cold. Dean looked at Cas’ pink and flustered cheeks, his eyes inquisitive and gentle, and Dean fought the urge to walk over and massage his arms and hands, helping him warm up. Cas looked briefly at Sam, still setting the table, and then back at Dean, a question on his face. Dean shrugged and shook his head casually, as if to say my brother was cool with it. Cas smiled, eyes wandering to Jess and then back to Dean apologetically.

Jess knows now, too.

“It’s okay,” Dean said, not meaning to say so aloud, and Jess turned in confusion.

“What’d ya say?” she asked, still shivering slightly.

“Uh…”

“Don’t mind them,” Sam interjected smugly, “they’re just having a conversation with their eyes.”

Jess snorted while Dean stared into the soup, wondering if he could crawl inside and slowly drown himself. “Babe, how long did that take us to master?” Jess turned to Sam coyly. “At least six months?”

“Probably a year,” Sam added.
“If either of you say one more damn word, Jess’ll be the only one cooking for the rest of the year,” Dean growled. She elbowed him playfully in protest, but didn’t argue. Apparently, even she knew her culinary skills left a lot to be desired. Everyone went to the stove, ladling their chilli and buttering slices of cornbread. They took their seats and Cas squeezed Dean’s hand under the table.

“Thank you for cooking,” he said, eyes blue and striking as always, and Dean felt the tension in his shoulders begin to fade. Castiel seemed to have that effect on him.

“It’s nothing,” he mumbled, smiling and swallowing a spoonful. “Just don’t get too full, okay? ‘Cause you’re my guinea pig for the pie contest.”

“Pie contest?” Cas asked, eyebrows scrunched, and Sam and Jess looked up in excitement, both speaking at once.

“What flavor are you making—”

“Better save us some—”

“Pie is a reward, you two.” Dean planted his elbows on the table, looking at his brother and sister-in-law, grinning. “Family members who embarrass me in front of my new boyfriend don’t make the cut.”

Cas stirred beside him, looking at Dean reverentially, as if being called Dean’s boyfriend was the greatest compliment. Dean looked down and blushed, putting a relaxed hand on Castiel’s knee.

“Dean,” Jess said slowly. “You wouldn’t get in the way of a pregnant woman and pie, now, would you?” Her voice was dripping with feigned sweetness.

“Good point.” Suddenly thirsty, Dean stood up and grabbed three beers from the fridge, passing them around and taking one for himself. Jess already had a glass of sweet tea, or else he would’ve fetched her one as well. “Don’t want my future niece or nephew to suffer. Looks like it’s just you who’s gonna miss out on blue-ribbon apple pie, Sammy.”

“Hey, you can’t punish me for doing my brotherly duty. Isn’t that what you called it when I brought Jess home sophomore year, during Thanksgiving break, and you told her not one—not two—but three stories about me during puberty?”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, no regrets there. That was fucking hilarious.” Jess took a long sip of sweet tea, suppressing a laugh.

“I’ll share my pie with you, Sam,” Castiel said affably, taking a hearty bite of his cornbread.

“Thank you, Castiel,” Sam said, his tone exaggerated as he glared playfully at Dean. He turned his attention back to Cas. “You know, I already like you more than all of Dean’s ex-girlfriends combined.”

“That makes two of us,” Dean mumbled, and everyone turned to him, likely wondering how authentic that confession was. It was the god’s honest truth, and the evidence must’ve been painted all over Dean’s expression.

“So, this pie contest…?” Castiel asked, graciously changing the subject. He took a long swig of his beer, and Dean fought the urge to track the movement. He watched Cas’ lips wrap around the bottle, following the delicate muscles of his throat as he swallowed… Dean shifted in his chair, ridiculously turned on just watching Cas drink beer. Yeah, he was a fucking goner.
“It’s the county fall festival, we have it every year,” Jess explained. “There’s a pumpkin patch and cornhole and hayrides, that kind of thing. The farm sets up a booth and we sell whatever produce we have left…usually cabbage, carrots, winter veggies. Dean always enters the pie contest—”

“And always wins,” Dean bragged, giving Castiel a wink.

“Which he’s very humble about,” Sam said sarcastically.

“Don’t need humility when you’re the undefeated champ.” Dean grinned, stretching overhead and resting an arm on the back of Cas’ chair. Their soup bowls were empty now, stomachs pleasantly full. Cas leaned against Dean’s arm comfortably, taking another sip of his beer and looking content.

“When’s the festival?” Cas asked conversationally. Dean imagined wandering the fair grounds with Cas, holding hands and drinking apple cider, and fought the urge to smile.

“Friday. But I always make a test pie two days beforehand.” He rubbed his hand absently on Castiel’s shoulder, slow and comforting circles. “Then we do a taste test. Interested?”

Cas perked up at the question, Jess and Sam seemingly forgotten as his gaze turned suggestive. “Definitely.”

***

It was unfairly arousing to watch Dean bake. Unfair for Castiel, at least, because they were in Dean’s childhood home, in the company of his brother and sister-in-law, while all Castiel wanted to do was bend Dean over the counter and feel the tight, hot heat of his body writhing underneath…

Dean. His boyfriend. Despite the significantly lewd thoughts he was having at the moment, the concept of having a boyfriend was surprising. Innocent. Dating in New York had been complicated for Castiel, with most of his interactions being one night stands or brief hook-ups. He had dated a few men long-term, but even after months together, it was never serious. Maybe it was the result of his own hesitations, or maybe it was the gay dating culture in the city. Either way, everything before Dean was fast and fleeting. That’s how Castiel thought of time now—Before Dean. During Dean. After Dean.

Dean’s baking process was long, but Castiel didn’t mind waiting. He hung out at the kitchen table with Sam and Jessica, drinking beer and playing cards. Dean’s expression was focused as he baked, not following an obvious recipe but reaching for ingredients on instinct. Interestingly enough, it was similar to his writing process—utter creative chaos, which stressed Castiel out to no end.

But he started feeling tense for an entirely different reason once Dean started measuring flour…and tossed an apron on. It was clearly a necessity as white powder dusted the countertops, thick as heavy snow, but Dean looked adorable and domestic and strangely sexy with it on. He imagined coming home to find Dean in the kitchen with an apron on, face flushed and grinning, wearing nothing else underneath…

“Your turn,” Jess said, nudging Castiel with her elbow. He stirred, shaking his head, and put a random card down without glancing at his hand. Dean looked at him curiously and winked.

Obviously, for Castiel, this evening would be an exercise in constraint.

Three long hours later, Sam and Jessica finally headed to bed. The freshly-baked apple pie was cooling on a rack and Dean was finishing up the last of the dirty dishes, the front of his shirt wet with soapy water. The house itself was dark and quiet, creaking from age and wind. All the lights were
off except the overhead stove light, fluorescent and bright as a lamppost on a rural street. Cas sighed peacefully and approached Dean from behind, wrapping his arms around the other man’s middle and nestling his head in the crook of Dean’s shoulder. Dean shut off the faucet and hummed happily at the touch, grazing Cas’ forearms lightly with his fingertips.

“Hello, Dean,” Cas whispered, and nuzzled closer, placing chaste kisses on Dean’s neck. Dean drew a breath, tightening his grip on Cas’ arms.

“Hey, Cas,” he whispered.

They stayed like this for several minutes, holding each other tight in this soundless, intimate way. Finally, Castiel asked quietly, “What are you thinking about?”

“How...I missed you today,” Dean admitted, still caressing Castiel’s arms.

“I’ve been with you all day,” Cas answered, chuckling.

“Yeah, but...we haven’t been alone all day.”

“Is there something you want to do alone with me, Dean?” Castiel switched from soft kisses to more urgent ones. Dean hummed appreciatively and exposed his neck further, allowing Castiel the access to gently suck and tease.

“I can think of a few things,” Dean said. Without warning, he spun around in Castiel’s grip, holding him by the hips, until they were nose to nose. Castiel’s heart began race—Dean’s lips were pink and wet, his eyes staring at Castiel’s mouth.

“I have some ideas as well,” Castiel replied, scrunching the back of Dean’s shirt until he touched bare skin, exploring with his hands. “Some that involve the apron you were wearing.”

Dean snorted, as if this was an unexpected development. “Got a thing for bakers, Cas?”

“Got a thing,” Castiel crowded against him, their lips a breath apart, “for you.”

Castiel didn’t remember lunging forward, wrapping his hands around the collar of Dean’s flannel and pulling him into a crushing kiss. But apparently, that’s exactly what he did. Their lips met in frenzy, heads leaning in sync, bodies angling to get closer. Their mouths fought for dominance, the kiss desperate and needy and wanting, and Castiel relented when Dean sucked and licked his upper lip. His lips parted and he instinctively pushed his leg between Dean’s open thighs, feeling a rush of arousal nearly electric between them. His hands roamed inside Dean’s shirt, leaving the curved plane of his muscled back and exploring his chest, rubbing his thumb against Dean’s nipple. Dean gasped at the sensation and rutted his growing erection against Castiel’s thigh, panting and pulling away for air.

“Fuck,” Dean whispered, voice low and breaking. “What was that for?”

“I’ve been wanting to do that for approximately four hours and twenty-seven minutes,” Castiel growled, and Dean exhaled with a quiet laugh. Castiel lifted Dean’s shirt over his head, leaving kisses on his chest before taking Dean’s nipple into his mouth. Dean moaned and arched his back against the touch, hands searching for any available part of Castiel he could touch...head, shoulders, neck.

“We—we shouldn’t do this here,” Dean whispered, breathing ragged. “Jess, she—god, Cas—” Castiel had moved onto the other nipple, tongue tracing the dark skin surrounding it, biting and licking. “She has to pee like every hour now. There’s no...ah...there’s no telling when she’ll get up. We should go
“Need you now,” Castiel replied, hoping he didn’t sound too demanding, though Dean seemed to enjoy it whenever he took the lead. And while Castiel liked Jessica and Sam very much—and certainly didn’t want to get caught having sex on their kitchen floor—the idea of driving to the B&B sounded excruciating. “Your room?”

“No, walls are too damn thin, but…” Castiel looked up and spotted a suggestive sparkle in Dean’s eye. “There is another option…”

Dean grabbed his hand, along with a flashlight hanging on a nearby hook, and opened the front door. The cool midnight air hit them in sobering waves as they walked the property hand-in-hand. Even with the sudden chill, excitement coursed through Castiel’s body, imagining all the places they could finish what they’d started—the shed and the Impala were his top choices at the moment. He was surprised, then, whenever Dean cracked open the door to the barn. It was dark inside, with only strips of moonlight traveling through the slates of the gable roof. They made their way up the hayloft ladder carefully, Dean shining the light on Castiel to keep him from stumbling. The loft floor was covered in haystacks, which Castiel suspected would make a suitable pseudo-mattress, at least for the night. Dean grabbed a nearby quilt and tossed it over the smallest stack. “Soft second cut hay,” Dean said, smirking. “Only the softest for you, Cas.” Castiel rolled his eyes but smiled, knowing he should probably be turned off by the spider webs in the ceiling and the layers of dust covering the floor. It wasn’t the most sanitary place to get intimate, especially for someone as neat and methodical as Castiel. But Dean was constantly pushing him out of his comfort zone, turning circumstances that would normally be stressful into something spontaneous and thrilling.

Thanks to a small window, Castiel had just enough light to see Dean’s face—the strong cheekbones, the poised pink lips, the look of exhilaration and longing in his eyes. It was the most breathtaking sight Castiel had ever seen, and as Dean moved towards him, wrapping his hand around Castiel’s back and searching for his lips, he knew there was no going back from this.

Castiel was falling in love with Dean Winchester.

They shed their clothes in a frenzy, panting and kissing and touching, until they were both stripped down to their underwear. Dean was wearing cheeky cotton panties, sky blue, with delicately scalloped trim that accentuated his tight, tan ass. Dean’s hard cock wasn’t at all contained, sliding out the side in such an obscene way that Castiel could feel his body tremble with lust. They traded filthy kisses, all flips of tongue and nips of teeth, and then they were tumbling down into the hay. They both smiled instinctively at the texture, the feeling of hay tickling their bare skin, but then Castiel took Dean’s nipple into his mouth again and the air around them intensified. He left a trail down Dean’s abdomen and thighs, worshipping Dean’s body with his mouth, before kissing Dean’s cock through the thin layer of panties. Dean inhaled and wove his hands into Castiel’s hair, tightening.

“Gorgeous,” Castiel whispered. He grew harder as he lavished dozens of wet kisses against the fabric, lips occasionally brushing Dean’s cock, precome glistening enticingly on the head. Castiel took his time giving Dean soft attention, tantalizing and slow, until they were both panting and moaning and likely to combust.

“Cas,” Dean breathed, “please...you’re driving me crazy.”

Despite his own desire to move it along, to begin barreling towards a mindblowing orgasm with Dean, Castiel only grinned in response. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

Dean audibly huffed. “I’m talking about the twenty minute panty tease. I’m talking about, if I don’t touch your dick ASAP, I might fucking explode. And then you’ll have my death on your hands, and
I don’t think you’d like me much as a ghost, and—oh, oh, Cas—”

Castiel licked up and down Dean’s shaft with a flat, skilled tongue. He left small kisses on the head, sucking and swirling his tongue, before taking a deep breath and gulping Dean down as far as his throat allowed. It was very far, surprisingly, since Castiel had never considered himself good at deep-throating. But as it was with everything else, Dean seemed to be his exception. He breathed through his nose and took Dean’s cock in deeper, swallowing and moaning around the head, and Dean was grasping at straws of hay and repeating Castiel’s name like a mantra. When he felt Dean was getting close he pulled away with a soft pop.

“Was I too late?” Castiel’s voice was gravely, the absence of Dean’s dick in his mouth making his mouth feel strangely open. “Did I just perform fellatio on the ghost of Dean Winchester?”

He couldn’t see in the darkness, but he was almost positive Dean rolled his eyes. “You’re about to become a ghost yourself if you don’t come up here so I can kiss the hell out of you.”

“Did you just threaten me during sex?” Castiel laughed, but moved forward, laying his chest against Dean’s so they were better aligned.

“Yep,” Dean said proudly, dragging his thumb against Castiel’s lip and staring. “You would too, if you were me. ‘Cause you’re the sexiest fucking man in existence. And you’re also annoying as hell.”

“You say ‘annoying’ while I say ‘expertly paced and gentle teasing’,” Castiel quipped.

“Yeah, well...expertly pace this.” He reached his hands into Castiel’s boxers and began jacking him off so quickly, Castiel’s squeezed his eyes shut on instinct, heart racing at the sudden heat. Dean sucked and kissed his neck and Castiel thrashed above him, gasping for air. He was already close, so close, but he needed to feel Dean against him. He tenderly brushed Dean’s hand away and slipped his boxers off. He adjusted Dean’s panties until his cock was fully exposed, then they rutted together fast and feverishly, both whimpering and muttering each other’s names. There was fire kindling between them stronger than anything Castiel had ever felt. It was as if they were both racing towards the same cliff, at the same pace and at the same time, matched in every way as they gasped and tumbled towards the edge—

They were kissing when they came, lips parted and opened in simultaneous moans, chests heaving against each other with their fingers entwined. He knew at some point that he rolled over, and Dean grabbed his abandoned shirt and cleaned them up. Dean tried to pry Castiel from the hay but he groaned and refused, suddenly exhausted. Through closed eyes, he heard Dean wandering around the barn before returning to Castiel with another quilt, wrapping them up snugly, carding his hands through Castiel’s hair. Castiel knew he fell asleep with a smile on his lips and his heart racing, thinking, I love you... I’m falling in love with you...

All too soon it was morning, bright light filling the cracks in the barn. His cell phone was ringing.

“Cas,” Dean grumbled, nudging him awake. “Cas, turn your phone off.”

Eyes barely cracked open, Castiel searched for his discarded jeans, finding them a foot away and covered in hay. He shivered in the early morning air, realizing he was naked in forty degree weather, which couldn’t be good for either of them. But oh, the night they had spent together, the things they had done and said and shared…

Castiel finally found his phone and squinted, unlocking the screen.

“Anna?” he said, running a hand against his temple. Was it possible to have a sex hangover? Castiel
definitely felt sore and tired, though he supposed the haybed was to blame.

“Cas,” she said, her voice was breaking. “I’ve been trying to call you all night.”

“I-I’m at the farm. I have terrible reception out here. What’s wrong?” At those words Dean seemed to stir, opening his eyes and searching Castiel’s expression.

“It’s...I’m sorry to tell you this over the phone, but...it’s Chuck.” She took a deep breath and began to sob. “They did everything they could, but late last night, he...” Castiel fell to the floor, knees pulled in, stunned into silence. He held the phone out so he couldn’t hear it, feeling nauseous and overwhelmed by all the details Anna was sharing. He imagined his first and oldest friend from New York dying in a hospital bed, surrounded by his predator of a son and distant family members who never really knew him. Not the way that Castiel did. He deserved so much better.

The phone slid out of his hand and Dean took over, the quilt wrapped around him like a cape. He heard the news from Anna before asking questions about funeral arrangements, about what they could do to help or donate. He listened with somber attention, placing a hand on Castiel’s shoulder and caressing his skin gently. Castiel said nothing but still leaned into the touch, realizing with a jolt of panic that—throughout this ordeal—Dean would be the only one keeping him grounded. What would happen if Dean ever left him?

What would become of Castiel then?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dean was in a debacle, that much was clear. Charlie had gathered way too many clothes from his closet and there simply wasn’t enough room in his suitcase. He held up a t-shirt Charlie had attempted to sneak in and regarded her with skepticism.

“Really? You veto Black Sabbath, but sneak in a ‘Who’s Your Daddy?’ Darth Vader edition?”

Charlie crossed her legs on Dean’s bed and scoffed. “C’mon, you’ll need something to lighten the mood!”

Dean scowled, placing the Vader shirt firmly in the no-pile. “It’s a funeral, Charlie, not Comic Con. And I don’t want all of Cas’ fancy coworkers thinking I’m a dumbass.”

Charlie’s face went slack, mouth agape. “It’s only because I know flying makes you crazy that I am not beating you senseless for blaspheming George Lucas’ masterpiece.”

Dean rolled his eyes and sat on the edge of the bed, pinching the bridge of his nose and trying not to panic. He had ten more minutes to pack, then he had to swing by Cas’ bed and breakfast and head towards the Nashville airport. And get on an airplane. A goddamn death trap with wings.

Out the window, he spotted Jess in a sweater and a bandana, pushing a wheelbarrow of vegetables. She was gathering harvest to sell at tomorrow’s fall festival, and Dean smiled ruefully, only slightly disappointed to be missing the fun this year. Okay, more than slightly. He really fucking hated to miss it. But only because he had wanted to take Cas, to carve pumpkins and eat caramel apples and kiss him on the ferris wheel like a prepubescent girl—and who the hell could blame him? He was in love, he was pretty damn sure of it, and he wanted to do all the disgustingly sappy things people in love do.

Dean turned away from the window, aware he had zoned out for a minute. When he blinked himself back into awareness, his suitcase was zipped and leaned against his bedroom door.

“What the…”

Charlie leaned against the door frame, grinning. “Am I awesome, or what?”

“Depends. How many fandom shirts did you sneak in?”

“Three,” she said, eyes roaming the floor.

“Charlie,” Dean said, his voice low and firm.

“Okay, fine. Seven. But there’s also your good suit and favorite jeans and plenty of that flannel you’re obsessed with.”

Dean chuckled, launching himself off the bed and pulling her into a quick hug. “Thanks, kid.”

“I left you a few surprises, too,” she said, winking. “Or should I say…a few surprises for Cas…”

“Jesus,” he said, exasperated. “How many times do I have to say it—”
“Doesn’t matter, I’ll never believe it. Do you really think you’re traveling across the country, to the home and undoubtedly glamorous apartment of your hot-as-sin boyfriend, and not getting blown to smithereens?”

“Ew, gross,” Dean winced, rolling his suitcase towards the back door. “If Cas were here, he’d inform you that your use of ‘blown to smithereens’ is all kinds of fucked-up.”

“I think it depends on how good the blowjob is,” she said, somehow straight-faced. “At least, that’s what the word on the ‘pro-dick’ street is.”

Dean shook his head and laughed, despite his best efforts. They walked down the gravel driveway towards the Impala, Dean loading his suitcase in the expansive trunk. He gave both Charlie and Jess quick hugs, at their insistence. They asked when he’d be back, but truthfully, he didn’t know yet. The funeral was tomorrow, and afterwards, Cas had some business to handle while they were in town. Dean could finish writing his manuscript anywhere, thankfully, not minding the atmosphere of coffee shops or public libraries. So they had both bought one-way tickets to New York City without considering what that might imply.

Ten minutes later, Cas was sitting on the porch steps when Dean pulled up to the B&B. He was wearing a thick cotton sweater, his hair messy from the wind, absolutely gorgeous without even trying. Dean sighed wistfully, not even bothering to hide his stare. They were beyond that, thankfully. He opened his car door and unlocked the trunk, then arranged Cas’ suitcase beside his. He shut the trunk and pulled his boyfriend close, hands on his hips, and kissed him slowly and sweetly, lips locked together.

Castiel eventually pulled away, breathless. “Keep heading in this direction, and we’ll miss our flight,” he mumbled, lips brushing Dean’s ear, embracing him. Dean tightened his hold, content to stay like this as long as Castiel would allow. He smelled like detergent and sunlight and Dean smiled against Castiel’s shoulder, unable to get enough of him.

Once they arrived, Dean parked in a short-term lot—Sam would fetch the Impala after work, to avoid the outrageous cost of long-term parking. Dean and Cas checked their luggage in, shuffled through security, and located their gate. They still had an hour and a half before boarding, so they grabbed a beer at the closest terminal bar and worked on their laptops—Dean, eighty thousand words into his novel; Castiel, steadily editing the previous chapters, eyes narrowed in concentration. Dean watched his boyfriend work and realized together they made a kickass, if not totally unexpected, team. Who would’ve thought, the uptight editor and the unruly writer? Not only were they gonna produce an awesome book together—fingers crossed—but they had discovered something even more meaningful in the process.

Dean’s cell began vibrating in his pocket, and once he saw the number, his eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“Shit,” he said, fumbling to unlock the screen. He stood up, leaning against his chair. Cas looked at him questioningly, but Dean was already speaking into the receiver. “Uh, hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Winchester?” The receptionist’s voice was kind but quiet, barely cutting through the noise of the airport. “You had an appointment scheduled for today at one o’clock, with Dr. Singer, and we wondered if—”

“Yeah, yeah, my bad. I totally forgot to call, but I’m gonna have to cancel.” Dean moved the receiver from his lips and mouthed “Bobby.” Castiel nodded sympathetically. “I, uh, am actually heading to New York for a funeral.”
“Oh, we’re so sorry to hear that,” she said kindly.

“It’s okay, I knew the guy long-distance and respected the hell of out him, but I’m mostly going to support my boyfriend.” Dean inhaled sharply, eyes widening. Castiel mirrored his expression, looking bewildered. Had Dean just come out to a receptionist whose name he couldn’t even remember?

“Oh, that’s sweet,” she said. “Your boyfriend is lucky to have you.”

Dean was still dazed when he heard commotion on the other line, the sound of the phone shuffling. Finally there was a deep breath and Bobby said, “Tell Castiel I’m sorry for his loss.”

“Uh, yeah, will do,” Dean said, face turning red. Cas tilted his head, probably wondering what could possibly be happening now. “How did you know—I mean, I didn’t say it was Cas—”

“Son, the way you talked about him last week, he was either the Second Coming or the love of your life. You don’t seem like the praying type, so that only left one option.” Dean didn’t think it was possible for his cheeks to burn any hotter, but apparently the universe didn’t get the memo, ‘cause he took one look at Cas and blushed deeper. Dean cleared his throat noncommittally and didn’t answer.

“Does he know?” Bobby asked, his voice softer now.

“Nope,” Dean said lightly, hoping Cas would assume they were talking about the weather or the flight or anything but Dean’s apparent head-over-heels love for the man in front of him.

“Well, just be careful. Which, by the way, is the only advice you’ll get from me without bringing your ass in and paying a copay.” Dean laughed, shaking his head. In only a handful of sessions, Bobby was already becoming more than just a therapist to him.

“Better hang up soon, then, ‘fore you slap a bill on me,” he joked. “I’ll, uh, call you when I get back. Thanks Bobby.” Dean hoped Bobby understood that the “thanks” covered multiple gratitudes—thanks for calling, thanks for therapy, thanks for helping me indirectly admit that I’m madly in love with Castiel Novak…

They ended the call shortly afterwards, Dean falling into his chair with a sigh. Castiel took a long slip of his beer and looked pointedly at Dean.

“So…the receptionist knows?” Cas asked cautiously.

“And Bobby.” Dean closed his laptop and took a long swig of his own beer.

“And Bobby,” Cas repeated. He turned in his seat, knees absentingly brushing Dean’s. “Well, that’s only two people, Dean. Nothing to worry over. And if I’m not mistaken, they legally can’t share personal information regarding their clients. So, as long as they keep quiet, and I suspect they will, I think you’ll be—”

“Cas.” Dean put his hand on his boyfriend’s knee, squeezing gently. “How many times do I have to tell you, man? I’m not gonna hide you away like a dirty little secret. It does feel…weird, ‘coming out’ or whatever. Doesn’t really seem like nobody's business but ours, but fuck it. I’ll get used to it.”

“Dean…”

Dean reached forward, intending to silence whatever counter-argument Castiel was形成 with the strongest defense. He pulled him forward. In the middle of a busy bar. In the middle of a busy airport. And kissed him.
The kiss was light but unhurried and Cas seemed frozen in place, shocked by the gesture. When they pulled away a few guys on the opposite end of the bar were looking at them funny, but who cared? Dean was willing to do whatever he needed to convince Castiel that this was real for him.

Once they boarded the plane, however, the only thing Dean wanted to convince Cas to do was to turn around immediately and let him drive them to New York City instead. ‘Cause seriously...what the fuck was Dean thinking, casually buying a plane ticket?

“It’s a thirteen hour drive, Dean,” Castiel reminded him, stowing their carry-ons in the overhead bin.

“Exactly. So, twenty-six total hours of uninterrupted Dean and Cas time. Not sure where the hesitation is coming from.”

Cas rolled his eyes. “Tempting offer, but the funeral is tomorrow and we need time to settle in.” He smiled encouragingly. “You’ll be fine, Dean. It’s just a quick flight.” Quick or not, they still had to leave the fucking ground and stay in the fucking air. That was the part Dean was definitely not “fine” with.

They slowly settled in, Dean fidgeting with his seatbelt while Castiel gracefully slipped into the window seat. Dean tried to keep himself distracted, but he couldn’t order a drink yet or attempt to read or write anything until they were well in the air...and there wasn’t a guarantee he’d be alive by then, because the take-off itself might actually kill him...

Flying was everything Dean feared it would be. Bumpy and rough and incredibly loud.

“It could be worse,” Castiel whispered, brushing Dean’s arm, clearly trying to distract him.

“Uh...in-in what way?” They were gaining altitude and Dean could hardly breathe, sweating through his flannel, clutching both armrests. The older woman beside him was not amused by his panic, putting on headphones and shutting her eyes.

“Well,” Castiel said slowly, as if he had no actual answer, but was making it up as he went along. “There...could be... snakes on the plane.”

“Snakes,” Dean repeated flatly.

“Snakes.” Cas looked strangely proud of himself. “According to Samuel L. Jackson, that would make the flight significantly worse.”

Dean groaned. During their various movies nights with Sam and Jess, they had eventually discovered that Cas had very little pop culture exposure. It was due mostly to his sheltered upbringing, and then later, a total lack of interest in TV and movies. It was a unique quirk that was shocking and endearing as hell.

“Jesus,” Dean said, trying not to chuckle. “It couldn’t be any worse than having a boyfriend who has never seen Star Wars but references Snakes on a Plane. I mean...really, Cas? Snakes on a motherfucking plane? That’s the hill you’re gonna die on?”

“I personally found the action sequences quite thrilling,” Cas said indignantly.

The rest of the flight passed without anything noteworthy, though the experience overall wasn’t quite as tense and terrible as Dean expected. Turned out, just being in Cas’ presence was reassuring enough, almost to the point where Dean considered asking if they could join the Mile High club. (Almost—as much as he enjoyed sex with Cas, he still wouldn’t be able to fully concentrate, being in a flying death trap and all.) He was overwhelmingly relieved when the plane touched down two
hours later.

When they stood up to fetch their carry-ons, the immensity of the trip hit Dean all at once. He was in Castiel’s town, New York fucking City, for the first time. He was about to see Cas’ apartment, meet all his coworkers, step inside his everyday life…

The next few days would change everything.

Dean was sure of it.

***

Castiel ordered two whiskeys, neat. The street outside was dark, though the cityscape was brightly lit. It felt strange to be back in the city again—too loud, too busy. After their plane landed, Castiel had taken Dean to his small, four hundred square foot apartment on W 27th. He felt embarrassed by how cramped, yet equally empty, his apartment was. He had furniture, sure...a loveseat, a bistro table with chairs, a small bookshelf. But he had lived in New York City his entire adult life, and never acquired much of what made a home, a home —knicknacks, art or decor, framed photos of loved ones. It was bare and cold compared to the warmth of Dean’s house, the farm always thriving and lively.

Still, it had been a relaxing afternoon settling in. Dean had still been buzzing with anxiety from the flight, but Castiel distracted him with a long massage in the shower, easing the tension away before drifting his hand lower. He took Dean’s stiff cock in his hand, kissing his back and shoulders, whispering encouragement in his ear and stroking him to hardness. Once his boyfriend’s come painted the shower walls—in less than three minutes, a personal best for Castiel—Dean had reciprocated by dropping to his knees. The movement had totally taken Castiel by surprise. He was positive Dean had never done this before, but apparently he had been paying attention to Castiel’s technique, because he spent the next several minutes taking Castiel apart expertly with his mouth.

When they finally reached the bedroom, torsos still wet and towels slung low on their hips, Dean had opened his suitcase to find it filled with condoms, a small bottle of lube, and a variety of travel-sized sex toys in the packaging.

“What the actual fuck,” he exclaimed, examining a butt plug, eyes wide. “I’m gonna murder Charlie.”

Castiel had snorted, throwing on sweatpants before coming behind Dean, biting his earlobe and whispering in a low voice, “Really? I was thinking...we should thank her.”

It had been difficult to nap after that, but they would undoubtedly survey Charlie’s gifts later. They needed a little rest before meeting Anna in Greenwich Village for drinks.

Standing now at the bar, Castiel observed Dean with an amused expression on his face. Dean’s eyes were wandering—appraising the dark walnut interior, the warm lights overhead. Eventually, his eyes settled on a framed signed proclaiming THIS IS A RAIDED PREMISES. Below, in smaller script, it was signed: Police Dept. City of New York. They hadn’t spoken for several minutes, and it was making Castiel feel uneasy.

“You okay, Dean?” Castiel whispered, placing a soothing hand on Dean’s hip. He slid his whiskey to him on the bar, and Dean finally seemed to stir, offering Castiel a small smile.

“Yeah, fine Cas.” His wrapped his hand around the glass, taking a long drink. “Just...you know. Taking it all in. This place has a fuckload of history.”
“It does. It’s practically the birthplace of the modern Gay Rights movement,” Castiel said matter-of-factly. He hadn’t been surprised when Anna had suggested they meet at the Stonewall Inn—it was her favorite spot when she didn’t feel like getting hit-on aggressively by men, and historically, it had been Castiel’s favorite spot to scope out a one-night stand. Or two. Or ten.

A lot had changed in just three weeks.

“Really?” Dean asked, sounding interested, his hand on Castiel’s elbow. Dean looked gorgeous in his brown leather jacket and dark denim jeans, hair sculpted with gel, and even though it was early and the bar wasn’t busy yet…plenty of other patrons had already taken notice of him.

“There was a riot here in 1969, which is where the first pride parade comes from. At the time, it was illegal to serve gay people alcohol or or for them to dance with one another.” Dean’s eyes widened in surprise, and Castiel shook his head solemnly, continuing. “During a typical raid, men who dressed in drag, women who weren’t wearing three pieces of feminine clothing, and most of the bar employees, were arrested.”

“Jesus,” Dean said, looking horrified.

“But in June, there was a huge riot during one of the raids. A lesbian in handcuffs was thrown into a police wagon and hit in the head with a billy club for complaining that her handcuffs were too tight. That ignited the crowd—they threw pennies and beer bottles, and eventually, bricks. The police had to barricade themselves inside the bar. The violence, the damage, it was significant. And it was just the beginning of the movement…”

“Fuck,” Dean breathed. He seemed genuinely stunned by the bar’s dark history, and Castiel realized again how new Dean was to the community.

“You should read about it, Dean. I know it seems like things are much better for us now, but…” Castiel smiled bitterly, trying not to think about his own difficulties growing up. “That hasn’t always been the case. You’re lucky, coming out now.”

“Yeah, sometimes I forget.” Dean cupped Castiel’s jaw, thumb stroking his chin. “It just blows my fucking mind, you know? All that, just for me to stand in this bar and kiss you?”

Castiel nodded, leaning into the touch. They had both already finished their whiskeys and were ready for another, but Castiel couldn’t seem to look away.

“Well, then…” Dean grinned, pulling Castiel to him. “Better make it a good one, huh?”

“Fifty years of history would agree,” Castiel said, eyes on Dean’s lips. He slowly leaned in.

They kissed tenderly at first, lips closed and sliding against each other in a leisurely way. Had they been anywhere else, this might’ve been the end of it. But they were at the Stonewall—where Castiel had witnessed a fair share of compromising encounters, particularly in the back alley—so he allowed Dean to pin him against the bar. His hands slide inside Dean’s leather jacket, grip wandering from his shoulder blades, to the dip of his back, to the tight muscles of his hips. He licked into Dean’s mouth and Dean’s grip tightened in response, massaging Castiel’s tongue with his own before nipping and sucking his lower lip. After what felt like an eternity, but in reality was probably just a handful of incredibly heated moments, they pulled away...foreheads touching, panting and gazing into each other’s eyes.

Castiel heard distant clapping coming from behind them.

“Great show,” Anna said. She was wearing a black sweater dress, her red hair long and straight.
“When’s the matinee?”

“Um…” Dean was turning red, eyes darting around the room uncomfortably. “Hey, Anna.”

“Hi Dean,” she said, overly cheerful. She looked at Castiel, eyebrows raised and curious. “Cas, clearly your weekly updates left out...some things.”

“Well, uh, this wasn’t exactly planned,” Dean said in a rush, pointing between him and Castiel. “We honestly couldn’t even stand each other at first, but that sort of developed into other...things. It was a total surprise. But a good surprise, like finding twenty dollars in your pocket. Or getting two pies for the price of one. Which, actually, totally happened to me once. I was going for an apple but then I saw a blueberry pie too, and they were both on sale, and then—”

“Dean,” Castiel said, feeling amused, putting a hand on Dean’s elbow in hopes of steadying him.

“Yeah, yeah. Great idea, Cas. I’ll shut up now.”

Anna laughed, practically beaming. A weighty tension seemed to leave Dean’s shoulders.

“I’m just as surprised as you are by this...development, Dean,” she said, eyes flashing between them. “But I’ve known you for four years, okay? We’re friends. Playing tonsil hockey with my best friend won’t change that.” She pulled Dean into a welcoming hug, and Castiel smiled. Two of his favorite people getting along, connecting...it was an immensely gratifying sight.

They spent the evening drinking and talking. Anna recounted every embarrassing story about Castiel that she had, apparently, been harboring for fifteen years. Castiel groaned but Dean smirked, egging her on, hand rubbing Castiel’s knee beneath the bar. Eventually they drifted into discussing the book, and Anna asked Dean to send her the manuscript in-process so she could take a look. They all pointedly avoided the topic of Chuck and the funeral, knowing tomorrow’s service would be difficult enough. When it was nearly midnight, Dean went to the bar to pay their tab—he annoyingly (and endearingly) refused Castiel’s cash. Instead, Anna pulled him outside as they waited, sharing a cigarette and shivering in the cold.

“Know what you’re doing there, Cas?” Anna took a drag of the cigarette, head tilted in the direction of the window. Dean was now at the register, opening his wallet.

“Not really...” Castiel reached for the cigarette, taking a long inhale. “But...I don’t know. This seems different, Anna.”

“This looks different. I’ve never seen you like this, Cas.” Her voice grew softer. She took a step closer, putting a hand on his arm. “I just hope you’re being careful. You’ve tried dating men in the closet before, and...it never seemed to end well.”

“Closet?” Castiel asked, stunned. “What closet? Have you already forgotten what you walked in on earlier?”

“Yeah, two men kissing at a gay bar. Not exactly Dean’s official coming out party, considering he lives four hundred miles away.”

“He’s already come out to his family, and his best friend...and his therapist,” Castiel added heatedly, not mentioning that coming out to Bobby had mostly been an accident. Anna didn’t need to know that.

“Okay, okay, Cas. I’m not trying to argue. He’s funny and talented and gorgeous, I know. I’m just trying to tell you to take things slow. Don’t do something crazy, like fall in love with Dean
Winchester after three weeks.”

She chuckled to herself, dropping the cigarette and smothering it with the toe of her boot. There was a long pause of silence, and when she looked up at Castiel’s solemn expression, her eyes went wide.

“Seriously? What the hell, Cas? You fell in love with Dean Winchester after three weeks?”

Castiel opened his mouth, intent on defending himself, but the bar door swung open and Dean sauntered towards them. Castiel closed his mouth, knowing their conversation was now over. Dean wrapped his hand around Castiel’s waist, kissing his cheek. “Ready?” he asked, Anna’s eyes narrowed.

Castiel cleared his throat, embarrassed by Anna’s scrutiny. He felt vulnerable now that someone else knew the magnitude of his feelings for Dean. Before, when it was just a crazy epiphany in his head, he had the option of suppressing it. But now he felt raw, exposed.

He nodded and said a stiff goodbye to Anna. He slid his hands into his trenchcoat, Dean at his heels, and they began walking towards the subway.

***

Castiel had been quiet the whole way home. Dean knew something had happened after their last drink, while he was busy paying the tab, but he couldn’t begin to understand what. Anna had been accepting of their relationship, treating Dean the same way she always had. Not to mention how thrilling it was to be out with Cas, to hold hands and kiss in public without any awkwardness or fear. There was a lot about New York City that Dean had discovered he hated—the crowds, the traffic, the constant noise. He would never, ever fucking move here on his own, would never abandon his family or the farm.

But for Cas? To be with Cas everyday, like he was tonight?

It was sacrifice worth considering, maybe in a few months’ time. At least, that’s what Dean had been thinking before midnight hit and Castiel turned into a monotonous robot.

“I’m fine,” Castiel said, for the third time in twenty minutes. They were standing in the bathroom, side by side, brushing their teeth. Dean rolled his eyes, Castiel watching him in the mirror.

“You’re a terrible liar, Cas.” He rinsed his mouth with water and walked back into the bedroom before Castiel could answer. Dean opened his suitcase, looked for his comfy pajamas, but was hit with sudden inspiration. There were ways of making Castiel open up, mutually beneficial ways, in fact…

He shed his clothes quickly, tossing his discarded jeans and flannel into the corner. He looked through the side zipper, which he’d filled before Charlie had come over that morning (they were best friends, yeah, but some things stayed between a man and his sexy ass, sulking boyfriend). He slipped on a pink, low-rise thong with straps in the back and crawled on top of Cas’ bed. Stretching out, stomach down, he reached for the dusty book on the nightstand and pretended to read. Facing the headboard, he couldn’t see Castiel’s reaction, which was disappointing. But barely a minute passed before Cas walked through the doorway, a low gasp caught in his throat.

Judging from the lack of footsteps, it seemed Cas was frozen in the doorway. Dean smirked, swinging his feet in the air, totally aware that his ass was on display. He heard the sound of Castiel unbuttoning his pants, then his shirt… The anticipation of feeling Cas’ bare skin against his made Dean’s pulse quicken.
After what felt like a maddening amount of waiting—Castiel was either the world’s slowest fucking undisresser or he was intentionally driving Dean crazy—the mattress finally dipped beneath him. Castiel crawled on top of him, leaving small kisses on his neck, his bare chest rubbing against Dean’s shoulder. Dean couldn’t help himself...he hummed at the sensation, savoring the feeling of Cas’ scruff tickling his skin.

“How’s the book?” Castiel whispered, one hand reaching down and caressing Dean’s lower back.

“Good,” Dean mumbled, though he had flipped to the middle and never given it a single glance.

“Really?” Castiel hooked his finger inside the band of Dean’s panties, snapping and testing the elastic. Dean ground himself against the mattress, cock already dripping with precome. “I didn’t realize you knew French, Dean.”

Dean blinked, looking at the page he had randomly opened, and sure enough. That was not English. Oops.

“Yep, uh, sorry for you to find out this way.” Dean shut the hardcover loudly, dropping it over the side of the bed. “I just didn’t want you to feel inferior.”

“Ah,” Castiel said. “Very thoughtful of you.”

Dean flipped himself around, legs wrapping around Castiel, finally facing him. And Jesus, what a fucking sight. Castiel looked dark and towering above him, eyes appraising, pupils blown with lust. He was so breathtaking and Dean felt so goddamn lucky to know him, to be here with him...

Their banter forgotten for a moment, Dean mumbled the first thing that came to mind.

“As if you could ever be inferior to me, Cas...” His hands reached forward, sliding over Cas’ chest.

Castiel snorted, leaning in the touch. “What was it that you called me? The first time we met?” He dipped forward, kissing Dean’s jaw. “‘Pretentious and judgmental,’ I believe.”

“Still true,” Dean said jokingly, fingers stroking Castiel’s back. “And then you called me...fuck, what was it?”

“‘Reckless, juvenile, and incredibly frustrating.’”

“Ah, right.” Dean chuckled, despite the very distracting set of lips working their way up his neck. “We should add ‘know-it-all’ to your list.”

“Only if we add ‘merciless tease’ to yours.” Castiel continued his trail of concentrated kisses on Dean’s neck, but snuck a hand slowly down and palmed the front of Dean’s panties. Dean shuddered as Cas brushed over his erection, fingertips lightly grazing but not providing enough pressure.

“Now who’s the tease,” Dean grumbled, pushing his hips up and attempting to rut against Castiel’s hand.

“Still you,” Cas said playfully. “Or have you forgotten that I walked into my bedroom, intending to sleep, and you were spread-out in a thong?”

“Hey, I don’t see you complaining.” Dean reached his own hand towards the front of Castiel’s boxer, fondling his boyfriend’s hard cock trapped beneath the cotton. Castiel closed his eyes, his erection growing stiffer in Dean’s hand. “Besides, I had to get you talking somehow.”
Castiel’s eyes opened abruptly. “I was talking.”

“Cas,” Dean said, voice pleading. “You know that’s not true. Not really. Just be straight with me, man…”

“If you want a straight man, you’ve sadly come to the wrong place,” Castiel grumbled, and Dean laughed, rolling his eyes. He pulled Castiel down to him, the momentary heat of their aching erections forgotten for now. Castiel settled into Dean’s chest, hand absently stroking his stomach.

“It’s nothing. Anna just got me thinking,” Castiel mumbled. Dean rubbed small circles into his back and listened. “About the future...or specifically, our future. It’s ridiculously early for that, I know, but Dean. I can’t deny that what I feel for you, it’s…"

Dean was holding his breath, heartbeat pounding in his ears. “Yeah, Cas?”

“It’s profound,” Castiel whispered. “It’s only been a few weeks, but...I feel connected to you, in a way that’s new and completely terrifying.”

Dean inhaled deeply, trying to fight the urge to shout— oh thank fucking god, ‘cause I think I’m in love with you. Yeah, no way in hell. There was honesty and then there was straight-up insanity. Instead, he kissed the top of Castiel’s head and mumbled, “I know what you mean.”

Castiel peered up at him, looking curious. “You do?”

“Yes, Cas.” He stroked Castiel’s cheek absently with his finger, stalling. He forced himself to continue, despite a lifelong avoidance of chick flick moments. Cas had put himself out there and deserved the same respect. “I...feel it, too.”

“Dean...” Castiel’s blue eyes—striking as ever—were filled with such hope, such relief and tenderness, that the whole moment felt surreal. What the fuck did Dean do to deserve someone looking at him like that, like they absolutely fucking adored him...especially someone as strong and smart and innately good as Cas?

“Stop staring at me,” he mumbled sheepishly.

“I always stare at you,” Castiel said casually, as if stating this as a simple fact made it a totally reasonable defense. “If memory serves, you usually stare back.” And, yeah, okay, maybe they both had a mutual staring problem. Maybe.

“Don’t stare at me like that, then.” Dean tried to think of something else to say, a way to change the subject quickly, but nothing came to mind.

Castiel propped himself up by the elbow, looking at Dean with his head tilted. “Like what, Dean?”

“Nothing, Cas...”

“Dean—"

“Like I actually deserve someone like you, okay? Like there’s any fucking universe where you wanting me makes sense.” The words poured from his mouth, persistent and unreleenting, and he was suddenly powerless to stop them. “Like falling for someone halfway across the goddamn country isn’t a terrible idea, but I can’t seem to stop, Cas, I can’t get enough of you and I’m in deep, and it scares the fucking shit out of me—”

Dean was silenced abruptly by a kiss, the impact wet and crushing and urgent. Castiel’s tongue
teased Dean’s lips open and he responded eagerly, sighing into the kiss, the burst of intimacy overwhelming his senses. They gripped each other fervently, lying on their sides with hands on each other’s hips, before Cas propelled himself forward and trapped Dean beneath him. He pulled away barely an inch, their noses still touching.

“I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you,” Castiel whispered, grasping Dean’s neck, his heart racing against Dean’s chest. “Dean, I’m...I’m so overwhelmed by all this. By my feelings for you, by how intense this is.”

“I am too. Jesus, Cas...I have no idea what I’m doing.” Dean pulled his head up for another kiss and Castiel obliged. “I just wanna be with you.”

Castiel hummed against Dean’s skin, kissing his cheeks, his chin, his neck. “I want that, too.” His hand glided from Dean’s torso, to his hips, to the inside of his panties… His face turned dark, mischievous. “What else do you want?”

Before Dean could answer, Castiel’s hand was pumping Dean’s cock in slow, unhurried strokes. Even at the current pace, Dean felt himself tremble. He wanted Cas, he wanted ever single available inch of him, of his body and his heart and his soul—

“Fuck me,” Dean moaned, and Castiel’s hand stiffened around his cock, suddenly immobile.

“Dean—”

“ Fuck me,” Dean repeated, not caring if he was coming across as desperate because, uh yeah, that was a good way to summarize the current situation. Still, though, Castiel’s expression was full of caution. Dean huffed impatiently, wondering how the hell to get his overly thoughtful boyfriend to fuck him hard into mattress already.

Dean pried himself away and rummaged through his suitcase, intent on retrieving the lube. Castiel, however, misinterpreted the motion, looking Dean with wide and panicked eyes.

“Don’t go...I want to, god do I want to. You have no idea what you do to me, Dean. It’s just…” He bit his lip, took a deep breath, and continued. “My first time was not pleasant. Raphael was careless and quick and I was sore for a while. It’s your first time and I want it to be memorable for the right reasons.”

Bottle of lube in-hand, Dean returned to his boyfriend, cupping his chin. “First of all, I’m not leaving. Not even close. Second of all, this Raph guy is the biggest dick of all time, and if I ever run into him at the Piggly Wiggly, I’m gonna throttle his ass.” Castiel snorted and Dean reclaimed his spot on the bed, Castiel draping an arm over his waist. “Third of all, anytime I’m with you is memorable, Cas, because it’s you. I trust you, okay? So if you’re game, let’s fucking do it.”

Castiel still looked doubtful but nodded. Satisfied to receive at least a nod, Dean pulled their hips closer and gripped Cas’ ass, moving steadily beneath him. Their erections had flagged slightly during the discussion, but the minute they pressed against each other, Dean felt a spark of electricity course through him. He reached for any part of Castiel available to touch—back, hips, neck, all bare and muscular and so goddamn enticing. Castiel drifted his mouth over Dean’s nipples and then down to his thighs, sucking a mark into the skin. A moment later, when Dean felt a tight, wet mouth brushing over the surface of his panties, his hips bucked in the air. Castiel fondled the cotton then licked a suggestive strip on the underside of Dean’s dick, dipping low before swiping his tongue against Dean’s balls. Dean moaned at the unexpected white-hot coil of nerves unraveling in his stomach. Jesus, Cas was so damn good at this.
A moment later Cas paused to locate the lube. Afterwards he slipped Dean’s panties to the side, looking down at him.

“You’re sure?”

“Cas, I swear to god, if you don’t put your—oh—oh…” Castiel had gently put one slick finger into Dean’s hole, watching his reaction intently. Dean became hyper-aware of every sensation—his own throbbing cock, the tickle of Castiel’s breath against his skin, the not unpleasant feeling of Castiel’s finger pulsing inside of him. Castiel still had his boxers on, which Dean found entirely impractical, so he reached a finger forwarded and began to slip them off.

“So impatient…” Castiel mumbled fondly, pulling his boxers down and discarding them effortlessly. Dean normally would’ve had a smartass retort, but he was too busy staring at Cas’ huge, glistening cock and wondering how the fuck that was supposed to fit inside of him. Jesus. Before he could lose his nerve, he pulled Castiel down for a searing kiss and rutted their hips together, pushing Cas’ finger in deeper. A moment later, Dean was breaking away from the kiss, panting and cursing, begging for a second finger. Turned out, it was much more of a stretch and took a moment to adjust; however, when Castiel began scissoring him open, whispering words of support and adoration in his ear, Dean realized how significant it would be to have Cas as his first. He felt intensely and recklessly turned-on, but also safe and completely taken care of. The combination was enough to make Dean emotional, maybe even allowing a single man tear to fall down his cheek... but hell no, he told himself firmly. Dean Winchester does not cry during sex, not even first-time gay sex with his potential soulmate, thank you very fucking much.

The third finger burned but he breathed through it. He knew all this prep was for his benefit, but he wondered if it might not be better to just rip the band-aid off and get fucked senseless already.

“Cas, c’mon…”

“Almost ready,” Castiel moved his fingers in a circle, while leaving sloppy kisses on Dean’s neck. “I’ve got you, love.”

They had never used pet names before, and the term of endearment made Dean blush...ironically, of course, considering there were currently three of Castiel’s fingers exploring the confines of his asshole. If he had any remaining boundaries with Cas, they were being dismantled one by one.

“How do you want…?” Castiel used his other hand, waving it between them, and Dean understood what he meant.

“I wanna see you,” he replied hoarsely. This moment would be a lot more than sex, and they both knew it. They had practically traded love confessions a moment ago, though they had pointedly avoided the “L” word...for obvious reasons. At least, Dean had avoided it, but he had been thinking it. Had Castiel been thinking the same?

Stuck in his thoughts, Dean didn’t notice Castiel pull his fingers out, but he felt the absence immediately. He was empty and stretched-out and nowhere near satisfied. He looked down, watching Cas slick-up his dick with lube, eyes hooded and filled with lust.

“Cas…” Dean reached for Castiel’s hip, hands nearly shaking with anticipation, eager and nervous at the same time. Castiel lined his cock up to Dean’s entrance, circling his rim with ample lube between them. Castiel tilted his head in hesitation, a silent form of permission, and Dean nodded. He felt the head of Castiel’s dick breach him, and as much as he wanted it, god did it want it, he couldn’t help but begin to tense up.
Castiel’s dick, surprise surprise, was not the same as three fingers. Not even close.

“Shhhh,” Cas cooed, rubbing Dean’s arm soothingly. “Relax, okay? Try to breathe. I’ll take care of you.”

“I know you will.” Dean closed his eyes, let himself lean into the mattress, focusing on the rise and fall of his chest. When Castiel pushed forward again Dean yielded, allowing himself to be slowly penetrated inch by inch until it seemed Cas had finally bottomed out. They were both breathing hard, but for totally different reasons—Castiel looked desperate to move, but kept his hips perfectly still, waiting for Dean’s say-so. For a few moments Dean was stiff and immobile, waiting for the burn to fade. He already felt a little sore, but his desire for Castiel far outweighed any discomfort. Besides, Dean knew the line between pain and pleasure was marginal. He reached for his own cock, which had gone soft during the adjustment period, and stroked himself back to hardness. Castiel watched him, sensually licking his lips.

“Looks like you’re about to devour me,” Dean whispered, thinking that would honestly be very enjoyable.

“Because I am,” Castiel said firmly, no trace of humor in his voice. Jesus, the tone alone made Dean’s cock twitch.

“Yeah?” Dean swiped precome from the tip then put both hands flat against the mattress. He was close already, but he wanted to come on Castiel’s cock. “Show me what you got...”

It was exactly as Dean suspected: Castiel had been holding back, colossally so. He pulled out—until barely the tip of his cock remained—then bottomed out quickly, once, twice, three times. Dean was already grabbing the bed-sheet, clinging for dear life. When Castiel picked up a steady rhythm, it was faster than Dean expected from his torture-loving, drag-it-out-as-long-as-possible lover, but they were both so fucking turned-on that clearly neither of them would last long. Dean was surprised how good it felt, Castiel’s cock throbbing and wet and pounding into him relentlessly, everything he hoped for and more. But the moment Castiel adjusted his hips, cock angled towards Dean’s belly, Dean gasped noticeably, a surge of electricity rippling through his body.

“Right there...right there, Cas. Oh...” He gripped Cas’ hips tightly, hoping he wouldn’t leave bruises, but Christ this felt amazing. Castiel brushed Dean’s prostate again and Dean moaned filthy, surprised that those sounds could even come from him. Fifteen-plus years of an incredibly active, satisfying sex life, but fuck. He had never made that sound before.

“So good, Dean. So fucking good.” Hearing Cas curse somehow made Dean realize how good this sex really was. How they had mostly skipped the awkward moments of first-time sex and gone straight into the mind-blowing portion, Dean had no idea, but no way he was gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. Castiel was now probing Dean’s prostate like a man possessed, cursing and moaning and calling Dean’s name, and it was too much, too fast, too hard, too—

Dean didn’t come as much as burst, come spilling all over his belly. His orgasm had built-up so powerfully than his brain couldn’t process it, and wow, that hadn’t happened in a long fucking time. He breathed through the aftershock and looked up at Castiel, wanting to witness the moment his normally buttoned-up boyfriend lost control. He barely had to wait at all, though, as Castiel’s hips halted suddenly and his head fell back, gripping Dean with a prolonged moan and falling forward into the bed.

“Is it always like that?” Dean didn’t realize he had vocalized the question until Castiel stirred beside him, turning his head and staring.
“Not usually, no.” Castiel leaned forward and kissed him, simple and tender and perfect. When he pulled back they were both smiling. “But I’ve come to expect that, in most situations, you and I are the exception.”

Chapter End Notes

The whole "Snakes on a Plane" digression is a gift /shout-out to my Trashcan girls, who were helping me with the details of Dean and Cas' trip and somehow..."snakes on a motherfucking plane" happened... haha I love y'all!

And I super love my readers, too—your comments are keeping me going! Keep ’em coming!
Chapter 11

Chuck’s funeral was an elaborate event. Dean observed the spectacle with interest, contemplating the similarities and differences between a funeral in the north and the south. The visitation didn’t include a potluck spread, for one thing, which Dean had experienced first-hand at his mom’s funeral. (He had been gifted so many casseroles, he suspected a handful were still wasting away in his freezer somewhere.) Chuck’s service had been grander and more ceremonial than anything he had ever experienced, which had been a surprise. From the little he knew about Chuck, Dean doubted his publisher would’ve actually approved of all the pomp and circumstance. Castiel, of course, confirmed his suspicion the moment they left the church.

“These weren’t even Chuck’s wishes,” he said vehemently. “I know that for a fact.” The service had just ended and they were buckling up in Anna’s car, about to head towards the burial site. Apparently Chuck had requested a day of greasy food, cheap bourbon, and classic rock. Dean thought that was maybe the best fucking combination he had ever heard of, and he obviously had to steal this idea for his own funeral...but one look at Cas’ downcast eyes and he decided to keep his opinion to himself. Dean gazed at his boyfriend empathetically, feeling the need to comfort him, to make this better somehow. He leaned forward from the backseat and found Cas’ hand. Anna started the ignition and joined the funeral procession line, heading for the cemetery and shaking her head.

“That bullshit has Zachariah written all over it,” she muttered, and Castiel tightened his grip on Dean’s hand, nodding. Dean squeezed his hand in response and they shared a small smile. It was a relief to be intimate again, even in such a small way. They hadn’t been affectionate around each other all day, not even around the handful of Cas’ coworkers Dean had met today (his two favorites being Hannah, who seemed sweet but clever, and Balthazar, who was certainly...entertaining). For his part, Dean was more than willing to show anyone and everyone he was with Cas, feeling ridiculously proud to be with someone this amazing. But Cas was adamant about being cautious around everyone but Sam, Jess, and Anna. There were technically no rules about editors dating their authors, but with everything in chaos after Chuck’s death—not to mention the current disarray of Zachariah’s transition as the new publisher—Castiel didn’t think their relationship would be well-received right now. At least...that was his justification for pulling away from Dean during the funeral earlier, Anna sitting between them.

Dean tried not to let it bother him, but when they parked at the gravesite and Castiel walked ahead, dropping Dean’s hand and matching pace with Anna, he couldn’t help but frown. Apart from a few dozen emails and a yearly Christmas card, Dean hadn’t known Chuck, not really. Anna and the others could certainly relate more to Cas’ grief, but...as his boyfriend, shouldn’t Cas want comfort from Dean, too?

There were nearly a hundred people at the cemetery, sitting in folding chairs or standing close to the burial site. Dean stood in the back, observing. Castiel looked particularly handsome today, with a blue tie and dark suit, his hair tousled by the wind. Dean sighed, wishing he could go stand next to him, loop a hand around his waist and lightly kiss his cheek...but this wasn’t the place. Not if they were trying to keep their couple status under wraps.

“Nice to see I’m not the only one keeping a low profile,” a man mumbled to his left. Dean turned, roused from his thoughts. The man was short, with dark hair and skin, wearing a wrinkled button-up and looking entirely out of place. *Just like me,* he thought.

Dean chuckled, the man’s face seeming friendly. “I keep a low profile wherever I go,” he answered, with an exaggerated smirk. “Less of a chance of getting into trouble that way.”
“Smart. Me, I never know how to act at these things. There’s too much…” The stranger looked up where Zachariah was standing—at least, Dean assumed the tall, imposing man was Zachariah. He hadn’t received the “pleasure” of an introduction yet, but figured the day of Chuck’s funeral probably wasn’t the best time. “Insincerity in the world,” the man finished. Dean hummed in agreement. The shared a quiet, comfortable pause.

“How did you know Chuck?” the man asked conversationally. Dean slid his hands into his pocket, fighting a chill. Remembering their at-the-moment-undisclosed relationship, Dean willed himself not to look at Castiel...

“He was my publisher. Found my novel submission in the slush pile, totally unsolicited. I was just some nameless farmer from Tennessee but he liked my novel enough to publish it.” He sighed, feeling emotional the more he remembered. “That was the best day of my life, you know? Finding out that, not only that my work was worth a damn, but a complete stranger thought so, too.”

The man’s eyes softened. “Chuck had that effect on people. Never met a stranger, as they say.”

Dean nodded, staring absently at the gravesite. He wondered who this man was and how he knew Zachariah, let alone apparently had a grudge against him...if that side-comment about “insincerity” was anything to go on, at least. But couldn’t think of a tactful way to pry. Instead, he glanced down at the man’s hands, noticing the telltale sign of someone who also worked in physical labor—dry and scratched skin, calluses, closely trimmed fingernails.

“I’d ask if you farm, but ’round here, that’d be near impossible,” Dean commented. The man followed Dean’s eyes and looked down at his hands in surprise, as if just discovering them.

“Sounds like you know a thing or two about it,” the stranger said with raised eyebrows.

“I know some, yeah. Got a farm just outside of Nashville...been in the family for almost thirty years.”

The man whistled, expression impressed. “Hope you hold onto it, keep it in the family. It sounds very special.”

The man was right, Dean knew, but he forced himself to shrug. “That’s the plan, but you never know.”

With Cas in his life, he wasn’t trying to plan too far into the future or make himself any promises…. Especially since the thought of one day selling his portion of the farm and moving to be with Cas had been crossing his mind a lot lately. But could he even live in a place that he hated, a place where he didn’t fit in? And would Cas even want him to make such a long-term gesture? Dean shook his head, staring at the back of Cas’ head and wishing he was standing beside him.

“Anyways...you never told me what you do,” Dean said, aware that the man was waiting for him to continue. “Construction? Carpentry? Fight club?”

The man snorted, seeming amused. “Gardening,” he corrected. “I’m a botanist at the Cleveland Botanical Gardens. They always tell us to wear protective gloves—and whenever we use chemicals, I do—but…” He smiled sheepishly. “I like to feel things growing. You know?”

“Yeah...I get that.” Dean had been young, barely at an age to remember, when Mary bought the farm. Their first harvest was meager and difficult and wonderfully memorable. Like writing, farming was hard, meaningful work. Dean loved them both, had established his identity around them. “So, uh, how did you know Chuck?”

The man shifted around in the grass, staring down at his shoes. It was the first time Dean noticed him
looking nervous or uncomfortable, and he wondered why.

“He would...talk to me,” the stranger said carefully. “Confided in me, from time to time.”

“Y’all talk a lot?” he asked, wondering if Cas would know him. Maybe he should wave him over...but he noticed then that Cas wasn’t standing beside Anna anymore. Strange. Maybe he was mingling somewhere, out of sight?

“More than most,” the man answered vaguely. “I’m very...upset about his passing. I’ll miss him very much.”

Apart from Cas and Anna, it was the most genuine moment of grief Dean had witnessed all day. He liked this man, whoever he was.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said. He reached his hand out to shake, wondering how they hadn’t already introduced themselves. “I’m Dean, by the way. Dean Winchester. What’s your na—”

He felt his phone buzzing in his pocket and pulled it out, frowning. He had a text from Anna, which was weird, considering she was barely ten yards away. He squinted his eyes, reading…

“I gotta go,” he said abruptly, feet already walking the block towards Anna’s car. “Nice to meet you!”

The man called his goodbye and Dean waved, the encounter already fading into memory. He sprinted back to the car, eyes frantic and searching, noticing there were dark rain clouds above. Anna’s words were burned into his brain, sudden and desperate and filled with panic:

_I can’t find Cas._

***

Castiel walked twenty blocks before finally hailing a taxi. He hated to waste the money, especially just to sit in the outlandishly busy Saturday traffic, but he was tired and cold from walking in the sudden rain. Besides, he didn’t particularly feel like being surrounded by a crowd. He needed to be alone, or alone with Dean, but no matter what he couldn’t handle being at the burial. Chuck had been spiritual but never religious, had been laidback, not sophisticated and lavish. Nothing about his funeral service reflected him in the slightest. The mishap was all Zachariah’s doing, as usual, and Castiel doubted he could spend one more free moment of his day in the company of that man.

All this paled in comparison to the realization that Chuck, his first true friend in New York City, someone who had been like a father to him for fifteen years...was no longer around. Was permanently gone. Castiel hadn’t attended his mother’s funeral, and now...he was missing the burial of his oldest friend simply because he couldn’t process his emotions.

He was angry at himself for his nonexistent coping skills. What did Dean even see in him? He was irrevocably damaged, forever in the shadow of his nightmarish childhood. His whole life he had come off as aloof and unfeeling simply because he felt too much, because he wore a mask of apathy in order to protect himself and everyone around him. But Dean was light and air and everything that made the world good. If he was being honest with himself, Castiel should let him go before he dragged Dean down into the depths with him…

He shook his head at the thought, feeling tears burn the corners of his eyes. No, he couldn’t. He didn’t care how selfish it was—he would stay with Dean as long as Dean wanted him. He couldn’t imagine life without him. It was terrifying, but true.
He was shivering when he walked up two flights of stairs and threw open the door to his apartment. It was still raining, torrentially so, and Castiel had been caught in it for blocks. He was shaking from the wet clothes and dropping temperature and all-consuming flood of memory and emotion. He needed to get out of these damp clothes, but first, went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. He had just put it down and turned the burner on when his front door swung open.

“Cas!” Dean bellowed, walking across the living room and sticking his head around the corner. “Cas! Are you here?”

“In the kitchen,” he answered weakly. When Dean spotted him, leaned against the counter, a variety of expressions crossed his face—worry then relief, followed by a flash of something...

“You okay?” Dean asked. Castiel didn’t know how to begin to answer that question. Dean was still standing in the doorway, arms crossed, waiting. Oh, Castiel thought dimly, he’s angry with me. And who could blame him? Castiel had left the funeral without alerting anyone, flying off mid-conversation with Anna. He didn’t deserve comfort, from Dean or Anna or anyone.

“I’m sorry if I worried you,” Castiel said quietly, wishing the hot tea was ready so he could do something to keep his hands busy.

“Yeah, you did. I mean, c’mon Cas…” Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. “You really suck at goodbyes, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.” Dean opened his eyes, narrowing them at Castiel, but he simply stared back. It was the truth, after all—Castiel had a habit of leaving whenever he felt the urge, not always realizing how his absence would be received. Apart from Anna and Chuck, he had been alone in the world for so long.

Still, despite his obvious frustration, whenever Dean noticed Castiel shivering he sighed and took long step forward. He slipped Castiel’s suit jacket off, folding it carefully on the counter. He loosened his tie, holding the knot in his hand, and managed to give Castiel a small, closed-mouth smile.

“It’s backwards,” he commented, almost fondly, but there was still an uneasy edge to his voice. He untucked Castiel’s shirt and began unbuttoning it, peeling it off his arms and shoulders. Once he was shirtless, Dean’s hands stroking his arms urgently for warmth, Castiel felt the panic from the funeral begin to slowly fade.

“Cas,” Anna called, the front door opening again with a noticeable hurl, “why’d you leave without—oh, uh...”

She stood in the kitchen doorway, eyes shifting between them, looking as though she had interrupted something she shouldn’t. “Sorry,” she mumbled awkwardly.

“It’s fine,” Castiel said, voice still shaking but gradually regaining his composure. Dean seemed to have a rather stabilizing effect on him. “I’m sorry to worry you, I just…I’ll call you later, okay?”

She nodded quietly and exchanged a brief glance at Dean, one that seemed wary, almost wounded. It occurred to Castiel that Anna might be jealous of their relationship...not only had Dean been Anna’s friend for years before meeting Castiel, but Castiel was her best friend. In less than a month, however, Castiel was craving Dean’s insight and comfort almost desperately. Not more than Anna’s, per se, but in a different and more intimate way.

She turned around stiffly and shut the door without another word. Dean sighed again, pulling Castiel...
in by the hips. Castiel melted against him, his warmth and security.

“You know you’re gonna have to deal with that, right?” Dean mumbled, stroking the hair at the nape of Castiel’s neck. Castiel didn’t bother asking him what he meant—he knew Dean was perceptive enough to pick up on Anna’s anger. Just like Castiel was perceptive enough to know that Dean was still upset about his unannounced exit, but was waiting to make sure Castiel was stable enough to hold a conversation about it.

“I know,” Castiel answered, unable to keep the misery out of his voice. In fifteen years, he had never had an argument with Anna...let alone hurt her feelings. Before the dismay could settle in, the kettle started whistling. Dean took it off the burner mechanically, pulling mugs and tea bags from the cabinet like he had seen Castiel do yesterday. While the tea steeped, he led Castiel to the bedroom, undressing him in a slow and tender way, and handing him a dry outfit—sweatpants and a t-shirt. Castiel was practically feeling back to normal by now, having expelled most of his panic during the long trek home. But he didn’t want Dean to stop touching him, to stop caring for him, so he stayed quiet. He was led to the loveseat, and a moment later, had a warm cup of tea filling his hands. He thought for the millionth time how astounding Dean truly was, how he deserved someone stronger and less broken to go through life with.

They sipped their tea in silence, Castiel pleased to find it had been lightly sweetened with honey, with only their shoulders brushing. The sound of the clock ticking was slowly driving Castiel mad, but he didn’t know what to say, was clueless about how to ease the tension between them. He had already apologized for worrying Dean—should he do it again? Should he explain himself or just beg for Dean’s forgiveness?

Dean set his mug down on the end table, the sound unsettling in the otherwise noiseless room. “Cas,” Dean said lowly. Castiel turned to him, searching his face...but his expression was unreadable.

“Dean,” he replied, trying to make his voice lighter, more willing to engage.

“Let’s...let’s start from the beginning.” Dean rubbed his temples and closed his eyes, like the conversation was already difficult for him. “Why did you leave?”

Castiel put his mug down and pulled his knees to his chest. “I kept thinking about something. A memory.” After a pause, Dean waved his hand, urging Castiel to continue.

“It was my first month here,” Castiel said slowly. “I had snuck out of my mother’s house in the middle of the night, with only enough money for a one-way bus ticket. I was so excited, so relieved to get away, until I actually got here.” Castiel chuckled, the sound hollow to his ears. “It was awful. I was young, I had no plan. Just a backpack full of clothes, books, and a toothbrush. I spent the first few nights in homeless shelters, until two men approached me and…” He looked up at Dean, smiling weakly. “Let’s just say they didn’t approve of what they assumed my sexual orientation was. Though they were correct, of course.”

Dean looked disturbed by this development, but stayed calm, placing a soothing hand on Castiel’s neck.

“After that I slept in parks, which in my case, turned out to be safer. I somehow got a job as a busboy, but still hadn’t saved up enough for my own place, so I slept anywhere I could. Public bathrooms, libraries, buses. Parks were my favorite, since it reminded me of being outside and tending to the bees...the only part of home I missed. A few times I got citations for loitering.” He took a deep breath, willing himself to finish. He had never told anyone this story. “One morning I woke up and there was a man sitting on my bench. I had fallen asleep reading, I believe it was a
Sylvia Plath chapbook. I couldn’t stop reading one of her poem’s... ‘Elm.’ Do you know it?”

Dean shook his head, rubbing small circles against Castiel’s skin. “I remember it by heart...part of it, anyways.” Castiel cleared his throat, trying to dissipate all emotion from his voice, and recited:

“I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?”

Castiel continued in low, rumbling voice, reciting nearly the entire poem. When he finished they were quiet for a moment. Dean pulled Castiel to him, their shoulders touching, Dean’s arms wrapped around him. Eventually Dean said, “Wow, you were one hell of a precocious teenager, Cas.”

Castiel snorted, not expecting such a lighthearted reply. “What were you doing at eighteen, Dean?”

“Sleeping around, farming, barely earning my GED,” he muttered. “Probably feeling fucking sorry for myself, to be honest, thinking that having a dead, alcoholic dad was the worst fate anybody could have, but…”

Castiel leaned against Dean further, knowing where this train of thought was going. It was why he rarely told anyone about his background—his mother’s abuse, his early hardships in the city. He wasn’t interested in pity, sympathy, or an unhelpful, childhood-trauma competition. Everything that had happened to him just was. There was no changing it.

“That would be challenging for anyone to accept, Dean. You don’t have to compare our situations...like most people, we’ve both encountered difficulty.”

He felt Dean nodding his head against his shoulder. “So,” he said, clearing his throat, “this man at the park. Your bench buddy. It was Chuck?”

“It was Chuck,” Castiel echoed. “He noticed my book and showed me what he was reading. On the Road, I believe, which I found incredibly disconcerting.”

“What? What the hell do you have against Kerouac?” Dean asked playfully, and Castiel scoffed.

“There are too many issues with that self-obsessed drivel for me to even begin,” he said shrewdly. Dean laughed, the movement shaking them both. “Anyways, despite his flawed taste, Chuck and I eventually developed a friendship. In the beginning it was centered around books and literature, but we eventually began discussing other things. I told him about my busboy job, about why I had no home and why I left Tennessee. He was the first person who ever knew about my mother, the first person I came out to because I wanted to, not because I was pressured. Over time, he told me he was in the midst of opening a publishing company and he was in need of interns...”
“And he offered you the position,” Dean finished, sounding awed. It was a peculiar story, Castiel knew, with a lot of melancholy, serendipity, and luck. What if he hadn’t fallen asleep reading that night? What if Chuck took his morning walks in a different park? His entire life would’ve turned out differently.

“Yes. He offered me one spot, Anna the other.”

They were quiet again, sinking into one another, but the silence had finally turned comfortable again. Castiel suspected Dean was in the process of forgiving him for his earlier mistake, but he couldn’t be sure.

“What made you think of all that? Before the burial, I mean?” Dean asked, and Castiel tilted his head, trying to remember.

“The leaves,” he said finally. “The trees at the cemetery reminded me of the trees in the park, the ones Chuck and I would discuss during our morning talks. The familiarity got to me, and I felt everything at once, and—”

Dean tightened his grip, placing a small kiss on the back of Castiel’s neck. “I know,” he mumbled. “I get it now. But Cas…” Castiel remained motionless, still waiting for the bottom to fall out and Dean to turn angry.

“You’ve gotta stop making this a habit, man. Whenever you get upset, you can’t just flee the freaking scene. And if you do, tell me and we can French exit together.” He exhaled, the air tickling Castiel’s neck. “Sound reasonable?”

“Sounds very reasonable,” Castiel said evenly. He craned his neck, searching Dean’s face. “I’m sorry, Dean. It was wrong to leave without you.”

“Damn straight it was,” he mumbled, but his eyes were beaming and he cupped Castiel’s jaw, gazing at his lips. He pulled him closer and brushed their lips together gently. Having his neck at this angle wasn’t exactly ideal, but Castiel leaned into the kiss all the same, thankful for Dean’s compassion. After a few moments they pulled away, and Castiel buzzed with contentment.

“Uh, while we’re having this talk,” Dean said, “might as well add to the chick-flick moment…”

Castiel rubbed his thumb on Dean’s cheek in soft strokes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just…” He bite his lip, hand sliding to Castiel’s back. “It’s hard for me to pretend that we’re not together in public, you know? I missed you today.”

Castiel had figured as much, based on Dean’s body language and emotional distance, that he had felt rebuffed this morning. An immeasurable fondness for Dean passed through him, and he fought the urge to kiss him again. It was endearing and complimenting, how little regard Dean had in taking their relationship public. But Dean was still new at this, and simply didn’t understand the gravity of the situation. There would be repercussions at his office—where he was employed and where Dean’s books were contracted for publication—now that Zachariah was in charge. Not to mention that being a proudly outed and noticeable gay couple in any public setting had the possibility to turn dangerous for them both. Dean hadn’t experienced any of that yet, and Castiel hoped he never would, but still…he had to protect him, protect their relationship. They had to be smart about this, to think it through. If not, they would run headfirst into trouble.

“I missed you too,” Castiel whispered, meaning it completely. As much as he appreciated Anna and the connection to Chuck that they shared, it was Dean’s hand he had been itching to hold all
morning.

“We’ll figure it out, I promise. Once everything settles down.” It was a vague promise, and Castiel wasn’t entirely sure what he meant by it, but it seemed to console Dean enough that he smiled in relief and reached down for another kiss. Dean’s mouth tasted like black tea and honey and Castiel ran his fingers through Dean’s hair, missing him and worshipping him and so thankful that the worst of their disagreement seemed to have passed. Dean adjusted Castiel’s hips, opening his legs wide, and Castiel found himself on top. With the added friction, the press of their bodies together, the kisses became frenetic, feverish, all tongue and nips of teeth. Castiel sucked mercilessly on Dean’s neck, leaving a small hickey behind his ear. They were both half-hard by now, rutting against each other, when Dean’s phone buzzed on the end table.

“Need to get that?” Castiel asked breathlessly, certainly not wanting him to, but attempting to be polite.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Dean answered, grinning and capturing Castiel in another kiss. A few moments later, though, the phone buzzed again and Dean pulled away. “Whoever is cock blocking me right now is about to hear an earful,” he grumbled, reaching above his head and snatching his phone. His face softened when he looked at the screen, and he turned it around for Castiel to view. Sam had sent photos of Dean’s apple pie with a blue, first-place ribbon draped across.

“You won,” Castiel said, beaming.

“Fuck yeah I did.” Dean smirked, expression proud and haughty. “Was there ever any doubt?”

“Well, considering I haven’t actually tasted your pie, I might’ve had a doubt or two.” Castiel kissed his cheek, expression clearly teasing, but Dean’s smile began to slip.

“Oh...right. We forgot to do a taste-testing, didn’t we? We could’ve done it today, but—”He shook his head, plastering another smile on his face, though this once seemed less genuine. “Oh well. It’s just pie, right?”

That statement sent a plethora of red-flags to the forefront of Castiel’s mind. After all, if there was one thing Dean Winchester loved, it was pie.

“It’s not ‘just pie,’ Dean...it’s your annual tradition. Your family always goes to the fall festival and you always win the pie contest. You’ve been talking about today nonstop and now I’ve made you miss it.” In all the chaos of flying in and attending the funeral, the thought hadn’t yet occurred to Castiel. Guilt settled into his stomach, but Dean was beneath him shaking his head vehemently.

“Cas, stop. I wanted to be here. Hell, I’m the one who volunteered, even though I’d rather choke down eighteen gallons of Jess’ green beans than fly any-fucking-where. I came because I wanted to, alright?”

Castiel nodded. Apart from a psychic, no one could’ve predicted Chuck’s funeral, but he still felt responsible for Dean missing one of his favorite events of the year. Maybe there was a way to make it up to him…

Dean lifted Castiel’s chin with his finger, his other hand reaching suggestively for his lower back. “Now stop thinking so hard. Get back up here and kiss me.”

***

Dean and Castiel both spent the next week inundated with work. Castiel edited Dean’s book in the evening, but was in the office during the day, helping to sort through the disarray that was Sacred
Sun Press. He would come home complaining of another policy or process that Zachariah had changed without taking his feedback into account, and Dean would put down his laptop and rub Castiel’s shoulders until they were both thoroughly distracted...and somehow wrapped in bedsheets. Huh, funny how that always seemed to happen. Meanwhile, Dean preoccupied himself with finishing the novel, typing and reading and typing and rereading, his eyes straining from staring at his laptop for hours on end. He counted down the days remaining on his manuscript deadline, obsessively fixated on it, unless Cas was around...then Dean was like any other red-blooded American, obsessively fixated on getting into his boyfriend’s pants.

Either way you sliced it, the past few days had been productive.

By Friday, with only hours to spare, Dean was still a few thousand words short of his deadline. Castiel was working from home that day, and—after some lengthy conversations and a very heated make out session in the kitchen—it was decided that they could no longer properly work together in the same room. Maybe not even the same apartment. The professional, shed-sharing phase of their relationship was over, and fuck, now Dean was listing all the surfaces Cas could bend him over in the shed whenever he visited next and holy crap that train of thought was so not helping.

In the end Dean kissed Cas goodbye, packed up his laptop, and walked to the nearest dive bar. It was the first time in weeks that they had voluntarily been away from each other, and as Dean slid onto a stool and opened his computer, he already missed Cas’ company. After a few moping sips of beer, he snapped out of it, reminding himself that him and Cas would be long-distance soon...he shouldn’t get too dependent, or too used to being near him everyday. Still, a smaller, wiser part of his brain pointed out that it was much too late for that.

After a few minutes of aimless tinkering, he finally started rolling out the last chapter, words coming to him faster than he could type. Mike had finally escaped from the dick angels, Luke was in the process of breaking the final seal, and Lucifer was on the cusp of rising. It was one hell of a cliffhanger, but maybe the sales on his fifth and final book would surge as a result. If his heart was pounding just writing the final scene, he couldn’t imagine the reaction of his readers. He wrote for hours without resting, only pausing to order another beer and take a leak. When he wrote the final sentence, he glanced down at the time, realizing he had been here for nearly nine hours. Christ, he was tired. He sent a quick email to both Anna and Cas, attaching the full manuscript. As soon as he pressed send, he felt a massive weight lift off his shoulders.

It was early evening by now and Dean’s stomach was growling. He texted Cas that he was on his way back, throwing on his leather jacket and texting it all-caps IT’S FUCKING FINISHED!!! Obviously Castiel still needed to edit it, then Anna would approve the draft and submit it for a proofread; afterwards there were months spent in production and design...this process was far from over. But still, Dean’s four weeks of crazy ridiculous work was finally paying off, and he wanted a large slice of pie and an extremely naked Castiel...but which one first? Maybe both, at the same time? At that tempting thought, Dean practically ran home—no, not home. Cas’ place, he reminded himself sternly. It was a strange slip-up, considering he strongly disliked NYC and the apartment wasn’t quite homey (in fact, if Castiel had told Dean he moved in two weeks ago, Dean would’ve believed him). But it wasn’t about the city or the space...it was about Castiel. Dean felt most like himself whenever Cas was around, like he could be a writer and a farmer and a dude super into having sex with one particular sexy-ass dude, and Cas would accept every contrasting part of him. Not only accept it, but seemed to relish it, cherish it, genuinely enjoy it. So fuck it, yeah, Cas was basically his home now and Dean was willing to follow him around the entire goddamn country if it meant never losing this feeling.

Five minutes later, he flew up the stairs to the apartment and opened the door using the spare key. He
couldn’t wait to spend the whole weekend celebrating and relaxing with Cas. Maybe they could even get away for the weekend, rent a cabin upstate and have hot jacuzzi sex. Or forest sex. Or—

Dean opened the door and heard an obnoxious crunch. Leaves, leaves everywhere. Unless Cas’ boots had drug in approximately two hundred leaves on accident, this made zero sense. What were leaves doing inside Cas’ apartment? Then he noticed the metal tub full of water and floating apples, the pumpkins with carving tools nearby, the pecan pie resting on the counter.

“Uh, Cas,” Dean called. “Come quick...I think fall exploded out here.”

Castiel rounded the bedroom corner and Dean practically lost his shit. Cas was wearing form-fitting overalls with flannel underneath, rolled up to the elbow, and a toothpick in his mouth. It was simultaneously the most absurd and sexiest costume Dean had ever witnessed, and he wasn’t sure which reaction to relay first. Castiel made the decision easy by outlandishly sauntering forward, apparently doing an impersonation of a country redneck that should honestly be illegal in most states. Dean laughed hard and Castiel grinned and the whole thing just seemed too whimsical to even be real.

“Cas, dude,” Dean was wheezing, he was laughing so hard, “what the hell? You gotta clue me in here.”

Castiel glanced down, eyes darting around nervously. “You couldn’t attend the fall festival last week, so…” He opened his hands wide. “I brought the festival to you.”

Dean thought there was a ninety-nine percent chance his heart would actually burst at the gesture, which would have been very inconvenient, considering he had a boyfriend that needed to be kissed. Now, immediately, and forever. He looped a finger around the straps of Cas’ stiff denim overalls—where had he even bought these, Home Depot?—and cupped his face in his other hand.

“You brought the festival to me,” he repeated, and he couldn’t help it, Dean was grinning like a goddamn, lovesick idiot.

“I did,” Castiel said, hands on Dean’s hips. “What would you like to do first?”

They started with pumpkin carving. Initially Dean had been surprised that Cas had never done this before, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. No way his crazy ass mom had approved of any Halloween-related traditions, though Dean smiled at the thought of a nerdy, baby Cas and how much he would’ve loved Halloween. There was so much that Cas had missed out on, so many things that Dean couldn’t wait to show him.

Pumpkin carving, however, created a mess that dismayed Castiel to no end. He ran into the spare closet and returned with newspaper and trash bags. He disliked the texture of the fibres inside, groaning and complaining the whole time, which Dean found adorable. Cas was confounded by Dean’s insistence that they save the pumpkin seeds, but once they had amassed a full bowl, Dean washed them and tossed them with melted butter and salt. They roasted in the oven while Dean and Castiel played a makeshift game of indoor corn hole (which totally wasn’t a thing, but wow, it was nice of Cas to try).

Afterwards they drank warm apple cider on the couch while Castiel streamed a video of a crackling fireplace, which made Dean smile to no fucking end. They shared Cas’ homemade pecan pie (which was totally overcooked, but Dean still loved it) and the bowl of roasted pumpkin seeds (which were perfect, and they both devoured the whole stash in two seconds flat). Dean was so full and content and absolutely smitten. He was the happiest he had ever been—his novel was finished, Sam and Jess would be having a baby in a few months, and Dean was in love. He leaned on Castiel’s shoulder,
yawning and asking for a blanket, but Castiel nudged him awake. They hadn’t bobbed for apples yet, and apparently, that was the activity Cas was most excited to try. Dean pouted slightly—and no, it was not because they had to stop cuddling, nope, not at all—but eventually relented.

At first he was still half-asleep, but plunging his face repeatedly into the tub of cold water was enough to make Dean fully awake again, and damn, if he wasn’t terrible at this game. Those little fuckers kept floating away, just out of his grasp (or, you know, mouth), until he grew frustrated enough to give up completely. Of course Cas was magnificent at it, which Dean only admitted begrudgingly...at least, until Cas started taking off his layers. Cas unhooked his overalls and unbuttoned the flannel, then the undershirt, evidently sweating from the half-dozen apples he had retrieved. Cas was now naked aside from a very tight pair of overalls on the bottom, body glistening with water that trickled down his chin and chest...yep. Dean was now the biggest fan of bobbing for apples.

“These are delicious,” Castiel commented, chewing a small bite out of his latest conquest.

“I wouldn’t know,” Dean grumbled with feigned exasperation. Really, he was just hoping Cas would finish up soon so he could take him to bed already. He was already sporting and impressive erection and they hadn’t kissed for over an hour, which was either incredibly embarrassing or incredibly impressive, depending on your perspective. Dean just hoped he wouldn’t pop a boner the next time he was shopping in the produce section, ‘cause holy hell, apples had never looked so good.

“Oh,” Castiel said, voice low and deep, “have a taste.” He offered up his apple, his previous bite small and round against the skin...but Dean had a better idea.

“Oh, I intend to.” He twisted a finger into the denim overalls, folded over at Cas’ waist, and pulled him close with a yank. Castiel yelped in surprise at the sudden heat of Dean’s mouth against his, but instinctively leaned into the intensity of the kiss, the apple rolling from his hand and falling to the floor—forgotten. Dean moaned and pushed Cas against the kitchen wall, pulsing with passion and sheer appetite, his exploration of Castiel’s mouth wet and wild and undeniably filthy. He licked into Castiel’s mouth and nibbled on his lower lip, and when he felt Cas’ erection against his thigh, he snaked his hand into the overalls and began stroking his cock. Castiel trembled at the touch, leaning his head against wall, eyes closed and moaning.

“Oh shit, Dean, oh shit—”

It would never not be a turn-on to hear Cas curse. It was a proven fact by now, since Dean was currently hard as a goddamn rock.

“That’s right, baby,” he cooed, kissing Cas’ neck and stroking faster. They had now fully transitioned to the pet-names-during-sex portion of their relationship and Dean was strangely okay with it. Hey, pillow talk was pillow talk.

“Don’t—not like this—”

Cas was talking in fragments, breathing heavy, but Dean knew what he meant.

“How do you want it?” he breathed, voice heavy and deep. He thought about offering up his mouth...it had been a few days since the last one, and he was still perfecting his technique. He slowed his grip on Cas’ cock and they both took a deep breath, neither commenting on how quickly things had escalated, but oh boy, had they escalated.

“You, bent over the table.” At those words, Dean’s stomach did a flip. Was he about to get fucked from behind on Cas’ kitchen table and why had no one told him today was fucking Christmas?
Castiel seemed totally in-control now, his usual dominating-bedroom-persona floating to the surface as he unbuttoned Dean’s jeans. His pants fell to his ankles and Dean stepped out of them dutifully. As soon as he finished, Cas was palming his dick through his boxers, and Dean sucked in a breath and nearly stumbled.

“How-do we do this?” Dean had the general idea, sure, but they hadn’t been very experimental yet with their positioning, and he wanted to make sure he didn’t mess it up. In a flash, Castiel wrapped his hand around Dean’s boxers and slid them off. Dean stood there, buck-ass naked and ridiculously turned on, seriously down for whatever Cas had in mind.

“Put your elbows on the table. I’ll go get the lube, but—” Cas pulled Dean in for a rough kiss, teeth clashing and tongues circling, messy and debauched and awesome. “Don’t touch yourself while I’m away. Tonight you’re coming on my cock.”

If a command like that was actually supposed to make Dean want to jack himself off right fucking now, well, mission accomplished. He barely managed to resist as he watched Cas walk into the bedroom. Dean leaned against the table, elbows down and ass up, heartbeat pounding in his ears. When Castiel returned he was gloriously naked, the overalls likely discarded somewhere on the bedroom floor (or, if Dean knew Cas, probably carefully placed in the dirty clothes hamper, the sexy nerd). He was already lubing up his pointer finger and Dean actually whimpered at the sight, Castiel gazing at him with pupils blown wide with lust. He stood behind Dean but didn’t immediately slip a finger in, leaning instead to cover his body with kisses. Dean was feeling less nervous and more relaxed when a finger did finally breach him, and then he was panting and rutting against the table, desperate for more fingers, more friction, more anything. Castiel curled his finger in towards Dean’s belly and wow, wow, wow, wow... there was his prostate yet again. Castiel had a knack for finding it and Dean would never get used to how good it felt, how dirty and debased, intimate and pleasurable, every encounter with Cas ended up being.

Dean barely noticed when a second finger was added ‘cause all he could think was this is not Cas’ cock, this is not Cas’ cock. Honestly, he was getting borderline whiny about the wait when Cas slapped his ass playfully and added a third finger. Dean moaned at the tight burn, breathing through it and enjoying the fullness, so turned-on by this point he figured there were streaks of precome on the table. They would probably need to disinfect all of Cas’ furniture at some point, especially the table, but damn if it wasn’t worth it.

Then came the moment that always made Dean shiver—the absence of Cas’ fingers, the clatter of the lube bottle opening, the slick sound of Cas lathering his dick. Thank the good lord above they had gone together weeks ago to get tested, ‘cause Dean didn’t know if he could even wait for a condom right now. This was the moment Dean always considered sheer anticipation, his whole body basically a vulnerable pile of nerves. It reminded him of the split-second between the rise and fall of a roller-coaster, the transition when the whole ride is about to tip forward, flying fast in oblivion and then you’re breathless, stomach flipping, feeling out of control in the most frightening and ecstatic way—

Cas bottomed out and Dean practically wailed with pleasure, the stretch fading and giving way to hot tightness, hands forcefully gripping his hips. When Castiel started to move Dean’s elbows began shaking, arms weak and falling against the table, head too heavy to keep upright. At some point Castiel wove his hand into Dean’s hair and pulled, his cock offering an exceedingly fast pace, in and out, in and out, and Dean remembered—not for the first time this week—that he loved the feeling of being pushed down, dominated, wholly at Cas’ mercy.

“Cas—ah fuck, Cas, feels so good...”
Reckless and emboldened, Castiel went faster and faster, the slap of skin against skin absolutely obscene, hotter than any porn Dean had ever watched. Jesus Christ, though, who needed porn with a boyfriend like this? Castiel hadn’t grazed Dean’s prostate for a while, which Dean figured was a strategic move on Cas’ part, ‘cause no way was he coming back from that. Nope, once Cas hit the money spot he would be painting the table in about three-point-two seconds. Eventually Cas’ breathing grew more labored, his thrusts intentionally slowing down, and Dean knew he was preventing himself from finishing.

“Come for me, Cas,” he whispered, voice deep and breaking.

“Not before you…” He reached forward, kissing Dean’s neck lazily before re-adjusting his hips. He finally angled his dick in that too-good-to-be-true way and there it was, bursts of white clouding Dean’s vision so powerfully that he closed his eyes. His back arched and he couldn’t help crying out, the intensity nearly unbearable, and Castiel was saying his name over and over, and Dean tried to commit every sensation to memory but it was too big, too overpowering, and then he was coming untouched all over the goddamn table.

Castiel followed shortly after, as Dean suspected he would, and slumped forward, head resting on Dean’s back. They rested quickly in the afterglow, chest expanding and contracting in a matching rhythm, and Dean was so filled with love that he had to say something.

“Cas,” he mumbled, face still planted against the table.

“Mhm?” Castiel was immobile, a comforting weight pressing down against Dean’s back.

“Uh, so...one day I’m going to tell you something. Something really important. Not now, ‘cause that’s crazy and you’ll think I’m a lunatic, but…” Dean breathed out, raking his fingertips against the wood. “When I do tell you that really important thing, remember this conversation, alright? And remember that I felt it, without a fucking doubt, right at this moment.”

Castiel was so quiet, Dean worried he had made a mistake, had misread the signals, had just totally fucked up the best thing to ever happen to him—

“Okay,” Castiel said calmly, “as long as you’ll remind me to tell you the same.”

Dean grinned, feeling relief and joy and disbelief. *Cas feels the same way...holy fucking shit.* “Deal,” he said softly.

They disentangled slowly, exchanging a few chaste kisses before Dean headed into the shower and Cas stayed behind, cleaning up the mess. The spray was warm and steady and Dean practically melted against the shower wall. Cas was supposed to join him soon, but after ten minutes, Dean was soaped and scrubbed and still standing alone.

“Cas?” He pecked his head from behind the shower curtain. “Cas?” He shut the water off, dried haphazardly before circling the towel around his waist. He found Cas sitting on the floor, still naked, head in his hands. His phone was at his feet and Dean looked at the clock. It was near midnight—had someone called, emailed? What was going on?

“Cas,” he repeated, squatting down low and putting a hand on his arm. “Cas, what’s wrong?”

“Anna sent Zachariah your draft, and…” He looked up, eyes filled with palpable grief. “I’m so sorry, but he’s—he’s refusing to publish the book unless...”

“Unless?” Dean didn’t even remember speaking, didn’t even know he was capable of producing words. He was too busy hyperventilating.
“Unless you take out the relationship between—”

“Mike and Angel.” Dean finished the sentence numbly, distantly, as if this was always the catastrophe he had been spiraling towards, as if his entire fictional world hadn’t just caught flame, burning before his eyes.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Morning, y'all!

So, disclaimer: I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. (Said in the David Tennant voice.) We've got some angst on the horizon. I promise to try and settle it quickly. If you're someone who might potentially be triggered, please check the end notes for specific warnings.

Shout-out to my beautiful, Book Club betas for their extra helpful feedback on these next few chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The commute to Chuck’s apartment took longer than usual. It was a bright and early Sunday morning and Castiel scowled at the autumn sky. It felt cruel that life was still continuing while his newfound happiness was on the precipice of crumbling. Castiel stuffed his hands into his trenchcoat and cast a worried glance at Dean, who hadn’t said much all night...just poured himself glass after glass of Maker’s Mark while staring at the floor.

As Dean’s editor, Castiel could do little to reassure him. They were in uncharted territory here, with Zachariah having total control of the company. Castiel didn’t think his new boss could cancel a book on a whim, especially for such obvious discriminatory reasons, but there was no way of knowing how the chips might fall. Castiel had known for years that Zachariah was likely homophobic, simply from the disapproving looks and stares he had given Castiel. But Chuck was open and accepting and the rest of the company had always followed suit. Castiel loved his job, he loved his coworkers. But he detested Zachariah.

As Dean’s boyfriend, Castiel was indignant and defensive and angry about the whole thing. Anyone or anything that could make Dean react like this—drinking to excess and gaping stonily at nothing—was not a welcomed presence in their life. And it was their life...right? Hadn’t they essentially traded roundabout declarations of love just moments before Zachariah’s email had landed in his inbox? Castiel had held Dean all night, kissing his forehead and soothing his back, until Dean finally put his head in Castiel’s lap and closed his eyes. While Dean slept, Castiel conducted an internal debate, wondering if they shouldn’t just appease Zachariah’s request. It would be difficult and perhaps impossible for Dean to agree to it, but the romance in the book was already quite subtle. Would the novel lose its impact by making a few more tweaks? Castiel suspected “no,” but he kept his pondering to himself, at least for now, knowing Dean was like most writers and fiercely protective of his work. And, Castiel thought shrewdly, Dean had always been incredibly defensive of his independence and freedom...

So it might take a few days, but they would do whatever they had to for the book to survive. The idea of compromising genuinely devastated Castiel—not to mention the reality of continuing to work under someone like Zachariah—but he was used to compromising his own happiness in order to exist in the world. It was a painful lesson that, perhaps, Dean needed to learn as well.

After a long subway ride and a walk two blocks east, they arrived outside the steps of Chuck’s building. Castiel spotted Anna the moment they rounded the corner, thankful that she was willing to bolster Dean and Cas’ argument and support them. Castiel had a renewed sense of energy just seeing
her, but things hadn’t quite been the same between them since Chuck’s funeral. She was keeping her
distance and Castiel didn’t fully understand why. He sighed, thinking, just another problem to add to
the list.

Once they were all gathered, staring at the front door as if it might bite them, Dean surprisingly broke
the silence.

“You look like shit,” Dean told Anna. Castiel wasn’t sure how she would respond to such an
observation, but his best friend only smiled weakly. It was true—her hair was greasy, her makeup
smudged. It looked like she had a difficult night, too. She had always been passionate about the
books she managed, but even more importantly, she cared about Dean as a writer and a friend.

“Like you look much better,” she replied, attempting to put a playful edge to her voice, but it fell flat.
They were all too worried, too panicked to be anything but blatantly honest.

“Yeah, well…” Dean huffed out a breath, lifting his gaze from his shoes and looking at Anna with
apprehension. “I have good reason to be.”

There were waves of anxiety coming off of Dean and Castiel put a steadying hand on his back.
There was nothing to say, no words of comfort to offer that actually rang true. The only way out was
forward.

“Shall we?” Cas mumbled, and they clambered up the steps together. Castiel took the lead as they
climbed a larger set of stairs inside, walking down the landing until Chuck’s familiar door came into
view. Castiel had worried all night about having this conversation, but the gravity of where they
were hit Castiel all at once. It was Sunday morning, sure, but why had Zachariah instructed them to
meet here...in his recently deceased father’s apartment?

Castiel knocked mechanically and waited. He willed himself not to reach for Dean’s hand, not now,
not when Zachariah was so close…

The door flew open and there he was, wearing a mockingly pleasant expression on his face. He was
dressed in his standard dark suit and silver tie, despite the early Sunday morning meeting, and Castiel
irrationally despised him for it and his inability to act even remotely human.

“Castiel, Anna.” His eyes settled on Dean, eyes shifting darkly. They shook hands stiffly. “Mr.
Winchester...please come in.”

When they crossed the threshold, Castiel struggled not to gasp. He had spent many nights at Chuck’s
apartment, discussing books over drinks, sharing cigarettes on the balcony, even ordering takeout
and losing themselves in a good movie. Now everything was in boxes, a moving crew taping up
cardboard and hauling trash bags, the landscape of Chuck’s home startling and barren.

“You’ve been...busy,” he mumbled, looking at the newly blank walls. He thought watching
Zachariah empty out Chuck’s office had been difficult to witness, but this... It hadn’t even been two
weeks since Chuck’s death, but Zachariah was already erasing every part of him from Castiel’s life.
He took a deep breath, resisting the feeling of hollowness settling inside his chest. He had to stay
strong...Dean needed him.

Zachariah clasped his hands. “You know what they say, idle hands and whatnot.” He looked
between the three of them, eyes flickering. “So, Castiel. You weren’t exactly clear in your email, so
please enlighten me. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We’re here to discuss Dean’s book,” Anna said, taking a step forward. “The fourth installment of
his Impala Chronicles series. Yesterday you had some thoughts on it?”

“Oh, right.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Apologies, Mr. Winchester. We have so many books to publish that it’s difficult to keep track of all the minute details. Not to go for a cliché in a room full of editors, but I’m a very busy man.” Castiel barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “What was the issue with the feedback I provided?”

“The issue was—” Dean began, jaw set and tight, but Castiel interrupted.

“You made some suggestions concerning the characterization of the main character,” he said quickly. “We’re hoping to discuss it further?”

“Oh, of course,” Zachariah said, a derisive bite in his tone. “It’s not our usual conference room, sadly, but this is all I can offer on a Sunday morning house call. Shall we make use of my father’s old dining room furniture before it’s picked up for donations?”

Castiel felt the color drain from his face, but followed. Zachariah was attempting to distract him from the issue at hand by playing off Castiel’s grief. He shut his mouth firmly and took a seat around the antique oak table, wanting to find some way to calm himself down without Zachariah knowing. As if sensing his distress, under the table and out of sight, Dean brushed his foot against Castiel’s lightly. He sighed, feeling the tight knot in his chest begin to dissipate. He could make it through this. They could make it through this.

“So, you all came here to discuss…” Zachariah threw his arms open widely. “Discuss.”

The three visitors looked between each other, not quite knowing where to start. Finally, Anna said, “Well, you suggested that the book wasn’t publishable unless the relationship between Mike and the angel was removed—”

“Now, hold on,” Zachariah said, lifting a finger patronizingly. “I never said that it wasn’t publishable. No need to make Mr. Winchester feel insulted.” He grinned apologetically, as if the whole thing was a mix-up that Anna had created. “I simply said that, at its current state, the book isn’t a good fit for Sacred Sun. None of our other fantasy series include a relationship...of that nature. Anna and Castiel would agree, they know our frontend and backend books by heart.”

“That’s exactly why we need this book as-is,” Anna argued, hands waving with emphasis. “While LGBTQ representation is rapidly expanding in the literary world, this story is doing something few other fantasy series are attempting. And it’s doing it incredibly well.”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I don’t agree.” Zachariah had one leg crossed at the thigh, hands casually on the table, as if they were discussing something trivial like the weather. “We’re not an innovative publisher. We’re a traditional publisher. We’re not here to make political statements about men being with other men—”

“Angel isn’t a man.” It was the first time during this meeting that Dean had spoken, and his tone was seething and sharp. “In this universe, angels have no gender. In fact, Angel considers himself a multidimensional wavelength of celestial intent, which I totally plan to mention later in the series...if, you know, there is a series still.”

There was a pause, uncomfortable and quiet, before Zachariah leaned against the table. “Mr. Winchester—”

“Dean.” The word came out as a growl. “If you’re gonna ruin my career and cancel my book for no good reason, the least you can do is call me Dean.”
Castiel’s limbs grew tense. No one talked to Zachariah liked that. No one. Strangely enough, though, Zachariah seemed amused by it.

“Dean,” he said. “If it’s so important to you, then tell me. Why did you include this man-on-man...or, excuse me, man-on-angel...love story?” He offered Dean a closed-mouth smirk, eyes bright and challenging.

“Uh, no offense to your interpretation or whatever, but the book’s not really about love. It’s a story about family, about overcoming evil and fighting for free will...the same free will, by the way, that should allow Mike to fuck whatever or whoever he wants when he’s not hunting.” His voice rose, trembling slightly. “It’s who Mike is, at least when Angel is around. It took me a long ass time to accept that. I didn’t write the character like that, it just happened, but it’s part of the story now and I don’t want to take it out.” He took a deep breath. Behind Dean’s head, Castiel and Anna craned their necks and exchanged a hopeful glance. Dean was a passionate, persuasive speaker—could he actually change Zachariah’s mind?

“So please, man, let me keep things the same. It’s important to me, and honestly, I think my readers will dig it. Which is what really matters, right?” It was the closest thing to “asking for permission” that Castiel had ever witnessed from Dean. He knew it was an offering not to take lightly, and he gave his boyfriend a small smile, admiring him greatly.

“Dean, I appreciate the sentiment, but please,” Zachariah said, lifting his eyebrows in surprise. “Did you really think it would be that easy?”

“Easy?” Dean laughed darkly. “You think any part of that was easy? Groveling for you to publish my book, even though you clearly have some sort of vendetta against it?”

“You know, this is the problem with authors...no practicality, an overactive imagination.” Zachariah shook his head, making a condescending *tsk tsk*. “As if you or your book are important enough for me to develop a vendetta against. In the grand scheme of things, Dean, you’re simply not important to us—”

“That’s not true,” Anna said hotly. “Chuck cared about his book, about his vision, about *Dean* as a person. And so do I.”

“Good for you,” Zachariah answered glibly. “Maybe you can waste your time fluffling up the egos of moderately-successful authors, like my father did. But I’m the publisher, Anna, and I take the role seriously. I don’t have time to wrangle authors or deal with their temper tantrums. I have to think about the big picture.” His eyes glinted towards Castiel. “Castiel understands that, he’s always been the reasonable one. There’s a hierarchy here and he knows well-enough to follow orders.”

Castiel felt Anna and Dean’s eyes on him, both willing him to speak up, to refute Zachariah’s claim. But he didn’t want to contribute to the escalating tension in the room. Someone had to play peacemaker, and unfortunately, the task had fallen to him.

“Let’s all try and speak calmly,” he said, but everyone shook their heads, ironically in unison. Zachariah looked at Anna and Dean, eyes narrowing.

“This has been entertaining, but it’s time to move on. We have other books that are more pressing. Dean has one week to rewrite the book to my approval, or we’ll cancel it and his contract will be broken.”

Dean stood to his feet, chair pushed out and falling to the floor. “Why wait? Let’s break the contract right now.” Castiel jumped to his feet too, grabbing Dean’s elbow, heart pounding. How had things
spiraled so far out of control?

“Dean, please—” If Castiel could just quiet down Dean, could talk some sense into Zachariah, then everything would work out...

Dean pushed Castiel’s hands away and glared at Zachariah, his face turning dark and furious. “Maybe I’m a ‘moderately-successful author’ but I can find another publisher with my eyes closed, you son of a bitch.”

Zachariah laughed unpleasantly, the echo in the empty apartment loud and unsettling. He looked between Castiel and Anna, his grin predatory. “Would you like to tell him...or should I?”

“Tell me what?” Dean snapped, squaring his shoulders and taking a step in Zachariah’s direction.

“Go back to your cute, little farm and read your contract, Dean, *thoroughly* this time. In the meantime, allow me to give you the CliffsNotes version. Essentially...” He took a step closer and glowered at him, unblinking. “I own your ass.”

***

Dean felt fire in his limbs. Adrenaline and anger were draining what little energy he had, but he couldn’t slow down. He couldn’t stop walking. If he stopped then he might have to think, and thinking would only lead to questions. Questions he was nowhere near ready to ask, let alone hear the answers to…

“Dean,” Cas called, not for the first time. “Dean, please stop.”

They had walked about six blocks in this exact fashion, and though Dean had no idea where he was walking, he knew he just had to *move*. He needed to put distance between him and that bag-of-dicks-in-a-suit before he marched back and stabbed Zachariah to death.

“Dean! Dean, we need to talk!” Anna ran past Castiel, putting her hand on Dean’s arm and tugging. He fought the urge to push away, because *fuck no*, *Dean Winchester does not push women*, but he was fuming, nearly unconscious with rage. He turned sharply and glared at them both, faces mirrored with worry and empathy. And fuck that, no way, they were partially to blame here too. As selfish as it was, in that moment, he wanted them to feel just as bad as he did.

“Wanna talk? Fan-freaking-tastic, let’s talk,” he said. It was almost lunchtime and the sidewalk was growing busy with traffic. They had apparently stopped in front of a busy breakfast place, but Dean’s stomach was tied in so many knots that not even bacon and eggs could unravel his anxiety. “Apparently I signed a deal with the goddamn devil and neither of you thought it was important enough to mention to me.”

“Dean.” Anna’s voice was firm, hardened. “How many times did I ask you to *read* the contract? Really read it? Or how about when I asked if Sam would read it and offer you legal council? Did you ever even ask him about it?”

Dean rubbed a hand over his jaw, looking down. “Okay, whatever, that’s on me. But I was in a fucking dark place and you knew that, Anna. Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I tried,” she said, exasperated. “And since then, I’ve been working behind-the-scenes to try and nullify those contracts.” Castiel looked at her in surprise—he hadn’t known that, apparently. “But then your writer’s block ended and things seemed better. You and Castiel were working together really well...better than I anticipated. But then Chuck died, and you turned in your manuscript and Zachariah...” Her face fell, and she buried it in her hands.
“What are the consequences, exactly? Of breaking the contract?”

Anna raised her head, exchanging a look with Castiel. Neither of them wanted to be the bearer of bad news, evidently, but Castiel relented first.

“There are termination fees. Sixty percent of all royalties you were given for the current book, in addition to thirty percent for any previous books. If the contract is broken, you’d owe all that, in-full.”

Dean sucked in a shallow, painful breath. His head was spinning. “I...I can’t...” The farm hadn’t been lucrative for years now, so Dean had poured his royalties checks into it, just to keep things afloat. Sam made a decent living as a defense lawyer, but he worked for a mom-and-pop place in town, so his salary was modest. And he was still drowning in student loan debt from law school, with a baby on the way. Neither of them had that kind of money to blow. They’d have to sell the farm, the land, everything.

“There’s more,” Castiel said.

“More?” Dean demanded. “What could possibly be worse than that?”

“The publisher’s retention of rights.” Anna’s voice was trembling—she had started to cry. “Legally, we own your manuscript now. Zachariah can make whatever changes he wants and still publish it.” Dean felt nauseous, dizzy. Now his own goddamn book didn’t belong to him? But it was his. He had written it.

“I want to fix this,” Anna continued, crying so noticeably that strangers were looking. “I just don’t know how.”

Castiel pulled her in by the shoulder and embraced her, sobs muffled by the lapel of his trenchcoat. He looked up at Dean with heavy eyes, patting Anna’s hair in pacifying strokes. Looking fully into Castiel’s gaze, those gorgeous fucking eyes that he loved so much, Dean felt a flood of emotions. Desperation. Despondency. Anger. Hurt. He wanted to lash out, to break something, to release all his feelings at once.

He could walk away now, try to cool off alone and salvage his friendship with Anna and his relationship with Cas. Yeah, he should definitely walk away. He shouldn’t speak. He shouldn’t—

“Nice to see you can be there for someone.” The words fell from Dean’s mouth and he was immediately worked up all over again, hands shaking and heart pounding.

“Excuse me?” Castiel’s voice was small.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“Actually, I don’t.” Castiel’s tone was still cool and unruffled and it was really starting to piss Dean off.

“ Weird...you must’ve had an out-of-body experience the whole time Zachariah was being a psychotic asshole to me.” He huffed into the air, taking a step closer. “Cause from where I was sitting, you just let it happen. You didn’t say one word to defend me, Cas, the entire fucking time. Even Anna spoke up, but not you.”

“I was trying to salvage your book, Dean. As your editor—”
“I don’t give a fuck about you as my editor. I care about you as my boyfriend just sitting there, letting some dickwad walk all over me.”

Anna peeked her head from Castiel’s chest, wiping her tears away. “I...I’m gonna grab some coffee,” she muttered, walking through the crowd and entering the nearby breakfast place. Once she was gone, Castiel grabbed Dean by the arm and dragged him to the side of building.

“What did you expect me to do, Dean?” Cas growled, pushing Dean against the bricks. It reminded Dean of the first time they met, outside the coffee shop that afternoon, when Cas had crowded against him. Like today, they had been on the verge of either making out or ripping each other’s throats out. But Dean was too hysterical, too panicked to feel anything but anger. He shoved forward, breaking his hold.

“I expected you to care, Cas. Or actually, here’s an idea. How about you treat Zach like you’re treating me — ’cause you’re about five seconds from ripping my head off, for whatever fucking reason,” Dean snapped. Cas seemed to regain self-awareness after that, taking a step back and letting Dean have more space. But he was still simmering with fury and Dean was feeling reckless. He wanted to provoke Cas, to have an outlet for how shitty everything had suddenly turned.

“Cat got your tongue, Cas?”

Castiel scowled. “Maybe you should try it sometime, rather than saying whatever comes to mind.”

“I’m blunt, always have been,” Dean said defensively, with a shrug. “At least I’m not like a freaking puzzle to figure out, dude. I say whatever is on my mind and I mean it. You just tiptoe through life until something sets you off, then you go all badass for a split-second before reverting back the factory setting, aka, letting everyone walk all over you.”

A flicker of pain floated across Castiel’s face, so vivid and unflinching that Dean had to look away. He had done that, he had caused Castiel grief. Castiel, his boyfriend who he was eight hundred percent in love with...why was he arguing with Cas right now? Shouldn’t they be working together to figure out the Zachariah situation? He sighed, wishing he hadn’t taken out his frustrations out on Cas.

“Cas, look—”

“Thank you for feedback on my personality flaws, Dean,” Castiel said flatly, spinning around and turning his back. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“No, wait—” He reached for Cas’ hand, grasping for his fingers. Dean was still infuriated by the whole fucked-up mess he had somehow found himself in. But he had to fix things with Cas first. No way would he make it through the pending shitstorm without him. Or, you know, just life in general. He needed Cas. Hell, he loved Cas.

“Cas, please—”

In the corner of his eye, wandering in from the back of the building, he spotted a group of guys approaching them. They were wearing various graphic sweatshirts, likely in their mid-twenties. And they were all staring at Dean and Cas.

“Guys, don’t look now,” one said, his tone mocking. “We have a pair of fags squeezing in a quickie before breakfast!” They all roared with laughter and Dean narrowed his eyes, taking a step forward.

“What the fuck did you just say?” he yelled, taking steps towards them. Four against one? Hmm, he had encountered worse odds during the occasional bar fight... But that had been over ten years ago,
when he was a twenty-something and a full-time farmer. Now he was a thirty-one year old writer who ate his boyfriend’s homemade pecan pie for dinner. Still. With everything going on with Zachariah and the book, and now Cas, he just wanted to lose control for a while. He needed to not think about anything, he just needed action.

“We said you’re a fag, fag,” another guy sneered.

“Yeah, take your pretty girlfriend there and go home!”

He didn’t remember deciding to run, but there Dean was...running. Heading straight towards a group of homophobic dicks that had seriously picked the wrong day and the wrong bisexual to taunt. He felt Cas call his name, gripping his arm and attempting to haul him backwards, but Dean shook him off easily. Castiel wanted him to stop, wanted him to be rational and safe. But right now Dean just wanted to lose himself in rage.

With one hand, he grabbed the first dude by the collar, his grip tight and unyielding. With the other he titled his wrist slightly, aligning his first two knuckles, and punched him in the jaw. He felt a slight throb at the contact, but he knew how to deliver an effective punch, and anyways, the only emotion he could process right now was fury. While the first guy was down, he set his sights on the one who had called Cas his pretty girlfriend like a fucking creeper, and yeah, that guy could go straight to hell. He slammed him against the brickwall, prepped and ready to deliver another blow, when he felt hands behind him. He knew better than to end up on his back—that was a surefire way to get the crap kicked out of you—but they tripped him and pushed and there he was...on the asphalt. On his back. Fuck.

He was surrounded now. He winced at the first kick, thrashing and attempting to regain his footing, but after the second and the third, he zoned out. He took blow after blow and stared up at the sky, thinking this was probably the perfect end to the worst twelve hours of his life. He was in the process of losing his book, his farm, and his boyfriend, and now he was going to be kicked to death by a gang of homophobic strangers. It was all he deserved, really.

“Get the fuck away from him,” Castiel growled. Dean heard sounds of a struggle...had Cas punched one of them?

“Cas...no…” Dean’s heart began to pound—what the fuck was Cas doing? It was one thing for Dean to get the crap beat out of him, he had basically asked for it. But Cas had been through so much already, he didn’t need another run-in to add to the list.

“I won’t ask you again,” Castiel snarled, and they amazingly started to scatter, though Dean couldn’t figure out why. Castiel was commanding, yeah, but he wasn’t scare-six-dudes-away-by-the-sound-of-his-voice commanding. Above him there were sounds of running, the scrap of shoes shuffling against the ground. Eyes closed, Dean tried to stand, but his torso felt swollen and achy, his abdomen tender to the touch. He likely had a rib broken. Castiel put a soothing hand on his shoulder, shushing him quietly. “Just stay down, okay? I need to call an ambulance.”

“Cas, no—”

“Dean, you could have internal injuries. I’m not risking it. And…” He sighed, as if an incredibly annoying detail had just come to light. “I believe my wrist is sprained.”

Dean cracked his eyes open, flooded with worry, eyes raking over Cas. He already had his cell-phone up to his ear, and in the other hand, which already looked limp and swollen…

“Dude,” Dean groaned. Everything hurt—his chest, his sides, his stomach. “You carry a shank in
your pocket?” That was why the dudes had scattered. Cas had threatened to cut a bitch.

Castiel rolled his eyes, covering the phone with his hand. “I’m from the South and I live in New York City. You expect me not to carry a knife?”

Dean didn’t have much of an argument for that, so he rolled his head back to the ground, closing his eyes. Fuck, he really needed to show Cas how to throw a proper punch. He could’ve avoided a sprained wrist if he’d known better.

Strangely, things between him and Cas already seemed better. It was comforting, despite the fact that the rest of his life was in shambles. But they still had a lot to talk through...Dean still wanted Castiel to back him up against Zachariah, but was it worth Cas losing his job over? Was Dean even willing to let Cas make that kind of sacrifice for him?

After he finished up his calls—one to 911, the next to Anna—Castiel squatted low, rubbing a hand through Dean’s hair. He felt sweaty and bruised, gravel sticking to his skin, but he leaned into Cas’ touch all the same. “Don’t worry,” Cas whispered. “I’m going to protect you.”

Dean chuckled, a dozen light-hearted jokes on the tip of his tongue. Instead, all he could think was… but who’s gonna protect me from you, and you from me, if this all comes crashing down on us?

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings for:

-Hate speech
-Homophobic language
-Assault
Chapter 13

Hi, I've missed y'all, it's only been a week (as usual) but it feels like forever since I've posted! This chapter and the next will be kinda unique with the POV, sticking with one perspective per chapter rather than an alternating structure. I wanted to really zero in while the conflict continues to unfold.

As always, thank you so much for reading, commenting, and sharing. <3

Two days later they were standing inside the airport. Dean was still healing from the assault, but aside from one fractured rib, the remainder of the damage was mostly bruises. The hospital hadn’t even held him for long, though the police had come to take a statement right after his X-ray. Dean hadn’t wanted to call them—technically he had thrown the first punch, after all—but Cas said everything should be documented, and wouldn’t take no for answer.

“You’re sure you have to go?” Cas asked quietly, for the third time that morning. They were leaned against a nearby pole right outside the gate. More than last time, even, Dean dreaded the thought of flying. Cas wouldn’t be there to distract or comfort him.

“I have to,” he mumbled, though that wasn’t entirely true. It was terrible timing, but Sam had arranged a meeting to interview a new accountant for the farm, which they were in desperate need of. Dean trusted his brother’s judgment, so truthfully, this meeting was just an excuse to go home. He needed to get the hell out of this city. The noise, the stress, Zachariah, the memory of those douche nozzle homophobes beating the shit out of him...

Yeah, he wouldn’t miss this. Not one bit.

But he would miss Cas.

He cupped his boyfriend’s chin, thumb stroking his cheek, and leaned in for a kiss. It was quick and sweet and simple and just what Dean needed before getting on the plane. Castiel, however, looked surprised.

“What?” Dean said, with a small smile. “Can’t give my hot-ass boyfriend a goodbye kiss?”

“Oh course,” Castiel replied quickly. “I’m just...surprised. That you would even want to...in public, I mean. After what happened.”

It hadn’t even occurred to Dean that the incident might make him skittish about PDA, or entice him back into the closet. Strangely, it had done the opposite. He wasn’t planning an official coming-out party or anything—though Charlie would be there with glitter and penis straws if he ever did—but he had never cared much about what other people thought. If the occasion to mention Cas or to “out” himself appeared, he wouldn’t avoid it.

Considering all that, Dean just shrugged. “Nothing could make me not wanna kiss you, Cas.”

Castiel’s eyes softened, a flash of vulnerability settling there. “You mean that, right? Because everything’s that happening between us, and your book, and Zachariah…”
Dean looked down at his feet, attempting to formulate a somewhat honest response. Truth was, he was still angry with Cas. His boyfriend had an apparent inability to stand up to Zachariah, which really fucking sucked considering everything Dean might lose if he didn’t. But another part of him knew it wasn’t Cas’ responsibility to get him out of this mess...he had created it by not reading the contract. They were stuck in a web of roadblocks and complications with Anna and Zachariah on the outskirts, and Dean and Cas stuck at an impasse in the center. Neither wanted to compromise, neither wanted to lose each other. So they had spent the past two days cuddling and kissing and avoiding all discussion of the actual issue, despite the fact that Dean only had five days left to rewrite certain sections of the book. If that was what he decided to do…

He really, really needed to go home and clear his head.

“Dean?” Castiel sounded worried now, and it shook Dean from his thoughts. “Are we okay?”

“We’re okay, Cas.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and sunk back into his heels, thinking. “I won’t say everything’s peachy, ’cause you know that ain’t the truth. But I don’t want any of this bullshit to change things between us. I just might need some space this week, all right?”

Castiel physically flinched at the word space, his complexion growing pale. “You aren’t…I mean, we aren’t…” He paused, noticeable inhaling. “Breaking up, are we?”

“What?” Dean demanded. Embarrassingly enough, the word was delivered as a squeak. Dean cleared his throat and tried again. “No, fuck no.”

Castiel still didn’t look convinced, though, and Dean’s heart began to race. “Unless...I mean, unless that’s what you’re trying to do right now…?”

“No!” Now it was Cas’ turn to practically wail, and thank god for it. Dean felt relief flow to his fingertips. “I don’t want that. At all. I just…” He bite his lip, looking for the right words. “I’m worried about us.”

“I am too,” Dean said honestly. He found Cas’ fingers and entwined them. Their foreheads leaned in, resting against each other. “By next week I might end up without a book or a farm...but at least I’ll have you.”

Castiel shook his head, eyes wide and grief-stricken. “I don’t want that, Dean. I want you to have everything you want, everything you deserve…”

Then help me, Dean thought desperately. Help me.

“Kiss me,” he asked instead, and his boyfriend obliged, pulling Dean in by his neck and sliding their lips together soundlessly.

They said their goodbyes and Dean walked numbly through security. Waiting outside his gate, he was no longer cognizant of anything, not the book or Zachariah or even himself. His body shut down inadvertently the moment he no longer had to pretend to be strong for Cas’ benefit. He had spent the last few days in a state of blissful avoidance, soaking up his last few days with Cas. But now the reality of their situation was beginning to sink in. He felt immediately lonely, and pulled up Cas’ contact info on his phone before shaking his head and locking the screen again. Cas had already made his stance on the situation perfectly clear. He wanted Dean to fall in line, to do what Zachariah demanded.

But Dean knew, deep down, that he wanted to fight. He just didn’t want to do it alone.

The flight home was full of turbulence and altitude shifts. Dean’s only distraction for the fact that he
was surely going to die on this godforsaken plane was picturing Cas beside him. His lips, his eyes, his hands wandering down Dean’s abdomen, teasing and searching for...nope, hold up. No way he was gonna pop a boner in the middle seat, wedged between little old ladies. He needed to think of something else, but every other part of his life was too depressing—the Zachariah situation, the fact that him and Cas lived on two separate ends of the country and hated the other’s cities. Maybe they could compromise, pick somewhere in the middle? Cas would look fucking good as a Colorado rock-climber, or a Wyoming rancher…

But no, not even that would work. In about six months Dean would be an uncle, and he wanted to be a part of the kid’s life—not just drop in on holidays. Maybe it was greedy, but fuck it, he needed a way to keep his family, the farm, the book, and Cas. He loved every aspect of his unimportant little life and he didn’t want to give any of it up.

A few hours later it was Jess, not Sam, who picked him up from the airport. It was the middle of the afternoon and Sam was busy at the office, which honestly suited Dean just fine. Sam knew next to nothing about what was going on and would want to have A Talk once he was in the loop again, which Dean was nowhere near ready for. He was still shaken and queasy from the flight, fighting the urge to reach out to Cas even though it had just been a few hours. He needed time and space to figure all this shit out, and if he talked to Cas about it now, they’d just end up arguing again. Jess mercifully left him alone with his thoughts—though she was just as nosey as her moose of a husband—and when they pulled into the gravel driveway, Dean practically wept with joy. The quiet, the hills, the smell of tobacco barns burning. He had missed this.

He carried his luggage inside and dumped it all on his bedroom floor, planting himself facedown on the bed. The sheets smelled musty and stagnant and so not Cas that it made a flicker of longing ripple through his stomach. Jesus, he was so gone on the guy. A few hours apart and he was already turning to putty. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, daydreaming, imagining a happy ending to this whole fucked-up situation. Zachariah was somehow out of the picture and Lucifer Rising was a bestseller, the farm was thriving, Sam was bouncing a baby in his arms, Cas was curled next to Dean on the couch, kissing his neck…

When Dean cracked his eyes open, evening had settled outside. The window was filled with darkness. Fuck—how many hours had he slept? When had he even fallen asleep? He groaned, rolling on his side and wincing at the bruises, when he realized something had woken him up. A buzzing sound. His was phone was ringing on the nightstand. There was an unfamiliar number on the screen, with a New York area code…

He tapped the screen open and answered. “Uh...hello?” His voice was deep, still heavy with sleep.

“Dean. Or, is it Mr. Winchester? I keep forgetting your preference.” Zachariah’s tone was sleek and precise and Dean felt wide awake now, like he had been drenched in ice water.

“Neither,” he grumbled, pulling himself up from the mattress. “I’d rather you didn’t call me anything. In fact, how ‘bout you lose my number?”

Zachariah laughed, the sound cold and hollow. “Now, is that anyway to talk to your publisher?”

“When my publisher is a manipulative dick, yeah.” Dean knew Cas would be horrified that he was talking to Zachariah this way, but you know, what Cas didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

“Interesting. I just had a chat with your boyfriend about his future with the company.” Zachariah intentionally paused, letting the words sink in. “I have exciting plans for him.”

Dean had been pacing his bedroom unintentionally, but those words stopped him dead in his tracks.
Cas had been annoyingly clear about keeping their relationship a secret—how the fuck did Zachariah know? What was going on?


Dean clamped his mouth shut. He didn’t want to incriminate himself or Cas if Zachariah was somehow bluffing.

“Disappointing. Castiel was downright chatty by comparison. Such a dependable employee...a company man, my father always said.”

Dean cleared his throat, head spinning. He tried his best to keep his voice level. “What do you want, Zachariah?”

“I want you to play your part. I want you to be a good little writer and write the book the way you’re told.” His voice was cheerful, chipper. Dean thought it was the most sinister tone he had ever heard. “And I want you to stop...how should I put this? Distracting Castiel, so he can do his job without you getting in the way.”

Dean inhaled sharply, letting out a dark, disbelieving chuckle. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“You’re a writer, Dean. Read between the lines.”

Dean leaned against his desk and closed his eyes. “You want me to what...break up with Cas? So you can get his undivided attention? Are you a psychotic, twelve-year-old girl?”

There was a pause, and Dean wondered if Zachariah’s cool facade was finally beginning to slip...but in no universe was Dean Winchester that lucky.

“Believe it or not, Dean, I’m the only one who will tell you the truth. Castiel has a future at this company, maybe he’ll even have my job someday. But...” Another dramatic pause, and Dean wanted to reach through the phone and wring Zachariah’s neck. “Not with you around. You’re draining him, confusing him. You’re only bringing him down.”

“Wow, you really know how to make a guy feel all warm and fuzzy,” Dean said sarcastically. He was deflecting with humor as he always did, but some of Zachariah’s words were ringing true. Castiel’s life had been less complicated before Dean wandered into it. Cas deserved an uncomplicated happiness—not whatever fucked-up mess Dean was offering him these days.

Still, there was no way he’d share these insecurities with anyone, much less a goddamn snake like Zachariah. “Thankfully Cas is a big boy and can make his own decisions,” Dean said, sounding more brazen than he felt. “So yeah, screw you, you nosy fuck. I don’t need you and neither does Cas.”

Zachariah laughed again, loud and full, and it made Dean shiver. “Interesting. See, from where I’m sitting, you both need me. And desperately. You need to publish your book so you and your family can stay financially afloat. Castiel needs this job so he doesn’t end up unemployed. I’m the one giving you both stability. I’m the voice of reason in this situation, whether you want to believe it or not.”

Dean was now officially sweating. Fuck. Why was Zachariah starting to make sense? How was he getting inside Dean’s head?

“This little fling of yours? No offense, but there’s no future there. Unless you’re planning to abandon your farm and family, and move to New York City...”
Yeah, Dean was full-on panicking now. Zachariah was wrong about a lot of things, but fuck, if he wasn’t kinda right about this.

“Cas can get another job,” he said weakly.

“Can he?” He could practically hear Zachariah smirking on the other end of the phone. “It’s unlikely. Thanks to his teenage runaway act, Castiel barely has his high school degree. He could never go to another publishing house and get the salary and benefits he gets here. He knows how good he has it—why do you think he never leaves?”

Dean didn’t remember falling to the floor...but there he was, leaned against the wall with his knees pulled up. “This is fucking blackmail.”

“This is reality, Dean. I’m doing you both a favor, believe me.”

Dean pictured Cas sitting on his loveseat right now, cozy in his favorite sweatshirt, trying to read—but he was distracted. He was waiting for Dean to call, anxious and worried, expecting to hear from him any minute...

He gathered up what little resolve he had left, and whispered, “What if I say no?”

“Well, the way I see it,” Zachariah began flippantly, as if they were debating something subjective and frivolous, “Castiel may find it romantic at first...maybe he’ll even love you for it. But he will eventually resent you. In this scenario, he lost his career because you were too proud to compromise—any idea what that does to a relationship? Here’s a hint. You eventually break-up. Afterwards, he works a soul-crushing job but still can’t afford his rent. Maybe he becomes homeless again. Speaking of—” Zachariah’s pitch took on an excitable quality, as if he had just thought of something fascinating. “Did he ever tell you about what happened to him, last time he lived on the streets? The men who cornered him, attacked him everywhere he went. From what I’ve heard, he’s never quite gotten over it. I heard he still has some scars, but that could just be a rumor—”

“Dammit, Zachariah. Stop it please.” Dean’s voice was shaking, shoulders trembling, suddenly on the verge of tears. *Nut up and calm the fuck down,* he told himself sternly, *Cas would never be homeless ‘cause he has you. Except...* a smaller part of his brain pointed out, *except he’ll never wanna move down here. And you’ll never wanna leave. If you stand your ground, you’ll lose the farm, the book, and Cas’ job. How could he not resent you after that? How the fuck could he love you through all that?*

*Love...* His throat felt tight and constricted. He swallowed forcefully, body burning with emotion. There was no doubt in Dean’s mind that he loved Castiel. It had barely been a month but he had never felt anything as potent, as terrifying or thrilling. He loved his long and muscled frame. He loved the way he spoke, all formal and stuffy and adorable. He loved the way he held a book in his hands, the way he took his coffee, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand. He loved his passion and his wrath and his coyness and his gentleness...

And he loved him enough to protect him from this fucking shitstorm.

“I’ll do it,” he said numbly. “I’ll do all of it.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Okay, yes. The answer is ‘yes.’ You bastard,” Dean’s voice broke and he pulled the phone away, determined not to let this son of a bitch hear him cry.

“Excellent,” Zachariah said sunnily. “Well, this was certainly a productive call, don’t you think?” On
the other end of the line, Dean could hear the sound of a cork popping...Zachariah was pouring himself a celebratory glass of wine. “By Sunday, I expect to have your updated manuscript in my inbox. You’ll be speaking to me directly from now on, so no need to bother Anna or Castiel...under any circumstance. I’m sure you understand.” He took a long swig of wine, sighing happily. “Farewell for now, Dean. Happy writing.”

When the call ended Dean stared down at the phone as if it were a foreign object, wondering if that conversation had been real. Maybe he had imagined it...some sort of hallucinatory nightmare. He checked the call log and there it was—an unknown number, call duration twelve minutes. Twelve minutes? He shook his head, a tear rolling off his cheek and clinging to his chin. Apparently that was all it took to fuck Dean’s life up forever. Twelve minutes.

And then he was filled with fire and fury, screaming out so he wouldn’t sob, throwing his phone against the wall with the might of a baseball pitcher. It hit the drywall with a thunk and fell between the mattress and the headboard, screen likely shattered. Good. He didn’t need the fucking thing anymore. The rest of his movements were a blur, unadulterated and manifested rage: his desk toppling over, books being thrown, records skittering across the floor like discarded frisbees. He couldn’t leave Cas, he couldn’t, eight fucking hours ago he had kissed him in the airport and promised him that they weren’t breaking up. He had promised. And while he had told Cas he needed space this week, surely after a few days he would notice Dean’s absence, and would worry and spiral and jump to conclusions and think Dean didn’t want him, didn’t love him—

For a moment his vision went dark, black and fuzzy around edges. Then there was only the sound of a bookcase falling, the contents tumbling to the floor. He had to get the fuck out of here. He couldn’t face Sam or Jess or anyone who knew him, anyone who might try and talk this out. He needed to not exist, to erase himself and vanish, to run far enough that he couldn’t hurt anyone else. Anyone besides himself, that was, because that ship had fucking sailed. Having the weight of this decision on his shoulders, breaking Cas’ heart in order to save him…

It was something Dean would never forgive himself for.

He grabbed his suitcase, still packed from his recent trip, and dragged it towards the door. Distantly, a more self-aware part of his brain remembered that all the clothes inside would remind him of Cas, of their two weeks spent together, of every touch and kiss and sigh—

Nope. He dropped his suitcase and stepped over it, grabbing his keys from the counter and heading out the back door. He would buy new clothes. He would buy new luggage. He would buy a new goddamn identity because after this, he no longer wanted to be a citizen of planet earth.

Before leaving he scribbled a quick note. Gone for a while. He needed an excuse, a reason to leave again so soon and without any notice. Writing trip. He pinned the note to the bulletin board and slammed the door behind him. Maybe it would be enough to keep Sam off his case for a few days. Maybe not. Either way, Dean officially gave no fucks. He slid into Baby with nothing more than his wallet and the clothes on his back and headed for the highway.

Three days. He spent three days in a crappy motel in a highway town. Three days walking to the nearest dive bar and wondering if it was possible to drown himself in whiskey. He was only aware of the passage of time because he passed a bank on his way to the bar, the electronic billboard flashing today’s date in ornate cursive. He was drunk almost every hour of the day—anything less made him self-aware and lucid, and that was the last thing he needed. Each morning he would wake-up sore and almost sober and think things like Cas, I miss you or Cas, I love you and then he’d tip back the whiskey bottle until the thoughts were silent. On the third night, NOVEMBER 10 according to the bank, he got sick in the bar. They ushered him outside and he stumbled back to his room,
woozy and disorientated, searching his pockets for the room key. Realizing he had locked himself out, he wandered to the front office. Everything that followed were delivered in flashes: the motel clerk cringing at the sight of him, Dean collapsing on the floor, suddenly clammy and fatigued, vomiting again without warning, the clerk asking him if he had someone to call, Dean muttering the only phone number he knew by heart...

Then darkness. Not the subtle slip of unconsciousness like all the nights before. No, this was the dark sting of oblivion. Gnawing, aching—he fought against it, stumbled blindly, searching for a way out. It was as if one minute Dean Winchester was a person with a body and a soul, with thoughts and feelings and fingers and elbows, and the next he was just a floating mass, a void of consciousness. Was he dead? Had he died?

No. Someone was slapping his face. His face. He still had a face, which he was surprised to learn relieved him. Someone said his name and lifted him, his feet moving now, his breath shallow, his heart softly beating. Someone was practically carrying him upright and then dropped him onto a seat, and he had no control over his body. He hung limply and curled around the leather. The leather…

He cracked an eye open. He was in Baby. Sam was at the wheel. The sky outside was black, and judging by the highway sign, they were halfway home by now. No, that couldn’t be, they had just left the motel…

“Dean,” Sam said, voice laced with fear, “stay awake, okay? I need you to stay awake.”

“Sammy,” Dean croaked, words feeling unfamiliar in his mouth. Apart from “whiskey, neat” and “where’s my check” Dean hadn’t spoken to anyone in three days. “Cas… I need to talk to Cas…”

“That’s not a good idea, okay? Let’s just talk—”

“I don’t want to talk to you, I want Cas.” His words were slurring, drool trickling from the corner of his mouth.

“Where’s your phone?” Sam asked, exasperated.

“I dunno,” he mumbled, though a hazy memory made him suspect it was back at the house. The Impala took a sharp turn and Dean fought another wave of nausea. “Cas, lemme talk to Cas,” he said again. “I need Cas. Sam, call Cas—”

“Okay, okay, jeez.” He heard the distinct clatter of Sam fiddling with his phone, but Dean’s eyes were already closing. He was so tired, and while he waited for Cas, a nap couldn’t hurt...

“Castiel? It’s Sam Winchester. I’m sorry to call so late. Dean wanted to talk to you—yeah, yeah, I found him. He’s… well. I think he might have alcohol poisoning. I know, but it’ll be okay. We’re gonna take care of him, all right? But he wants to talk to you, just… keep him talking, all right? He doesn’t need to sleep yet or he might choke on—yeah, exactly. Okay, here he is.”

A cell phone slid against his ear. Dean’s eyes fluttered open to the familiar sound of...

“Dean?” Cas’ voice was frantic and low. “Dean, are you there?”

“S’mee, Cas.” He was shivering, skin covered in goosebumps. He desperately wished Cas were here beside him. “Miss you, wanna have you here. Can’t... can’t stop thinking about you. Every day, Cas. I think about you.”

“I can’t stop thinking about you either,” Cas said, breathless. “I’ve been so worried about you, Dean. These past few days have been…” He exhaled softly, voice trembling. “Incredibly trying. Without you.”
Hearing the emotion in his voice made Dean’s heart began to pound. Fuck, Cas was hurt. *He* had hurt Cas.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Fuck Cas, I’m sorry.” He was babbling now, hysterical, a flood of unconscious thought falling from his lips. “That son of a bitch... *he* made me do it, he said, ‘break-up with Cas, leave him.’ He said he would fire you and you’d be homeless and—*Cas*, I love you. I love you so much it hurts. But how were we ever supposed to make this work? You live there and I live here and we’ll never be in the same place, and I’ve ruined everything, but fuck, I need you. I need you so badly. Cas—”

“Dean.” His voice was firm and steady. “I need you to take a breath for me, okay? A deep one. Just like this…” Through the phone, Cas took in a long gulp of air, releasing it slowly. Dean closed his eyes and did the same. “Again...good, Dean. One more time.”

Dean followed Cas’ instructions until he was leaned into the seat, feeling significantly calmer. It was quiet now and Dean felt so relaxed, his head started to tilt back, his eyes closing...

“Don’t fall asleep on me, baby,” Castiel cooed, and a grin spread on Dean’s face.

“Hey, Sam, didya hear? I’m *Cas’ baby*.” He was relieved and delirious and too drunk to care.

“Oh, congratulations,” Sam said, and wait, why was he smiling? This was serious. “We’re home now, by the way. Tell Cas you’ll call him tomorrow.”

Dean squinted in the dark, realizing the Impala was parked in the driveway. *Woah. Time moved fast while drunk.*

“I don’t wanna,” Dean mumbled, looking down at the phone as if it could somehow transport Cas here.

“Well, I don’t want to deal with your sick, drunken ass, but here we are.” He wrestled the phone away amidst Dean’s incoherent shouts of protest, mumbling into the phone, “Yes, I think he’s better. Still drunk, but better. I’ll tell him to call you tomorrow...okay, bye Castiel.”

Before Dean could comprehend what was happening, there were car doors slamming and opening again and then there was Sam, standing above him and pulling him up by the shoulder. Dean swayed, gripping the Impala’s exterior.

“Sammy,” he muttered tensely, “take me...take me to the bushes. I don’t wanna upchuck all over Baby.”

“This oughta be fun,” Sam mumbled, pulling Dean by the arm and guiding him towards the yard.

They were in for a long night.
“What’s got you in such a good mood?” Anna asked the next morning, whenever Castiel passed by her open office door. His best friend was hunched over her computer, face zeroed in on the monitor. She had been incredibly focused on something lately, more than her usual work.

Not realizing he was that transparent, Castiel slipped out his trenchcoat and folded it in his hands. He had forgotten to stop by the coat rack on the way in, only partly from sleep deprivation. Truth was, he had been unusually distracted this morning…

Castiel hadn’t rested well in days, not since Dean had gone radio silent. Whether he was at the office or at home, on the bus or the subway, he had spent nearly every waking moment wondering if Dean was doubting their relationship. He had felt a colossal rift grow between them the longer they went without speaking. Now, leaning in the doorframe of Anna’s office, still reeling over Dean’s midnight phone call, he wondered if he would ever feel rested again.

“Dean called,” he admitted, and Anna’s eyes lifted from her screen.

It had been, to put it simply, a terrible few days. After Dean left for Nashville, Castiel had texted him a long, sweet goodnight without receiving a reply. The next day, three more texts—unanswered. Finally he had gathered his courage and phoned Dean, only to have the call go straight to voicemail. A creeping feeling of unease had been resting on his shoulders ever since, a suspicion that something was going on with Dean beyond his book-related conundrum. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Dean was either trying to end their relationship or was in jeopardy somehow, but he knew his boyfriend had a tendency to self-sabotage. This week Castiel had driven himself—and Anna—insane with worry.

But then Sam had called. No, not Sam, exactly. Dean had called from Sam’s phone and the conversation had been both upsetting and uplifting. Monumental, even. Because while Dean had been incoherently drunk at the time—it made Castiel’s heart race just thinking about how god-awful of a night his boyfriend had probably endured—Dean had told Castiel something amazing.

Dean loved him. Apparently.

He had confessed it not once, but twice.

Which had been such startling news that Castiel had practically curled into a ball on his loveseat, trying to stay calm for Dean’s sake while having an internal meltdown of his own. It wasn’t that Castiel hadn’t suspected his feelings were returned… He knew Dean well enough by now to know he was a deeply loyal man, and wouldn’t abandon Castiel no matter how difficult their circumstances were. But he wasn’t sure he deserved Dean’s love, not with everything that was happening with the
book and Zachariah. If Castiel couldn’t protect Dean from a situation at his own workplace, how could he protect him as a potential life partner?

There was also the possibility that Dean had simply been hopelessly inebriated and that the confession meant nothing. Castiel regarded the old adage and cliche—were “drunken words” guaranteed to be “sober thoughts”? If not, and if everything Dean had said was actually nonsense, why had Dean mentioned someone was trying to break them up? That seemed too specific, too detailed, to be the random musing of someone three sheets to the wind. Between the outright love confession and the mention of a sinister figure out to sabotage their relationship, Castiel was more inclined to accept the latter at face value. He was steeped in too much guilt lately to believe Dean could really, truly love him.

It was nearly three o’clock in the morning when he had finally drifted off to sleep, curling around a pillow that smelled faintly like Dean, dreaming of arms wrapped around him and whispers of love in his ear.

“Finally,” Anna sighed, relief evident on her face. “Where the hell has he been? He hasn’t been taking my calls either.”

“He didn’t say,” Castiel answered, frowning with sudden worry. Anna was right...he still didn’t have the full story. Not even close. This morning he had checked his phone obsessively, but neither Winchester had contacted him since Dean’s drunk dial. All morning long he replayed their conversation in his mind, grinning despite himself. I love you. I love you so much it hurts. Castiel knew the feeling well. Sometimes just thinking about Dean, he wondered if he might burst...

“I suspect he’s been drinking in excess and fretting about the book,” Castiel said, still frowning. “He said…” He took a long breath and steadied himself, still in disbelief that the conversation had even taken place. “Anna, he said someone has been trying to sabotage our relationship.”

Anna’s eyebrows raised. She tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear and silently mouthed, “Close the door.”

Castiel moved from the doorway and obliged, clicking the door shut behind him. He dropped his coat over Anna’s desk and took the nearest chair for himself. There was only one reason they would have to speak in whispers at work...

“You don’t think it could be—”

Anna nodded, tilting her head in the direction of Zachariah’s office.

“Seems a bit extreme,” Castiel mumbled skeptically.

“Why, because he’s such an advocate for Gay Rights?” Anna snorted. She was typing an email, her eyes scanning the screen.

“No…not even close,” Castiel mumbled darkly. “But how did he find out about us? And why would he care enough to try and break Dean and I up?”

Anna pressed “send” on her email and glared at him impatiently. “Think about the conversation you had three days ago. When he called you into his office.”

Castiel had hoped to push that meeting from his mind. It had been one of the briefest and most uncomfortable moments of his career. It had been after-hours and Zachariah had poured him a glass of scotch, intent on discussing Castiel’s “bright future” with the company and how Zachariah wanted to teach him everything he knew about publishing.
“Wake up, Cas. He wants you to replace him as Assistant Publisher. He wants to groom you to take over after him—”

“That’s ridiculous,” Castiel interrupted, shaking his head vehemently. “You technically have a higher position, and you take much more of an interest in the behind-the-scenes elements of the publishing process. I just want to read and write, to make manuscripts better. He knows that—”

Anna leaned forward, her face animated, her tone urgent. “That’s exactly why he wants you, Castiel. Don’t you see? He wants someone he can manipulate, which he’s always been able to do...before you met Dean, that is. You disagreeing with him on the *Lucifer Rising* manuscript—it’s the most rebellious you’ve ever been.”

Castiel leaned into the chair, mulling over Anna’s word. Truthfully, he had always felt a tension between him and Zachariah, a competitive discord that made him believe he’d never receive a raise from the man, let alone a promotion.

“I’ve never thought about it that way,” he muttered, thinking aloud. “It’s arrogant to say, but...I always thought Zachariah was jealous of my relationship with his father. Chuck and I were friends in a way he never was with his son.”

“Not Zachariah, anyways,” Anna mumbled to herself. Castiel stared at his friend, leaning his head against his shoulder in confusion.

“What does that mean? Chuck only had one—”

“Listen, Cas...” Anna’s voice was pressing and allusive and Castiel leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “You’re my best friend. And a good man...one of the best I’ve ever know. But time’s up. I’m afraid you’re going to have to decide.”

“Decide what?” he rumbled.

“Whose side you’re on,” she said, eyes wide and full of intention. “Cause I have a plan already in motion. Just...talk to Zachariah, okay? Ask him about Dean. Whatever you decide, call me.”

She pulled a cardboard box from behind her desk and began emptying her bookshelves, dropping hardbacks and book files in with reckless abandon. She snatched up framed photos and potted plants and everything that made her office hers.

“You’re quitting,” Castiel said evenly, feeling as though every shred of stability was slipping through his fingers.

“Technically I already have. About...three minutes ago. According to my inbox,” Anna answered briskly. Castiel scoffed in surprise—she had emailed her resignation just moments ago, while Castiel was still in the room? What in the world was happening?

“Anna, what’s—”

“Don’t feel pressured to leave with me, Cas. I want this to be your choice. That’s all any of us have, okay?” She stood beside him, gripping his arm reassuringly. “The freedom to make our own choices.”

Castiel felt the weight of their conversation land squarely on his shoulders, knocking the breath out of him. For some reason he felt like weeping—no matter what happened next, it was the end of an era. His oldest friend, his favorite co-worker, was leaving, abandoning everything that Chuck had so carefully built fifteen years ago...
“I can see how you and Dean became friends,” he said quietly, a gentle hand tucked under her elbow. “Toss in a colorful expletive or two, and that sounds like something he would say.”

Anna smiled then, pure and proud, and gave his cheek a kiss. “Good luck,” she whispered, walking past him in the doorway. It was impressive how quickly she had left her office stripped and barren, the cardboard box heavy with nearly two decades of history. He turned, watching her walk down the hallway, out the door and out of sight.

None of their other coworkers would be here for another half-hour, but her absence would be felt immediately. Zachariah was just a figure head, but Anna essentially kept the place running. Castiel stood there frozen, a ball of nervous energy, unsure if he should run in the bathroom to privately cry or smash a chair over the nearest desk in frustration. There was still so much he still didn’t know or understand...had Zachariah really been threatening Dean and their relationship? Why did Anna quit so suddenly? Did Anna actually “have a plan”...and did that plan include usurping Zachariah?

There was only one way to know. Castiel knocked on Zachariah’s closed office door, heartbeat pounding in his ears. From the other side, he heard a faint “come in” and twisted the doorknob. Zachariah was sitting behind his computer monitor, scowling.

“If you’re here to deliver the good news, you’re too late,” he said dryly.

“You think...Anna quitting is good news?” Castiel tried to keep his tone neutral, but under the circumstances, he found the task difficult.

“Now, c’mon, don’t say it like that,” Zachariah scoffed, as if Castiel was the unreasonable one. “I just think it’s better to know now that she’s not a team player—”

“She’s been with the company for fifteen years, same as me,” Castiel pointed out.

“All the same, we don’t need that kind of flighty, rebellious editor on our team. We need more employees like you, Castiel. Dependable, devoted, loyal to a fault—”

“Please, stop.” If Castiel had to listen to more of Zachariah’s empty compliments, he might start feeling nauseous. “I...I need to speak with you.”

Zachariah shrugged and pointed to the chair in front of his desk. Castiel took a seat, trying not to focus on how he had been in a similar situation with Anna not ten minutes ago.

“I received a strange phone call from Dean Winchester last night,” Castiel said carefully.

Zachariah’s face darkened. “Oh? What does farm-boy-wonder want now?”

“You tell me.” Castiel had never played coy with Zachariah before, fearful of the repercussions. But if Dean’s accusation was correct, the time for peace had long past. “He mentioned...he said...”

Zachariah sighed in annoyance. “Whatever he said, try and push it from your mind, Castiel. You need to keep your personal relationships separate from work. You’re becoming too close to the writers in your charge.”

The accusation nearly made Castiel laugh. Aside from a stray email or two, he hadn’t interacted with any other writers for weeks. This wasn’t about Castiel’s editorial practices...it was about his connection to Dean. Which made Castiel suddenly, and fervently, angry. He was tired of this endless chess match with Zachariah, tired of being manipulated and pushed around.

“Is that why you told Dean to break up with me?” he said coolly.
Zachariah’s face turned to stone. “I did no such thing. I merely offered him a choice and he took the easy way out...as I suspected he would.”

Castiel felt himself begin to sweat. Were they really having this conversation?

“Dean would never do that unless he felt cornered. Unless...” The words returned to Castiel all at once. **He said he would fire you and you’d be homeless.** Was Zachariah callous enough to say something like that? “...Unless you threatened someone he cares about.”

Zachariah waved a dismissive hand, eyes searching the ground. “Listen, Castiel. It’s barely eight o’clock in the morning and I’ve already filled my quota of drama for the day. It’s time to move on.” He stood up, clasping his hands. ‘Concerning Mr. Winchester—I’m his primary contact from here on out. He’s delivering me a revised manuscript by this evening, unless he wants to lose everything he holds near and dear. And you, Castiel, will return to your office and focus on the other dozen projects requiring your immediate attention. Because it’s what my father would want...and as his favorite editor, you owe him that much.”

The smile on Zachariah’s face was twisted and cruel, practically a sneer, and Castiel felt his hands begin to tremble.

“What happened to you, Zachariah?” Castiel’s voice was quiet and small...though not from lack of anger. If anything, in this moment, he felt pity. “You grew up with a father who loved you, you had a home filled with love...”

Zachariah huffed viciously, evidently processing Castiel’s words and disagreeing with them vehemently. He took a long sip of his scotch, smacking his lips together. **Wow,** Castiel thought, **not even Chuck got drunk in the office, before noon no less...**

“A man who emotionally abandoned me, you mean, who shamed me for my ambitions? Who wanted me to **adore** poetry and novels when all I cared about were facts and figures? A man who made me feel like a villain because I’m not like you, I’m not like Joshua, I simply wanted to rise above in the world and prove my worth? And that makes me evil?”

Castiel felt his cheeks turning red, heartbeat rattling in his chest. He had never realized Zachariah harbored so much resentment towards his father, himself, and...who was Joshua? A spike of self-awareness drifted through Castiel’s subconscious. The name sounded so familiar...

“I don’t think you’re evil, Zachariah. I think you had a complicated relationship with your father and you’re still coming to terms with his death. But make no mistake, what you’re doing now to Dean is evil.” Things were getting heated, escalating quickly, but Castiel had no intention of backing down. At some point during the conversation Castiel had stood up, crowding Zachariah’s personal space.

“Whether you’re punishing him for being with me, or attacking out of blind hatred for couples like us, I don’t know. But either way, it ends now.”

“Oh, does it?” Zachariah snorted, straightening to his full height. “You know, for a few days, I wasn’t even sure you were together. I had my suspicions, just seeing you two eyeballing each other like slabs of meat, but wow...you should’ve heard Dean on the phone, when I told him to leave you. Emmy award-winning stuff.” Something in Zachariah’s demeanor changed then—he seemed light, almost joyful. “Castiel, do you know what it sounds like when a grown man accepts defeat? When he gives up on something, or **someone**, that he loves? The tremble in his voice, the anger, the crying...it felt like a hard-won game of chess, hearing Dean Winchester’s heart begin to break.”

Castiel didn’t remember stepping forward to slam Zachariah into the wall. He didn’t remember the glass of scotch slipping and shattering to the floor, or the surprised look in Zachariah’s eyes as he
surged forward. But here he was, pinning his boss against the wall and willing every joint in his body not to lean forward, not to strike.

“You will never threaten Dean or me ever again,” he said, voice low and absolute. “Do you understand?”

“Mention of your pretty boy ruffle your feathers, Castiel? Good. Took long enough.” His eyes light up as he smirked unapologetically. “Should’ve known it’d be a bitch like Dean Winchester to help you grow a pair, but hey, better late than never—”

The next moment Castiel was making contact with the side of Zachariah’s chin. His fist was fumbled and weak but he struck Zachariah’s face all the same, catching him off guard, making him lose balance and slump against the desk. The pain was immediate for Castiel...it had barely been a week since he had sprained his wrist in another fight, also defending Dean.

Falling in love, it seemed, was a hazard to Castiel’s health.

“In case the message wasn’t clear,” he growled, rolling up the sleeves of his button-up in haphazard jerks and stomping towards the door, “I quit.”

The next several minutes were a tense, jumbled blur—rushing back to his desk, throwing his trenchcoat on, emptying his desk drawers and stuffing his pockets full of pens and notes and papers. He gathered a stack of books and lugged them under his left arm—trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his right wrist—and exited quickly, walking towards the bus station on instinct. At some point he texted Anna with the news, then stuffed his phone to the bottom of his pocket, attempting to clear his mind. He was still shaking with rage halfway through the bus ride, shoulders hunched and rigid, staring ferociously at the floor. That’s when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He took his time retrieving it, feeling drained and lethargic, figuring it was Anna. By the time he dug deep enough, rifling through all the random contents lining his pockets, he had one missed call.

From Dean.

He gasped so audibly that a woman three rows up turned and stared. Hands shaking, he pressed Dean’s name from his call log. It only rang once before Dean answered.

“Cas?” he breathed. He sounded jumpy, nervous.

“Dean.” Castiel cleared his throat, trying to sound less overwrought and on edge than was strictly true. Dean had enough to worry about right now...Castiel didn’t want to add another worry to his boyfriend’s list. That was, if they were still boyfriends. Dean had apparently tried to break up with him, indirectly at least, and Castiel was too dense to get the memo. “How are you feeling?”

“Like hell,” Dean groaned. He paused, and Castiel could hear the clatter of a glass. Good—Dean was drinking water. “I haven’t been that drunk since...fuck. I’ve never been that drunk.”

Castiel let out an uneasy chuckle. “Yes, you were quite inebriated.”

“Yeah, uh...about that. 'Fore he left for work, Sam told me I drunk dialed you.” His voice was low and panicky, and Castiel felt a wordless strain growing between them.

“Dean—”

“No, Cas, just let me say this.” He took a deep breath. “Whatever I said, I guarantee I didn't mean it. I say dumbass shit when I’m drunk—you can ask Sam, it’s what I do. So whatever I said, I was really fucking drunk, dude. Sorry for worrying you.”
At those words, Castiel felt like he was plummeting, falling headfirst and swallowed into the earth. Dean hadn’t been wrong about Zachariah—

that hadn’t been drunken babbling. But saying “I love you” was something totally different. Did Dean remember telling Cas…and now he regretted it?

Had it meant it—or not?

“Oh,” was all Castiel could manage in response. His limbs turned rigid as stone. The bus stopped in front of his usual street, and he gathered the books and stood, wincing when he accidentally shifted pressure onto his tender wrist.

“Cas…you okay?” Dean sounded genuine and concerned and it was almost enough to make Castiel breakdown, sob, tell him everything. I just lost my job. I punched my boss in the face. I sprained my wrist…again. I miss Chuck.

I believed you when you said you loved me, but now I'm not so sure.

“Fine,” he said numbly, scrambling down the bus steps and heading in the direction of his apartment.

“Okay,” Dean said slowly, as though he didn’t believe Castiel at all but didn’t feel like exposing him, either. “Well, look. I gotta go. I have to rewrite this manuscript today and I’m still fucking hungover. Hell, I’m probably still fucking drunk—”

“Don’t you dare,” Castiel hissed, turning the corner sharply and entering his street. “Don’t touch that manuscript, Dean. I mean it.”

“What…? Cas—”

“Listen to me. If you trust me at all, you will not do this.” Castiel squinted down the road…there was someone sitting on the front steps of his apartment building…

“I have to—”

“Dean, no—”

“You don’t get a say in this, okay?” Dean spat out fiercely. “It’s my book, my decision. End of fucking story.”

Castiel exhaled in disbelief, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. “Dean…we were supposed to be partners in this.” He knew he sounded pitiful, even pathetic, but he couldn’t help it. “You…you don’t want my help anymore?”

“Not with this,” Dean said quietly, and he sounded miserable and wrecked and Castiel knew he didn’t mean it. But it nearly broke his heart in half all the same.

“As an editor or…” His voice was a whisper, hollow and shaking. “As your boyfriend?”

“Cas, I…” Dean sounded on the verge of tears, and Castiel wondered if he was, too. “It’s complicated, and... Look, I can’t talk about this now. Fuck, I honestly shouldn’t be talking to you at all—”

“Dean, listen, I know—” I know Zachariah was blackmailing you, but I’ve solved that problem, I quit my job and made a stand for you, so please don’t do this.

“No, I have to go. Fuck. I…” He sighed, and Castiel could picture him at his desk, pinching the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. “I miss you.”
With a sudden click the call ended. Castiel pulled the phone away, swearing under his breath, fighting the urge to throw the damn thing against the concrete. He redialed Dean’s number, knowing if they just had an honest conversation about this, everything would be fine. Well, not fine...they were about a thousands miles away from “fine.” But Dean’s phone went straight to voicemail...turned off, obviously, which was infuriating to Castiel. He changed tactics, walking towards his apartment again and calling Sam instead. The phone rang and rang… hadn’t Dean said his brother had already left for court? He groaned angrily, stuffing the phone back in his pocket.

When he was a few yards from his front steps, he looked up and finally noticed her. Anna was leaned against a pillar, a suitcase at her feet.

“Going somewhere?” Castiel said dully, unable to gather enough energy to care. He was having a torrentially bad day. Even though he was exhausted and drained and physically battered, he wanted to literally knock some sense into Dean.

“We’re going somewhere,” Anna corrected.

“Not in the road-trip mood.” Castiel stalked past her grumpily, fumbling with the key to his front door.

Anna sighed, rolling her eyes. “You’ll wanna come with me, Cas. I promise.”

Castiel turned abruptly, narrowing his eyes. “Where?”

“Where do you think? We’re making a visit to one of our authors...Dean Winchester.” Anna crossed her arms over her chest and grinned. “I believe you’re a fan of his work?”
Oh, y'all. I am so excited about this chapter!! Please drop me your thoughts/reactions in the comments! <3

Dean planted his elbows on the kitchen table, head hanging down like an anvil between his hands.

“So...it’s awful,” he said bluntly. He was so not in the mood for pussyfooting around. Not today. Maybe not for a long time. Maybe never, in fact.

“I didn’t say that,” Charlie insisted, lips pursed. “It’s just…” She flipped a page of the manuscript, frowning slightly. “Shouldn’t you have Castiel look over your rewrites? I know I was your go-to gal back in the day, and believe me, I’m super duper flattered, but—”

“Cas isn’t an option,” Dean interrupted, pointedly avoiding Charlie’s gaze. She knew him too well, could read through him in an instant. *Hell, she could probably tell something was wrong the moment I answered the door...*

“Nope, sorry. Unpaid, amateur, high school BFF editors don’t get bossed around, no matter how famous you are,” she said, looking up from the pages and crossing her arms. “Besides, dude, it’s me. I’m the Sam to your Frodo, like, every year for Halloween. And right now you’re treating me with Smeagol-level weirdness.”

“I am not,” Dean grumbled, mostly on instinct, ‘cause yeah...he was acting weird today. Sue him. He had started the morning off massively hungover and practically crying on the phone, talking to his boyfriend who he missed something awful but had to push away, thanks to a blackmailing piece of shit trying to ruin their relationship. Then he had turned off his phone, knowing that would piss Cas off to no end but not seeing any other option. He had to rewrite this manuscript today—he was literally down to the wire. And now, eight hours later, he was sitting around his kitchen table with Charlie, apparently avoiding all his problems all over again. “If anything, it’s more like Frodo with Mary or Pippin…”

“Seriously? You’ll debate *LOTR* analogies but everything else is off limits?” Charlie threw up her hands, exasperated. Dean didn’t blame her...she had been there for an hour already and he had remained closed off, just wanting to get her feedback on the book without any extra commentary. It had basically been the worst week of his life and he didn’t feel like rehashing the details with anyone.

“Spill,” she demanded anyways, staring at him without relenting. From the living room, Dean heard the TV decrease in volume before being abruptly muted. He imagined Sam and Jess sitting together on the couch, leaned forward, quietly listening. Jesus...why did his friends and family decide to be annoyingly observant at a time like *this*? He only had an hour left before he missed Zachariah’s deadline and life as he knew it began to combust.

He turned around in his chair, cupping hands around his mouth and calling, “Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Obvious Eavesdroppers, get in here already.” The pair immediately stirred and entered the kitchen, though they had the decency to look slightly embarrassed by their overt spying.
“You rang?” Sam said sarcastically, eyebrow raised. He had spent all day trying to get Dean to open up, and standing now in the archway, he looked rather skeptical. Apparently, he no longer felt confident in Dean’s ability to open up.

Unfortunately, he’s not fucking wrong, Dean thought.

“Look, you three. I only wanna say this once.” He rubbed the back of his neck, willing himself not to sweat through his flannel. “I’m on edge, yeah. Whatever. Here’s why: my fucking book is due in less than an hour. I’ve rewritten chunks of it and it’s a complete piece of shit now and I dunno how to fix it. And Cas…” He gripped the table, staring down at his folded hands, hoping to steady himself. Fuck. He really needed a drink.

“He called me, Dean, and—”

Unexpectedly Sam paused mid-sentence, and it took a moment to realize why. Dean drew in a breath, recognizing the distinct ding of the front doorbell. He groaned and stood up, ready to yell at whatever mailman or Girl Scout dared to cross him today. The phrase get off my lawn was already on the tip of his tongue. The last thing he needed right now was a house guest—he was already up to his elbows in prying, well-intentioned loved ones who needed to leave him the hell alone.

“Well, I’m sure he told you I’m a distant, careless asshole, and you know what…” Dean craned his neck to glare at Sam, practically sneering. He reached for the doorknob and lobbed it open with a fast and careless fling, only the screen door remaining closed.

“He’s right. Okay? I suck. In fact, if Cas knows what’s good for him, he’ll lose both our numbers, move to fucking Florida and live on a beach somewhere. He’ll be a hell of a lot happier without me, ‘cause I’m just a piece of—”

He turned back around, shoving the screen door open.

Then his brain short-circuited.

“Shit,” he whispered, finishing his sentence while also remarking upon his current situation, cause... shit. The familiar shade of khaki, the dark brown hair, the unbearable, penetrating eyes…

“I wouldn’t do well in Florida, I’m afraid,” Castiel said evenly, as though they were continuing a conversation he had been invited to participate in, rather than listening on the other side of the screen door because what the fuck was Dean’s life right now? Castiel waved a hand vaguely around his face and shrugged. “Don’t have the complexion.”

“Uh…” Dean turned around in the doorway, looking between Sam, Jess, and Charlie in the kitchen, and then turned back around to face Cas, who was standing in front of—

“Hi Dean,” Anna said cheerily. “Ready to be rescued?” She didn’t wait for his response, but picked up her suitcase and passed him in the doorway, putting his shoulder companionably as she went. She wheeled her bag against the couch then introduced herself to everyone inside, breezy and lighthearted. Sam and Jess were asking about her flight and the weather as if she had been invited, apologizing for not picking her and Castiel up at the airport.

What...the actual fuck? Had everyone known about this but him?

Meanwhile Dean was still frozen in the doorway, locked in a heated gaze with Cas that showed no sign of relenting. Castiel didn’t look...well. Not cosmetically—he looked naturally and irritatingly handsome, as always. But his eyes were heavy, tired. He was holding his wrist absently, visibly in pain. There were a range of emotions crossing his face...exhaustion, apprehension, anger?
“Hi Cas,” Dean finally said, for lack of better words, wishing there was a greeting that conveyed: “I miss you, I love you, but what the fuck are you doing here?”

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel replied, just as quietly. Unlike Anna, Cas hadn’t waltzed right in like he owned the damn place...which was ironic, since Castiel had practically lived here for a month. Dean felt his cheeks grow pink, thinking about how they had cuddled on the couch watching TV, made-out mercilessly in the kitchen while cooking supper, went through Dean’s panty drawer to pick out Cas’ favorites before running back to the bed and breakfast and stripping their clothes and… Yeah, pump the brakes. Dean really didn’t need to remind himself of all that. Not now. He was technically supposed to be breaking up with Cas, according to the proclamation set by his Dark Overlord, Zachariah. Instead, he was replaying their greatest hits like a damn rom-com montage and was two seconds from falling to his knees and begging Cas’ forgiveness.

“I apologize for showing up unannounced and without an invitation,” Castiel said formally. “We tried to call you, but…”

Dean winced. “Yeah, sorry about that. I turned my phone off to clear my head, and...you know. Finish the manuscript.”

“I see.” Castiel fiddled with his suitcase awkwardly, not meeting Dean’s eyes. “Well, if you had answered, we could’ve saved you the trouble.”

“How...?” Dean turned to look at Anna now, who was apparently having a similar conversation with Sam, Jess, and Charlie in the kitchen.

“We’re outsmarting Zachariah, that’s how,” Anna said smugly. “Cas and I have a plan, but we need all hands on deck.”

Dean turned back to Castiel for confirmation, but he was frowning miserably and staring down at his feet. When he looked back up at Dean, his expression had drastically changed—more guarded, steeled.

“Let’s just take care of this, Dean,” he muttered. “Afterwards, you can continue to ignore me if you wish.” He pushed his way inside stiffly, leaving his luggage by the door. He didn’t give Dean another glance before walking past him and heading into the kitchen, joining the group around the table. Dean closed the front door but kept his back turned, closing his eyes, trying not fall apart. He was officially on the verge of losing Cas, and even though that was what he had been attempting to do all week long, faced with the sudden reality of life without Cas made Dean feel a deep and unrelenting anguish. Would they—could they—ever recover from this? He wished he could have an emergency session with Bobby right about now.

Dean turned around slowly, plastering on a blank and neutral expression, and finally faced the ragtag team sitting around his kitchen table. He entered the room looking purposefully at Anna, voice laced with sarcasm. “Not that I don’t love a good dramatic entrance, but...” He opened his hands wide and questioning. “What the hell are y’all doing here?”

“I already told you,” Anna said absently, sitting between Sam and Cas at the table and digging into her briefcase. “We’re rescuing you.”

Dean chuckled dismally. “Yeah, uh, that’s nice and all. But I’m not exactly looking for an eleventh hour save from the Scooby Gang.”
From the inside the fridge, Charlie groaned. “Dude, how many times have I told you not to make Buffy jokes until you finish the series?” She passed beers to Sam and Anna, opening her own can with a metallic-sounding pop. Dean lifted his eyebrows at her, silently requesting one from the fridge, but Charlie took a long sip and shook her head.

“Sorry, man,” Charlie said sympathetically. “After your three-day, near-death binge-drinking, you’re cut off.”

“It’s my beer you’re drinking,” Dean pointed out. “And how do you even know about…”

“I filled them in while you and Cas were having a faceoff at the door,” Sam said casually, taking a long gulp of his beer, as if discussing Dean’s personal life was totally normal. He looked at Castiel and Anna now, speaking to him directly. “So, basically, Dean tried to drink himself to death.”

“I was just—” Dean said, trying to defend himself, but apparen-t-fucking-ly, no one was interested in his version of events.

“Because of something that’s going on with the book, and Zachariah, and...well. You, Cas.” Sam and Jess exchanged a long and meaningful look that made Dean’s stomach flip.

“We’ve been worried sick,” Jess said quietly, and Sam laced their fingers together.

“Look, I’m sorry, but—”

“Dude,” Charlie whispered, coming beside Dean and squeezing his shoulder. “Maybe just take a backseat for a minute, ‘kay? Let everyone talk it out. We’re just trying to help.”

“But y’all are talking about me like I’m not even here!” Dean snapped. Castiel shuddered at the sharpness of his voice, and Sam glared at him. Charlie opened her mouth again, likely trying to diffuse the situation, but she hesitated too long.

“If you’re uncomfortable with having a transparent conversation about your situation, Dean, then leave,” Castiel said firmly. Since their tense reunion at the front door, they had been intentionally avoiding eye contact. But Dean glared at his (ex?) editor and (ex?) boyfriend fully now, and fuck, there was a lot of heat and fury in those eyes and Dean hated how much it made him shiver...in frustration, yeah, but also in a totally-not-the-right-fucking-time-but-god-that-man-is-sexy way.

“No one is excluding you,” Castiel growled, gripping the back of Anna’s chair as if he might break the wood in two, “but we’re not asking your permission to have this conversation, either.”

Dean was stunned and silent, slumping against the wall, eyes still narrowed at Cas. The longer they stared the more Dean felt like his skin, his veins, were scorched with fire. There wasn’t just fury between them now, but a seed of something more persistent, more intimate—passion, hunger, lust. It was all-consuming and Dean felt his heart hammering, his body wanting nothing more than to push Cas against the nearest surface and...

“Anyways,” Sam mumbled awkwardly.

“Do they do that a lot?” Charlie asked curiously. “Zone out and have angry eye sex?”

“Not always angry, but...yeah, pretty much,” Anna answered nonchalantly.

“You get used to it,” Jess said with a shrug.

Dean tore his gaze from Cas begrudgingly and rolled his eyes. “Okay, that’s enough from the peanut
gallery. If you’re forcing me to have this powwow can we at least fucking focus?” He checked the clock—only twenty minutes now until his deadline.

“Gladly,” Sam said briskly. Everyone had taken a seat now at the kitchen table, even Cas, but Dean stood resolutely against the wall with his arms crossed. He would entertain whatever scheme Anna and Cas had cooked up, what-the-fuck-ever, but ultimately the decision about his book was his. He wouldn’t let them forget that. “So, Dean...if you really want to help, why don’t you tell us what happened while you were in New York?”

Dean shifted awkwardly on his feet, trying to ignore the fact that his first thought was *I had mind blowing sex with Cas, he gifted me a pseudo-fall festival that was the most adorable fucking thing I’ve ever seen, and I fell even more in love with him…*

No, Dean decided, those probably weren’t the details Sam was searching for.

“What do you wanna know?” he grumbled.

“Well,” Sam said impatiently, “for starters, why are you rewriting your book? And why are you trying to make some insane deadline that Cas and Anna seem hellbent on you missing?”

The question hung tense and substantial in the air. Finally, Dean sighed, rubbing the back of his neck absently.

“Okay, fine. Some of you don’t know this, not because I’ve been keeping it from you or anything, but…” He swallowed, a lump forming in his throat. “Cas helped me through it, so it didn’t seem important to rehash.” Against his better judgment, Dean’s eyes flickered again to Cas, who was looking back at him now with an aloof sort of sadness. “Everyone here knows my books are based loosely on Sam and me, yeah? Well, the reason I had writer’s block for...uh, six months or so, was because Mike turned out to have not-so-friendly feelings for, essentially, another dude. That’s when I realized I was...into guys, or *whatever.* It’s why I couldn’t finish the book before Cas came and snapped me out of it.”

“I think he did more than that,” Charlie mumbled, and Dean glared at her until she mouthed “sorry” and glanced back down at her beer.

“Anyways,” Dean continued tensely. “I finished my manuscript and wrote Mike and Angel the way they were meant to be written, and...well, whatever. Everything seemed about perfect.” He stared down at his feet, not trusting himself to look in *any* direction except for Cas...’cause yeah, that nerdy hot editor of his had been a major part of that perfection. “Long story short, though, my publisher Zachariah—Anna and Cas’ boss—he hated that little sliver of gay I had written in. Enough to give me an ultimatum about writing it *his* way or canceling my contract, which would essentially fuck me in the ass, and not in a good way.”

“Where’s this contract?” Sam said reflectively, and Anna leafed through her papers, sliding a copy into his hands. He skimmed it quickly, his eyes growing wider at every page. “Dean, this is…”

“Yeah, yeah—”

“Why didn’t you have me read this—”

“What do you want me to say, Sammy?” Dean yelled, and awesome, they had reached the point in the intervention where he was full-on yelling now. “I was depressed and lazy and I trusted Anna. But it’s not her fault, okay? It’s mine...this whole thing is my fault. That’s why I’m just saying ‘fuck it’ and playing by Zach’s rules.”
“That’s not entirely true,” Castiel said quietly, and Jesus, could Dean ever catch a break? Cas’ expression now was soft and sympathetic and that worried Dean so much, he honestly wished Cas would glare at him again.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he said, voice shaking. Everyone in the room was silently watching the exchange happen, but oh-the-fuck-well, Dean needed answers and he needed them now.

“It’s not your fault, not entirely. That wasn’t the only ultimatum you were given,” Cas said evenly. “Zachariah gave you another one, four days ago. Didn’t he?”

Dean drew in a quick breath, his first instinct to deny, deny, deny. How could Cas possibly know about that?

“What do you mean?” Jess asked, hands folded over the table. The whole room was hanging on Cas’ every word and Dean really, really didn’t want to be discussing this anymore.

“That doesn’t matter—”

“Yes it does, Dean,” Cas interrupted, voice rising and firm. He turned back to the rest of the group, who were waiting with rapt attention. “Zachariah threatened us. He told Dean that if he didn’t rewrite the book, and if he didn’t…” Castiel’s breath caught in his throat, the next part a whisper. “If he didn’t break up with me...that Zachariah would fire me, bankrupt the farm, and we would all lose everything.”

The silence that followed was practically nail-biting and Dean fought the urge to leave, to walk around the block, to go into the barn and toss around a bale of hay, something, because fuck. Seeing the reality of his situation reflected in the people he loved was making him guilty and uneasy.

“That son of bitch,” Sam said, merifully breaking the quiet. “He blackmailed you. And that’s why you...”

“Tried to drink myself into an early grave?” Dean said self-deprecatingly, hoping to deflect some of this heaviness and lighten the mood. The tone only seemed to enrage Sam more, though, unsurprisingly.

“This isn’t a joke, Dean,” Sam said fiercely. “Our dad was an alcoholic and you handle your grief in the same way. Drinking killed him and last night, it could’ve killed you too—”

“We can talk about that later,” Jess interrupted, casting a warning glance at both brothers. “And we will, Sam. I promise. But one problem at a time.” Sam scowled in Dean’s direction but shook his head silently.

“Okay, so,” Charlie said conversationally, looking up at Anna and Cas, “now we’re caught-up on Dean’s side of things. What’s been happening with you two?”

Anna and Castiel exchanged a meaningful glance, and Dean perked up from his slouching position against the wall, eager to hear what Cas had been doing for the past few days...and hoping it didn’t show on his face.

“I’ll go first,” Cas muttered. “After Dean’s phone call last night, I suspected things with Zachariah were worse than I knew. Anna quit this morning, and afterwards, I confronted Zachariah. He confirmed the blackmail, we exchanged some heated words, and I also...quit.”

The news hit Dean like a blow to the stomach, panic flooding him like electricity. “Cas, no—”
“It was my decision, Dean, and one I should’ve made weeks ago.” Castiel’s tone was matter-of-fact, but Dean knew the weight behind his words. “I never should have let him threaten you the first time.” Dean could read between the lines—this was Castiel apologizing for waiting so long to make a stand. Dean looked down at the floor and nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“You didn’t tell them the best part.” Anna interjected. “Well, maybe not from a legal standpoint, but...oh well. Cas punched Zachariah in the face!”

“You did what?” Dean was moving away from the wall and heading for Cas before he could even register what the movement might mean. His hands fumbled, reaching for Cas’ wrist, and the other man winced.

“Cas, what the hell?!” he shouted, accusation in his voice. “You weren’t even healed from last time!”

“Last time?” Charlie repeated, eyes wide. “Did you and Cas join a fight club in NYC?”

Dean huffed and stood up, ignoring Charlie and searching through their kitchen cabinets for the first aid kit. He was pissed all over again—apparently Cas didn’t give a shit about his well being and just went around punching people willy-nilly, not giving a fuck if he would ever have a fully functioning wrist again.

“Oh, that’s one thing I forgot to mention,” Castiel said nonchalantly, as Dean rifled through the freezer. “Dean and I had an altercation with a group of homophobic thugs. Dean suffered significant bruising but I pulled out my pocket knife in time and managed to scare them off.”

“Seriously? You just ‘forgot to mention’ that?” Sam said incredulously, looking back and forth between them.

“We’ve been a little busy,” Dean snapped, returning to the table with his hands full. There were no chairs left so he nudged Castiel, who scooted over without a word, sharing the edge of his seat. Dean was aware that several pairs of eyes were on them, but he no longer cared about being a spectacle. He only cared about Cas, the dumbass, and his untreated injury. He held Cas’ limp and swollen wrist, firmly but gently, and compressed it with a wrap. Then he put an ice-pack over the patch of skin that was already puffed and discolored, and slid a couple of anti-inflammatory painkillers in Cas’ other hand.

“This isn’t necessary,” Castiel argued, looking at the pills in his hand. “It only hurts when I—”

“Cas, you stubborn son of a bitch, if you don’t take this glass of water and swallow the pain pills, I…” Dean gulped air, head spinning, suddenly aware he hadn’t been breathing. Castiel sighed and took the glass Dean offered, tossing the pills into his mouth.

“Who says romance is dead?” Charlie said, grinning. Dean narrowed his eyes in warning, and tried not to concentrate on how closely he and Cas were sitting—elbows brushing, thighs side-by-side. It felt comforting and solid and right. He risked looking at the nearest clock, a fluorescent block of numbers above the stove, and...he had missed his deadline. Well, fuck.

“Please, Anna, put me out of misery,” Dean mumbled. He was officially at the mercy of whatever vigilante plan his friend had cooked up. “Do you have a way to get the fuck out of this mess, or not?”

“I do,” she announced, and everyone leaned forward on the table, all eyes on her. “I’ve spent months searching the contract for a loophole, but what I should’ve been reading is the will. Chuck’s will, to be specific.”
She rummaged through her papers and produced a manilla folder, passing it to Sam.

“How did you get this?” Sam asked, intrigued. “Chuck just passed away. The will is still in the probate process, so—”

“So the document should be unavailable for public access until the estate is fully settled? Yeah, I know,” Anna said breezily. “I went to the county courthouse and paid an advanced fee...and when that didn’t work, I flirted with the clerk.”

“Wow,” Sam chuckled, shaking his head. “I think you missed your calling, Anna.”

“Nah, she seems too underhanded for legal work,” Charlie tossed in cheerfully. “She should join me in the world of IT, aka...illicit computer hacking.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Sam mumbled fondly, flipping through the pages of the document.

“Well, I do find myself without a job, so I’ll keep my options open,” Anna said dryly. “Anyways, Sam...look on page twelve, the section I highlighted.”

Sam found the correct page and paused, eyes darting around the page. “Are you thinking...?”

“The wording would suggest it—right?” Anna said excitedly.

“Any idea who it might be?” Sam’s newfound enthusiasm palpable.

“Uh, anyone wanna clue me in here?” Dean interjected, waving his hand between the two of them. “It’s just, you know, my book and career on the line.”

Anna cut her eyes at him sardonically. “Read for yourself,” she said, retrieving the paperwork from Sam and placing it squarely in Dean’s hands. Cas sat close behind him, reading over his shoulder.

The highlighted portion read:

Full ownership of Sacred Sun Press, LLC shall be passed to the eldest, biological son of CHUCK G. SHURLEY; ownership must be legally claimed by said beneficiary within thirty days of the deceased’s official time of death, otherwise the asset will fall to the appointed hierarchical second, Assistant Publisher ZACHARIAH A. SHURLEY.

Dean scanned the highlighted sentence once, then twice, his mind a spiraling mess of confusion and disbelief.

“What the everloving fuck,” he hissed, turning to Castiel. “Does Chuck have another son? A son who he left the company to?”

“That’s what Anna and I spent today trying to find out,” Cas supplied, as Anna plunged a hand inside her briefcase and pulled out her laptop. While Castiel spoke, she turned to Jess, logging onto the wifi. “Chuck never mentioned another son, but I started thinking about the women he had mentioned over the years...usually drunken conversations, so I never paid them much mind. He met a lot of women and had a lot of regrets. But there was one woman Chuck always thought he’d end up with in the end...he always said she’d be the death of him. His high school girlfriend, Billie Berry.”

“Exactly,” Anna said, hands posed over her laptop, “so I bought wifi on the plane and we spent an hour tracking her down. Turns out, she does have a son who fits the timeline perfectly.”

She spun her computer screen around for the group to see. It was a picture of—who Dean assumed
was—Billie Berry. She was in her sixties, same age as Chuck, with black, curly hair and curves in ideal places. She was a beautiful woman, Dean thought, and couldn’t imagine what she must’ve looked like forty-plus years ago. Standing next to her was a middle-aged man wearing a tan workman’s shirt and a denim pullover, with dark skin, facial hair peppered with gray, and a face that Dean found very familiar…

“His name is Joshua and he lives in Cleveland,” Anna said. “He works at—”


“How?” Anna breathed, seemingly floored by this recent development.

“We met at Chuck’s funeral,” he said, stunned by his own words and the revelation they initiated. “Just in passing, but...fuck. He said him and Chuck spoke all the time. He seemed really sad about his death.”

“So it is him,” Castiel whispered, awed. “Joshua is Chuck’s son...and the rightful owner of Sacred Sun Press.” Everyone seemed to be in an equal state of shock—even Charlie, who was staring at the unfolding drama as if she wanted popcorn to accompany the show, was strangely quiet.

“I wonder if he knows,” Sam finally mused.

“Only one way to find out,” Anna countered, voice low and slow, as if she were thinking out loud. “Dean and Cas have to go to Cleveland...tonight.”

***

Castiel loaded his suitcase into the trunk of Dean’s Impala, silent and sullen, dreading the eight hour drive to Cleveland. With the current state of things between them, he was nervous at the prospect of having this much uninterrupted time in the car together. He slid into the passenger seat feeling guarded and drained, the day’s events sending him spiraling into a dozen different directions.

Castiel had woken up this morning believing Dean loved him, before having the drunken confession ripped away, breaking his heart in the process; then he had discovered his boss was blackmailing him, injured his wrist (again), quit his job, boarded a plane back to the last state he ever wanted to visit, and finally, landed on Dean’s doorstep...uninvited, upset, and angry.

This was, hands down, the worst day ever.

And yet, even though he was feeling a variety of emotions towards his author-turned-boyfriend-turned-whatever, he couldn’t deny that it still felt right just to be in Dean’s presence. Riding together in the car, his awareness of Dean’s body grew more and more as the minutes passed, heightened because he couldn’t reach over and touch Dean’s knee, or stretch over for a quick kiss. Every time Dean’s hand reached down to put on his turn signal, or fiddle with the travel mug of coffee Jess had packed him, Castiel felt his heart pound. It had been weeks since they had denied themselves physical contact, and Castiel wasn’t sure he was going to survive eight hours of the cold shoulder treatment. It was maddening.

For a long time they drove with only a Metallica cassette to keep them company, sharing a significant silence. There were so many unanswered questions and feelings between them that the opportunity to quietly let their minds wander felt more oppressive than relaxing. Before the evening light began to fade, and just to keep himself busy, Castiel pulled out Dean’s revised manuscript from his bag (something Charlie had stowed away, in case “he needed something to make him angry during the
drive”). He shuffled through the papers, skimming with narrowed eyes. The more he read, the more he felt despair gnawing away at his nerves. He attempted to steady his face, keeping it void of reaction, but he was too horrified...

“It’s not that bad,” Dean scoffed. It was the first time they had spoken in hours, and the sound of Dean’s voice was jolting. Castiel nearly dropped the stack of papers.

“It is that bad,” he argued, keeping his eyes down, staring at the page in front of him. He was avoiding Dean’s gaze...there was a permanent electricity, an intensity, that always passed between their eyes. He needed to prevent that from happening right now, when they had such a crucial task to perform. They couldn’t get distracted by their relationship (or lack thereof) when so many people were counting on them to pull through and convince Joshua to help them.

“Whatever,” Dean grumbled. Even though he didn’t glance up, Castiel could feel Dean’s eyes rolling. The defiant tone made Castiel’s irritation return tenfold.

“It’s not ‘whatever.’ It’s literally your life’s work that you nearly ruined,” Castiel said, whipping his head up. Dean lifted his eyes in surprise, but kept his eyes on the road. “Your new characterization of Angel, it’s...cold and mechanical. When you removed the implication of romance you stripped the friendship between Mike and Angel completely. You took a gorgeous, complex relationship between two unlikely heroes and made it lackluster and flat.”

“Wow,” Dean mumbled, and to Castiel’s surprise, he chuckled. “Didn’t know you were so passionate about the book. I sorta...”

Castiel sighed, crinkling the papers anxiously in his lap. “What?”

“I dunno...I thought you edited the book ‘cause you had to. ‘Cause it was your job or whatever. I never thought...” He ducked his head, avoiding Castiel’s gaze. “That you actually liked them.”

Castiel turned to Dean, mouth agape. “That’s absurd. Of course I do,” he said instantly. Dean parted his lips, likely to argue again, but Castiel continued before he had the chance. “The series itself is incredibly captivating. The themes of familial love and sacrifice, of perseverance and strength, perfectly complement the world you’ve created.” Dean seemed stunned into silence, so Castiel took a breath and continued. “Your characters are fascinating...I especially related to the character of Angel, his demeanor and rebellion arc was very engaging—”

“That’s because I...I based him on you,” Dean confessed quietly, hands stroking the steering wheel. “If it’s weird then I can...I dunno, change it again. Not like this book is ever gonna see the light of day anyways, unless Joshua is ready for a career change, but if it makes you uncomfortable I can—” Dean was speaking quickly and Castiel shook his head, interrupting.

“It’s fine, Dean,” he said evenly, keeping his eyes down. In reality everything was very far from fine and hadn’t been for weeks, not since Zachariah had inserted himself into their lives. On instinct Castiel reached his hand towards Dean’s shoulder, an automatic gesture of comfort. By the time he remembered that things were strained between them and hastily lowered his hand, it was too late. Dean had caught the motion in the corner of his eye, and when Castiel withdrew, Dean’s expression
soured. There was a fresh wave of disappointment evident on his face, overwhelming his features.

“Planning to stay mad at me forever?” he muttered, voice low and gruff, staring straight ahead at the quickly darkening road. Castiel’s first instinct was to say no, but he leaned into the leather seat, pondering everything that had transpired. Dean hadn’t trusted Castiel at all lately—he had kept the threat from Zachariah a secret, hadn’t listened to Castiel when he insisted that the manuscript remain as-is. He had made all their important life decisions by himself without consulting Castiel, and in both instances, his choices had produced disastrous consequences. Not to mention, Dean had nearly drunk himself into an early grave and apparently attempted to break up with Castiel by ignoring him to death. Oh...and the inebriated love confession that was rescinded the next day.

Castiel had a lot to be upset about.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. It was an admission that pained him but he didn’t want to lie to Dean, not after everything. He knew the largest part of him was—and would forever be—wildly in love with Dean Winchester. But another part of him felt raw and broken, overwhelmed by the severe emotions he was fighting. When they were together, they became something Castiel had never experienced before...unwieldy, forceful as nature with the fervency and sweetness of honey fresh off the comb. Loving Dean in such an unexpected whirlwind had left Castiel open, vulnerable. Perhaps he needed time alone to build up his walls again...to protect himself so no one else could devastate him like this again.

“So that’s it, then?” Dean shook his head and huffed. “One bump in the road and you’re done with me?”

Castiel’s head snapped up, incredulous. “One’ bump? Don’t you mean a dozen?” He felt his voice rising but couldn’t stop, couldn’t breathe deeply enough to steady himself. “You’re the one who cut me out, Dean. You’ve done nothing but avoid me, ignore me. You haven’t trusted me with any of your problems—”

“How the hell was I supposed to go to you after that morning in Chuck’s apartment, when you sat there and let Zachariah walk all over me?” Dean spat out, furious. “This was never about me not trusting you. This was about me being alone in this. It was about you being too damn afraid to stand up to Zachariah, and me trying to do what’s best for both of us—”

“I’m sorry two weeks wasn’t fast enough for me to quit my job, Dean,” Castiel said sardonically. “As far as doing what’s best for us, how is being apart and not speaking ever what’s best for us?”

“Because I’m bad news, Cas! Don’t you get it?” Dean was shouting now, swerving slightly on the highway. “You can do so much better than me—”

“Stop it,” Castiel said sharply, whether he was referring to Dean’s negative self-talk or his erratic driving, Castiel wasn’t sure. It was nearly nine o’clock at night and he was suddenly aware that they hadn’t eaten, they hadn’t rested. They were both hanging on by a thread, but now that they were having this conversation, there was no easy way to end it.

“Zachariah might have tried to end our relationship, Dean, but you’re the one who sabotaged it—”

“Why the hell is this all on me? Can’t you take a little responsibility—”

“You’re the one who ignored me for three days, went on a bender, tried to break up with me, then drunk dialed me and told me you loved me, just to take it back!” Castiel’s voice was shaking now, dense with rage and despondency. Words were flying out of his mouth before he had time to recover them, to tuck them away and retreat back onto his mind. “Did I make a mistake not defending you
from Zachariah? Yes, of course I did. I did it out of loyalty for Chuck, but I should’ve been loyal to you because you mean everything to me. I made the wrong decision and I’m sorry, and I’m trying to fix it now. If you think that compares to everything you’ve put me through lately, then you…you just don’t understand…” Castiel trailed off, eyes tired and heavy, burdened with the weight of unshed tears.

Dean swallowed thickly, seeming to be in a state of shock. “Cas, no, I didn’t…”

Castiel threw his hand up, silencing him. He hadn’t meant to say all that, to show his entire hand so dramatically, and he worried that if they continued speaking he might actually combust.

“Don’t, okay? Just don’t.” He pulled his sweater closer, concentrating on the drag of cotton draping his arms. “Let’s just focus on Joshua. We don’t have time for this.”

Shockingly, Dean did as he was told. He closed his mouth, jaw set hard and eyes full of worry, and kept driving. He was clearly contemplating something, determinedly trying to work something out in his mind. Castiel figured it had to do with them, or their situation, but he didn’t have the energy to try and decipher Dean’s thoughts or emotions. Instead he closed his eyes and leaned against the window, trying not to daydream about every touch, every kiss, every moment they spent wrapped in each other’s arms…

Castiel was stirred awake by a hand on his shoulder three hours later.

“Hey,” Dean said softly. Castiel craned his neck, feeling stiff and unsettled. They were still in the Impala and it was dark outside, the only light cascading from a nearby street lamp.

“Where are we?” Castiel grumbled, rubbing a sore spot out of his neck.

“Motel, hour outside of Cleveland. I figured we should rest up and go see Joshua in the morning.” Castiel nodded, humming in agreement. “I...uh, already got us a room. It was slim pickings, considering it’s nearly midnight, and this room only has one bed—”

“I’ll sleep in the car,” Castiel interrupted, tone more dismissive than he intended. The truth was, he didn’t trust himself to be alone with Dean right now. If they shared a room, a bed, things would become tense and complicated and he was tired of both.

“Seriously, Cas?” Dean sounded outraged by the thought and it only made Castiel more resolute. “If anyone should sleep out here, it should be me.”

“You just drove five hundred miles and I’ve been asleep for most of it,” Castiel said logically. “Go inside, get some rest.”

“Cas—”

“Dean, if you don’t let me sleep in peace I’ll walk to another motel and—”

“Fine, whatever, be a stubborn asshole and freeze out here rather than spend a few hours with me.” Dean was the epitome of pissed off now—shoulders tense and raised, expression twisted and snarled, a nonchalance in his tone that was clearly fabricated. He threw open his car door and slammed it shut, the glass rattling. He unlocked the trunk and snatched his overnight bag, then closed the trunk in one hard, hostile movement. Castiel watched with weary eyes as he stalked towards a door in the right-hand corner of the motel, wondering with a sting of regret if he had made the right decision. He sighed, stretching out fully on the bench and draping his trenchcoat over him. He put his head on Dean’s side of the seat and imagined his head was in Dean’s lap, a hand lightly ruffling his hair, lips on his forehead…
He had almost drifted to sleep when he was jostled awake by a loud tapping on the window. He shuddered, panic engulfing him. He had slept in enough public spaces to know they weren’t safe, and his fight-or-flight instincts were taking over when he squinted in the dark and recognized…

“Dean?” he whispered slowly, reeling the window crank an inch or two. Dean bent closer, facial features unreadable in the dark. “What are you…?”

“Come inside. Please, Cas.” His voice was shaking, and strangely, so were his shoulders. He wasn’t wearing his leather coat, Castiel realized, and the winter chill had completely overtaken the night air. There was already a light layer of frost on the windshield.

“Dean…”

“I won’t say anything or try to touch you or whatever, I swear. I just need to show you something, and I...I need to know you’re safe.” His voice was pleading, genuine, the previous irritation leaving him like a deflated balloon. It occurred to Castiel that one of things Zachariah had threatened Dean with was Castiel’s safety, not to mention how concerned Dean had been hearing his tales of homelessness in the city…

He sighed and nodded in agreement, cranking the window up and opening the door. He would likely regret this, he knew, but he couldn’t stand the thought of making Dean worry all night. Dean manually locked the Impala and led the way to the motel room, Castiel dragging behind him. He cracked open the door and held his hand out, implying that Castiel should enter first. Castiel crossed the threshold and took in the scene: the motel was old and rundown, a standard queen bed planted in the middle of the room. The accommodations were anything but noteworthy…but the notecards covering the furniture, those made Castiel paused. There were at least a hundred cards scattered haphazardly, on the bed and the desk and even the floor. The sheer number was overwhelming.

He bent over and picked one up at his feet. The corners of the card were brown and crinkled, obviously several weeks old:

*The color of Cas’ eyes makes me wanna listen to love songs...fuck that’s cheesy.*

Castiel couldn’t help but smile. Without thinking, he moved forward and grabbed a handful, reading voraciously:

*Cas ate an apple today and I watched the juice drip from the corners of his mouth for a solid twenty minutes. Jesus. Now I know why Lucifer tempted Eve with an apple…*

*Cas and I went people-watching today at the Parthenon, and while the architecture is always stunning to see, Castiel was the only sight I wanted to look at. (After this, maybe I should get a job writing shitty pickup lines...)*

*Kissing Cas is the most blissed out, intense experience of my fucking life and if I never kiss another person, I think I’d be a-okay with that.*

*I can’t help but feel proud watching Cas walk around NYC, trenchcoat billowing behind him, so fearless and brave even after everything he’s been through.*

*This week at Cas’ apartment, waking up in bed every morning next to him...I can’t even describe it.*

*Am I actually allowed to be this happy?*

“Dean…” Castiel cleared throat, surprised to find he couldn’t speak. “Are these…?”
“My notecards from the writing exercise you made me do? Yeah.” Dean was twisting his hands in his jean pockets, eyes downcast. He fidgeted while Castiel read, and when he was finished, Dean reached for a smaller stack on the bedside table. “These are the only ones left. Notes about landscapes, or character building, whatever. Only twenty out of two hundred.”

Castiel swallowed, falling into Dean’s gaze, into the openness and sincerity and love he found there. “And all the rest are…?”

“And all the rest are…?” Eyes still trained on Castiel, he took a step forward, entwining their fingers together.

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“Some of the them I wrote months ago. Some just this morning. Cas, I have written about you everyday since the first day we met. I never meant to show you all these, obviously, they were just for me, but...I realized it was the only way for me to try and convince you…” He moved his hands up and around Castiel’s neck, his stare unwavering. Castiel swayed, dizzy, heart pounding, feeling as though he was spiraling headfirst into the earth. Before he knew what was happening, Dean reached into his back pocket and pulled out another card and held up it for Castiel to read. The ink was fresh and Dean’s hands were shaking:

I love you. I was an idiot and I’m sorry, but I’m not dumb enough to let you go. Please, Cas…

Forgive me?
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Here you go, dear readers…the chapter you've been waiting for. :)

And a whole day early, no less!

No use denying it. Dean was fucked.

Standing in the motel room he held his breath, shaking. His eyes searched Castiel’s face, looking for any flicker or reaction, any sort of giveaway that his notecard-gesture had done its job and things between them might finally be fixed. But Cas, in his rumpled white button-up and tousled hair, was strangely unreadable—his gaze alternating between the words in Dean’s hand, to the ones (apparently) written all over his face.

Dean loved Cas, it was the goddamn truth, but he had no memory of declaring that via drunk dial. He had berated himself the entire drive that he had allowed himself to say something so monumental while practically incoherent. It’s why Castiel deserved a grand gesture now, and why Dean stood in front of Cas wearing his heart on his sleeve—or, you know, with a love confession literally cradled in his hand. Tomayto, tomahto.

The moment of stillness between them had Dean sweating with panic. He had gone too far, been too honest, put too much on the proverbial table. There was no way Cas would love someone like him... Dean Winchester, half-ass farmer, half-ass writer, full-ass fuck up. Dean took a step back, eyes downcast, dread rolling around in his stomach, fighting the presence of tears—

That’s when he was pushed against the wall, pinned by the force of Castiel’s body weight. At first all he could focus on was the unexpected change in positioning, the dull throb of the collision. But then he felt Castiel everywhere...his hands grasping Dean’s neck, his mouth open and heated and hot, licking his way into Dean’s parted lips. Dean moaned into the sudden heat of it all, gripping Castiel’s shoulders and pulling him in with a rough and desperate movement, begging to be closer. He fist the back of Castiel’s shirt, attempting to untuck the button-up so he could touch skin, Cas’ skin, smooth and warm and angular and strong, skin he had believed thirty seconds ago that he might never caress again.

But Castiel pulled back and stilled his hands, somehow not on-board with the whole, get-naked-as-fast-as-possible plan. Dean was already breathing heavy, already half-hard simply from a few frantic kisses. Still, he willed his eyes open in search of answers.

“Cas…”

Castiel gaze was striking, powerfully dark and dangerous, and a surge of arousal sparked inside Dean. “Will you follow my lead?” Castiel rumbled, voice so low Dean felt his words vibrating against his chest. Cas licked his lips, tongue quick and wet and Dean wanted it inside his mouth. Or better yet, gliding over his cock…

Either way, Dean nodded eagerly to Castiel’s request. He was to-ta-llly game for this.
“Good,” Castiel whispered, and Dean shuddered at the command in his voice. Castiel’s tongue explored every inch of his exposed neck, breathing over the patch of damp, reddened bites slow and teasing until Dean felt goosebumps cover his forearms. Castiel’s movements were jarring and forceful and in-fucking-decent, and Dean was already shivering at the unhurried intensity of it all. He was clutching Castiel’s shoulder and lower back, hands traveling down to his hips, urging Castiel nearer. Instead he just stayed planted, crowding Dean against the wall, sucking deep marks and leaving sloppy kisses all along on his neck in the same firm, unhurried way.

“Cas,” Dean moaned, fighting the temptation to palm himself through the outside of his jeans, cause dammit, he was sporting a serious erection now. Without access or friction or any semblance of control...Dean was starting to lose it.

Castiel must’ve noticed his frustration, must’ve felt his muscles grow tense, ‘cause he pulled back. “What do you want, Dean?” he mumbled against his ear.

Fuck...Dean had a whole laundry list of “wants” fighting for dominance right about now. Sucking Cas off held some serious promise—Dean had gotten even better at blowjobs, thanks to their marathon sex in New York. Or maybe they could skip the foreplay altogether and get right the Big Event, though Cas—the beautiful, tortuous bastard—would probably never agree to that plan. Dean felt unfocused and overwhelmed, all the possibilities making him feel off-kilter. Castiel waited patiently as he deliberated, until finally, Dean whispered what felt was the most honest answer.

“Want you,” he said, voice a quiet rumble of emotion. He wanted Cas’ body, holy fuck did he want that right now, but he also wanted anything and everything Castiel could offer him...his time, his passion, his support, his adoration. He was all in, no longer seeing a point to everyday life without Castiel there beside him.

“You have me.” Castiel’s finger lightly traced to outline of Dean’s scruff, his expression softer now. “I want to show you just how much, okay? Just let go, Dean...just trust me.”

Castiel’s eyes were sincere, a slight arch lifting his eyebrows, a question painted on his face. Dean understood then: this was Castiel’s request. He needed reassurance that Dean was his, that they belonged to each other, that they would face the next minute and hour and day and month and year together as one. He melted into Castiel’s touch then, no longer concerned about getting naked or getting off. If those things came, great, no complaints from Little Dean. None what-so-fucking-ever.

But he cared more now about being with Cas, giving the reins over in a way he had never done before. Despite their kiss-swollen lips and straining, denim-clad erections, this was no longer about lust or sex. Looking into each other’s eyes now, mirrored expressions of warmth and openness, it was evident that they both knew it. Something had irreversibly changed.

They loved each other. They were in love. This was real, this was happening.

Castiel gripped Dean by the back of neck, took a deliberate breath, and brushed their lips together. Dean clung to the erratic, half-open collar of Castiel’s button-up shirt and opened his mouth fully, inviting Cas to give him whatever he was willing to provide. Their lips slotted together perfectly, wet and wonderful in an unpredictable pattern, with Castiel sucking on his bottom lip before Dean returned the favor, leaving small nips and dragging Castiel’s lip to him. They gripped each other by the neck and shoulders, fingers memorizing the touch, the texture of each other’s skin. Their heads tilted together, left and right, left and right, smooth and gliding as a piece of machinery. When Castiel finally deepened the kiss Dean gasped at the flick of tongue invading his mouth, making him tremble and tighten his hold in Castiel’s hair. Eventually their tongues collided, making eager contact in the space between their open mouths. It was erotic and overpowering and Dean felt his knees begin to
As he recovered, he nearly chuckled to himself then—fuck, he was literally swooning for the guy at this point. There was no coming back from this, from Cas. This was no ordinary love—this was fanatical, inflamed, die-for-each-other-if-need-be, give-you-everything-I-got love.

And now that he had it, he wasn’t about to let it go.

Dean didn’t acknowledge he was being lowered to the bed until he felt the dip of a mattress beneath him. The laid-out notecards folded under them, wrinkling and bending under their weight. He already missed the feeling of Castiel’s hands on him, but Cas was busy untying Dean’s shoes and unbuttoning his jeans, fondling the cotton of his t-shirt, effectively slipping off Dean’s clothes with a sensual drag of his fingers. Dean just laid there, breathing in and out his nose, trying to remain in the experience with Cas and not slip inside his head again. Castiel surprised him then by stripping off his tight boxers, the sweep of the elastic band against his aching cock making Dean moan without warning. Castiel raised an eyebrow and Dean smiled sheepishly, letting out a mumbled “sorry.”

Castiel tilted his head, pads of his fingertips tracing shapes against Dean’s shin. “Don’t be sorry. I want to hear you moan, Dean…I want to hear you scream.” A whimper—well, if he was being honest, a borderline howl—ripped its way from Dean’s lips. Jesus Christ, would Cas ever stop being the fucking sexiest person in all of existence?

Castiel moved closer, intending to join Dean on the bed, but Dean looked at him questioningly.

“Here I am, naked as the day I was born,” he said, trying to ignore the bob of his erection down below, breathing laboriously through his nose, “and you’re so overdressed, you’ve still got your shoes on.”

Castiel grinned wolfishly. “All part of the plan, I’m afraid.”

“Well, in that case…” Dean debated for a moment, but then decided, fuck it. I’m all in. “Put your trenchcoat on?”

For the first time in what felt like an eternity of foreplay, Castiel looked properly stunned.

“My trenchcoat,” he repeated evenly, and Dean nodded. Castiel walked back towards the front door and retrieved it, sliding his arms in and regarding Dean fully. “I wear this coat every day, you know.” He took long steps back to the bed, then sunk one knee between Dean’s spread legs. He braced himself on either side of Dean, dipping his head low. “Are you prepared to find yourself aroused every time I put this coat on, Dean?”

“Fuck yeah,” Dean breathed, grabbing at his lapels and closing the distance between them with a kiss. It was quick and chaste, the opposite of what Dean’s now-naked body was screaming for, begging for, but tonight was about giving Cas the reigns. A thrill ran through him when Cas deepened their kiss, falling further against Dean’s chest until his slacks were rubbing against Dean’s erection…and then an electrical surge of arousal made his insides burn. Everything changed very fucking quickly, very fucking fast.

Having the soft shuffle of Castiel’s clothes on his throbbing cock made Dean whine so loudly that it vibrated in his throat, muffled by the engulfing heat of Castiel’s mouth on his. Cas had a hand twisted in Dean’s hair and he pulled away sharply to lick at Dean’s lips, the soft pink curl of his tongue making Dean wonder if he could come just from this fucking sight alone. Castiel’s movements were rough and filthy now, slick kisses peppering his neck and face and lips as Cas ground his hips against Dean’s, making them both groan into each other’s mouths, hands scrambling
to pull each other near.

“On your stomach,” Castiel growled suddenly, pulling at his belt buckle. Dean wasn’t sure if he had ever moved so quickly in his life, lifting his knees around Cas and flipping to his stomach. He was buzzing with anticipation, listening to the drag of Cas’ zipper and the shift of his boxers being jerked down his thighs.

“Fuck,” Castiel mumbled suddenly and without context, and he cursed so seldomly that Dean craned his neck.

“What’s wrong?” he asked instantly, inspecting the corners of Castiel’s frown.

“We don’t have any lube,” Cas muttered, clearly stumped by this development. Dean opened his mouth into a wide hanging “oh” and deliberated on confessing the fact that he had packed lube in his suitcase, a best-case-scenario impulsive grab before they left. But then he realized being fucked by Cas would far outweigh any momentary pride on his part, so he admitted, “Left-hand zipper. In my duffel.”

Castiel lifted his eyebrow in an intrigued, dominating raise. “Aren’t you a confident man, Dean Winchester.”

Dean nudged his head in the direction of his ass, up in the air and ready. “Clearly,” he retorted, and Castiel grinned and rolled his eyes, his weight leaving the bed as he searched through Dean’s duffel. Dean buried his head back into the comforter, musty and damp—they seriously should’ve stripped this thing off the bed before getting down to business, but Dean wasn’t interested in delaying this anymore than was strictly necessary—and waited for Cas to return. His footsteps must’ve been soft, though, because Dean felt him first: a pair of lips grazing his neck, traveling down his back, nipping the flesh of his backside, and then a tongue against...

oh! Oh holy mother of god.

Castiel was massaging Dean’s cheeks, gripping them firmly before licking a flat, unhurried tongue against his hole. Dean fisted the bedspread and lifted his hips on instinct, moaning louder than he thought possible as Castiel left a trail of licks from Dean’s balls to his perineum to his hole—back and forth again, tender and wet and absolutely debauched, before blowing air against the exposed skin.

“Cas, ah…Cas...”

The rush of intimacy was like a drug, a surreal ignition of desire that made Dean’s consciousness float away until all he felt was pleasure. After a moment he was dragged back to earth by teasing, nibbling teeth scraping against his ass cheeks.

“Next time, we’ll wash up beforehand,” Castiel said, lips exploring Dean’s lower back, “and I’ll eat you out all night long until you come, untouched.”

“Fuck, Cas...fuck.” Dean’s back instinctively arched at the thought and Castiel caressed the dip lovingly.

“So beautiful,” he whispered. “So good, Dean. And all mine.”

“All yours,” Dean answered softly. After a few more soothing kisses on his back, he heard the sound of the lube bottle popping open. He went down to his elbows, allowing Castiel better access, and took a deep breath when the first slick finger entered him. He had been loosened up by Cas’ light but satisfying rim job and pushed back against the finger, fucking himself against it desperately. The bed squeaked and the headboard hit the wall with a repetitive thud and then Castiel curled a finger in
towards Dean’s belly, fireworks exploding through his body. He gasped and moaned and lifted his hands up, searching for something to hold on to. He pushed against the stiff pillows and they tumbled sideways, knocking the cheap bedside lamp over and probably breaking it, based on the sound of the tumble... Oops.

Castiel responded by pushing Dean’s head down with his other hand, obstructing his movements in a way that Dean only found more arousing. Castiel knew he liked being manhandled, the bastard, and Dean could practically hear the smirk in his voice when he said, “If you aren’t more careful, Dean, I may have to restrain you.”

Dean keened into the comforter, fighting the urge to say he would like to try that very fucking much, please. But that was a conversation for another day. Castiel leaned down, biting and sucking Dean’s earlobe before inserting a second finger into Dean’s entrance. The stretch was minimal and Dean whimpered at the burn, already wanting more, but knew Cas wouldn’t be swayed from his preparations. He scissored Dean open painstakingly until Dean had embarrassingly drug precome against the fabric of the comforter. Between this and the broken lamp, the likelihood of Dean’s credit card being charged a fee or two was ramping up steadily.

When Castiel added a third finger, Dean was biting his lip in such a way, he worried he might break skin. He was moaning so unabashedly that he only realized the phone had been ringing when Castiel froze, keeping his fingers in Dean but reaching for the receiver with the other.

“Hello?” Castiel grumbled, and fuck, his voice was all dark honey and whiskey and gravel and it made Dean’s cock twitch. “Yes, we’ll...we’ll do that. Thank you.”

He leaned forward again, sliding the phone into the cradle.

“Cas?” Dean’s voice was tentative while Castiel pulled away, lifting himself from Dean’s body and slipping his fingers out. Before Dean could protest at the sudden loss, hands were pulling at his hips, guiding him to flip over. Dean was happy to face Cas again, but a little surprised when he pulled Dean to the edge of the bed, pushing his knees towards his chest. Castiel was standing above him, still fully clothed apart from the boxers and slacks pooled at his ankles. And, Jesus fuck, that cock. It was glistening and pink, thick and curled, and Dean wanted it inside of him immediately.

“Any reason for the change in venue?” Dean quipped, wondering how long he could realistically keep his knees like this before he grew sore. Farming kept him in good shape, sure, but he wasn’t exactly flexible.

“It seems we’ve had a noise complaint.” Castiel’s eyes were hooded and suggestive as his gaze racked over Dean’s body, and Dean realized Cas found this interruption arousing. Dean knew he should be embarrassed for being so goddamn loud that someone complained about the idiots screwing like rabbits at one in the morning, but it sent a flurry of exhilaration through him instead. “So if you want me to fuck you, I need you to be very, very quiet Dean. Can you do that?”

Dean knew that—without a doubt—there was no fucking way for him to be quiet now. The sexiest man he had ever met, aka his boyfriend who he was crazy in love with, was about to pound him into next Tuesday. There was little to no chance of Dean controlling himself around Cas and he knew that. Still, he tilted his head up, filled with feigned confidence, and said, “I can do that.”

Castiel smirked, seeming to see through Dean’s facade. But then he was squirting lube from the bottle and lathering up that perfect fucking dick of his and the smile fell from Dean’s face instantaneously, replaced by a primal need to have Castiel inside of him. Now.

Cas settled between Dean’s raised knees until they were chest-to-chest, Castiel still standing and
leaning down towards Dean. He angled his cock at Dean’s entrance and slid his way inside, bottoming quickly from the abundance of lube and Dean’s well-prepped hole. Dean barely contained his groan at the intrusion—Cas was much bigger than three fingers. He huffed air through his teeth while Cas stroked his legs in small, comforting circles, letting Dean get adjusted. Dean felt himself relax, sinking in the mattress and then he whispered, “Cas, please…”

It was all the encouragement that Castiel required, as he pulled out fully before re-entering Dean, setting a breakneck pace. It was wet and wild and fast and Dean wouldn’t last for five minutes at this pace. Forgetting his instructions, Dean cried out as Cas penetrated him with a particularly forceful thrust.

“Dean,” Cas said, panting, with a disapproving tone that Dean knew was mostly false. “If you can’t control yourself…”

He pulled out swiftly, re-adjusting his angle, seeming to search for something...then he lunged forward again, hitting Dean’s prostate in one unyielding blow.

“Well, that’s what Dean thought until Cas’ hand flew to his mouth, muffling his cries. Why in the fucking world was hot, Dean might never know, but their eyes were locked together now and Dean clutched Cas’ smothering hand as he stumbled closer and closer...

“You like that, don’t you?” Cas said, evidently referring to his hand clasped over Dean’s mouth. Dean nodded enthusiastically, moaning against Cas’ palm. “Maybe next time I should use my tie instead…” And it was that mental image that sent Dean spiraling over the edge, the white hot coil of pleasure spilling all over his stomach. He fell into the mattress, sated and boneless, consciousness floating away in the afterglow of such mind-blowing sex. Once Dean was taken care of, Castiel increased his speed tenfold. When his eyebrows knit together and Dean knew his boyfriend was close, an idea occurred to him.

“Come on me, Cas,” he requested, voice low and breaking. “On my face...let me taste you.”

Castiel flinched at the thought, whining and thrashing, and pulled out quickly. He took himself in hand and Dean watched in amazement at the new angle. His mouth was only inches from Cas’ erection and he wanted nothing more than to suck him dry. He licked his lips, staring at that gorgeous cock and debating on asking Cas if he could give him a blowjob, when Cas was crying out and shooting strips of hot come on Dean’s cheeks, his mouth, his chin. Dean smacked his lips and swallowed it, the salty tang decent enough to ingest if it could produce Castiel’s current level of flustered—sweat on his temples and shirt collar, legs trembling, barely holding himself up.

“You...honestly…” Cas tumbled forward, head rolling to Dean’s chest. “Might be the death of me.”

Dean smirked, holding Cas close. He wanted a washcloth and a quick shower and then hours and hours of interrupted sleep, preferably in the arms of the man he loved. But for now he was content to nurse Cas through his post-orgasm haze, running a hand through his hair before eventually lulling them both to sleep.

***

In the morning, Castiel was stirred awake by the nuisance of his bladder. He stumbled around in the
dark and relieved himself quietly, not wanting to wake Dean. Judging by the lack of sunlight escaping the curtains, it was early, before sunrise even. Once he finished up in the bathroom, he looked for his phone, remembering he had slipped it into the pocket of his trenchcoat. Searching for it on the floor, notecards shuffling beneath his feet, gave Castiel a rush of excitement…

Last night had been incredible. More than incredible. It had been a revelation, a life-altering occasion. It was the most secure he had ever been in his relationship with Dean, knowing they were finally on the same page. This newfound assurance…it was a feeling he never wanted to lose.

When he finally unlocked the screen of his phone—his battery life severely depleted—he discovered it was ten o’clock in the morning. Huh. His eyebrows raised in surprise. Those must be some high quality, light-blocking curtains in the room. Apart from hangover or illness, he hadn’t slept this late in a long time. He found Dean’s still-sleeping form curled on his side, hand clutching the sheet, and smiled. They had both needed the rest after such a physically and emotionally exhausting day, clearly. But for Castiel, it was more than that. Being in Dean’s presence made Castiel feel settled…safe and wanted in a way he had never felt before.

Shivering slightly in just his boxers, he couldn’t recall Dean stripping him down before bed, but he must have, tenderly shrugging off his trenchcoat before freeing Castiel of his outer layers. That was, perhaps, one of Castiel’s favorite parts of their relationship. They were opposites but equals, always content to take care of each other no matter the situation. Even if Dean relied on him entirely—which would never happen, Dean was much too independent, self-sufficient, and stubborn for that—Castiel wouldn’t mind shouldering the majority of their burdens as long as he had Dean’s love. Which, if last night was any indication, he did.

So, no matter the outcome with Joshua and the eventual ownership of Sacred Sun Press, Castiel was loved and in love and that changed everything. He was still prepared to fight Zachariah tooth and nail, but it was no longer for his own benefit. He only wanted justice for Dean and to preserve Chuck’s memory…beyond that, he was more than willing to leave behind his career, his city, his entire life in New York. Anything if it meant waking up next to Dean every morning.

Speaking of…he dreaded the thought of rousing Dean from his much-needed rest. He wished they could sleep the whole day away, lazy and languid in each other’s arms. But they had come to Ohio for a reason, and Castiel suspected they needed to check out of the motel soon. Though, that didn’t mean he couldn’t make Dean’s transition into the land of the fully conscious a little more fun…

He tiptoed stealthily back to bed. Positioned on all-fours on the mattress, he slipped his whole body under the sheet and put gentle hands on Dean’s hips…just to realize his boyfriend had been sleeping in the nude. Fantastic. This would make Castiel’s plan significantly easier.

Hands steadied, he left small, stirring kisses along the flesh of Dean’s muscular thighs. His body was truly amazing, an absolute work of art, and Castiel couldn’t wait to spend every available second lavishing it with all the love he could offer. A moment later he set his intentions lower with tentative licks on the underside of the head of Dean’s cock, knowing the sensitivity around the slit would arouse him quickly. Eventually Castiel moved up, focusing on the shaft, before taking a deep breath and taking the member fully into his mouth. He felt the cock harden against the roof of his mouth, grow receptive and stiff as Castiel sucked, bobbing his head in rhythm with his fist. Through the thin layer of top sheet, he heard a muffled groan and felt Dean’s thigh twitch. Eventually hands were searching the space around him, Dean’s fingers touching his shoulders and threading tightly in his hair.

“Holy fuck, Cas,” Dean breathed, lifting the sheet and ruffling Castiel’s hair in the process. Castiel gazed up with a pop, eyelashes thick and fluttering, knowing he looked sinful and sensuous and
feeling zero self-consciousness about that fact. His hand snaked beneath Dean’s sizable, glistening cock, fondling his balls and rolling them gently between the pads of his fingers. Dean audibly whined as Castiel wetted his lips, leaving damp and dragging kisses along Dean’s length. After a few teasing grazes he took Dean’s cockhead into his mouth again, hollowing out his cheeks, eyebrows raised and suggestive. Dean looked simultaneously adorable and debauched, the remnants of sleep still in his eyes with his mouth frozen and agape. Castiel thought suddenly, *I love this man so much it hurts*. Maintaining eye contact, he slowly edged the cock towards the back of his throat, breathing through his nose and taking all of Dean’s shaft further down. He stayed relaxed, fighting the urge to spasm, and moaned obscenely around Dean’s cock. The corners of his eyes were damp with tears but still he pushed on, loving that he could give this to Dean, could show his infatuation in such a tangible way.

Even without Dean shouting his name in warning, Castiel could tell his boyfriend was about to come. He knew all of Dean’s tells by now...the husky inflection of his voice, the quivering of his thighs, the curled toes, the arched back. Dean came and Castiel couldn’t keep himself from staring, transfixed by the shifting emotions crossing Dean’s face...the flustered approach of orgasm, the ecstasy as it came crashing down, the ache as Castiel sucked every drop of come from Dean’s tender cock. And finally, perhaps Castiel’s favorite, the thousand-watt smile, satisfaction painted on Dean’s features without any hint of embarrassment. Dean was sometimes too self-aware for his own good, but in these private, deeply satisfying moments, there was only genuine content on his face. Bliss, even.

“C’m’here,” Dean slurred, sounding positively love-drunk, and Castiel grinned, licking his lips and slotting their bodies together. In the midst of the blowjob Castiel had grown inexplicably hard, and sliding into Dean’s arms caused a delicious amount of friction on his erection. Dean tilted his chin and sucked on his bottom lip, Castiel responding eagerly, opening his mouth for Dean’s tongue to wander in, to taste remnants of his come on Castiel’s tongue. Dean wrapped his hand around Castiel’s throbbing dick while sucking a mark into the pulse point of his neck, and Castiel moaned at the sensation of it all...but forced himself to pull away, gasping for air.

“We…should...really...get...going,” he panted, trying to think about anything but the hot wet goodness of Dean’s mouth. “Check-out is in...thirty...minutes…”

Dean groaned dramatically, clearly as distraught about the rush as Castiel was. “Shower time, then?” Dean gave him one more pecking kiss before rising up and off the bed. Castiel followed suit, and once they were vertical again Dean looked down, regarding Castiel’s erection with a mischievous grin. “Hey, Cas...since we’re on a countdown and all...what’s the fastest way to get you off?”

Castiel, who was rarely at a loss for words, suddenly felt like his mouth was stuffed with cotton. Truthfully, he knew, anything Dean was likely to do would arouse him immensely. Was that an acceptable answer? “Uhh…”

Dean’s wicked facade only magnified. “Sounds good,” he said, slapping Castiel’s ass cheeks playfully as they headed for the bathroom. “I like a challenge.”

It turned out, barely six minutes later, the fastest way for Castiel to reach orgasm was quick strokes of Dean’s skilled, soap-slick hand, his mouth covering Castiel’s in hungry kisses as he hurriedly stroked him under the shower spray. They washed each other afterwards with generic motel soap, kissing and smiling and feeling light as air. While they dried off, Castiel practically felt drunk from just being in Dean’s presence. He knew it wouldn’t always be this way, that real life would come back soon and level out their endorphins, but right now Castiel was willing to ignore everything else and simply bask in the rapture that was Dean Winchester.
Dean got dressed in his usual, unsystematic manner—grabbing whatever was closest and clean, which today, ended up being a waffle henley and a pair of light-wash jeans—then laced up his boots and headed towards the Impala. In the chaos of last night, Castiel had left his suitcase in Dean’s trunk. While Dean was busy retrieving it, Castiel wrapped a towel around his waist and collected all the notecards Dean had put on display for him last night. Many of them had been bent or damaged in the heat of their...was it too saccharine to call it lovemaking? That’s how Castiel regarded it, even though the sex had been rather frantic and rough, full of passion but not much in the way of subtlety.

A sinking feeling, heavy as an anvil, fell to the bottom of Castiel’s stomach. Last night, he had adopted a rather dominant persona and they hadn’t discussed if that was okay. Had Dean been okay with everything they did together? Not to mention, they hadn’t even had the opportunity to vocalize their feelings yet. Grand gestures and mind blowing sex were wonderful ways to convey emotion, but part of Castiel craved hearing those three little words spoken aloud, exchanged between them freely...

Lost in his thoughts, Castiel nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt someone touch him from behind, sliding hands around his hips. He whirled around and faced Dean, who had somehow returned to the room without Castiel noticing.

“Woah, Cas.” Dean put his hands up, a gesture of calm surrender. There was still an unusual amount of cheerfulness on his boyfriend’s face, a contented sort of smile that Castiel found absolutely gorgeous. Thanks to Castiel’s edginess, though, there was a hint of confusion there too. “Didn’t mean to spook ya.”

“It’s fine,” Castiel responded, trying to force the oncoming tension to roll off his shoulders. He spotted his suitcase leaned against the wall and went to retrieve it, unzipping it and deciding on a sweater and jeans. Dean sat on the bed as the towel dropped around Castiel’s waist, eyebrows raised in interest.

“That’s a pot-kettle situation there, Cas.”

Castiel put his left foot into his jeans, then his right foot. “How do you figure?”

Dean snorted, expression incredulous. “Dude, really? You stare at me all the time.”

“And you usually stare back,” Castiel argued, fidgeting with the button of his jeans. Dean opened his mouth to protest, but seemed to think better of it, shrugging in a “touché” sort of way instead. Castiel slipped the sweater over his head and adjusted the hem, walking to the bathroom mirror. Ten minutes later, Castiel finished getting ready without much fanfare, collecting all the notecards and slipping them into his bag while Dean smiled sheepishly. They loaded their luggage into the Impala at eleven o’clock sharp.

It became quickly apparent that neither of them had eaten in almost a day, having skipped last night’s dinner and breakfast this morning. They were eager to find Joshua, though, so Dean stopped at a drive-thru and they inhaled an early lunch of greasy burgers and fries. They set out towards the highway afterwards, only an hour remaining between them and Cleveland.

Castiel already missed the easy buoyancy of this morning. Now he felt weighed down, worried about what they would say to Joshua while also replaying the events of last night over and over in his memory, wondering if he had misstepped somehow. Twenty minutes into the drive, Dean nudged him with his elbow, then shuffled his palm and placed soothing strokes on Castiel’s knee.
“We’ve got this. Okay?” Dean’s voice was filled with such confidence that Castiel glanced up, wondering if there was a way for all that conviction to rub off on him. Castiel only smiled weakly, placing his hand on top of Dean’s.

“If you say so,” he mumbled, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“Cas, is there anything…” Dean turned his head, staring at the road. “Uh, anything wrong? Anything I did…?”

“No!” Castiel exclaimed, with such immediate fervor that he wondered if he should feel embarrassed. “No,” he repeated more evenly, stroking the top of Dean’s hand with his thumb. “I’m just...last night…”

“That’s what this is about?” Dean said, looking at him curiously. “Well, I dunno about you, but last night was fucking amazing for me.”

“Really?” The relief Castiel felt must’ve been evident, because Dean chuckled, moving closer to him on the seat. “There are still some things we should discuss though, Dean.”

“Like what?” Dean gave him a sideways glance, as if this exchange was entirely bizarre.

Castiel took a deep breath and decided to lay everything on the table. “Well, if I’m being honest, I’ve always been rather...you could say, dominant, in bed. But last night was more intense than we’ve been in the past, and we should’ve discussed it beforehand, but it was so unexpected—”

“Cas—”

“And you shared your feelings with me, Dean, but I haven’t been able to share my feelings with you, and—”

Dean slanted the steering wheel and slowed down, pulling over on the shoulder. He put the car in park then turned to Castiel, scanning his face like it contained pieces of an unsolvable puzzle. “You really wanna talk this out?” he asked, seeming a little hopeful that Castiel would change his mind.

“I think we need to,” Castiel answered carefully. “We’re not great at communicating, Dean, not when it counts. But if we want to make this work…” Castiel’s voice trailed off, letting the implication linger. Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing, as if what Castiel requested would be unfathomably difficult.

“Look,” Dean said finally, eyes glued to the steering wheel, “you know I’m not one for chick flick moments, which is one reason why I’d like to file last night’s rom-com behavior under ‘never to be discussed in public, or within a twenty-mile radius of my nosy fucking family.’” Castiel snorted despite himself, but Dean continued. “And the sex...well, that’s the best spank bank material of all fucking time. Best sex of my life, no joke.”

Castiel let Dean’s words sink in, trying not to grow flustered. “So,” Castiel started cautiously, “you’re sure…”

Dean twisted his torso and drew closer, hands sliding to Castiel’s neck as if it belonged there. “I’m sure about you, Cas. Honestly that’s all I need to know. When we get back we can…I don’t know, borrow a feelings-stick from Sammy and sing kumbaya or whatever.”

“Good,” Castiel said firmly, leaning into Dean’s touch and drifting a hand to his chin. “Because I don’t intend to ever almost lose you. Not again.”
Gradually he pulled Dean into a deep and searching kiss, open-mouthed and zealous, trying to draw reassurance from Dean in a physical form of communication, one they more easily shared. Dean responded perfectly, pushing against Castiel’s lips with his tongue and fistng his sweater in a tight grip. Before they knew it, they had lost track of time...making out in the Impala on the side of a busy highway, worries be damned. When Castiel felt the heat between them grow, his cock rising to the occasion, he knew they had to take a breather. He touched his forehead to Dean’s and they panted openly, sustaining a simmering and open eye contact.

“Did that...uh, answer your questions?” Dean said, chuckling. Castiel smiled and rolled his eyes, stroking Dean’s lip with his thumb.

“Not exactly,” he mumbled. “But we have plenty of time for that.” A whole lifetime, Castiel hoped.

They set out on the road again with the tension between them eased completely, though another anxiety was already waiting in Castiel’s brain, willing to take its place. He worried they wouldn’t be able to convince Joshua, but he had faith in Dean...not to mention an unwavering belief in what they could accomplish if they worked together. The reassurance of Dean’s hand knitted in his was the only thing keeping Castiel grounded as they parked the Impala in the garage directly across from the Cleveland Botanical Garden. Dean grumbled about the eight dollar parking fee, then the twelve dollar cost of admission, and Castiel could almost let himself be distracted by the familiarity of Dean’s inherent grumpiness. He could pretend that they were just another couple here to sightsee, rather than fulfilling some strange mission or quest. At the front entrance, they located a map and were surprised to see eleven potential gardens for Joshua to be working in.

“Great,” Dean sighed, folding the map over in irritation, “all we gotta find is one tiny gardener in a literal conglomerate of huge-ass gardens.”

“I’m not sure you’re using the word ‘conglomerate’ correctly,” Castiel muttered, and Dean glared at him, so he cleared his throat and continued. “Let’s try the glasshouse first.”

“I’ve already seen that,” Dean complained. “I came here on a field trip once, remember?”

“Dean, we’re not here on vacation,” Castiel reminded him, nudging him in the direction of the glasshouse.

“Thirty dollars down the drain and I can’t even stop to smell the freaking roses,” Dean grumbled. “Joshua better be here.”

Castiel nodded in agreement and they began walking. At first they had wanted to approach Joshua at his house, but for some reason, not even Charlie had been able to locate his address. Calling him seemed safer but much easier to ignore, especially if Joshua wasn’t in the mood for a life-altering conversation. Convincing him in-person seemed to hold the greatest possibility of success, which is how they ended up wandering inside the glasshouse, Castiel’s head dizzy from the fragrance and the heat. The vegetation was tropical and the temperature was humid, heavy enough that he rolled up the sleeves of his sweater. There was a waterfall nearby, loud and thunderous, which is why Castiel missed it when Dean first said, “That’s him!’

“What?” he shouted, leaning closer.

“That’s...him...there,” Dean said louder, emphasizing each word and pointing. Castiel followed the direction of Dean’s finger and saw a man squatting low, tending to an exotic fern situated under a bronze statue. As if on cue the man got to his feet, done with his task. He dusted his hands on his khasilis, sighing, and turned absently in their direction.
Before Dean or Cas could say a word, recognition seemed to spread on Joshua’s face, a dramatic
gasp coloring his features. He opened his mouth to speak but no sound escaped.
And then, he ran.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It hadn’t been a conscious decision to follow Joshua. Dean hadn’t meant to react, to move in long strides and rush towards the vanishing sight of Joshua’s khaki-clad back. It surprised him how badly he wanted this, how desperate he was to speak face-to-face and make his case to Chuck’s son. He had been pessimistic about this mission from the start, had spent the past week accepting his situation and wallowing in misery and despair.

But then Cas had returned. Cas had returned and broken down Dean’s defenses in a way that Sam, Jess, and Charlie had been trying to do for days. And now with Cas in tow, Dean had the smallest hint of faith that maybe, just maybe, they could change their fate. Now or never…

Time to kick it in the ass.

Beneath all the adrenaline Dean felt a sliver of guilt, one he had been trying hard to suppress. Castiel had lost his job over this. Over Dean. And Dean knew what a sacrifice that was, how tightly Cas had clung to the hope of staying with Sacred Sun Press and preserving Chuck’s memory. He had given it all up, left a sure thing, a guaranteed promotion under Zachariah, just to rebel with Dean.

So yeah, he wasn’t about to let Cas’ sacrifice be for nothing. Joshua ran as fast as his spry, middle-aged frame could carry him, and Dean followed. He turned the corner, his view obscured by a row of lushly overgrown bushes, but within a few steps the other man was close enough to touch. Dean’s hand wrapped around Joshua’s shoulder, gently pulling him backwards.

“Joshua,” he said cautiously, quiet as a question, but the other man shrugged him off vehemently. Dean raised his eyebrows, not expecting that severe of a reaction. He was about to just say fuck it and let them all get royally screwed over by Zachariah—nothing could be worth borderline harassing a nice dude who just wanted to live his life in peace—but to his astonishment, when he glanced up, Castiel was blocking Joshua’s exit. Joshua sighed and glanced between Cas and Dean, finding himself properly surrounded.

“Boys,” Joshua began, exasperation in his voice, “is all this really necessary?” He waved a hand between the three of them, as if their current situation was ludicrous.

“I dunno,” Dean said noncommittally, shrugging, ”was it necessary to run from us like we’re the freaking IRA or something?”

Over Joshua’s shoulder Castiel’s eyes flickered to Dean, soothing and poised, giving him a once over. Dean rolled his eyes and looked down at his feet grumpily, receiving Cas’ silent message, probably something like we can catch more bees with honey or some shit. Yeah, that was probably the idiom Cas would use, considering his childhood obsession with those four-winged fliers. Whatever. They had come here for a reason, and Dean was ready to get down to business.

“Apologies...we didn’t mean to ambush you,” Castiel said genuinely. “We just have an important matter to discuss with you, and we preferred having this conversation in person.” Cas took a small step forward, extending his hand. “I’m Castiel Novak. I am... was... an editor at Sacred Sun Press.”

“I know who you are,” Joshua said matter-of-factly, then his expression changed, softening just a little. Castiel tilted his head as if trying to unearth something, before his features became smooth and
“You talked to Chuck,” he said, more to himself than anyone else. He hadn’t been involved in the gravesite conversation between Joshua and Dean, hadn’t heard Joshua speak about these things already.

“Mostly he talked to me,” Joshua said.

“So it’s true then?” Dean stepped closer, the three of the forming a misshapen circle. He tucked his hands into his jean pockets, nervous. “Chuck is really your dad?”

Joshua exhaled, gaze skimming between them. “I know why you’re here, Dean, and I know what you intend to ask me. I’m afraid I can’t give you the answer you want.”

Dean’s mouth went slack. If Joshua already knew about the will, about the true ownership of the company, why hadn’t he acted on it? He squinted, unconvinced…to say he was skeptical was an understatement. “How’dya know that? You haven’t even let me ask the freaking question yet.”

“You want me to accept my claim on the company. To push Zachariah out.” Joshua looked at them and his shoulders tensed, heavy with an unseen burden. “Am I wrong?”

Dean and Castiel exchanged a weighty stare.

“Didn’t know you ‘ready knew about that,” Dean muttered. The thought that Joshua was already aware of his father’s will and was simply rejecting it…

Had they come all this way for nothing?

“I don’t understand,” Cas said, the disappointment in his voice making Dean begin to ache. He had wanted this plan to succeed for everyone, but Cas most of all.

“I suppose I owe you an explanation.” Joshua sighed and rubbed his face, as if explaining a difficult concept to a slow-witted audience. “With me in Cleveland and Chuck in New York, we rarely spent much time together face-to-face. Especially when he was a younger man, and was trying to...unsuccessfully, I believe...move on from my mother.”

Dean wondered if the glasshouse—a fairly busy tourist spot—was the right venue for this conversation. For a fleeting moment he considered suggesting they go find a bench or deserted corner to hash this out, but he’d been unendingly curious about Joshua since they realized his connection to this whole ordeal. He kept his mouth shut and listened.

“But about twenty years ago, when I was a younger man and my father was the age I am now, he began calling me once a week. We talked on the phone for hours. He told me things, confided in me.” Joshua shifted his gaze to Castiel. “He told me about the day he met you in the park. When he offered you the internship, and eventually, moved you into your first apartment. You became like a son to him, and I heard about you nonstop for fifteen years. I…” Joshua cleared his throat, looking uneasy, as if the next words might physically hurt to share. “It’s strange to say, but in a way I feel like I know you. At times I’ve considered you more my brother than Zachariah.”

Dean watched Castiel’s reaction—the slack paleness of his face, the introspective blinking. Castiel had been an only child in an abusive household…he would’ve given anything for a sibling, for a familial relationship like Sam and Dean’s or a brother like Joshua. Dean fought the urge to find Castiel’s hand, to entwine their fingers and squeeze reassuringly.

“Chuck rebuilt me…he saved my life,” Cas said quietly, voice trembling with self-awareness. “I
would’ve been honored to know you, Joshua. But why…” He glanced down, clearly attempting to think through his next question. “Why did Chuck keep you a secret? He only mentioned you once when he was drunk, and I don’t remember…”

Castiel trailed off, uncertain. Dean wondered if it made Cas uncomfortable that a stranger seem to know everything about him, while Castiel was just meeting him for the first time.

“I asked him to,” Joshua explained. “My half-brother is very—territorial, let’s say that.” He smiled humorlessly. “When we first met he was all pleasantries. But the closer I became with Father, the more jealous he grew. After a few months I asked Father to keep our weekly chats—and even my presence in his life—between us.”

“You didn’t want your psycho little bro ruining everything,” Dean offered candidly, and Joshua nodded. “I get it. Zach’s a freaking master at that.”

Joshua looked to Dean for an explanation, but it was Castiel who spoke.

“Zachariah has been blackmailing Dean for several weeks. We didn’t see a plausible way out of it until…” The you came along was implied but unspoken, hanging over them like a thick raincloud.

“So you see now why we need you,” Dean finished. Joshua opened his mouth again, likely to protest, so Dean barreled on. “You’re a gardener, okay? You of all people should get it. ‘One bad apple spoils the barrel’ or whatever the hell the saying is—”

“‘Spoils the bunch,’” Castiel corrected.

“Really,” Dean said impatiently, narrowing his eyes. Castiel had the decency to look sheepish.

“Anyways…” Dean scrambled to reform his thoughts, reaching into his mind for a way to persuade the man in front of them. “At the funeral I told you I’m a farmer. Right?”

Joshua nodded slowly, obviously not following Dean’s train of thought.

“Well, that apple shit is real. There’s a natural plant hormone called ethylene that literally forces certainly fruits to ripen. It’s pretty much poisonous if they’re in proximity to each other.” Castiel was looking at Dean with raised eyebrows, clearly impressed.

“What?” Dean mumbled, a light blush reddening his cheeks. “It’s not all cars and pies up here, ya know.” He patted his temple with a finger for good measure.

“I know that, Dean,” Castiel said, so quickly and with such conviction that Dean wanted to kiss his boyfriend slow and sweet and... Oh yeah, Joshua was still here. Still there and watching the heat between the men with piqued interest.

Well shit, this was awkward.

Dean cleared his throat, attempting to refocus. “What I’m saying is, Zach is a poison to everyone around him and you know it. Don’t you?” The earlier amusement was gone, and there was only grief and understanding reflected in Joshua’s eyes now. Still he said nothing, his silence a form of confirmation. Dean continued. “Your brother is not only gonna ruin my life, but he’s gonna steamroll anyone who gets in his way. He’s gonna make Sacred Sun Press into something unrecognizable, something Chuck would honest to god be ashamed of.”

“How are you so sure? Are you psychic, Dean?” Joshua had a fresh bite in his voice, deliberately lingering on each word.
"If that boy’s psychic, then I’m a blonde, six-foot amazonian queen,” came a woman’s voice, a thick southern accent accentuating each word. Her hair was fuzzy and black, her frame short and supple. She was wearing a gardener’s uniform similar to Joshua’s, a pair of shears passing between her gloved hands.

"Thank you for the input, Missouri," Joshua said, sounding sarcastic.

"Well, I haven’t given you my input yet Joshua, but now that ya mention it…” She dusted herself off, stray mulch and clipped greenery still covering her knees. “I couldn’t help but overhear your predicament, and I think ya oughta give these two a chance. I have a good feeling about these boys.”

Dean had no idea who this woman was—Missouri, apparently—but hey, if she was helping their cause, Dean was grateful. Hell, if she could convince Joshua to help them, Dean would invite her to Thanksgiving dinner.

"Thank you," Castiel told her, expression soft and honest. “Your name again…?”

"Missouri Moseley,” she took off one glove and shook hands with Castiel and Dean, the latter exchanging their names politely in response. “Joshua’s coworker and oldest friend. Only friend, actually.” She grinned teasingly at Joshua, who let a small smile spread on his face, mirroring her expression. “And I been hearing about his daddy issues since day one, I’m ‘fraid. Whatever gives him closure on all this mess, would make me pleased as punch.”

"You know about Chuck?” Dean asked in disbelief. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised—just because Chuck kept Joshua a secret from the people he loved, didn’t mean Joshua was obligated to do the same.

"Oh yeah, honey,” Missouri said, waving her hand casually. "Josh, you know I love you, but you got more daddy issues than a dime-store hooker.”

Dean snorted, unable to stop himself. Yeah, regardless of what happened next, Missouri was freaking awesome.

“And that Zachariah? Shoo…” She shook her head dramatically. “ Took one look at him and knew that man ain’t nothing but a snake. If his lips movin’, he’s lyin’.”

"You met Zachariah?” Castiel asked curiously. Joshua narrowed his eyes and shot Missouri a you weren’t-supposed-to-mention-that glare. Joshua sighed and turned back to Dean and Cas.

"My brother paid me a visit a few months ago, when Father first finished his will,” Joshua explained carefully. “I’m not sure what had him more upset—our father’s illness, or knowing that I was set to inherit the company.”

"Surprised to hear he even cared,” Dean said, then clarified, “About Chuck, I mean.”

"Zachariah isn’t without some feeling,” Castiel murmured with a far-away look. Dean wondered what exactly Zachariah had told Cas during their confrontation yesterday. He made a mental note to ask his boyfriend later.

"Well, I for one ain’t got no sympathy for the man,” Missouri announced proudly. “That man’s stuck-up higher than a light pole, and if you can help put ‘im in his place, Josh, I reckon you oughta.”

They were still for a moment, wondering how Joshua would react to such a declaration. Dean could feel his heartbeat pounding in his ears, a glimmer of hope spreading inside his chest.
“I can’t,” Joshua muttered hesitantly, then tore his gaze from Missouri and addressed Dean and Cas. “The day he visited, Zachariah threatened me. He said if I accept the offer in the will I’d ‘incur his wrath’…whatever he meant by that, I have no intention of finding out.”

“So you’ll just let yourself be bullied outta your inheritance? By your own brother?” Dean’s voice was sharp and shaking, but fuck, he couldn’t hold in his indignation any longer. They had spent the better part of twenty minutes trying to reason with Joshua, but they were no closer to reaching their goal than they were yesterday.

“I don’t care about the inheritance or the money,” Joshua said simply. “My father is dead…that means I can finally wash my hands of Zachariah.”

“You wouldn’t have to do anything so drastic,” Castiel said pleadingly. “You wouldn’t be alone in this, Joshua. We would help. You wouldn’t have to move or change careers…the minute you accept your inheritance, you can hire someone to lead the company in your stead. And if you fear repercussions from Zachariah, Dean’s brother is an excellent lawyer.”

Dean nodded eagerly, knowing Sammy would do anything to help. “Chuck trusted you to make the right call. Why the hell else would he give you the company?” Dean’s head fell back, neck shifting as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t let him down, man.”

The persuasive logic of their argument and the possibility of conceding was crossing Joshua’s face in tense waves. But then a deeper, more rooted emotion took hold, making Joshua’s eyes dart to the ground and his hands shake.

Fear.

With a firm but apologetic frown, Joshua said, “I’m rooting for you boys. I wish I could do more to help you, I do, but…” He opened his hands wide, sweeping them in reference to the greenery. “I just trim the hedges.”

His voice sounded so firm and resolute than any remaining hope left Dean immediately. He had heard quite enough, and turned abruptly on his heels, stomping towards the exit. Still sweating from the humidity inside, as soon as he slipped between the heavy doors, Dean was hit by an invisible wall of cool air. His leather jacket had been folded in his hands, and he shivered involuntarily and slipped it back on in a rush. He ran behind the building for privacy, ending at the vacant smoking section outside. He was fuming and shaky and on the precipice of losing it.

It was official. They had failed Anna, Sam…everyone.

Most of all, Dean had failed Cas.

That’s when he felt warm hands wrap around his waist, his head dropping unconsciously to Cas’ shoulder. They breathed against each other, face to face, pulling on leather and khaki to draw each other closer. If Dean lost everything else—his farm, his writing career, any form of financial stability—at the very least he would have Cas. He would be the only thing tethering Dean to earth, preventing him from spiraling into oblivion. The intensity of that realization made Dean falter, a forceful rush overpowering all his other senses, and he didn’t realize he was crying until the first tear slipped off his chin, dampening the shoulder of Cas’ trenchcoat. Castiel started rubbing his back, whispering words of comfort that should’ve sounded empty but somehow, coming from Cas, reassured Dean.

“It’ll be okay, baby,” Castiel was cooing softly, a hand stroking Dean’s hair. Outside of the bedroom they had rarely used pet-names, but Dean found himself melting into Cas’ affection willingly. They
were swaying in their embrace and Dean couldn’t speak, the apprehension and anxiety of the past few weeks leaving him overcome.

“What’d we do now, Cas?” he mumbled, hating how small his voice sounded, how defenseless. But he he leaned into the vulnerability, opening himself up to Cas in a way that felt easy as breathing. They were together, they were safe. They would take care of each other.

“Oh, Dean…” Castiel was cupping Dean’s chin, a thumb wiping at the tear tracks on his face. Dean looked up at his boyfriend, unashamed and unguarded, receptive to whatever Castiel might say next. He was tired of holding himself together all the time, of controlling everything around him. He had a partner now, right? Someone to help shoulder the responsibility. Someone he trusted and had his best interests in mind.

Castiel grazed Dean’s lips with his own, gentle and calming, releasing tension in his shoulders Dean wasn’t even aware he had been carrying. The kiss was warm and chaste and exactly the reassurance he needed. They clutched each other tighter and kissed in that soft, unhurried way until Castiel pulled away just an inch.

“I’m going back inside to speak with Joshua.” Cas put his hands on Dean’s neck, lifting his chin until their eyes met. His expression was a mix of worry and adoration, and Dean wondered if his own face reflected the same.

“It’s a lost cause, Cas,” Dean whispered, voice low and wary. At this point Dean was content to hid from their problems. A few days ago his method had been the bottle, but now, he just wanted Cas’ arms around him…the comforting presence of his body next to him in bed.

“I have to try, Dean,” Cas said quietly, hands slipping down and rubbing relaxing circles into his Dean’s wrist. “For you I’d do anything.” He kissed him once more, squeezed his fingers, then took a tentative step backwards and headed towards the glasshouse.

Dean watched him go, ignoring the flicker of hope ignited within him at the sight of his boyfriend heading, once again, into battle.

***

Crossing the threshold into the glasshouse, Castiel was struck by a memory.

Two decades ago he had been gawky and fourteen, sporting a mop of unruly brown hair and sitting in the pew of his mother’s church. He was alone, quiet—how he spent every biweekly occurrence at church, sulking and withdrawn. It was an early Sunday morning and service hadn’t yet begun, so Castiel let his eyes and mind wander, catching Raphael’s gaze down at the altar.

This was before anything had transpired between them, before Raphael’s betrayal, before Castiel suffered outright abuse at the hands of his own mother and, eventually, was forced to repent at the church publicly. No, this was a flash-in-the-pan recollection, a moment of sentimentality that Castiel had allowed himself once.

Only once.

He had watched Raphael stand in a circle with his three brothers, goofing off and roughhousing, and Castiel had been struck with covetousness. A sin, he remembered thinking, and in the church no less. But he couldn’t censor the desire to belong, to have family relationships that were rooted in acceptance and love…not judgment and hate. That morning he had permitted himself to imagine a sibling, a person he could confide in and depend on.
And then his mother had slid into the pew beside him, wordless with her shoulders hunched, innately aggravated about some element of Castiel’s demeanor that he couldn’t understand.

The fantasy was broken.

As was Castiel’s present-day reminiscing as he rounded the corner, the sound of Missouri’s sharp voice echoing off the wall and reaching his ears. He continued walking forward, trying to meet her eyes, but she hadn’t spotted him yet.

“If you can’t trust me, who can you trust?” she was whispering tersely. “You’ve never doubted my abilities before.”

Castiel couldn’t hear Joshua’s reply—he was speaking more evenly, his face turned towards the ornate waterfall. Whatever he was saying, though, Missouri was disagreeing vehemently.

“You’re lettin’ your fear outweigh your conscience,” she said, and the firm tone of her voice brooked no argument. “I’m tellin’ you, this is your path. Ain’t no doubt in my mind. All you have to be is brave enough to face it.”

When Castiel was about a foot away he cleared his throat. The pair turned to him, exasperation painted on Joshua’s face.

“Castiel.” Joshua sighed visibly.

“Apologies for the intrusion,” Castiel mumbled, referring to the heated conversation he had just interrupted. He hoped the apology would be sufficient.

“You didn’t interrupt nuthin’ but a bull-headed man gettin’ his hide handed to him.” She smirked, and Castiel found her lifted spirits contagious. She craned her neck forward, looking behind Castiel. “Where’s that firecracker boy ‘ah yours run off to?”

“He just needed some—” Castiel was suddenly struck by the directness of her question. “How did you know he was my…?”

She snorted, shaking her head. “Oh, honey. You ain’t gotta be psychic to see he’s the only cock in your henhouse. Though…” She paused considerably. “For you, I oughta amend that sayin’.” She grinned, lighting up her face. “Ain’t ever been a hen in your house, sugar.”

“Missouri,” Joshua exclaimed, appalled, while Missouri winked for good measure.

“It’s quite alright,” Castiel said graciously, hand raised. “She’s not wrong.”

“I never am,” Missouri said, eyes turned back to Joshua. “Some people seemed to have forgotten that.”

Joshua opened his mouth and then closed it, shaking his head as if he couldn’t engage in this argument with Missouri again. His interest turned to Castiel, a hand resting on his chin.

“What can I do for you, Castiel?” he asked. It was a simple, but interesting, question. Standing outside just a moment ago with Dean, Castiel had expected to come barreling back inside, full of renewed purpose and rage, demanding Joshua help them whether he wanted to or not. A part of Castiel would always be unyielding, a force of nature—it’s why he made a meticulous editor. But another part of him, an intensely private and incredibly delicate part, was still sitting in that church pew at fourteen…
Desperate for connection.

While he had been spurred back inside the glasshouse by selfish desire to defend Dean, to make him proud and salvage his book deal, Castiel realized the significance of this moment. This opportunity.

“Nothing,” Castiel whispered, and Joshua’s eyebrows knit together in confusion, so Castiel raised his voice and continued. “There’s nothing you can do for me…I’d rather ask what I can do for you.”

Joshua leaned backwards, outwardly floored by this development. “There’s nothing you can do for me, Castiel, except let me forget about Zachariah and allow me to live in peace.”

Castiel nodded. There was only one way to make Chuck proud. Only one way to truly find peace, no matter the outcome…

“As you wish.” He tucked his hands into his trenchcoat, wondering how to say something so meaningful to a person he had just met.

But who, apparently, had known him for fifteen years.

“But before I go, I’d like to…” He searched for the right words. Stay in touch? Exchange emails? It all seemed too nonchalant, too inconsequential. “Remain a part of your life. If you’ll have me, of course.”

“I…” Joshua turned on his heels, looking at Missouri inquisitively, seemingly at a loss. “Castiel…why…” He chuckled in astonishment, the sound startling. “I refuse to help you and Dean with something that’s clearly vastly important to you, and you…want to stay…in touch?” By his tone alone, Castiel could tell Joshua thought the idea was absolutely incredulous.

Castiel took a step closer.

“I understand your hesitancy. I intended to come here and convince you to help us. Dean is…” He breathed deeply, biting his lip, and took the plunge. “He’s the man I love. The person I’d do anything for. But if you meant what you said about considering me your family, then…” He pulled his hands from his pockets and waved them around, losing his train of thought, attempting to push through. “Chuck was like a father to me and he saw something in you. Enough to keep in touch, to divulge all his burdens. And I would like to know that man. As a person, as a friend, as a—” He felt sweat creep against his collar, his voice shaking. “As a brother.”

The shock and awe was evident on Joshua’s face. Clearly he had expected Castiel’s wrath, but instead, was face-to-face with benevolence.

“I don’t know what to say,” Joshua said softly. Castiel shook his head.

“You owe me nothing. But you and I…” Joshua’s eyes were wide and open and vulnerable. “We owe this to ourselves. To Chuck.”

Castiel knew Dean would eventually understand, would respect and support his decision. As much as he wanted to deliver good news to Dean, there was no way to avoid it.

Their failure was predestined. Inevitable. The odds were stacked against them.

He turned on his heels, feeling exposed and raw and dreading the bad news he would be dropping on Dean shortly. He made it halfway to the door when Joshua said his name.

Said his name and changed the future forever.
“Castiel,” he said loudly, “what would you like to call me?”

Castiel wrinkled his eyebrow, tilting his head instinctively. “I don’t know…what are my options?”

“Friend. Brother.” Joshua took long, deliberate steps forward. “But around the rest of the staff, maybe call me ‘boss.’”

“You...you mean…” Castiel gaped. Amazement and shock were overwhelmed by warmth, spreading in his chest, making him feel lighthearted. He smiled before he quite realized it, wide and natural and gummy. He took a step towards Joshua and shook his hand zealously, grasping him by the elbow.

“What the hell are we waitin’ for?” Missouri said, grinning at Castiel. “Get your sweetie back in here an’ let’s celebrate.”

Castiel was moving through the doorway before he could even comprehend the movement, taking sizable steps towards the back of the building where Dean would be waiting.

“Dean,” he called out, rounding the corner in practically a sprint. “Dean!”

The emerald-eyed, leather-clad, love of Castiel Novak’s life glanced up. His eyes were swollen and red, burdened with anticipation.

“Cas?” He rushed forward, jaw square and tense, hands swinging at his side. “What happened?”

“We did it. Dean, we…” Castiel wrapped his hands around Dean’s neck, smiling wildly, rubbing Dean’s tight muscles with both thumbs. “We did it.”

Dean’s grin was luminous, eyebrows raised in astonishment, laugh lines etched like marble on his face.

Now that was a sight Castiel would never grow tired of.

A sight he could—and would—spend the rest of his life worshipping.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, there you have it folks. This is the official end of the story. However, I have a VERY SATISFYING epilogue planned out that I think you’ll wanna stick around for. :) Gimme a few days to crank it out, and I’ll post it ASAP.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Wow, this is it y'all. Thanks so much to everyone who's read this as a WIP! You guys kept me going.

Also, I can't say adieu without thanking my editor EllenOfOz, one final time. 'Cause she's amazing. I'm actually in Boston this weekend visiting two of my gorgeous betas and bffs, who are sitting next to me on the couch as I post this: WaywardLenn and CBFirestarter. Endless thanks to favorite fellow southerner WaywardAF67. You're wonderful and I love you all.

Same goes to my readers—I've loved getting to you know you all in the comments! Thank you so much for enjoying my work and encouraging me every step of the way. <3

Dean balanced two arm-fulls of groceries, unsteady and slipping, fumbling to find his house key. Castiel was inside their cabin, undoubtedly pacing in his office, but Dean refused to ring the doorbell and break his concentration. Cas had a god-awful case of nerves about tonight, and after three years together, Dean knew well enough to let Cas process things on his own time. He would respect that, no matter how desperately Dean wanted to throw the groceries down, run inside, and kiss every single one of Castiel's problems away... And hey, if kisses weren’t distracting enough, there were plenty of other options...

“Coming!” Charlie shouted from the car, racing forward and coming to Dean’s rescue. Dean exhaled and roused himself from the sexy-Cas daydream, hoping Charlie would assume the flush on his cheeks was from grocery exertion—not, well, you know. The thought of taking Cas’ pants off with his teeth.

Charlie was carrying a heavy case of wine, which Dean had insisted she leave in the Impala for him to retrieve later. Instead, she had loudly deemed that “sexist bullshit” and was, apparently, carrying the whole case by herself out of protest. It was endearing and annoying and Dean kinda loved his best friend for it. After finagling the house key from Dean’s slippery grip, she unlocked the door and they crossed the threshold, walking forward and dropping their mountain of groceries on the kitchen island. The rich smell of cut wood still permeated inside the cabin, the distinct fragrance of walnut and maple wafting in on occasion, even though the cabin had been built for over a year. Despite the dark choice of wood, Dean and Cas’ home was light and airy, with rows of wall-length windows framing both sides. Dean had insisted on a stone fireplace, which he found cool as hell—and Cas had deemed “aesthetically pleasing”—even if it was impractical. (“You do know we live in a state with year-round humidity?” Castiel had grumbled, yet he spent more time in the winter reading by the fireplace than anyone. Dean chalked that up as a win.)

As they emptied grocery bags and began sorting—deciding which cold goods Charlie wanted to keep out and use now, and which to store in the fridge—Dean stared longing down the hallway. Sam and Jess would be here in less than an hour, ready to load into the Impala and begin their drive southeast. Charlie would stay behind in the cabin, Dean’s official “best friend slash event coordinator extraordinare” (a self-made title, obviously). Dean would have about an hour with Cas in the car, and
could at least reach past the wheel and put a reassuring hand on his knee. But tonight was a big fucking deal, perhaps the biggest of their lives together thus far, and with Jess and Sam in the backseat, they wouldn’t have much privacy to discuss things...

Dean blinked and stirred, keenly aware that he was being stared at. When he looked down Charlie was examining him with a smile of amusement, her hands sorting blocks of cheeses and smoked meats for the charcuterie board.

“Just go see him,” she said softly, then added, with a smirk, “Not like you’re helping me much anyways. It’s daydream city over there.”

“Huh?” Dean said instinctively, then flushed when he realized he might’ve just proved her point.

“You’ve been holding the cherry tomatoes ransom for like, ten minutes,” she laughed.

Dean looked down guiltily at the produce in his hands and promptly dropped it on the counter.

“Sorry Char, I’m just…” Nervous? Excited? Borderline about to throw-up?

She rolled her eyes, waving her hand dismissively. “I know, I know. Just go.”

Dean could make the argument that Cas needed time alone, but that had never been an official request from his boyfriend—just an unspoken one that Dean had felt, like an imperceptible itch, unseen but very real. Castiel had needed to process something today, but maybe now he was done. Ready for Dean’s company again.

Heading now to Castiel’s study, he looked down at his clothes...his jeans were stiff with sweat from feeding the animals earlier, and his t-shirt, hands, and socks were dusty for no good reason except, well, they lived on a farm. It was kinda unavoidable.

He knocked on Castiel’s office door tentatively, holding his breath, uneasy. What if he broke Cas’ concentration? Dean heard a muffled “come in” and sighed, twisting the knob and standing in the doorway.

Castiel’s office had immediately been one of Dean’s favorite places in their home, ‘cause it was pure Cas. His desk was under a window, the autumn breeze sifting through the window screen and rustling the curtain. The walls were stacked high with bookshelves, more industrial and modern than the rest of their furniture, but eclectic and weird in the best way. The Cas way. The books were more disheveled than usual—what had Cas been reading today? Dean’s two favorite things were additions he could take credit for: the honey bee shadow box, featuring the first honeycomb they had collected from their hive, just months ago; and the second was the small leather futon, where Dean spent most of his afternoons reading when he grew tired of his own office, or had no farm work to keep him busy, or...you know, just missed Cas.

Which was often.

Castiel swiveled in his office chair, crease lines of worry smoothing over at the sight of Dean.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean said with a faint smile.

Castiel tilted his head, as if amused by the formality. “Hello, Dean.”

“I’m not...ya know...interrupting, am I?” Dean instinctively backed towards the door, as if already knowing Castiel’s answer. The panic on Cas’ face was evident, though, and he stood up from his chair, hands reaching for Dean.
Dean let himself be drawn forward, hands finding the dip in Castiel’s lower back. Cas gripped Dean’s neck, bringing their foreheads together.

“You’re never interrupting,” he said kindly, pulling away slightly to look into Dean’s eyes, to show how much he meant it. Three years together, and the sight of those eyes were just as stunning and piercing and fucking endless as ever. Fuck. Dean melted into the stare, every inch of apprehension rolling off his shoulders as Castiel drew close again, parting his lips, and kissed him.

They swayed and moved, gripping each other closer, lips fitting together in a familiar pattern. By now they knew each other purely on instinct, all the secret spots marked like an “X” on a treasure map, so when Castiel flicked his tongue cursorily against Dean’s lower lip, Dean opened his mouth readily, sucking Castiel’s tongue hard and filthy. His thumb played with the buttons on Castiel’s collared shirt, eager to touch more skin.

Dean knew from previous experience that it was a bad idea to get all worked up before company came over—not to mention Charlie was already in their kitchen, though she had walked in on them too many times to count—but as their kisses became deeper and wetter and more desperate, it became increasingly apparent that they both needed this.

They were better together.

Castiel pulled away from the impromptu make-out session, red-faced and panting.

“Couch?” he asked, eyebrows raised, and Dean grinned. It was incredibly tempting, considering they had many fun horizontal memories on that futon already…

But he shook his head. “I need to get cleaned up for tonight.” He touched the thigh of his grimy jeans as way of explanation. Looking at Cas’ crestfallen expression, he added, “I could use some company in the shower…”

Ten minutes later he was crowding Cas against the shower wall, his lips sucking hard on Castiel’s collarbone and a soapy hand wrapped around his cock.

“Don’t—ah—Dean—” Castiel was gripping Dean’s shoulder blades. “Don’t leave a mark tonight, babe.”

Dean paused his lips, switching from deep and purposeful sucking to sweet, nipping kisses. His hand worked Castiel over twice as quickly, though, rubbing a skilled thumb over his sensitive head. “What’s the point of having the hottest boyfriend in existence if I can’t show everyone?”

“After tonight, I’m pretty sure everyone will know,” Castiel replied, amused. “Besides, do you really want me on the front page of The Tennessean with a hickey?”

Dean pulled away, as if mulling it over. Then he grinned wickedly. “Yep.” He zeroed in again on the tender spot of Cas’ clavicle, sucking mercilessly, and Castiel moaned.

“You really are insufferable,” Castiel panted, and Dean could tell by the tone in his voice that he was already close to coming. “Everything I tell you to do, you do the opposite.”

“What can I tell you, babe? Shoulda used reverse psychology.” Dean’s lips wandered down, knees bending slightly before taking Castiel’s nipple gently between his teeth. Castiel buckled, hands spreading against the shower tiles, fingers grasping the air. He came with a low whimper in Dean’s fist, and as his labored breathing tapered off, he lifted Dean by the chin and brushed their lips together. They inched their way closer to the shower spray, Dean washing his hands and Castiel’s softening cock. Before he knew it, Castiel’s hands were reaching for Dean’s erection, a very pointed
look in his eyes, and—

Then someone knocked on the bathroom door.

“Hey, your brother’s here!” Charlie called. “Stop gettin’ your rocks off and hurry up!”

Dean groaned in frustration, wondering how dignified he could be in public all night while sporting a semi.

“I can be quick,” Castiel offered, lips dragging along Dean’s chin with precision. Dean intercepted his wandering hand and threaded their fingers together.

“Nah, I can wait.” He took a step forward, swatting Cas to the back of the shower, and turned the temperature all the way to the left—frigid. He gritted his teeth at the sudden change. “It’ll give me something to look forward to.”

Castiel arched his eyebrow high and licked his lips, examining Dean’s tanned skin with obvious appreciation. “Oh, I’ll make sure of it.”

“Cas,” Dean complained, shivering as he bathed himself in cold water. “So not helping.”

Castiel grinned, clearly unapologetic, but threw his hands up in surrender. Once his erection finally flagged, Dean cut the water and they dried off quickly, moving around their bedroom with the ease of a couple in a practiced routine. Dean wrapped a towel around his waist and gelled his hair to the side, shaving closely, figuring he oughta go all out since he’d be posing for photos all night with Cas. When he went back into the bedroom, Castiel was wearing a khaki tweed blazer over a dark navy vest, a light blue button-up, and fuschia and blue-striped bowtie. He looked like every hot-for-professor porno that Dean had ever come across and literally willed himself to look away, lest he jump his boyfriend’s bones (again) and cause them to be late. Well, later. Dean was glad Cas hadn’t shaved closely, but kept a noticeable amount of growth on his chin, cheeks, and upper lip—a dark and tantalizing shadow, a texture that Dean loved to feel against his bare skin. He went into their walk-in closet and picked out an outfit unconsciously, coming back with dark jeans, a black blazer, and fuschia button-up. When they stood next to each other in the long mirror above the dresser, they definitely looked like they were going to middle-aged, gay dude prom but ya know, fuck it. If he was gonna be known as the arm candy of the man-of-the-hour, Dean reckoned he might as well look the part.

When they finally walked down the long hallway, chattering to themselves quietly and heading towards the front door, they were accosted with hollers and whistles.

“Look at that—Dean actually owns a pair of jeans that aren’t filled with holes.” Sam had cleaned up well, sporting a black button-up and slacks. Then again, Dean reminded himself, Sammy wore a monkey suit five days of the week—tonight was like casual Friday for him. Deanna was hoisted on his Sam’s hip, her light brown hair tied back in a bow, her expression soured.

“I’m gonna ignore that, and snag my adorable namesake of a niece instead,” Dean said, reaching for the toddler and sliding his hands under her armpits, lifting her with minimal effort. It had taken some time—two years and four months, in fact—but he was finally getting used to this gift...this little firecracker of a girl who shared a name and a family with him. He kissed Dee’s forehead and she cracked a half smile, then seemed to remember she was pouting about something and narrowed her eyes again.

“What’s wrong, Dee?” Dean asked her, frowning dramatically for good measure.
“Mommy made me we'a bow,” she announced huffily.

“Aw, but you look so pretty,” Dean offered, looking to Cas for help (damn if Sam’s daughter didn’t love Cas more than anyone else on the planet) but he was busy chatting with Charlie about tonight’s after party. Jess was standing beside them, leaned against the kitchen island.

“I pretty without bow,” Deanna argued fiercely, without a shred of self-consciousness. Dean frowned and nodded in agreement, threading his hand in her hair and searching for the clasp.

“Hey Jess—“

“Touch that bow and I will kill you,” she said, and wow, like mother like daughter or whatever. Jeez. She sighed then, crossing her arms. “Fine. Let’s get her picture with you and Cas first, then we’ll take it out.”

They decided on the fireplace for the backdrop, Cas coming to their left. Sam and Jess each held out their cell phones, taking pictures so fast and at two different angles that Dean didn’t know where to look. His prom metaphor was suddenly coming to life. Jesus. He really hated posing for pictures. But D-bird was standing at their feet, little hands clutching Dean and Cas by the hem of their pants, beaming widely at the camera (probably at the thought of being rescued from the captivity of her evil bow, but hey, Dean would take a good toddler mood whenever it presented itself). With an arm wrapped around Cas’ waist, he felt a lump form in his throat at the significance of it all. In the aftermath of the drama, the transition of Sacred Sun Press and all the new finalging they went through in their professional lives over the past few years, some key developments in their personal life had taken a back seat. They had the house, sure, and that was good—permanent, safe, theirs.

But Dean wanted more. And tonight, he intended to tell Castiel just how much.

The whole crew, minus Charlie, loaded up and into the Impala without any additional fanfare. Dee was sitting in her carseat, wedged between her parents, and she made goofy faces at Dean in the rearview mirror. The grown-ups chatted about the after party and the weather, but halfway to Nashville Dee grew ravenously hungry and Sam and Jess searched the diaper bag for stray snacks. Dean took the moment of distraction to slid a soothing hand on Castiel’s thigh, giving him a wide, sideways smile.

“You nervous?” he asked lightly. Cas hadn’t spoken much during their drive, content to let Dean take the reins. He turned his head now, smiling unconvincingly.

“I’m fine,” Cas said, though he was fidgeting and staring straight ahead at the road.

Dean exhaled, increasing his grip. “You’re gonna be amazing.”

Castiel bit his lip, head bending towards the window. “It’s just…so many people are coming.”

“So many people who already know how fucking brilliant you are.” In the rearview mirror Sam raised an eyebrow, tilting his head towards Deanna, who was listening to Dean with interest. “Ugh, my bad. Not used to have little ears in the backseat.” His face flushed but he returned his gaze to Castiel, not ready to let this conversation go just yet. “You know I’m telling you the truth, right?”

Castiel smiled more genuinely this time. He reached for Dean’s hands and brought it to his lips in a soft, sweet gesture.

“I know I’m lucky to have you.” He kissed Dean’s hand and squeezed, interlacing their fingers together, Castiel’s thumb kneading the patch of skin where his lips had just been. Dean breathed out and looked at Cas, content. At least once a day, it hit him all over again—the love of his life loved
him back.

Twenty minutes later Dean was parking the Impala just outside the Parthenon. The event organizers had reserved a paved spot across the street just for Cas, which—considering the cost of parking in the city—was fancy as fuck. Castiel was only carrying a briefcase, but as soon as they parked, his co-workers called and asked if Dean would help set up the book table. He nodded—Balthazar hardly had any meat on his bones, it was a wonder he had helped transport three hundred books this far—and Cas relayed the message before hanging up.

Dean made a wide step in the direction of the van where Hannah, Balthazar, and Anna were waiting for him, but Castiel gripped his elbow. “I don’t know that I’ll get to see you before…” His face was pale, his forehead sweating…fuck, he was way more nervous than Dean had even anticipated. Why? What was going on?

“Cas.” He closed the distance between them, cradling Castiel’s face in his hands. His spoke in a firm and reassuring voice. “Listen to me, all right? You’re gonna do so good. You know this book inside and outside, and maybe I’m biased, but fuck it. It’s amazing, and you’re amazing, and you make me so goddamn proud just by being mine.” He kissed Castiel’s forehead, then his cheek, before settling tenderly against his lips. He tried to channel all his comfort, all his pride and support and assurance, into the soft, open-mouthed kiss. Maybe it was just the stage fright, or maybe Castiel really understood how much adoration and respect Dean had for him, but when Dean pulled back, his boyfriend’s eyes were heavy and wide.

“I love you,” Castiel whispered. They had said it so often over the past few years that the declaration no longer made Dean’s heart race, no longer made him feel invigorated or surprised. Instead the exchange was familiar and sweet, calming, like coming home.

“I love you too.” He gave Cas’ shoulder one last squeeze, then took a step backwards. “Where’dya want me?”

It was a question they were used to asking each other. During Dean’s most recent book tours—first for *Lucifer Rising* and then for *Swan Song*—Castiel had often stayed behind stage, the first to see him before and after a big reading, to give him a hug and a word of encouragement.

“Front row,” Castiel said, sounding more confident about this than he had anything else today. “I need to see you.”

“You got it, angel,” Dean said, winking outlandishly and making Castiel crack a small smile. The pet-name had originated from Dean’s *Impala Chronicles*, a reference to the angel Mike had fallen in love with. After everything Castiel had done to make sure Dean’s book was published, the months of turmoil in Sacred Sun Press where they battled with Zachariah and implemented new policies and leadership, Dean considered Cas the series’ literal savior. It was only fitting, then, that the once unnamed angel was now known as Castiel, and in the front matter of Dean’s fourth book, there was this dedication: *For Castiel, the fiercest angel in the garrison, who rescued me from hell.*

Dean wasn’t one to brag, but that dedication had been a great fucking idea. Possibly his best ever. He had woken up via blowjob for almost a week straight after Cas read that shit.

He said a quick “see you soon” to his family and turned on his heels, following the vague directions Balthazar had given him and heading for a parking lot across the street. He found them easily enough, wheeling dollies of Cas’ book to and from the Parthenon steps. Dean gave a quick round of hugs—they hadn’t seen each other since the spring, at Cas’ official book launch in NYC—but they only had thirty minutes to transport a large amount of books, so they got to work quickly. Anna was introducing Castiel on stage, so after giving Dean a quick peck on the cheek she excused herself,
searching for Cas. Dean nodded in approval—if he couldn’t be there to help calm Cas’ pre-reading jitters, Anna was the next best thing. Or, you know, person. Sometimes it amazed Dean he was a writer, ‘cause wow. Vocabulary was for the birds.

It took them twenty-five minutes to load up the books and setup the purchase table, and then, Dean barely had enough time to find his family in the front. He took a seat beside Sam with Deanna wedged between Sam and Jess, closer to the end of the row in case they had to do an emergency-crying-toddler evacuation. Thankfully Dee was usually content to sit through both Dean and Cas’ book readings (provided she had a sippy cup of juice and a toy of some sort, though she preferred playing games on her iPad now…damn technology). Dean rested his elbows on his knees, suddenly restless. He looked behind him at all the rows of white-padded lawn chairs, and then kept looking, and looking… Jesus, they had predicted two hundred and fifty people in attendance, but this looked closer to three-fifty. Dean swallowed, glaring impatiently at the front stage. For as confident as he had felt reassuring Cas all day, now he was the one flooded with nervousness. It was late afternoon, and the sun was high and bright and hot, clearly not understanding that it was fucking autumn. Dean shrugged out of his blazer, balling it into his fists before realizing he’d have to look camera-ready later, smoothing out the wrinkles and folding the jacket in his hands. He focused on that small task so heartily that Jess gave a chuckle and slid her hand over his.

“He’s gonna do fine,” she said, patting him lightly.

“I know that,” Dean answered, a bit defensively, before softly adding, “I know. Thanks.”

When Dean glanced up, Anna was walking to the microphone. Dean sat up straight, every muscle tense, leaning closer to catch every word.

“Good afternoon, Nashville! I’m Anna Milton, the publisher of Sacred Sun Press—an independent book publisher based in New York City. I’m thrilled to be here and welcoming you to the Southern Festival of Books official author reading!” Anna’s voice was vibrantly animated, and there was a scattering of applause before she continued. “It’s my greatest pleasure to introduce Castiel Novak to the stage. Most of you know Castiel as the New York Times bestselling memoirist of State of You, a timely exploration of Cas’ deeply religious childhood, his experiences as a queer man growing up in the South, and perhaps most famously, his whirlwind romance with fantasy novelist, Dean Winchester.”

Dean blushed inadvertently as the applause rang louder. He had grown used to this over the past few months—having a relationship in the public eye, knowing there was a bestselling book that outlined some of the most private and intimate moments they had shared. But Castiel had sought his opinion at every step of the way, double and triple checking that Dean approved of the manuscript before they decided to move forward and publish it. Castiel’s book broached a variety of topics, as Anna had mentioned, but meeting Dean three years ago and falling in love—hard and headfirst, which Dean could relate to—was the narrative arc holding the cultural commentary together.

State of You was a one-hundred-thousand word love letter to Dean.

And suddenly Dean ached to see Cas, to hear his voice, to kiss him. He wasn’t sure he would ever get over just how much he loved this man, and how lucky he was to have found him.

“Castiel is also the assistant publisher of Sacred Sun Press, and the best damn editor we have on staff, which Dean can attest to.” She cast her eyes down and winked at him, and Dean could only nod in agreement. “Castiel is the most captivating nonfiction writer I have ever had the pleasure of publishing, not to mention, my best friend of almost twenty years.” She turned around and Castiel came from behind a pillar, looking shy but determined. “Here he is, folks—Castiel Novak!”
The crowd’s reaction was thunderous, with many audience members already on their feet and clapping wildly. As always, Castiel looked taken back and coy, still unaccustomed to the praise. “Thank you, thank you,” he mumbled into the mic, as the applause died down. “I’m completely floored, as usual, that anyone would find my life’s story interesting. Thankfully I met an undeniably attractive writer on a farm forty miles north of here, and that’s where the story really begins. I helped him write a very successful book called *Lucifer Rising*, which you should definitely go to your local bookstores and purchase immediately.”

Dean beamed, shaking his head and grinning. Castiel plugged Dean’s writing at any and all available opportunities, and it was adorable and generous every single time. Where other couples might grow vindictive and unkind, fighting for notability in the same field, they supported each other voraciously.

“Tonight I’ll be reading several excerpts from my memoir, which my publisher hopes will make you want to purchase the book, available at the table at the bottom of the steps,” Castiel said lightly. “My goal is much less lofty, I’m afraid, in that I hope I don’t put you all to sleep.”

Dean snorted, rolling his eyes. There was that dry, self-deprecating angel of his. Castiel looked much less nervous now that he was on stage, and Dean settled into his chair, hands clasped as Castiel began to read. He started with a crowd favorite, a story that always made Dean blush—that day in the coffee shop, when they exchanged fiery insults and nearly ended up colliding physically… whether in a fight or a makeout session was anyone’s guess. Next Cas read a section from a flashback chapter, a poignant memory of his mother and the church that left Dean’s eyes watery. Interestingly he included the chapter where they visited the Pantheon three years ago, simply as editor and writer, learning about body language. He ended with a thrilling retelling of their mission to convince Joshua to join their cause in Cleveland, and the aftermath that followed—the firing of Zachariah, the appointment of Anna as publisher, Castiel’s move to Tennessee where he lived in the farmhouse with Dean, Sam, Jess, and Deanna, working from home and flying out once a month to perform his duties as assistant publisher.

It was a well-rounded reading list, Dean thought, highly enjoying himself now that the initial apprehension had faded. Castiel usually ended his readings after an hour, on the dot, methodical and organized as he was. But he surprised Dean by clearing his throat to introduce another piece.

“To close, I’d like to read the rough draft of something I just wrote. Today, in fact.” Dean raised his eyebrows, interest piqued. Castiel looked down from the stage, searching for Dean’s face. Once he found him, eyes locked and full of intensity, he began to read:

*Right now it’s the early hours between night and morning, dawn and dusk, when the world feels most vulnerable.*

*When I feel most vulnerable.*

*Dean is sleeping in our bedroom just down the hall, and I imagine his leg is slung over on my side of the bed, his hand outstretched and grasping. Maybe he notices I’m gone—maybe he doesn’t. He was tired today, rolling on his side and snoring the moment he fell against the memory foam mattress. He had a full day of harvesting, barely stopping at lunch for a ham sandwich and a glass of lemonade before heading back outside. I was on a conference call with Anna, and barely had time to wave a “hi” and “goodbye” to my boyfriend. When he comes back for the night I’m grilling hamburgers on the back patio and he smells like cut grass and dust, like the sweat and soil. And because I have a rather obstructive penchant for the truth, I tell him as much. I stack our freshly grilled patties on a plate, ready for supper (as Dean still calls it, a southerner through and through) and he pulls me into an embrace. There’s sunshine still burning on his tan skin. I’ve missed him, missed this, all day long. Still I say, “You smell terrible, babe.”*
Dean laughs, looks amused. “Is that so?”

I cover the plate of food with a stray paper towel, and close the grill lid. “Yes, that’s so.” I know this a trap somehow, a game we’re now playing, but I can’t resist following—seeing where he’ll take me.

“Well then…” He lunges forward unexpectedly, arms tucked around my sides, and drags me off the patio and into the grass. I hit the earth utterly dazed and spinning, still not quite sure how I got from an upright position to a horizontal one. And then I look up at my assailant, who’s straddling me and holding down my arms, wearing an outrageously deviant grin.

“Dean.” I put more venom in my voice than I’m currently feeling—partly for the game, and partly because I know Dean loves it. “What exactly are you doing?”

“Leveling the playing field,” he answers easily, with the confidence of a child who’s solved a hard-pressed, grown-up problem. He leans forward and I feel the sweat from his tank top make cold contact with the bare skin of my abdomen. Evidently my undershirt has scrunched up, my button-up is likely wrinkled and possibly grass-stained, and there’s a sweating, hulking farmer straddling my lap.

Many of my teenage daydreams began in a similar fashion.

“Huh,” I say, as if I’m pondering Dean’s logic. “Well, allow me to do the same.” Gathering my strength, in one energetic thrust I reach for his hips. He collapses against me in surprise, and I roll to my side, effectively pinning him beneath me. It doesn’t escape my notice how close our lips hover, how we pant and smirk and share the same air.

How alive we are when we’re together.

“Oh, you’re going down, Cas.” Dean digs his fingers into my sides, escaping my grasp, and then we’re both scrambling to our feet, invigorated and ready. He tries to tackle me again but I side-step him, and then we’re just circling each other, exchanging meaningless smack talk (as Dean calls it) before I finally get behind him, pinning his arms to his side and hauling him to the ground, both of us laughing.

Twenty minutes later, we’re both sweating. I ignore the itchy sensation of gnats tickling my neck and ankles, of rocks invading the inner-soles of my loafers. I’m competitive—Dean knows this. Dean loves this. So I heave him into the dirt one final time, properly winding us both. I’m looming on top of him and we are no longer smiling because—without warning—our lips have met, sudden and heated and rash. We stay that way for a long time, kissing and writhing in the field behind our cabin, gliding and entwining against each other like sated garden snakes.

I don’t have to tell you why our burgers grew cold.

But I do have to tell you why this recollection is important, why it happened three weeks ago but here I am, the morning of the biggest reading of my career, and I can’t seem to focus. All I can think about is that night, kissing in the grass with Dean, losing all sense of time and agency, not knowing where he stopped physically existing and I started.

This is why.

I keep thinking about a scripture. It’s not even a good one—not a popular one, the type you see on t-shirts or billboards. But it’s one I’ve been thinking about when I close my eyes and picture Dean. I’ve thought about it so much that I even pulled my mother’s ancient bible from its place on my
bookshelf, a text I haven’t opened in nearly twenty years, but for some reason I can’t convince myself to be rid of.

I open to Isaiah 25:12:

“He will bring down your high fortified walls and lay them low; he will bring them down to the ground, to the very dust.”

My walls. The ones I had before Dean.

The ground. The dust. Where we lay together, where we loved each other, that evening in the grass.

You should know that I am not the first to entwine human love with spiritual awakening. For one, the metaphysical poet John Donne has argued this for centuries, using the image of a flea to suggest it is holy and divine when two people are sexually joined. But I’m using it now for a higher purpose, a sacred purpose. One that cements our bond, the profound depth of my feelings…

Castiel looked at Dean, dropping the official reading voice, the papers in his hand falling on the concrete. “Dean, will you allow me to devote myself to you? To love you, and adore you, and revere you for the rest of our lives together? Will you...Dean Winchester, will you marry me?”

By now Castiel’s voice had faded from a confident vibrato to a shaky whisper, but Dean barely noticed. He was already on his feet.

Running.

Dean climbed every damn step of the stage separating them as if he were being timed, taking the steps two at a time, adrenaline pumping and making him tremble. His mind was racing, barely processing everything he had just been offered—Love. Companionship. Marriage. Forever. Forever with Cas.

Fuck. Yeah.

When he reached the stage he could hear the crowd, the shouts and claps and exclamations, but then Cas turned to face him and everything went quiet. It was surreal, the immediacy of it, the way everything else fell away, forgotten. And then he was falling into Castiel’s arms, gripping him as if he couldn’t be real, as if he might disappear if Dean didn’t cling to him even harder, and then—only lips, teeth, tongues, kissing fast and frantic and without any regard for their fishes-in-a-fish-bowl status. There were the flash of cameras, questions, reporters, fans. None of it mattered. Dean was grinning and crying and saying “yes” over and over again, as if Castiel was still waiting for an answer to his question.

As if he didn’t already know.

“Yes,” Dean whispered, lips muffled against Castiel’s neck, holding him tight. “That’s a definite, fucking yes.”

***

Castiel was still shaking, still grinning wide and grand and outlandishly, by the time they crossed the threshold and entered the cabin. He tightened his grip on Dean’s hand and pulled him closer, lugging him sideways and kissing his cheek, his chin, his temple. For the past hour they hadn’t been able to stop touching, stealing spontaneous kisses at every opportunity, laying hands on each other’s backs and arms and elbows. Castiel wanted nothing more than to whisk Dean away to their bedroom and spend the rest of the evening—the rest of the week, maybe—slowly taking his boyfriend apart. No,
not boyfriend.

Fiancé.

He grinned all over again.

But they would have time for that later, for embraces and I love you’s and intimate moments wrapped in bedsheets. They had the rest of their lives, in fact, for just that. But right now Castiel only wanted to watch Dean’s face as they entered their home-turned-party-venue, processing the scene in front of them.

“Holy shit,” Dean said breathlessly.

For weeks, Dean had been helping Charlie plan a “post-reading after party” for Castiel’s book event. In reality it had always been a surprise engagement party, with small touches Cas had requested—champagne for toasts, black and silver engagement décor, and three homemade pies Charlie had baked using Dean’s blue-ribbon recipe. Of course, there was also the drinks and snacks Dean had gathered, and together, there was an elaborate spread covering their dining room table.

But perhaps the most impressive part—what made Castiel’s heart swell with affection and gratitude—was everyone in attendance. There was Charlie, of course, and her wife Dorothy; Sam, Jess, and Deanna, who had gotten a ride to the party with Anna, Hannah, and Balthazar in the rental van (Sam had insisted Dean and Castiel needed some private time to fully process their engagement—and after an incredibly heated make-out session in the Impala that nearly ended in a state of undress, Cas had to agree with his future brother-in-law); there was the familiar Roadhouse crew, Ash, Garth, Ellen, and Jo, who Castiel had gotten to know much better over the years; Jodie and her daughter Claire, and her long-time boyfriend, Kevin, had brought them flowers; Donna and Doug, kind and thoughtful as always, from the bed and breakfast where Cas stayed all those years ago; Bobby was there, though Dean was no longer his client—they had formed a paternal bond over the year or so of therapy, with Bobby becoming like a surrogate father to Sam and Dean both; even Benny had been invited, which Castiel had to admit, he never saw coming. But he had dropped by the farm a year ago, full of apologies and fresh out of rehab, and the Winchesters had forgiven him as easy as breathing. Castiel was a bit more skeptical, protective of Dean and his new family, but Benny had proven himself a loyal and steadfast friend to them both…and was eventually rehired on the farm. Last but not least, leaned against the wall and watching the spectacle with interest, was Joshua and Missouri—the newest members of Castiel’s ever-growing family.

The cabin was full of celebratory shouts and cheers, including an outrageously high-pitched squeal that Castiel suspected belonged to Charlie. He blushed as they stood in the doorway, and while their friends and family hooted and hollered, Castiel pulled Dean to him for an enthusiastic kiss.

Considering their audience—not to mention the fact that they couldn’t stop smiling, chuckling—the kiss remained sweet and chaste. Even so, their spectators cheered.

As soon as they withdrew, taking small gasps of air, they were bombarded with hugs and back-claps. The attention was overwhelming, as was the pull to visit with every person here that they deeply loved, to share in their gratitude. Anna got to Castiel first, embracing him as tightly as she had backstage. She had tears in her eyes and Castiel only gripped her more voraciously, feeling overpowered, undeserving of such a deep, lifelong friendship. She looked at Dean, who had just kissed Ellen’s cheek, and gripped his elbow.

“Take care of him,” she said earnestly, then added with a zealous wink, “he was my best friend first, you know.”

“And always will be,” Dean answered, his face serious and thoughtful. “You’re family, Anna. You
always have been.”

Anna beamed in response, arms leaving Castiel and wrapping around Dean’s neck in a quick embrace. “You know,” she began conversationally, pulling away, “I remember when Chuck pulled your manuscript from the slush pile. Here was this farmer from Tennessee, no writing credentials, barely even a GED. But he looked at me and said, ‘I believe in Dean Winchester. I’ve got plans for him.’”

“Luckiest day of my life,” Dean murmured in disbelief, gaze floating to Castiel. He reached and entwined their fingers together.

“And now we’re here,” Anna said, wonder in her voice. Castiel knew she didn’t just mean their engagement—there was also the popularity of Dean’s book series, the unexpected success of Castiel’s memoir, Cas and Anna’s various promotions, and even Cas’ return to Tennessee. He had never expected to live in his home state, a place that had caused him eighteen years of heartache and grief. And while those wounds would never fully vanish, they were healing more every day. He was making new memories here to replace the old, establishing a life with Dean that he wouldn’t sacrifice for anything…certainly not geography. Luckily he still visited their office in New York City once a month, for necessary publishing schedule meetings and to see Anna; otherwise he was home on the farm, the cabin, the land Mary had purchased for her family thirty years ago.

The land the Winchesters would now, and always, call home.

“Castiel.” There was a hand on his shoulder, and Castiel turned on instinct, recognizing the voice. He clasped Joshua solidly on the back and pulled him closer.

“Congratulations,” Joshua said, sincerity evident in his tone.

“Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit.” Missouri reached for Castiel’s hand, gripping him snugly. “It’s about damn time.”

Castiel cast his eyes down, the usual embarrassing flooding him at the expected nagging. Then, a comeback occurred to him.

“Like you two have much room to talk,” he pointed out.

Joshua and Missouri had only recently revealed their burgeoning romance, which even Castiel could see was years in the making. They were still gardeners at the Cleveland Botanical Gardens, still coworkers and constant companions, but now they rented a house together and were considering eloping in the Smoky Mountains over Christmas. Castiel wasn’t sure who had been more excited by the possibility—Joshua, Missouri, or Dean, the last of which had taken an immediate shine to the new couple. Dean genuinely loved Anna, Joshua, and Missouri just as much as Castiel did. Together, they had created the most eclectic and non-traditional family unit south of the Mason-Dixon line.

“Yeah, yeah,” Missouri said dismissively. “Well, we might make it to the altar before you two—how’d that happen?”

“Not if I can help it.” Dean said immediately, and Castiel’s eyes drew wide, not realizing his fiance had been listening to their exchange. Dean turned pink at his eager confession, and it became apparent that they had a lot to discuss once their families left.

Castiel, for his part, was on-board with a short engagement. He was in his late thirties and had been seriously dating Dean for three years now. In fact, they had pretty much been inseparable since the
moment they had met. If there was anything Castiel was sure of, it was Dean Winchester.

The remainder of the party passed with the expected amounts of joy, drinking, and teasing. Bobby pulled Castiel aside to have a “father-grilling-his-pseudo-son’s-new-future-husband” talk, which Castiel took very seriously, promising that their combined literary successes and busy schedules wouldn’t get in the way of their marriage. Castiel had written an entire book about their love story, and yet, there were hundreds of moments he had never written down. Moments that were just for him and Dean to share, to remember—summer afternoons wrapped around each other in the hammock, holidays where they snuck into closets for a quickie while their (highly suspicious) family members carved the turkey. There were darker times, too, impassioned disagreements while meeting with the architect to design their cabin; nights when Dean felt like getting intimate but Castiel was too stressed from work, or vice versa; quick spats over dinner, in the Impala, in bed. Dean could still infuriate him more than any other living person ever, but could just as quickly make him roll his eyes and laugh, his hands shake with lust, his heart fill with easy content. He would take it all, the good and bad and in-between, if it meant forever with Dean.

Slowly the guests began to leave, either for home or hotels. Castiel began making plans with their out-of-town guests, but Dean pulled them aside conspiratorially, making vague promises to “text them later.” Castiel wrinkled his eyebrows, but shrugged. It was possible Dean had made plans he needed to rearrange.

In the end it was nearly one o’clock and Charlie was cleaning the kitchen, putting all the leftovers into tupperware containers. Dorothy had nearly fallen asleep on the couch and Castiel gently roused her awake, shuffling her and Charlie both to the front door with a hug and an endless stream of thank you’s. And then, eight long hours after the proposal, Dean and Cas were finally, blissfully, alone.

“C’m’here, you,” Dean mumbled sleepily, opening his arms wide. Castiel locked the front door and turned off the lights, then stepped forward, immediately enveloped in Dean’s warmth. They stood holding each other, trading sweet whispers and kissing lightly, slowly, in a way that was comfortable and full of cherish.

“Hey,” Castiel mumbled, pulling away slightly to see Dean’s face more clearly. “What do you have going on tomorrow?”

“Oh…” Dean shook his head with uncertainty.

“Dean?”

“We kinda have an appointment.” Dean’s voice was quick, spiraling. “It was supposed to be a surprise, but then you went and surprised me, proposing like the protagonist of a fucking Harlequin romance novel, and now my thing seems a little anticlimactic so we can do something else—”

“Appointment where?” Castiel’s hands were on Dean’s hips, and he gazed at him again, watching a complicated flurry of emotions cross his fiancé’s face…

“The courthouse.” Dean took a deep breath, regarding Castiel with hesitancy. “Earlier this week, I kinda had this crazy idea of, I dunno…getting married tomorrow?”

Castiel felt his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Suddenly he wasn’t feeling very sleepy.

“‘Crazy idea’?” he repeated.

“I didn’t think you’d wanna big production or anything.” Dean was flushed, embarrassed. “But then tonight happened, and it blew all of my fucking ideas out of the water, Cas, so I can totally cancel the
“Don’t you dare,” Castiel interrupted, voice growing low with fervency.

“But—”

“We’re getting married tomorrow.” He threaded their fingers together and raised Dean’s hands to his lips, kissing every knuckle. Dean seemed to visibly melt into the touch. “Your idea was perfect, Dean. I wish I had thought of it myself.”

Dean relaxed against him, nuzzling into his neck. “Well, you did write me a whole book, and then propose so well that I cried like a goddamn baby on stage, so—gotta give me something here.” He grinned, thumb tucked under Castiel’s chin as he pulled him close. “So, tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Castiel agreed, filled with an overwhelming ache to be closer, to let Dean know just how much he loved him. Only moments later they were kissing with renewed urgency, leaving a trail of each other’s clothes down the long hall to their bedroom.

And then, two prolific writers in wild, reckless, all-consuming love…

They no longer had a need for words.

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!

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