The Inksters

by BleedingInk

Summary

Twins Jack Kline and Claire Novak are starting their last year of high school before their eventual departure for college. Jack is worried about what that might mean for their uncle, Castiel, a reclusive writer who has dedicated all his time and effort for the last fifteen years to raise them. It just so happens that when Castiel meets their new English teacher, Professor Meg Masters, sparks fly between them, but being painfully introverted, the twins know he is never going to even ask her out without some serious meddling on their part. Claire and Jack put a plan into motion to convince Castiel to help Miss Masters with her creative writing club, at the same time they also struggle with romance, their own coming-of-age and their strained relationship with their father, Luc.
Chapter 1

The last first day of school started pretty much like any other school day.

Castiel woke up at six am sharp and walked downstairs, still in his pajama pant and sleeveless shirt. He turned on the coffee maker, placed the bread inside the toaster and took out four eggs from the fridge. Jack liked his eggs poached, Claire like hers scrambled.

At six thirty, Jack’s alarm clock went off, a cheery melody of birds and various nature sounds. He would be out of bed with plenty of time to shower, get dressed in clean clothes, and come down with his backpack, ready to start the day with the same sunny disposition that always accompanied him.

Claire’s alarm went off at the same time, a loud shriek of guitars and drums that Castiel wasn’t sure could even be classified as music. She would turn it off with an angry slap, pull the covers over her head and roll over to try to catch five more minutes of sleep that would probably turn into another half hour. She would then wake up with a jolt, run down the hallway and demand her brother relinquish the bathroom because she needed time to do her hair and make-up.

Sure enough, at around seven fifteen, Castiel heard the pounds above his head.

“Hey, finish jerking off already and get the hell out of there!” she demanded loudly. Castiel didn’t catch Jack’s reply, but it must have been something biting, because she then said: “Oh, that’s very mature, Jack-ass! You have five minutes or I’m going to pee outside your room…!”

Castiel took a closer look at the eggs and decided to do something different with them instead.

At seven thirty, Jack came downstairs donning jeans, a white t-shirt and his favorite navy blue jacket, his light brown hair combed to one side. He wished him good morning and his blue eyes glimmered when he saw what Castiel was making.

“Oh, pancakes!” he exclaimed with child-like wonder. “You haven’t done those in ages!”

“Well, it’s a special day today. Leave some for your sister,” he added as Jack started piling up the pancakes in his plate.

Jack twisted his mouth and then returned one to the platter before he set out to make his coffee. Well, that was a figure of speech: what he did was heat up the milk, pour tons of sugar and cream and just a trickle of coffee into his mug. He hummed softly as he did and later sat down on the table and read the news out loud to Castiel from his phone.

It was a very peaceful routine. It lasted until Claire barged into the kitchen, groaning like a zombie clad in black clothes. Castiel immediately extended a mug of coffee to her, which she downed in one gulp, with no sugar or milk. She had braided part of her long blonde hair and as usual, she had applied several layers of eyeliner and dark eye-shadow on her face. She refilled her mug and blinked at the platter in the middle of the table.

“Pancakes? What are we, twelve?”

“Well, if you don’t want yours…” Jack said, stretching his forks towards them. Claire immediately slapped his hand and greedily pulled the platter towards herself.

“Where’s the syrup?”
“There isn’t any left.”

“What are you hiding…? Cas, he won’t give me the syrup!”

“Would it kill you to ask nicely for it?”

“Would it kill you to be less of a nuance when I just woke up?”

“Kids, please.” Castiel sighed as he sat down next to them. Jack bit the inside of his cheek, but finally placed the honey on the table.

“You’re welcome,” he snapped, passive-aggressively. Claire stuck her tongue out at him.

“How are you two nearly adults?” Castiel wondered out loud.

“No idea.”

“Passage of time.”

Castiel laughed. Despite their constant bickering, he was happy he got to share this morning with the two of them.

“Well, eat,” he urged them. “You don’t want to be late for your last first day at school, do you?”

Jack smiled once again while Claire let out another groan.

“Yeah. It’ll be great to see everyone again after the summer,” he commented.

“It’ll be great to know I won’t have to see their faces again after this year.”

Coming from Claire, that was a positively gushing statement. Castiel laughed again at the two of them and continued talking (while, he talked with Jack while Claire stuffed her face with pancakes and coffee) until it was time for them to go.

As usual, Jack had to wait around the car while Claire fled upstairs to grab hers and came back running with it a second later.

“If you left it ready like I told you, you wouldn’t have to do that.”

“Hey, I don’t tell you how to leave your life or wear your hair, so shut up.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Jack asked, running a hand through it.

“Oh, boy, where do I even start?” Claire replied, rolling her eyes.

Castiel chuckled at them as they got into the car.

“Have fun!” he wished them.

“Thank you, Uncle Cas!”

“We’re going to school, so I doubt it,” Claire quipped, but she still waved at him before she started the car.

Castiel stayed on the front door until their car disappeared around the corner. As soon as he went back inside, though, he felt the weight of the day ahead fall on his shoulders.
Still, he took his time: he washed the dishes and put them away. He took a quick shower, put on some jeans a shirt as if he was going out even though all the groceries have been bought and all the bills have been paid. He marched into his studio, turned on the music (soft instrumental jazz) and sat down in front of the computer.

And there he stayed, staring at the blank document in front of him, waiting in vain for the words to come.

“Did he look different to you?”
“I don’t know, different how?”

Jack tapped his fingers on the dashboard, as if the question required serious consideration.

“Like, sad, maybe?”

“He looked the same as always,” Claire said, shrugging.

Jack huffed. Of course his sister wouldn’t notice Godzilla taking a stroll through their neighborhood unless she’d already had at least two mugs of coffee.

“He made pancakes,” Jack pointed out. “He never does that unless it’s our birthday or something.”

“Well, you heard him. Last first day of school,” Claire reminded him. “I guess that must hold some sort of significance.”

Jack tried not to let his exasperation get to him.

“No, he definitely was off,” he insisted. “Maybe he’s starting to experience Empty Nest Syndrome. I read that it can cause parents and guardians to feel isolated and depressed…”

“Jack, that happens after the kids are out of the house. We still have one year left.”

“More like, nine months or so.”

Claire stopped the car by a semaphore and sighed before slowly turning towards him.

“He’s fine,” she promised him. “And he’s going to be fine when we leave. So stop fussing about it.”

She turned on the radio as if to mark the end of the conversation. Jack couldn’t shake the feeling that Claire was wrong, though he managed to keep quiet about it until they were in the parking lot and heading towards the school’s doors.

“Maybe he just needs someone to keep him company,” he suggested. “Like… maybe a roommate or…”

“What, a girlfriend?”

“Why not?” Jack replied.

Claire let out a laugh, but then stopped when she realized that Jack wasn’t joining.
“Oh, shit, you’re serious.” She stared at him incredulous. “For real? You want to get him a girlfriend?”

“I’m just saying. He hasn’t really dated anyone since he broke up with April.”

“Yeah, ‘cause April was a major child-hating bitch,” Claire declared.

“She was… I mean, she could have been nicer to us, that’s for sure,” Jack said, cringing.

He hated to speak ill of anybody, even if that person might have deserved it. April, Castiel’s last serious girlfriend, had been very adamant about not liking children, but she was still dead set on trying to get Castiel to marry her. When she suggested she should “hand them over”, Castiel had promptly broken up with her.

“Really? ‘Could have been nicer’?” Claire repeated, drawing air quotes with her fingers. “You’re gonna go with that?”

Jack blinked at her, genuinely confused.

“Jack, she doesn’t deserve you being kind after the bullshit she pulled!”

“I disagree. Everyone deserves kindness. But that’s not the point,” Jack said. “The point is, that was five years ago and he hasn’t seriously dated anyone since then.”

“That’s not surprising. He hardly ever goes out of the house.” Claire closed her locker and started walking, hoping her brother would realize that this conversation had been going on for way too long.

“That’s exactly the problem!” Jack insisted, following her down the hallway. “He doesn’t have too many friends, he doesn’t talk to his brothers…”

“’Cause they’re all dicks.”

“… he’s going to be all alone after we leave!” Jack continued. “That can’t be healthy for him!”

“You know what’s also not healthy?” Claire added. “You, trying to get Castiel laid.”

They spotted two free seats and Claire hoped the fact they were about to begin the class would clue him about the end of the conversation. But it just seemed like it was one of those days when Jack just wouldn’t let a topic go.

“Well, I mean, I don’t know if it will lead to that,” he said. “For now we should try to just… introduce him to someone he might like?”

Claire rubbed her temples.

“Look, we can sign him up for Tinder if you want to. Other than that, I don’t know how else you intend to find him a girlfriend. It’s not like the perfect woman for Castiel is just going to stroll in through the door.”

A woman strolled in through the door just as Claire finished saying that. The chatter from all the students died down as she settled a pile of books on the desk.

“Good morning, everybody,” she greeted them. She was wearing a purple shirt dress with a wide black belt and had her dark hair tied up in a bun behind her head. “I’m Miss Masters and I’m your new English professor.”
“What happened to Mr. Wyatt?” Alexis asked from the front row.

“He decided to take an early retirement to tend to his rabbit farm.” Mrs. Masters moved the chair behind her desk and sat down with a calm smile. “Now, since it’s the first day of your last year of school, I figure we can take it slow. Let’s talk about what you like to read on your spare times or your favorite authors. Who wants to start?”

Jack’s hand shot up in the air and Claire immediately wished she had sat far away from him and his eagerness to be the teacher’s pet. They always ended up expecting the same thing from her.

“Yes…” Miss Masters pointed at him with his pen.

“Jack Kline,” he said, with a beam. “Well, my favorite author has to be my uncle, Castiel. He’s been writing books for me and my sister since we were very young.”

There was a collective groan around the classroom. At some point during middle school, it had stopped being impressive that their uncle was a mild celebrity in the children’s book community. It also stopped being cool that the boy and girl protagonists of his books were actually them. There had actually been a couple of genius who thought it would be fun to bully them for that.

Claire had set them straight right away and she made sure to glare at all the people who had groaned to let them know they were on thin ice right now.

Miss Masters seemed to find that interesting, though.

“Really? Anything I might have read?”

“The Agatha and Jasper series.”

Miss Masters snapped her fingers, recognizing the name. “I did have a class in elementary school read that,” she said. “The Other Side of the Valley?”

Jack’s features lit up with a smile.

“That’s my favorite one!” He was practically jumping off the seat with excitement. “He also writes some really beautiful poetry.”

“That’s very interesting.” Miss Masters nodded politely, though Claire had the impression she lacked a bit of enthusiasm. “Thank you for sharing that, Jack. Alright, anyone else?”

There was a few seconds of silence as Miss Masters’ eyes scanned the room. She finally pointed at someone behind Claire.

“How about you, Kaia? What are you reading these days?”

Claire looked over her shoulders, as did practically everyone in the classroom.

The girl was sitting alone in the last row, next to wall, in what had to be the most isolated corner in the room. She had thick black hair and light brown skin, and she shrunk as if she didn’t know what to do about all these people looking in her direction.

“Well… I’m reading Joy Harjo’s memoir,” she said, in a meek voice, but her eyes almost shone as she raised them towards Miss Masters. “But you knew that, Meg.”

Claire barely had time to be surprised at that while Miss Masters chuckled.
“You're right, I did,” she admitted. “Everyone, this is my foster daughter, Kaia Nieves. I expect you’ll be nice to us both, since we’re new in town. Alright, who else wants to share?”

Kaia sighed with relief and slumped on her chair as the gazes turned away from her. Claire’s linger on her a little longer, though, but when Kaia looked up, Claire immediately spun to pay attention to Miss Masters again.

The rest of the class was inane enough. Some people brought up Harry Potter or The Hunger Games. Miss Masters listened to them with a polite little smirk and a nod, but Claire had the impression she had heard those answers too many times across too many classrooms. In the end, she gave them all a list of books and authors they were going to be studying that year and dismissed the class just as Claire started thinking she was going to die of sheer boredom.

“I like her. She seems very nice,” Jack commented when they left the classroom.

“You like everybody,” Claire pointed out.

She slowed down her pace and looked around, trying to be discreet. People were coming out of the classrooms in groups or pairs, chatting happily as they caught on what they’ve done over the summer. The person she was scanning the crowd for was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you looking for that girl Kaia?” Jack asked.

“What? No,” Claire answered. She held her notebook tight against her chest and walked away. Of course, she didn’t manage to leave Jack behind.

“That’s really kind of you that you want to be friends with her,” he commented. “It can’t be easy to start school in a new place where you don’t know anybody.”

Claire just stared at him. People who didn’t know Jack might have believed that he was pulling her leg, but no. He was actually that candid.

“Okay. Well, I gotta go to my next class. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Jack waved his hand at her with a beam as she walked away and headed for his own locker. The day had started great, with the pancakes and the nice new professor so he was optimistic that it would continue the same way.

And even more so when Tracy Davis came up to him, her blonde curls bouncing on her shoulders as she ran towards him.

“Hey, Jack.”

“Hi, Tracy! How did your exam go?”

“I passed!” she informed him with a wide smile.

“Congratulations!”

“I couldn’t have done without your tutoring. Math’s really not my strong point.”

“Don’t mention it.” Jack shook his head. “If you’re struggling again this year, just let me know. I’ll try to help you before you fail your class.”

Tracy grabbed one of her curls and gently twisted it in her finger.
“You’re so sweet. I still have to thank you for studying with me this summer,” she said. Before Jack could tell her that wasn’t necessary, she took a step closer and lifted her eyes up at him. “How about you and I go to the movies next week?”

“That would be nice,” Jack accepted.

“Yeah?” Tracy’s smile grew wider. “Alright, then it’s…”

“Could Claire join us? I know she’s been dying to go see the new *Hell Hazers* movie,” Jack added.

Tracy’s smile faltered a little, but didn’t quite disappear.

“What?”

“Oh, there’s this new girl, Kaia. I really think we should try to make her feel welcome,” Jack continued. “You could ask your friends from the squad and their boyfriends to come, too. It’d be this really awesome outing if we all went together…”

His voice trailed off. Tracy’s smile had morphed into a grimace of irritation. She scowled at him.

“If you didn’t want to go, you could have just said so.” She spun on her heels, her hair casting a golden halo around her head as she did. “Prick.”

She marched away and disappeared around the corner. Jack stood where he was, stunned, the book he was about to put away still hanging from his hand and a pit in his stomach growing beyond his control. He wasn’t sure what he had done. But suddenly he felt like this wonderful day was quickly going downhill.
Lunch break took forever to arrive. Claire wasn’t really friends with a lot of people in the school (that was more of a Jack thing), so having to sit through a couple of classes with no one to share a random joke with was incredibly boring. Perhaps she should be more social, she thought as she mindlessly browsed through her phone looking up news about her favorite bands and new guitar tabs to practice at home with her door locked.

Jack finally spotted her comfortably isolated table and came to sit with her.

“Hey, do you think that if I ask him tomorrow, Cas will let us go to a concert three months from now?” she asked, as she marked the tweet that announced that Fall Out Boy would be making a special performance in the nearby city.

“I… maybe,” Jack mumbled.

Claire immediately put her phone down. Jack never mumbled. Not unless he was especially bummed about something. She took one look at him and realized something was wrong: his shoulders were slumped and he was toying with the food in his plate without really putting it in his mouth.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing. Why do you think something happened?” Jack said, avoiding her glance. He tried to smile, but it looked forced. “Just… another day at school. We already have so much to read and…”

“What happened?” Claire insisted.

Jack fidgeted with his hands for a moment.

“It was just a misunderstanding,” he confessed in the end. “I’m sure if I talk to her and explain that I didn’t mean to offend her…”

“Who?” Claire said, grabbing her phone tight.

“Claire, please,” Jack sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

Claire took a deep breath and slowly looked at her phone again. Fine. It didn’t matter. If he said it didn’t matter, then she wasn’t going to…

Ryan Humphrey set down his tray right next to them with a thud.

“Hey, Kline!” he said with an ugly smile. “Heard you turned down Tracy Davis. What’s wrong with you? Are you faggot like your sister?”

Jack’s pained expression was enough to convince Claire that she was about to get into a lot of trouble. Jack immediately realized what she was about to do.

“Claire, no. Calm down…”

“Or maybe he wants to fuck his sister,” Humphrey continued, cackling loud enough for people in the surrounding tables to turn towards him. “I mean, he’s weird enough to want that.”

Claire grabbed Humphrey’s tray and flipped it over. Pieces of meat and sauce flew around and landed on Humphrey’s shirt, who stared at her stunned, as if he couldn’t believe she had the gall not
...to sit there and take his ugly bully face.

“Bitch!” he shouted at her as he tried to dust his cloths clean. “What, you can’t take a joke…?”

Claire was not done: she grabbed her carton of milk, stepped around the table and promptly emptied it on Humphrey’s head. He gasped as the cold, white liquid slid down his face and neck.

“What? You can’t take a joke, Ryan?” Claire repeated back at him.

She was aware that the cafeteria had gone silent and there were several eyes turned towards her, but this wasn’t it. Humphrey, as always, was just there because he was an ass that thought tormenting people was good fun. He had been like that since they were kids and he was the meanest bully in the playground.

The real problem were people who weren’t as direct in their attacks.

Claire was already halfway to the football field when Jack caught up with her.

“Claire, please, no. Claire, don’t…”

Claire didn’t listen. She was seeing red.

Just as she suspected, Tracy Davis and her entourage of cheerleading assholes were having lunch in the bleachers, giggling and laughing as if they were all so nice and friends with each other.

“Tracy!” Claire bellowed from the other side of the field as she marched towards them. “What the fuck have you been saying about my brother?”

Tracy had the decency of standing up and looking at her in the eye. It was bold of her, but Claire had to respect that.

“Nothing that isn’t true,” Tracy said, rolling her eyes at her. “Go away.”

That was the wrong answer. And honestly, at that point, Tracy should have known it was a bad idea to turn her back on Claire, even before she proceeded to do exactly that.

Claire grabbed a fistful of Tracy’s hair and pulled as hard as she could. Tracy yelled and turned around, ready to slap her and as Claire stepped back to prevent it, she planted her feet among Tracy’s leg and next thing she knew, they were both going down.

It wasn’t a great fight. Mostly Tracy trying to get Claire off of her just as Claire attempted to rip off her ugly hair extensions. They rolled on the floor groaning and screaming for what must have been two minutes before someone grabbed Claire by the waist and pulled her up.

“That’s enough!” a male voice ordered. “Stop right now, Claire!”

Claire wiggled in those arms for a moment, but she soon realized the only way they were going to put her down was if she stopped resisting. So with a groan, she went limp and waited until her feet were back on the floor before she turned around.

It was Mr. Winchester, the school counselor, scowling at her with anger in his usual gentle face. A few steps away, Miss Masters was helping Tracy stand up.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Tracy threw her hair back indignantly and pointed a finger at Claire.
“She’s crazy! She just attacked me for no reason!”

“Oh, I had my reasons, you bitch!” Claire shot back. Mr. Winchester grabbed her by the arm before she could take a step towards Tracy.

“I said, enough!” he repeated. “We’re going to my office right now!”

He half-pulled, half-dragged Claire away from where Tracy was now crying in Miss Masters arms (the overdramatic bitch) and past the small crowd of students that had gathered to gawk at the drama.

“Show’s over!” Mr. Winchester told them. “Go back to your classes!”

There were some sighs of disappointment as they scuttled away. Claire noticed Kaia Nieves, staring at her with wide eyes as she passed through, and Alexis just shaking her head with disapproval.

Claire groaned. She could imagine exactly what Alexis was thinking: “This is why I broke up with her…”

Mr. Winchesters took Claire directly to his office and closed the door behind them as Claire slumped down on the chair in front of his desk. Now that the adrenaline of the fight and the rage were subsiding, she was beginning to realize just in how much trouble she was in.

And her cheek burned. Apparently Tracy had managed to scratch her, but Claire only noticed this when Mr. Winchester offered her a handkerchief to wipe off the blood.

“You’re going to have to go see the school’s nurse,” he commented.

“What for? Her nails are as fake as the rest of her,” Claire groaned as she placed the handkerchief on her face. “No risk of infection there.”

Mr. Winchester sighed and ran a hand through his long brown hair as he sat down behind his desk and looked at her with gentle eyes.

“Claire,” he said, leaning forwards. “We’ve talked about this.”

It was amazing the ability that man had to make himself look non-threatening and calm, despite being over six feet tall and having just basically ripped Claire away from a fight.

“You don’t understand,” Claire protested. “She was spreading some vile shit about Jack!”

“I do understand, Claire. My brother and I were also very protective of each other growing up. That doesn’t mean it’s right to attack someone.”

Mr. Winchester also had the ability to cut right through the bullshit. Claire huffed and leaned back on the chair.

“Yeah, well, your brother probably could defend himself,” she pointed out. “If someone was saying nasty things at Jack, he would probably lay down and take it. Someone has to stand up for him. They have to know they can’t mess with him just because he’s nice.”

Mr. Winchester just let her ramble in silence. He knew, just as well as she did, that it didn’t really matter why she’d done it in the end.

“I’m gonna have to send you to Principal Crowley’s office. You’re probably going to get suspended for this,” he announced her. “And we’re gonna have to call your uncle.”

Claire cringed at the idea. So, she was definitely going to miss the Fall Out Boy concert. But then
again, a part of her already knew before she even flipped Humphrey’s tray that she was going to have to accept the punishment that would follow. She was ready for it.

“I also want you to come talk to me once a week,” he added.

“Of course,” Claire muttered. Mr. Winchester had good intentions and she liked him better than most other professors in the school, but he apparently seemed to think that Claire’s “aggression problems” would get solved by sitting around and sitting around and talking about how it sucked that her dad never hugged her…

“And I want Jack to come see me, too.”

Claire stared at him, stunned as Mr. Winchester wrote something in a paper.

“Wait, what’d he do?”

“Well, you seem to be worried about the way he behaves around people,” Mr. Winchester said. “Maybe we can work on that so you don’t feel the need to get in fights to help him out.”

“No, hold on, hold on.” Claire raised her hands as if that could physically stop Mr. Winchester. “I’m the fu… the screw-up, okay? He’s perfectly fine. He doesn’t have to get in trouble just because I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, Claire. You just have poor impulse management,” he replied. “And this isn’t a punishment. Maybe he can get something positive out of it.”

Claire still wasn’t sure how that as supposed to happen, but she was still too stunned to argue when Mr. Winchesters handed her a slip and ordered to go to Principal Crowley’s office.

Castiel took his damn sweet time to get there, or at least it seemed so to Claire, who had to awkwardly sit in silence next to both Humphrey and Tracy. Humphrey looked terribly uncomfortable in his milk-stained shirt and Tracy had her arms and legs crossed, not even acknowledging Claire’s presence. Her clothes had some green spots and her usually perfect hair was a little bit tousled, but other than that, she seemed perfectly fine. Claire definitely could have done some more damage to her annoyingly pretty face, but honestly, she hadn’t been fighting to hurt Tracy. She just wanted to scare her into not messing with Jack again.

She wasn’t sure how successful her plan had been, but maybe now Tracy and her cheerleading entourage would direct their ire towards Claire. That was fine. She could take it.

What was a little more difficult to handle was the look of disappointment in Castiel’s blue eyes when he finally showed up to pick her up.

“Really, Claire?” he said. “You couldn’t even last a day?”

Claire began to protest, but Castiel raised his hand to interrupt her and shook his head.

“We’ll talk about this in the car,” he said as he walked into Principal Crowley’s office. Humphrey hooted when they were all alone.
“Somebody’s in trouble…”

“Shut the fuck up.” Claire glared at him and he seemed to shrink a little in his chair.

Tracy kept ignoring the both of them, staring into the horizon as if she was too dignified to even acknowledge what was going on.

“Don’t act so high and mighty,” Claire told her. “You’re the one who was spouting shit about my brother to begin with.”

“I’m sorry, are you talking to me?” Tracy scoffed. “As if you needed an excuse to be a violent dyke…”

Claire stood up suddenly, the chair scraping the floor as she did. Tracy’s face immediately went from blank to utterly terrified.

“That’s right, Tracy,” Claire told her, dropping her voice until it was just a menacing whisper. “I’m a violent dyke. You might want to remember that next time you’re babbling on to your lackeys, lest you want daddy to buy you a new nose.”

Tracy had nothing to say about that. Claire smirked at her and silently sat back down. Mission accomplished.

Castiel left the office a few minutes later.

“… I am very sorry, Principal Crowley. I assure you, it’s the last time this happens.”

Principal Crowley, a stout, brunette man, stared at Claire’s uncle with beady, unimpressed eyes.

“Hopefully, since your niece is in her senior year,” he reminded him, exaggerating his Scottish accent a little. “It would affect her future greatly if she were to be expelled and not graduate in time.”

“I’m sure she’ll be thinking it twice from now on before she gets in trouble,” Castiel replied.

Claire had to resist the impulse to roll her eyes. It was pretty obvious that they had waited to have that particular exchange until they were on the door so she could hear it.

It didn’t change the fact that they were right, though.

She stood up very slowly, slung her backpack over her shoulder and followed Castiel towards the door without even glancing at Tracy or Humphrey. Castiel didn’t say a word, but she could feel his anger bubbling just underneath the surface, in the way his jaw was clenched and in the rigidity of his steps.

For the first time, the magnitude of the trouble she was in really hit Claire. If he was this furious, then this just hadn’t been another of the fights that she was used to get into.

“They’re not going to expel me,” she said, though she didn’t sound as certain as she tried to.

“If you keep acting like a bully, Claire, they just might,” Castiel answered softly.

“I’m not a bully!” Claire protested. “They are! They were saying…”

“I don’t care!” Castiel snapped at her. He stopped in the empty hallway, took a deep breath and pinched his nose, as if he was trying to calm himself down. “Claire, you’re almost an adult. You need to start taking some responsibility for your actions. People will always insult you or those you
love and you can’t solve every instance of that with your fists.”

“I can try, though.”

Her joke felt flat. Castiel stared at her, completely blank-faced, and then pointed towards the door. Claire decided not to say anything else during the trip back home.

To her surprise, they found Jack and Miss Masters waiting by Castiel’s car.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” Castiel asked him, squinting at him.

“Miss Masters gave me permission to be here,” Jack said. He seemed a little skittish. “Uncle Cas, please. Don’t be too harsh on Claire. She was only doing it because I…”

Castiel raised a hand and Jack immediately went quiet. Even though he was almost as tall as Castiel, suddenly, with his shoulders slumped like that and his eyes on his shoes, he seemed very small.

“We’ll talk about this when we get home. Go back to class.”

Jack stepped aside, but he stayed lurking around as Miss Masters approached Castiel.

“Well. This was not how I expected to meet you.”

That disconcerted Castiel enough that he stopped being furious for a couple of seconds.

“You… were expecting to meet me?”

Miss Masters smiled and introduced herself. Claire had the impression that her hand linger on Castiel’s a few seconds longer than necessary.

“Jack says you’re a writer.”

As usual when someone brought his job up, Castiel got immediately flustered.

“Yes. Mostly children’s books,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “They… they probably wouldn’t interest someone such as yourself.”

“Oh the contrary,” Miss Masters assured him. “See, I was thinking about setting up a workshop or a club for the students who want to learn to write fiction and poetry.”

“Do you, now?”

“I believe writing is a very noble passion,” she continued. “It should be fostered and supported, don’t you think?”

Castiel’s eyes lit up a little. It was probably rare for him to find someone who thought so positively about his job, especially in that small town where people mostly believed him an eccentric of some kind.

Not that they were wrong.

“Yes, definitely. I agree wholeheartedly.”

“It would be an honor if I could count with your help for setting it up. Maybe you would even like to come over, impart some of the wisdom you have as a published author?”
“Oh.” Castiel shuffled in his place, suddenly rattled once more. “I, uh… I would have to get back to you on that.”

“Of course. You must be very busy.” She threw a significant glance at Claire, but her smile didn’t falter. “Well, we’ll be in touch, I guess.”

“Yes,” Castiel mumbled. Miss Masters had taken him by surprise and it wasn’t like he was always the most eloquent man, but now he just stuttered and shifted like a nervous teen waiting to ask a girl to the prom. “Thank you. For thinking of me, Miss Masters.”

“Please.” Miss Masters put a hand on his arm. “Call me Meg.”

She walked past them, heading back to the school. Castiel turned around to follow her with his gaze, then realized Claire was staring at him with a crooked eyebrow.

“What?”


Castiel clenched his jaw, as if he’d just remember he was supposed to be angry with her.

“Get in the car.”

Claire did so without another word. However, as she was adjusting her seat belt, she noticed her brother looking in the direction Miss Masters had left. Then at the car. Then back again at Miss Masters.

Claire could almost swear she saw a light bulb turning on top of Jack’s head.
Chapter 3

Jack went directly to Claire’s room after he came back from school. He tried not to step over any of the clothes on the floor as he pulled her desk’s chair and sat down looking at her.

“Do you think Uncle Cas likes Miss Masters?”

Claire was barefoot in her bed, with her guitar on her lap. She slowly raised her head at him.

“I don’t think he’s known her long enough to have an opinion on her?”

“Oh, but… what if…?”

“No.”

Claire pulled up her guitar’s case from underneath the bed and made sure to fold the strap carefully on top of the strings as Jack stared at her, half-offended.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“I can imagine,” Claire replied and adopted an excessively chirpy tone: “‘What if we convince Uncle Cas to be part of the creative writing club thing that Miss Masters is trying to get off the ground so they become friends, and then start dating, and then get married and have a lot of babies?’ Am I wrong?”

“I mean, you could have done without the mockery, but essentially. Yes.” Jack smiled as if he was happy Claire had got the gist of it so quickly. “What do you think?”

“It’s a dumb idea.” Claire stood up and walked past Jack on her way to the door. But Jack obviously wasn’t done talking, so he followed her downstairs and all the way into the kitchen while still talking:

“Why? I think it’s a great idea!” he insisted. “He barely goes out of the house. This could be a chance for him to actually be friends with someone. And if something else happens, well, I mean… that would be a bonus.”

“You were just telling me this morning that you thought he needed a girlfriend,” Claire pointed out. “So don’t try to sell me this whole ‘it’s just so he can make friends’ thing.”

She opened the fridge’s door to physically put a barrier between her and her brother while she rummaged around for the juice. Jack stood on the tip of her toes and continued talking above the door.

“Okay, maybe you got a point,” he admitted. “But I mean, he’s a writer… she’s an English teacher. She obviously likes reading. So they have that in common.”

“And Alexis and I both really liked Yellowcard,” Claire replied. She closed the door and settled the juice carton over the counter. “Guess what, both us and Yellowcard ended up splitting up. A relationship needs more than just common interests to work, Jack.”

“But it can be a starting point!” Jack insisted, undeterred.

Claire scoffed at him and decided not to dignify that with an answer. Instead, she grabbed a glass from the cupboards and decided to give another line of attack:
“How do you even know that Miss Masters is single? She could have a really hot boyfriend or fiancé or something.”

That managed to curb Jack’s enthusiasm, at least for a couple of seconds.

“How. Do you think she’s single?”

“Totally. A smart, independent, beautiful woman such as herself is just waiting around for one of her students to pair her up with their guardian,” Claire replied. “Hell, for all we know, she could play for my team.”

She poured the juice until the glass was filled to the brim and started heading back to her bedroom. Jack still seemed to think the conversation wasn’t over, because he once again followed her upstairs, talking:

“Do you think she does? Play for your team, I mean.”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?”

“Don’t gay people have a sixth sense of sorts that allows them to know when other people are also gay?”

Claire stopped in the doorway of her room, breathing in slowly and reminding herself that she loved her brother very much before turning to talk to him.

“What’s all of this really about, Jack?”

“It’s about Cas,” Jack replied, a little too quickly for it to be believable. “I just want him to have some company.”

Claire kept staring at him until Jack shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I really am worried about him,” he insisted.

“I know. You’re worried about everybody, all the time,” Claire said. “I don’t know how you even handle it.”

“Yeah,” Jack muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “And you’re always worried about me.”

There followed a short, awkward silence. Claire sipped from her juice calmly while Jack searched for the words to tell her what he was thinking.

“You shouldn’t have attacked Tracy,” he concluded, in the end. “But the things she was saying about me… and about us… they were really mean.”

‘’Cause she’s a mean bitch,” Claire declared.

“She’s… she wasn’t like that while I was helping her study over the summer,” Jack replied. He leaned back against the wall next to Claire’s door and sighed. “I think I might have done something to make her mad.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me. I thought Tracy was my friend.”

“It doesn’t matter if you did something or not, Jack,” Claire clarified. “Tracy had no right to say
those things. You’re better off making new friends.”

“Yeah.” A soft smile appeared on Jack’s lips. “Say, you know what would be a great way to make new friends? Joining a club of extra-curricular activities!”

Claire rolled her eyes and started closing the door until Jack put a hand on it to prevent it.

“But, uh… thank you. For… watching my back.”

“You’re welcome,” Claire told him. She smiled for the first time since Ryan Humphrey had interrupted their lunch.

“You still shouldn’t have fought her,” Jack insisted.

“Oh, come on. I just roughed her up a little bit,” Claire protested, but where other people failed to get to her, Jack always managed. She finally felt a twinge of guilt for how she’d handled the situation. She still didn’t think Tracy’s gossipy mouth should have gone unpunished, but perhaps she should have counted to ten before crossing that field. “Ugh, you sound just like Mr. Winchester.” She took another sip of her juice and remembered: “By the way, he wants you to go see him too.”

Jack frowned, as confused as her. “Why?”

“No idea.”

The siblings stared at each other for a few seconds to see if the other came up with an answer, and then simultaneously shrugged.

“Well, if that’s all…”

“No, that’s not all,” Jack said, putting a hand on his hip. “You left the empty carton on the kitchen instead of throwing it away.”

Claire closed the door in his face.

Jack waited until the classroom was almost empty before he walked up to Miss Masters’ desk and cleared his throat. Miss Masters looked up from all the notes she had spread in front of her.

“Oh, Jack,” she said. “Is there anything you needed?”

“I was just wondering if you had any news about that creative writing club you mentioned?” Jack said, trying to sound like he had no ulterior motives for asking. And honestly, why was he worried about how he sounded? Miss Masters obviously wouldn’t suspect if he had ulterior motives or not. He should just relax and try to act natural.

Claire was much better at lying than him. If he wanted this to work, he was going to have to get her on board somehow.

“Well, it’s going slow,” Miss Masters said, with a sigh. “Principal Crowley doesn’t seem inclined to spend more of the school budget in more extra-curricular activities.”

“Why not? This wouldn’t require a lot of budget,” Jack pointed out. “Just people with their pens and
notebooks, right?"

Miss Masters looked at him with a smirk. She started gathering the papers on her desk in one swift movement.

“You know, I argued the same thing,” she said, as she put the stack away in her briefcase. Jack noticed one piece of paper had fallen on the floor and quickly leaned down to pick it up. “But the man is just stubborn… oh, thank you.”

“That’s too bad. My sister and I really were interested in going.”

Miss Masters stopped halfway into closing her briefcase.

“Really? I would think having your uncle at home, he would encourage your passion for writing.”

Jack scrambled to quickly find an excuse before Miss Masters left the classroom.

“Yes. He does,” he said, as he followed her down the hallway. “But it’s always good to meet even more people with the same interests, you know? It’s a good way to make friends, to, uh… connect… with people,” he repeated and immediately wanted to kick himself for being so clumsy about it.

Mrs. Masters, however, only looked at him with a polite smile and a nod.

“Well, I’ll make sure to keep you posted.” She stopped at the door of the faculty lounge. “Thank you, Jack. I’m glad you took an interest in this.”

“Thanks to you, Miss Masters,” Jack said, cheerfully.

Miss Masters closed the door behind her. Jack hesitated for a moment, thinking if it was appropriate or not. Claire would have done and not felt guilty about it at all, so he casually stood closer and took a peek through the window. Miss Masters went directly to the water cooler where Mr. Winchester and Mr. Phelps were chatting. Mr. Winchester turned towards with a smile and she extended her hand to touch his arm.

What did that mean? Mr. Winchester was single (at the very least, Jack had never seen him wearing a wedding band or anything of the sort) and if Miss Masters was too…

Mr. Winchester happened to lift his eyes at that precise moment. Jack stepped backwards quickly, his cheeks burning at the thought of having been caught spying on the teachers and turned around to make a swift escape.

He wasn’t fast enough.

“Jack?”

Jack stopped dead in his tracks and closed his eyes for a moment. Claire would’ve had a lie or an excuse ready to roll out of his tongue, but all he could do was stammer awkwardly:

“Mr. Winchester, hi! I wasn’t… I didn’t mean to…”

“Were you looking for me?” Mr. Winchester asked him. “Did your sister tell you I wanted to talk to you?”

“She did mention that, yes,” Jack replied, thankful for the neutral answer. “I was… a little confused, to be honest.”
“Well, do you have some time now? We can go into my office and talk about it. Or you can come and see me after your next class.”

“Umh…” Jack fidgeted with the strap of his backpack. In truth, he had a free period before lunch that he intended to use to go to the library and check out some of the books on Miss Masters’ reading list. But if it was really important for Mr. Winchesters, he guessed he could leave that for later. “Yes. Sure. Let’s do that right now.”

“Okay.” Mr. Winchester stepped out of the lounge and gestured towards his office.

Jack really liked the counselor’s place, or maybe it was the man himself. He hadn’t been there as many times as Claire had, but every time, Mr. Winchester had unfailingly made him welcome and like his problems were going to be heard.

Which made it all the more strange, because Jack wasn’t having any problems that he could think of right now.

“So, how was your summer?” Mr. Winchester asked as soon as Jack was sitting in front of his desk.

“It was fun!” Jack said, beaming at the memory. “Claire, my uncle and I went on a little road trip to the Grand Canyon. Claire complained about the heat a lot, but we had a great time overall.”

“That’s good to hear.” Mr Winchester nodded. “And how about when you came back? Did you have a good time then?”

Jack blinked at the counselor, unsure of where he was going.

“Yes, of course. But it’s really good that the classes started back again. I have missed everyone.”

“Yeah, you always seem to make friends easily,” Mr. Winchester pointed out. “It’s funny, though. Despite that, unlike other students, you don’t seem to have fixed group of friends.”

“Well, Claire says I get along with everybody,” Jack replied. “I’m not sure she means that as a compliment, but…”

“I think your sister thinks very highly of you, Jack,” Mr. Winchester interrupted him. “She has reasons to do that, of course. You’re a straight A’s students, you have never been in any serious trouble, unlike her.”

Jack wasn’t sure Mr. Winchester was telling him to flatter him, but he felt a little flattered nonetheless.

“I try.”

“I know you do.” Mr. Winchester made a pensive pause as he crossed his fingers over his desk. “Do you ever feel… tired, of trying?”

The question baffled Jack even more. What was he supposed to say to that? What did Mr. Winchester want him to answer?

“Just tell me how you feel, Jack,” Mr. Winchester encouraged him. “Anything that comes to your mind. This is a judgment free zone.”

Jack still wasn’t quite sure what to say. He reflected on the question for some seconds, his fingers tapping on Mr. Winchester’s desk as he tried to gather his thoughts.
“I mean, of course I get tired of studying sometimes,” he concluded in the end and tried to smile again. “Everybody does. That’s no reason to give up, though. Just… have to keep your eyes on the prize. That’s what my uncle always says whenever he has writer’s block.”

He chuckled, but Mr. Winchester didn’t join in. He just kept looking at him and nodding.

“And what is your prize, Jack? What’s your long term goal?”

“Uh… graduating?” Jack said. He chuckled again, because it was a bit humorous that Mr. Winchester was asking something as evident. “Going to college, of course.”

“What are you planning to study?”

Jack opened his mouth and then promptly closed it again, his smile faltering as the seconds keep ticking by and he couldn’t really come up with an answer.

“Well, I haven’t… I haven’t thought about it, all that much,” he admitted in the end. “I like many things. Claire is very lucky, in that sense. She knows she likes music and art the most and she wants to dedicate her life to that. I just, uh… well, I don’t know. I guess I haven’t figured out something that really grabs me that way. But I’ll know it, when it comes my way. I’m sure of it.”

He thought that was a pretty convincing argument. Mr. Winchester’s expression, however, didn’t vary and Jack was beginning to fear he had said something wrong. He shifted in his chair, uncomfortable…

“It’s your senior year, Jack,” the counselor pointed out. “Perhaps it’s time you start exploring your options. It’ll help when you decide what colleges you want to apply to.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right,” Jack agreed, but after saying that, he realized he had nothing else to add to that. Explore his options? How was he supposed to do that?

Mr. Winchester once more seemed to read his mind, because he opened a drawer in his desk and rummaged through it for a few seconds before he extracted some pamphlets.

“Vocational tests could help you figure out what you’re good at and what you enjoy doing,” he suggested, sliding the pamphlets towards Jack. “These are some websites you can look up at home. And if you have any more questions or would like to discuss something you’ve seen on them, then you can always come and see me again.”

Jack took the pamphlets and thanked Mr. Winchester as he threw them inside of his backpack. He had the feeling that he had somehow got easy if what the counselor wanted to discuss was his plans for the future. Mr. Winchester walked him to the door and opened it up for him.

“Remember, my office is always open.”

“Yes. Thank you again,” Jack said. He took two steps out of the door and then something occurred to him. “Mr. Winchester?”

The counselor was already retreating back inside, but he stopped when he heard him:

“Yes, Jack?”

“I was wondering about… Miss Masters and… her family,” Jack said, stumbling through the words far more slowly than it was necessary for it to sound like a casual question. Mr. Winchester frowned.
“As far as I know, Meg… I mean, Miss Masters only lives with her foster daughter.”

“So she’s single, then?”

That was not as smooth as it should have and Jack realized immediately by the way Mr. Winchester tilted his head.

“Why are you asking that?”

“No reason!” Jack said. His voice raised an octave and his face was burning bright. “Just… since they’re new in town, I was hoping to make them feel welcome. You know, like… part of the community!”

He didn’t know if he sounded convincing. In fact, he was sure he hadn’t, but Mr. Winchester decided not to comment on it.

“You’re a good boy, Jack,” Mr. Winchester said in the end. “Don’t worry about Miss Masters and Kaia. I’m sure they’ll find their place here soon enough.”

“Yes, of course,” Jack replied. “Uh… thanks again, Mr. Winchester.”

He spun on his heels and fled before he stuck his foot in his mouth even further.

It wasn’t until he was driving back home that he realized that he hadn’t actually discovered if Miss Masters was single or not.
Chapter 4

Claire wished Principal Crowley had suspended her for the entire week instead of for three days. What was the point of making her come to school on a Friday after she had already missed out most of the first week? Torture, probably. She had the theory that Principal Crowley used to do some not very savory things for the mob, but she had no one to share that with. Jack had been scandalized the one time she had suggested to him (“Claire, he’s an educator, not a criminal!”) and most of her admittedly few friends and ex-girlfriends sometimes didn’t share her sense of humor.

It really wasn’t that big of a deal. While Jack was running around making friends with everybody and trying to become every single professor’s pet, Claire preferred to be by herself. Yes, sometimes it was nice to have a cute girl around to hang out with her, but that was always a hit or miss business for her. Some girls, like Alexis, were smart and funny, but they were also way too serious: they were always going on and on about what they wanted to do in the future and what plans they had for themselves and all sort of boring stuff that Claire didn’t really care for.

She was going to move to L. A. and become a rockstar. Or a comic artist, whatever happened first.

She knew her relationship with Alexis was over when she said that wasn’t a feasible plan.

“I like that you’re so passionate about those things and don’t get me wrong, I think you’re very talented,” she had said. “But that’s… that’s just not realistic, Claire.”

Instead of pointing out that Gerard Way had done it, Claire decided it was time that she and Alex saw other people. Alex had agreed and told Claire she needed to work on her anger issues, to what Claire had replied that if she needed someone "safe", maybe she should date a tall dude. It hadn’t been her best comeback and it had ended up backfiring on her, because a month later, Alex was fooling around with Fucking Henry the Quarterback and Claire was sad and girlfriend-less.

At the same, she wasn’t sorry. If Castiel could raise two children by writing lame children’s books, she could maintain herself drawing and playing music. Maybe she would get a cat to go along with her downtown L.A. one bedroom apartment.

She was fantasizing about that future as she shaded her latest work, with her earphones plugged in. Jack had said he wanted to see if he found Miss Masters to ask her again about the club (because the woman wasn’t sick of him pestering her yet) and Claire had decided to go outside and sit underneath the trees’ line behind the sports field. Except for a few jocks throwing a football back and forth in the distance, not many people seemed to have gone there that day. The ground was still green and the trees still gave enough shade that it was nice to sit underneath them. She had to take this moment while it lasted. As much as she hated high school and every single person in it with the possible exception of Jack (sometimes, after she’d had her coffee), she liked that tree line and how isolated it was.

Which is why at first, when a shadow was cast over her sketchbook, she was irritated. But when she looked up and found a pair of sweet dark brown eyes staring back, she completely forgot the reason. The owner of those dark eyes said something and Claire pulled one of her earphones out as quickly as she could.

“What?”

“I asked if you don’t mind if I sit here,” the girl repeated. “Everywhere else is kind of noisy.”
“Oh.” Claire’s stupid lesbian brain took a moment to catch up to what was happening. “Umh… yeah, sure.”

She moved her backpack away and the girl sat right next to her. She promptly opened her backpack and took out a book. It was obvious she intended to read and completely ignore Claire, but the fact she was sitting there, sharing a tree trunk with her put all sort of ideas in Claire’s head immediately. She couldn’t let this chance pass. It was either that or she had to wait until Monday and Miss Masters’ class to see her again.

She cleared her throat.

“You’re… Kaia, right?” she said, clumsily. “You’re Miss Masters’ daughter.”

At first, she thought Kaia hadn’t heard her or had decided to ignore her all around. But then she turned her face towards her and cracked a soft smile.

“Yeah,” she said. “And you are?”

Claire struggled to remember her name for a second or two.

“Claire Novak,” she said, offering up her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Kaia’s hand was warm and the sensation of her touch lingered on Claire’s skin for longer than she cared to admit.

“You’re Jack’s sister, aren’t you?” Kaia asked. “The kind of weirdly enthusiastic dude who always participates in class?”

Claire chuckled. That had to be the most accurate description of Jack that someone had ever uttered.

“That’d be me, yes.”

Kaia nodded and went quiet. Claire thought she was going to let the conversation die and go back to her book, but then she spoke again:

“Can I ask you something? If you’re twins, how come you have different surnames?”

Many people had asked that question along the years, and Claire had always felt compelled to give outlandish answers like “We were conceived during a threesome, so we have different dads” and “Mind your own fucking business”. But for some reason, with Kaia, she felt compelled to tell the truth.

“Well, you see, originally we were both Kline,” she explained. “But then our mom died and our dad’s family took us in. We were given the choice to keep our surname or change it. Jack kept his.”

“Oh. I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Thank you.”

Kaia tapped her fingers in the cover of her book.

“My mom died, too,” she said. “And my dad. That’s why I ended up in the system and Meg took me in.”

Claire was slightly taken aback by her honesty, but it was hard to feel anything but butterflies in her stomach when Kaia smiled like that.
“You were wondering,” she said, simply. “And since you told me, I figured it would be fair I told you too.”

“Right.” Claire nodded. “But if we already told each other our tragic backstories, what else is left for us to talk about?”

That had the marvelous effect of making Kaia laugh. Her eyes lit up in the most wonderful way when she did that. She closed her book and moved her body so she would be sat facing Claire now. Claire lowered her eyes to her hands for a moment. She didn’t know if she was ready to be the center of Kaia’s full, undivided attention.

“We can talk about the present,” Kaia suggested. “What are you drawing?”

Claire suddenly felt very embarrassed about her skills, but she had learned a long time ago that self-deprecation wasn’t attractive.

“It’s just a… just a dragon,” she said, lifting up her sketchbook. She hoped Kaia wouldn’t notice one of the wings was lopsided and the snout was far too long. “I did it in like five minutes, so it’s not very…”

“Oh, that’s so cool!”

She snatched Claire’s sketchbook from her hand to take a closer look at the dragon, but she didn’t flipped the pages to look at the other drawings. Claire appreciated her for it. So many people looked at her other drawings without permission and it always got on her nerves.

“You draw a lot?” Kaia asked, returning the sketchbook to her.

“Yeah,” Claire said. She tried walking the fine line between being humble and boastful and she wasn’t sure that she got it: “I draw and I play the guitar. That’s kind of my thing.”

“That’s awesome. I write. Poetry mostly.” She didn’t elaborate on that and Claire had no time to ask her more about it before Kaia reached out and put her hand on Claire’s forearm. “Hey, do you like comics?”

Claire blinked a couple of times and forced her tongue to move to formulate an intelligible answer.

“Yes. Of course.”

“You know, if you came to Meg’s writing club, we can have a class on how to script a comic,” Kaia suggested. “Would you be interested in something like that?”

It was odd. Whenever Jack mentioned the writing club, Claire rolled her eyes so hard she was afraid that they would get stuck and she would have to stare at the back of her head forever. Now that Kaia mentioned it, no sensation of irritation or contempt invaded her. Just a slight bafflement.

“Are you serious?”

Kaia chuckled. And oh, God, she had the most adorable laughter Claire had ever heard in her life.

"Kinda lame?” she said, shrugging. "I'm sorry. It's just... Meg is really trying to make thing take off, but Principal Crowley doesn't seem to think there will be enough interest in it and he's being kind of an ass about it."

"Principal Crowley is an ass about everything," Claire pointed out. Kaia laughed again.
"So I was thinking maybe if we get enough people to find out, it'll help," she explained. "But, uh... I'm not the greatest recruiter ever."

"Don't say that. I think you're doing a bang up job."

Claire realized the words that had just rolled off her tongue and decided she needed to tone it way the fuck down. She didn't want Kaia to think she was that desperate and needy. Needy chicks were a turn off.

Hell, maybe chicks in general were a turn off for Kaia. How would she even know? Jack thought she should be able to tell, but Claire had more of a please-be-gay-dar.

"Thanks," Kaia said, tucking a lock of her black, curly hair behind her ear. "Meg is really trying to do this for me, you know?"

"She is?"

"Yeah. She says it's important I have friends and try to have a life as normal as possible," Kaia explained. "And I don't want to disappoint her. I've been in the system for a while and now I'm about to grow out of it, but Meg treats me like a real daughter most of the time. I'm sorry, I'm oversharing," she added, glancing away.

"No," Claire told her. "It's fine. I like hearing you overshare."

Well, she was failing hard at this not-sounding-desperate business.

Kaia smiled at her again and changed the topic.

"It must be awesome, though. To have an uncle who is a writer, I mean."

"Well, you know... he just... locks himself away in his studio and writes stories about me and Jack having zany adventures in his magical invented lands," Claire said. "I don't really know much about the process."

Kaia blinked at her very slowly.

"No!" she said. "You're Agatha? For real?"

Claire huffed and tried not to look too embarrassed about that. Yes, she had been the inspiration for Agatha when she was very young, and Jack had been Jasper's. But honestly, sometimes the comparison annoyed her a little. Agatha was always ready to defend what was right and fair, but she was far more patient and certainly kinder than Claire was to anyone. She thought Castiel didn't write her as Claire was, but as he wanted her to be. And she was pretty sure Agatha was straight, or at the very least had a will-they-won't-they relationship with a knight in the magical kingdom.

She didn't tell any of that to Kaia. She didn't really need to know any of that, especially when she had been so enthusiastic about Castiel's writing to begin with.

"Yeah, a little bit," she said instead.

"Man, that is so cool," Kaia replied. "I had a major crush on her growing up."

That confession startled them both. Kaia looked away and cringed while Claire bit the inside of her tongue and tried not to scream in triumph.

A few seconds of awkward silence passed them by until Kaia cleared her throat.
"Anyway... I think I should be going now," she said. She put the book she hadn't read back in her backpack and stood up. "Thank you for letting me share your tree. I, uh... I will see your around."

"Yeah. See you," Claire muttered.

Kaia hanged her backpack over her shoulder and walked away fast, almost as if she was fleeing. Claire followed her with her gaze.

Well, that had certainly been an interesting development.

She didn't have any classes with her brother after lunch, so she had to wait for the school to see him.

She closed the car's door behind her.

"Hey, how was your classes?" Jack asked, sitting behind the wheel (Claire's driving privileges had been revoked indefinitely after her fight with Tracy).

"Boring," Claire replied. She watched in silence as Jack fidgeted with the keys and decided the best way to bring it up was to just up and say it: "Okay, I'm in."

Jack stopped long enough to throw a confused look at her.

"In?" he repeated.

"In… your… stupid plan to get Cas laid," she said, wishing there was another way (any other way) to get to spend more time with Kaia. But had been thinking all day and she was coming up empty.

Jack's eyes slowly lit up as he looked at her.

"Really?"

"Yeah, try not to make it into a thing..." Claire protested, but she couldn't say much else. Jack had thrown his arms around her and was hugging her tight in his excitement.

Castiel caught Jack and Claire arguing loudly about something later that night when he walked down from his studio to make dinner. They had Jack’s laptop opened on the dining table and seemed to be very busy as they looked something inside it.

“I’m telling you, that font isn’t going to work! It looks too cluttered!”

“Maybe if we moved the dragon…” Jack suggested, only for his sister to stare daggers at him.

“No,” Claire said, sharply. “The dragon is important.”

“What are you two kids doing?” Castiel asked, approaching them.

As always, Claire startled and slumped back on her chair. She didn’t like Castiel inquiring about what she considered “her businesses”, but luckily, Jack was always willing to share.

“We’re making leaflets for Miss Masters’ creative writing club,” he said cheerfully, turning the computer so Castiel could see.
The dragon that Claire had drawn occupied most of the page, looking menacing with its wide golden eyes and its wings extended, a ball of fire starting to grow in its mouth. As always, Claire’s art was stunning and Castiel was surprised of how much she had improved, but telling her that guarantee that she would never again showed him anything she had done. The font (which was, indeed, too big and flashy) announced the creative writing club and urged students to try it out.

“I didn’t know you were interested in creative writing,” Castiel told them. “You could have told me. Have you written anything you’d want me to see?”

Claire and Jack exchanged a quick, looking every bit like he had asked an uncomfortable and frankly irrelevant question.

“Well, you know… we were looking to get started,” Jack stuttered.

He was always very bad at lying.

“And besides, it wouldn’t be fair,” Claire continued. “Miss Masters asked you to help out for a reason. There’s a lot of students with an interesting in literature that would benefit greatly from you sharing your knowledge with them.”

She could lie with far more confidence and Castiel rarely caught her when she did, but this time, she had quoted Miss Masters almost verbatim and that made him suspicious. He put his hand on his hip and narrowed his eyes at them.

“What’s this really about?”

“What? Why do you think there’s another reason other than us wanting to explore new and exciting creative outlets?” Jack said, sounding almost offended that Castiel would imply they didn’t have the more pure and honest intentions in pushing for the club.

At least he was sticking with his story. When Castiel turned to look at Claire, she pulled nervously from a lock in her hair and bit the inside of her cheek.

“Okay, there’s a girl who’s interested in the club,” she admitted. “She’s very cute and she likes poetry.”

That made a lot more sense. If Claire was after another of her conquests, it would make sense that Jack was trying to help her get together with her.

“And she likes your books!” Claire added quickly. “So you know, if you want to help solve with my sad situation of singlehood, I would be eternally grateful.”

Castiel tilted his head. Now, that was an interesting offer.

“How grateful?”

“I’m not gonna fight anybody for the rest of the year,” Claire promised. “And I will like, make all of my homework and, uh… do the dishes every night.”

The girl must have been really cute. That was Claire’s most hated chore and she tended to avoid it and leave the dishes pile up until it was someone else’s turn to deal with them. Castiel decided this would be an excellent chance to teach her some responsibility on top of improving her interpersonal relationships. He slowly approached the table, pulled up a chair and sat in front of his nephews.

“For the whole year?”
Claire seemed to regret having spoken so hastily.

“For six weeks,” she offered.

“Ten,” Castiel countered.

Claire tapped her fingers against the table and looked at the ceiling as if she was about to lose her patience. But in the end, she sighed deeply and extended her hand to Castiel.

“Done,” she said, and they promptly shook on it.

“Awesome!” Jack said, his blue eyes lightening up. “So you need to talk to Miss Masters and tell her you’re coming on board. And you also need to talk to Principal Crowley! I heard he wasn’t too convinced, but I’m sure if you tell him…”

“Alright, Jack, calm down,” Castiel said, laughing at his nephew’s enthusiasm. “First things first. A club needs members, so we should look at this leaflets of yours.”

He stared at the dragon urging people to join the “creative writing club” and realized immediately what the first and most obvious problem was.

“You need a better name,” he said. “Something shorter and catchier.”

“Like what?” Jack asked.

Castiel thought about it for a moment, but in the end, he shook his head.

“I’m going to make dinner and see if that gives me any ideas. Jack, set the table, please. Claire, you can do whatever you want until everything is ready. You’re washing the dishes afterwards anyway.”

Claire loudly, but she seemed to have no intention to back down from the deal she’d made.

Dinner went incredibly well. Claire and Jack argued over who had the most homework and which teacher was worst (Jack took the “They’re all trying to do their jobs to the best of their abilities, cut them some slack!” side of the argument) and when they were done Claire, making a really disgruntled face, picked up the dishes and marched unto the kitchen.

Castiel couldn’t help a twinge of pride. Maybe this was exactly what she needed to mature a little bit.

He went upstairs after saying goodnight to Jack, but instead of going to his room, he sat once again behind his desk and stared at the page that was as blank as it had been at the beginning of the week. Sighing, he ran his hands through his hair.

Perhaps this was what he needed as well.
Chapter 5

There were some things Claire was expecting to happen now that she had agreed to this whole "get Castiel laid plan". First, she expected endless teasing from Castiel himself about her crush on Kaia. She expected Jack being overly enthusiastic about basically everything and forcing her to be Miss Masters' pet just as he had decided to be from the second the woman had walked into the classroom. She expected to eventually be able to have another conversation with Kaia, perhaps underneath the same tree where they'd had the first. Maybe eventually ask her out. Something calm, like a movie or coffee in her favorite place downtown. Nothing fancy. Just something that allow her to listen to her talk for hours about poetry and watch her face as she did. Claire would certainly be more than satisfied with that.

Which was why walking into the cafeteria and seeing Kaia and Jack sitting on the same table, chatting amicably, blindsided her as much as Ryan Humphrey crashing against her and almost making her drop her tray.

"Watch it, dyke!"

Despite her perplexity, Claire managed to give a death glare that made him walk along in a brisk pace with his asshole, terrible friends.

She still hadn't quite recovered when Jack raised his hand over his head and waved it at her, obviously trying to attract her attention.

"Claire, over here!" he called when he hesitated. "We saved you a seat!"

Kaia looked over her shoulder, her wide eyes looking bright. At first they seemed a little worried that Claire was coming over to their table, but then a smile appeared on her lips, and well... Claire just couldn't avoid sitting with them anymore. It would have been just plain rude.

She still made a point to sit by Jack's side and not Kaia's. She didn't want to be that obvious, after all.

"Hey," she greeted her, trying to sound casual before turning to her brother. "What's up with this?"

"Well, Kaia and I were trying to come up with a name for the club," Jack explained, as if it was the most obvious and simplest thing in all of the world. "You know, since our uncle said that we need something shorter and catchier."

"We don't have to do everything Castiel says..."

"But I think it's a great suggestion!" Kaia said. "It'll definitely help bring more people over and that's exactly what we need."

On second thought, trying to come up with a name for the damn thing might have been the smartest thing.

"Well, what do you have so far?" she asked.

Jack slid a notebook to her, where several names were scribbled and some of them promptly crossed out. Some were simple things, like calling the club by its initials (the CWC sounded more like a TV network, Claire had to admit) and others were the opposite of what Castiel had suggested, making the name unnecessarily long and complicated: the Fantasy and Mystery Club, which made it sound
like those were the only two genres they were going to be covering. The Club for Inky-Fingered Individuals, which was vague enough that it could also have been an art club. The Book Club, which had obviously been discarded because it sounded like they were going to sit around and talk about Harry Potter for an hour or so, which would have been cool, but not what they were aiming for.

"Umh..." Claire muttered, looking up and down the list.

"I know," Kaia sighed. "They're kinda stupid, aren't they?"

"I was gonna say mind-numbingly dull, but stupid works too," Claire said and immediately bit her tongue. How the hell did she expected to have a chance with Kaia if the first thing she did was insult her ideas?

Kaia, however, only chuckled at Claire's words.

"We've been breaking our skulls trying to come up with something interesting and creative. Some writers we are, right?"

"Don't worry, Kaia. I'm sure we'll think of something," Jack said, with his characteristic optimism oozing from every word.

"I wanted something cool sounding and sophisticated," Kaia continued, ignoring Jack's remark. "You know, like the Inklings."

"The Inklings were a bunch of old white English guys with weird religious hang-ups," Claire said. "We're gonna be way cooler than them."

Kaia raised an eyebrow.

"You think we can be better than Tolkien and C. S. Lewis?"

"I think..." Claire stared at the list of names and stole Jack's pen from besides his tray. She wrote down "INKLINGS" in all caps and stared at it for a moment. "... the 'ink' reference has to stay, right? We're a writing club. It makes sense."

She crossed out "lings" on the page and tapped the page with the back of the pen.

"That's as far as I can think of," she confessed.

"Maybe we can make a portmanteau," Kaia said and Claire startled at the way her tongue rolled over to make the French sound perfect. "The Ink... something that transmits a sense of adventure?"

"The Ink Pirates?" Jack suggested, because of course that was the most adventurous thing that he could think of.

"The Irates," Claire said, and to her satisfaction, Kaia giggled.

"That doesn't sound very friendly," she admitted. "The Ink Musketeers!"

"Insketeers," Claire said and it was her turn to laugh. "That's unpronounceable."

"I know, it sucks..."

"No, it doesn't suck." Claire shook her head. "We just need something a little more..."
"The Ink Detectives!" Jack said. "The Inktectives!"

"The Ghostwriters!" Claire suggested.

"Hell no, I want my work to be recognized," Kaia complained. "The Writing Spooks. The Spookings!"

They kept coming up with even more ridiculous and unpronounceable with every suggestion. They weren't even writing them down at that point, just laughing their asses off with every new impossible and made-up word. Claire was pretty certain that people around them were starting to give them weird looks, but she honestly couldn't bring herself to care about it.

She forgot she had been blindsided. She forgot how tense and nervous she'd been when she sat down at the table with them. And she definitely forgot she and Jack were doing this with a secondary purpose in mind.

"The Atheistic Queer Writing Youth of Color!" Kaia suggested. "We'll the complete opposite of the stuffy white guys from Oxford!"

"I think we need something that has a more broad appeal," Jack said with his usual earnestness. "No offense, but that sounds a little too specific."


It was as if something had clicked. Suddenly, none of them were laughing and Jack's eyes were lighting up even more than they had before.

"Holy crap!" Kaia exclaimed. "That's brilliant! Write it, write it now!"

Jack scrambled to get the pen at the same time as Claire and they ended up pulling from it on different directions.

"Let go!" Claire demanded. "I came up with it, I get to write it!"

"But it's my pen and my notebook and I was writing the things before you came!" Jack protested.

They broke into a loud argument about who should be honored to write down the name of their just-named club that was only half serious while Kaia burst into giggles.

Claire didn't remember having a lunch hour this eventful since she had fought with Tracy Davis. And honestly...

"Oh, fuck!" she shouted, letting go of the pen.

"Huh!" Jack exclaimed triumphant, but then he realized what his sister was looking at. "Oh, no."

They had been so entertained with their little chitchat that they had completely neglected to keep track of the time. They were the only people left in the cafeteria and the janitor was already mopping the floors around their tables.

"It's okay, isn't it?" asked Kaia, her eyes widening with panic. "We're only late if we don't get there before the bell."

And just as if her words had invoked it, the bell's ring echoed around the school, jarringly acute and loud.
They scrambled to pick up their backpacks and sprinted out of the cafeteria as if the ghosts from Hell Hazers were on their trail. The halls were empty, so they somehow managed not to crash against anybody... until they took a sharp turn around the corner.

Jack stopped in his tracks right in front Mr. Winchester, who was heading to his office with a plastic cup of coffee in his hand. Claire crashed against her brother's back, but Jack managed to stay on his feet... until Kaia also crashed against Claire and sent both twins toppling over. Mr. Winchesters saw them and managed to get out of the way, but he did it with such speed that he spilled his coffee all his jersey and the floor.

Claire and Jack groaned out of pain on the floor, while Kaia stood there, paralyzed, with her hands over her mouth.

Mr. Winchester ran his hand over his jersey and looked at the three of them.

"You do know that, no matter how late you are, running on the halls isn't allowed, don't you?" he told them, gently.

In Claire's favor, she had promised she wasn't going to fight anybody. She hadn't said anything about any other sort of troubles.

That wasn't much of a consolation when they found themselves hours later in detention with one other dude who seemed very keen in making paper frogs and getting them to jump from desk to desk while Mr. Phelps pretended to watch them. He was, in fact, slumbering behind his magazine and fooling absolutely no one. Claire stared at the plug behind the desk and wondered, if she moved very silently, she could perhaps plug in her cellphone and listen to her music until it was time to go...

One of the frogs landed in her hair.

"Hey!" she groaned.

"Sorry," the guy said, and smiled innocently. Claire wasn't too sure he was sorry. "What are you in for?"

"Lateness," Claire replied, turning her attention back to the plug. "And knocking Mr. Winchester's coffee."

"Ha! Cool. I'm in for showing people pictures of pugs and being a disturbance in the class."

"We're not supposed to talk," Jack reminded them in a whisper.

"But you just talked," Kaia pointed out.

Jack raised his eyes and stared into the distance, as if he was trying to process the paradox that had been presented to him.

"I'm Ben Braeden," the guy introduced himself. "And you?"

Claire was going to tell him that her name was Nunya when Kaia leaned over and extended her hand to him.

"We're the Inksters," she introduced herself.

Ben Braeden was taken aback for a moment.

"Is that a cult of some sort?"
"It's a writing club," Claire explained.

Mr. Phelps let out a long, loud snore so they all went quite at the same time. But the professor simply let the magazine slide from his hand as his head lolled to the side. He snored one more time and kept sleeping peacefully.

"Sounds awesome, can I join?" Ben Braeden asked, is there had been no interruption whatsoever in the conversation.

"Do you even like writing?" Claire asked, throwing him a skeptic look.

Ben shrugged, as if he thought that was secondary, and ran his fingers through his dark brown hair.

"First time for everything."

Claire huffed. She wanted to tell him that they weren't even officially a club, and even if they were, they hadn't yet decided who they were going to allow to join them.

"Sure, that'd be great," Jack said before Claire had the chance to open her mouth. "That means we have four members already. Principal Crowley won't be able to refuse after this!"

His enthusiasm made him forget they were supposed to be whispering. Mr. Phelps stirred in his chair, waking up suddenly and shot a stern look at all of them as he hushed them.

“Sorry,” Jack said, lowering his eyes. Ben suffocated a laughter against his sleeve.

It had been three hours.

Castiel had decided that he was going to take it easy that day. He went to do the groceries, cleaned up every inch of the house (except for Claire’s room, because she was very territorial about her mess in general) and did the laundry. He even did some chores that were supposed to be Jack and Claire’s, like mowing the lawn and vacuuming the carpet.

After every inch of the house was clean and he couldn’t keep pretending he wasn’t procrastinating, he decided it was time to get to writing. He sat down in front of his computer, opened the blank document and wrote down the first sentence. Then he deleted it and wrote down a different first sentence. Then he closed the document and spent the next three hours dickering around the Internet, reading criticism of his previous book, both recent and old ones, positive and not so much, that he had re-read a thousand times. Rachel, his agent, had insisted on him getting a Twitter account, but mostly it had been used by her to make announcements about release dates and signings.

He almost never went to signings. He detested them. When Jack and Claire were younger, he could get away not going to them with the excuse that he needed to care for the twins. Now that they were about to leave and go to college, he didn’t have that luxury anymore.

And Rachel knew it.

“If this is really going to be the last book of the series, Castiel, you’re going to have to do it,” she insisted. “People are going to want to talk to you. You can’t avoid your readers forever.”

It sounded like a nightmare.
But the worst part was that he was already supposed to have some chapters to present to her. He should’ve had them in the damn summer already, but he had dodged it with the excuse that it was Jack and Claire’s last high school summer and he wanted to take them on a trip and spend time with them. Rachel had been extremely understanding and patient with him, but the last few times they had talked on the phone… well, her tone had been sterner.

“We need to get the promotions rolling, Castiel. It’s going to be a big event. You realize a lot of people grew up with these books, right? We have to make it really big.”

Castiel wasn’t sure about Rachel’s assessment that people had grown up with them. They weren’t Harry Potter level of famous and they certainly hadn’t been number one best sellers. But they’d given him enough money for him to survive and pay for Jack and Claire’s expenses… and little else. He couldn’t help but to wonder now: if he had gone on those damn signing tours and made witty jokes on Twitter that people could enjoy, would the books have been more popular? Would he have to be wondering how his nephews were going to afford their higher education?

He leaned back on the chair and stared at the ceiling for a long time. He then opened his desk’s drawer and took out the picture he kept there.

It was one of the few pictures that they had taken of Kelly, one day when he had taken the three of them to the park. Jack and Claire were two and a half years old, but their contrasting personalities already shone through: Jack was waving at the camera and smiling, while Claire frowned and looked away as if someone had annoyed her. Kelly’s eyes were bright and her cheeks were full and pink as she held her children close to her chest.

That had been the week before she started chemotherapy.

“You’re going to take care of them, aren’t you, Cas?” she had asked him with panic in her voice that was unlike anything she’d ever said before. “If something happens to me, promise me you will.”

“Don’t think like that, Kelly. Nothing will happen to you.”

He had been wrong, of course. He had done what she wanted and taken care of the twins. But as he stared at that picture of her and thought dreadfully about the future, he couldn’t help the feeling that he hadn’t really done enough.

The chiming of bells startled him and he quickly put away the picture back in the drawer. He then recriminated himself for being stupid. Obviously, the person on the phone (whoever it was) couldn’t see that he had been reminiscing and being what Claire called “an insufferable sap”.

He still shut the drawer before he took the call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Castiel. I hope you don’t mind me calling you. Jack gave me your number.”

Castiel shivered. He didn’t have to ask who he was speaking to. That smoky voice was unmistakable.

“Yes, Miss Masters. Meg,” he corrected himself. “Is there a problem?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that I was thinking about going to talk to Principal Crowley about the club next week and since Jack said that you had agreed to help us, I pictured you might’ve wanted to be there as well.”
Castiel closed his eyes for a moment. He had been so busy not writing and reminiscing about the past that he had completely forgotten he was supposed to be helping with that.

“Yes, of course. I’d… what time do you want me to be there?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

“I’m not bothering you with this, am I?” she said. “Jack seems very eager, but I hope this isn’t a problem…”

“No. No, of course. Not at all,” Castiel assured her. “And well, Jack can be very… uh, spirited.”

Miss Masters… Meg, laughed at his assertion. It sounded like a purr in Castiel’s ears.

“That he can be,” she agreed. “Well, is around twelve good for you? We can ambush him during the lunch break.”

“Ambush. That sounds smart.”

He closed his eyes, mentally kicking himself. Why was it that whenever a smart, gorgeous woman talked to him, he turned from “professional writer” into “blabbering mess that couldn’t string two coherent sentences together”?

Meg sounded amused when she confirmed the time.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Castiel.”

The promise hanged in the air like an enticing scent he could barely perceive. He stared at his phone for a long minute before he opened another drawer and took out his moleskin and his favorite fountain pen. He hadn’t written poetry in a while, but he was inspired for some reason.

This time, the words came with complete ease.
“I am pretty sure we’re breaking some sort of rule and we already ended up in detention this week…”

Jack shushed his sister. For someone who had agreed to go along with the plan, she sure protested a lot at every step of the way.

“What are we supposedly doing, again?”

“Miss Masters and Castiel came to talk to Principal Crowley about the club,” Jack said. They had located themselves strategically around the corner next to the lockers so they could have a better view of the principal’s office. “We wait for the moment they come out of there, we go talk to them, and we casually mention some great and good things Castiel has done.”

“Right. Smart.”

“You really think so?” Jack asked looking at her over his shoulder.

“No. It’s creepy as fuck that we’re stalking our uncle and, oh, yeah, our professor,” Claire snapped. “And how did you even know they were coming to talk to Crowley today anyway?”

“I saw it on Castiel’s Google calendar.”

“How did you see his calendar…?”

“He forgets his passwords so he told them to me,” Jack explained, exasperated at this line of interrogation. “Now, pay attention. We have to go talk to them as soon as they exit.”

Claire, however, wasn’t done protesting.

“Why did he tell you his passwords? I have good memory too!”

Jack breathed in deeply and slowly turned to his sister.

“You know, Claire, I don’t think whether you can remember them or not is Castiel’s issue.”

“Right. But at least I don’t use my password privileges to stalk him.”

“It’s hard to be insulted by that when you don’t even have passwords privileges…”

Claire slapped him across the shoulder, but Jack refused to give in to such childish tactics. Well, until she started poking him. Over and over, just jamming her fingers on his side.

“Stop that,” Jack demanded angrily and tried to swat away her hands, but Claire didn’t relent and began poking him even harder until he had to turn around and try to grab at her hands. “This is serious, Claire!” he insisted. “Come on, you agreed to help with this!”

“Yeah?” Claire said, still trying to get to him with her pokey fingers. “Remind me why did I do that again?”

“What are you guys doing?”

Both siblings let their hands fall at the sides of their bodies immediately.
“Nothing!” they said in unison.

Kaia gave them a confused look, but decided against saying anything about their weird behavior.

“Okay… are you coming to have lunch?” she asked.

Claire opened her mouth, but Jack spoke faster:

“I’m sorry, we’re kind of in the middle of something here. We’ll catch up with you later, Kaia.”

“Really?” Kaia tilted her head. “Because it seems to me that you’re sort of loitering around without doing much.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you?” Claire said. Jack didn’t have to look at her to know that she was rolling her eyes. He resisted the urge to stick his tongue out in her direction. That was a war that he couldn’t win, and in any case, he wasn’t there for that.

“You guys are acting weird,” Kaia determined. “Do you want to tell me what this is all about?”

Jack slowly turned his head towards her.

Of course. Why didn’t he think about it? All this time, he had thought that Kaia was just the cover, the excuse that Claire had used to justify her sudden interest in the writing club. But she could be so much more than that. She lived with Meg. She would know things about her. She could transmit first hand intel and give them updates on whether what they did was working or not.

“Hey, Kaia. Do you mind if I ask you something?” he said, his eyes now completely fixed on her.

“Is Meg single?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Claire muttered under her breath, but Jack ignored her.

Kaia blinked at them, confused.

“What are you asking me that?”

“No reason. Pretend he didn’t do it, please,” Claire said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Jack wasn’t going to give up that easily, though.

“Do you have any idea what kind of men would she be into?”

“I am begging you, Jack, stop talking…”

“She… never brought any guys home,” Kaia said, hesitantly. “At least not while I’ve been living with her. But seriously, dude, why do you want to know that?”

Well, if she wasn’t going to help unless he put all of his cards on the table, he had no choice but to do exactly that.

“We want our uncle and Miss Masters to fall in love with each other.”

“No, you want that!” Claire corrected him quickly. “I have no part in this crazy scheme…”

“Oh.” A soft smile appeared in Kaia’s lips. “That’s actually kind of sweet.”

Claire immediately stopped talking.
“You… you really think so?”

“Yeah, it’s a little bit cute,” Kaia said, nodding. “I don’t know. I’m kind of a sucker for romantic shit like that.”

“Well… good to know that,” Claire replied clumsily.

“So are you gonna help us?” Jack insisted.

“No fucking way, dude. It’s also a tiny bit creepy.”

“Tell me about it,” Claire chuckled. Jack felt his exasperation growing at the both of them.

“It’s not creepy!” he protested. “I’m trying to help him. He deserves to…”

“I think you guys missed your cue?”

Jack turned around and realized with a jolt of panic that Kaia was right: Miss Masters and Castiel had left the office and were standing right outside together, talking. He said something and Miss Masters threw her head back and laughed. Castiel smiled at her, his blue eyes bright while he fidgeted with his fingers.

There… actually didn’t seem to be any reason for them to intervene. He seemed to be doing well on his own. He thought. Or maybe they were just being friendly with each other, which would have been fine too, perfectly fine, no reason for that to be any less great than them flirting, but…

Castiel lifted his eyes and spotted them.

“Jack?”

Jack straightened up his back and tried to look like he had been… well, in Claire’s words, stalking him.

“Uncle Cas, hi!” he said. He grabbed Claire’s arm and dragged her towards them with him. "We were just... passing through on our way to lunch!"

"Isn't the cafeteria the other way around?"

Oh, that was bad. Jack cringed, trying to come up with an excuse fast so that he and Claire could be spared from having to confess the truth.

"Okay, he lied," Claire admitted. Jack threw her an alarmed look. "This nerd here just wanted to know if you had talked to Principal Crowley about the club. You know, because he's so eager to start."

She punctuated that with a roll of her eyes. To Miss Masters and Kaia, who didn't know her all that well, it would have looked like she was taking a jab at Jack. Castiel smiled, amused. To him, it was obvious that Claire was trying not to admit that she was interested in the club as well, especially in front of Kaia. Only Jack knew exactly what she was doing and despite their fighting and all, he had to admit the capacity his sister had to cheat everyone was a little bit impressive.

Or perhaps she was really just taking a jab at him. It was honestly hard to tell.

"Well, in that case, we have good news for you children," Miss Masters commented. She extended her hand and Kaia immediately walked up to her so Miss Masters could put an arm around her neck and hug her close. "Principal Crowley has agreed to let us use my classroom every Thursday for the
"Inksters."

"That's awesome!" Kaia cheered.

"The Inksters?" Castiel repeated.

"Claire came up with that."

Claire looked down at her shoes, embarrassed that Kaia would announce that in front of everybody.

"Yeah, well... it just sounded good. I don't know."

"It sounds really good," Miss Masters assured her with a smile. "Now, why don't you kids go have lunch for real? We don't want you being late to classes and running on the halls again."

"Or we could go to the library and print the leaflets!" Kaia suggested instead. "We can pin them on the school's board and leave them on the classrooms and..."

"You go do that," Castiel said with a chuckle. "It's really nice to see someone with such passion for writing."

Kaia's dark eyes immediately lit up with pride while she blushed. Claire's eyes grew slightly wider, as they always did when she was shocked or seeing something strange, but Jack couldn't figure out this time which one it was.

"Thank you, Mr. Novak!" she exclaimed, extending her hand towards him. "It'll be such an honor to work with you."

"The honor will be mine, certainly."

"Okay, off you go!" Miss Masters insisted. "I have to walk Mr. Novak to the parking lot."

"I'll see you at home," he said. "Provided you don't get yourselves landed in detention again."

"We won't," Jack muttered.

"Scouts honor," Claire said, lifting up two fingers to imitate the salute.

She was the first one to turn around and walk away from the office, with Jack and Kaia struggling to catch up with her wide strides.

"That went really well!" Jack commented. "I think they like each other. We might not even have to intervene at all!"

"Good, because I was not in the mood for Parent-Trapping Castiel," Claire replied.

"We're not Parent-Trapping..." Jack started to protest, but Kaia's laughter interrupted him. She stepped forwards and lassoed her arm around Claire's.

"I think it's really great how you care for your family," she commented, though she was mainly looking at Claire. "Do you want to help me hand the leaflets after class?"

Claire struggled for a moment to get her tongue to work.

"I mean... that sounds... yeah." She awkwardly cleared her throat and started again: "Sounds good. Count on me."
"Okay!" Kaia said, smiling wide. She didn't let go of Claire's arm as she almost pushed her towards the library. "We should stand at the bottom of the stairs, so we can get as many people as possible, but not disturb them much since they'll be in a rush to get to their cars..."

Neither of them noticed that Jack stayed several steps behind them and then, after they turned away heading for the library, stopped completely, watching them walk away. Their heads seemed very close together now, as if they were sharing a secret, Claire's soft blonde hair contrasting with Kaia's black, thicker one.

"Yeah, you girls go ahead!" Jack shouted at them from his spot. "I'll just... go do something else."

Claire looked at him over her shoulder briefly and showed him a thumbs up before turning her attention back to Kaia. A soft smile appeared on her lips, something that didn't happen very often.

Jack blinked at them, a little disoriented. He had pushed for the club hard, with the excuse of getting Castiel to come out of the house; that was true. But he was also hoping to make new friends, especially after Tracy and the cheerleading squad, who were all very kind to him before, had ostracized him. He thought he'd made another friend in Kaia, but it seemed like she preferred to be around Claire.

Which was fine. Maybe Claire did really like Kaia after all. He wouldn't know. But if she did, that was fine. He was happy for his sister. He knew how hard she'd taken her break-up with Alexis, no matter how much he had tried to cheer her up. So it was great that she had found someone else. He was happy for her.

He should be happy for her.

That was the bottom line. He was going to ignore that weird, unpleasant feeling on his chest, because a good brother should be happy when good things happen to his sister, and that was exactly what he was.

"The kids are very excited, aren't they?"

Castiel laughed again. Not only because of course Meg believed that, but also because she wasn't wrong. Whether the reason was they really wanted to write or just impress someone special (which, he suspected, was more Claire's case), they really were.

"Yes. I'm getting excited, too," he commented as he and Mrs. Masters headed for the school's exit. "I'll have an excuse to spend a little more time with Claire and Jack. They've grown so fast, I can't even believe..."

He stopped himself. He didn't want to be one of those parents who was always waxing about how time flew by, but sometimes he couldn't help it. It seemed like yesterday they had come to live with him and he still had to check underneath their beds and assure them there weren't monsters there waiting to eat them as soon as they turned off the lights.

"Getting a little nostalgic?" Meg asked him, guessing correctly. "It always happens in their senior year."

Castiel looked at her with a frown, not knowing how to ask the question Meg answered next
"Kaia is my fourth foster kid," she said. "Before her I had Krissy, and Aiden, and Josephine. I specifically ask for kids who are about to age out of the system and have little chances of being adopted to be sent to me. I know how important it is for them to have a stable home, even if it's only for a couple of years so they can graduate."

"I see," Castiel nodded. "That's very noble."

"I don't know about noble," she chuckled. "I just try to be the person I needed when I was seventeen and getting into all sorts of trouble."

They stopped right next to Castiel's car and he fumbled a second or two with his keys. The thing that had come to his mind when she'd mentioned that probably wasn't the right thing to say. It was too familiar. He'd only just met her. He couldn't possibly...

"I can't imagine you getting into trouble," he heard himself say, his tongue moving faster than his brain. He immediately bit it, but to his relief, Meg took it humorously.

"That's because you met me now I'm older and wiser," she said, with a wink. She stepped a little closer to him. "But you know... I could still get in trouble for the right reasons, if they chance arises."

A strange, electric wave descended through Castiel's back. She was standing far too close, her smile was far too open. Was there an insinuation in what she had said? He wasn't sure, or perhaps...

perhaps he was hoping there was.

"I... I have to... go," he stammered.

"Okay," Meg smiled at him and once again placed her hand against his arm. "I'll send you a message so we can brainstorm some ideas for Thursday."

Castiel got into his car, but he didn't start the engine right away. He allowed himself a minute so he could linger on Meg's figure, heading back to the school.

That wasn't appropriate at all. She was his nephew's professor. They were going to be working close together. He shouldn't be having thoughts like that.

But as he stared at her walking away back to the school, he felt like Thursday couldn’t come soon enough.
Chapter 7

The first Thursday of October, Claire put on extra effort in her make-up and clothes. Not only because it was finally October and Halloween, her favorite holiday, would be coming up soon. But because she knew with absolute certainty that she was going to see Kaia that day at the first meeting of the club.

Well, she had been seeing Kaia every other day at school. But usually she was busy going to classes or had homework to do (technically, Claire did too, but she was of the opinion that homework was one of those things in life that was mostly optional). Sometimes she would sit with Jack and Claire during lunch, but so far, they hadn't had the chance to talk the way they'd done it underneath the tree all those weeks ago.

But no more. That day, Claire was going to march up to her after The Inksters' first official meeting was over and she was going to ask her out. Kaia was going to say yes, and they were going to go out for ice cream and it was going to be great and sweet.

Or Kaia could tell her that no, she liked Claire, but all the vibes she had been getting were just Claire's imagination and Kaia actually just wanted to be friends. Which would be absolutely fine, too. Claire had no problem with that. She could do friends.

She wondered how she was going to manage it when she was this bad at lying to herself.

Jack honked the car downstairs and Claire looked at herself in the mirror one last time. She considered putting on her colorful hair extensions, but she didn't want them confiscated. She knew she was already toeing the dress code line with all her make-up and frankly, she didn't have the time. Jack honked again and she knew that if she didn't go down right this moment he was going to drive off without her.

"Good luck!" Castiel wished her on her way to the door.

"I don't need luck. I got this," Claire replied, throwing her head back.

At the very least that made Castiel laugh. She didn't want to admit it, because that would be the equivalent of admitting that Jack had been right all along, but it was true that Castiel had been less stressed out since they started talking about the club. Unlike her, because getting a crush on a girl and trying to warm up to her was exhausting and nerve-wracking.

"What were you doing upstairs?" Jack asked her annoyed as Claire closed the door behind her.

"We're going to be late!"

"Well, then, stop nagging me and drive."

Jack huffed and shook his head, but proceeded to do exactly that.

Claire barely paid attention to any of her classes, drawing doodles on the margins of her notes and glancing at the clock over and over. She couldn't locate Kaia at lunchtime, which was fine, because it was best if she surprised her. Oh, shit, should she had brought her a surprise? A chocolate? A stuffed animal? Some book that Kaia liked? Was it too weird to give her a gift for no reason or would that have been the appropriate thing to do...?

She was overthinking. She did this whenever she saw a girl that she liked, and it always ended up with her walking up to said girl and asking her out because she wasn't a coward. Yes, it was
crushing when they said no and even more crushing when they said yes, they dated for a while and then it ended up going down in flames. But this time wouldn't be any different. Kaia was just a girl. Just like any other girl. Claire had no reason to be so nervous.

She still found herself in the girl's bathroom after her last class, making sure her eyeliner hadn't smudged and reapplying lip gloss once again.

"Claire, come on!" Jack said from outside the bathroom. "I don't want to be late!"

"Give me five minutes, dammit!" Claire shouted back at him.

She leaned against the sink and looked at herself in the mirror one more time. She suddenly wished she could splash her face in cold water to calm herself down, but it was too late now. She would have to do whatever she had to do.

"Finally!" Jack exclaimed when she came out. "What took you so long?"

"Well, I was having a long, nice cup of minding my own business," Claire replied, rolling her eyes at him. "It's fun. You should try it some time."

Jack sighed, but since he was physically incapable of fighting back, he just changed the subject.

"I wonder how many people are going to show up. You did a great job with the dragon and I know Kaia gave away a lot of leaflets. There's bound to be a lot of people participating!"

Claire didn't know if that was good or not. On one hand, she wanted The Inksters to be a bit of a success, because she knew how much it meant for Kaia (and Jack, she guessed, but Jack had ulterior motives). On the other, she hoped none of the people she especially hated showed up.

It was as if an evil genie had heard her wish, because they had just turned around the corner to get to Mrs. Masters' classroom when Alexis appeared at the other end of the hallway and marched towards them, her black hair straight and shiny as ever. Claire wished with all her might that she would keep going and not even acknowledge their presence, but to her chagrin, Alexis stopped right in front of them.

"Um... hi, Jack," she greeted him.

"Alex, hi!" Jack said with his usual niceness and before Claire could silently telegraph to him not to do that, he opened his arms and pulled her in for a hug. "It's been forever! You never visit us anymore!"

"Yes." Alexis chuckled awkwardly. "Well..."

Jack turned to look at Claire and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Right," he mumbled. "Sorry, I forgot."

"It happens," Alexis said, though Claire was pretty sure forgetting who his sister had broken up with only happened to Jack. "So, uhm... I'm here for the creative writing club?"

"Really?" Jack asked, his eyes lighting up.

Claire was having a very different reaction.

"No. You can't be," she said, as she felt the blood fleeing from her face.
"Why not?" Alexis asked.

"Why would you be? You don't even like writing!"

Alexis scoffed and shook her head slightly.

"Well, maybe I'm thinking about taking it up!" she replied, putting her hand on her hip. "You don't know everything about me, Claire."

"I know enough to tell that you're wearing your ugly green bra underneath that shirt," Claire snapped.

Alexis made an offended noise and stepped back, though now she held her notebook in front of her chest as if it was a shield.

"Well, you know, I don't care," she said, even though her cheeks were slightly redder now. "You can act like a bitch all you want, but it won't make me leave."

"Oh, come on," Claire growled. "Of all of the clubs in all of the school, you had to choose this one? Why?"

Alexis didn't have time to answer to her. Kaia, along with Mrs. Masters, the random boy from detention and a tall, dark-skinned girl that Claire didn't know showed up around the corner.

Kaia's eyes lit up.

"Oh, hey, Alexis, you made it!"

And to Claire's dismay, the two shared a quick, affectionate hug.

"I told you I would make it!" Alexis replied, grinning wide. "And call me Alex, come on. All my friends do."

"Okay." Kaia smiled back at her. "Alex. Oh, let me introduce you. This is Ben, and this is Patience."

"Hi," Patience said in a soft voice.

"Howdie?" Ben replied, in a tone that was positively booming compared to Patience's.

"Well, now that the introductions are made, you should head inside and choose your seats," Miss Masters said. "We just have to wait for Mr. Novak and we'll be all set."

"Awesome!" Jack said, completely oblivious to the tense stare contest that Claire and Alexis were having. "Let me help you with your briefcase, Miss Masters."

They all walked inside one by one. Kaia didn't even turn around to look at Claire. Alexis, however, did just that as soon as the two of them were the last in the hallway.

"Did I tell you I broke up with Henry over the summer?" she asked. She winked at Claire and made a point to go sit right next to Kaia.

Claire was mortified, but not really all that surprised. It was just her luck that her ex would be after her new crush.
Castiel was late.

Not by much, just a couple of minutes. He could afford to be late just now.

The thing was, he wasn’t late when he came out of the house. He was just on time. But then it turned out that there was not much traffic in the street, so he ended up arriving at the school with around ten minutes to spare.

He parked his car next to the twins’. It was a second-hand Lincoln that Claire and Jack had bought from a neighbor down the street as soon as they got their license and they had a complicated system of rules of when each of them got to drive it. Castiel had thought that they’d become laxer with them as soon as the novelty of being able to drive wore off, but they never had.

Sometimes it felt like the two of them spoke their own language. Like they had their own little world they only rarely allowed anyone in, including Castiel himself. Maybe that was why he had written about them at length the way he had, and maybe that was why he was sitting uncomfortably in the parking lot, letting the minutes tick by instead of getting up and going inside.

Because it felt like, for the first time, the twins were inviting him to step into their world. They had been so eager to get this club up and running and to get Castiel’s help for it that even if they had ulterior motives, like getting Claire a new girlfriend, it was still something they could do all together as a family. It was nice. He wanted to share this with them.

Also, Meg would be there.

Castiel came to the conclusion that the reason he was still sitting in the parking was because while he was excited to start, he also didn’t want to make a fool of himself. This was too important for him, but then again, it was possible the kids weren’t giving it as much weight as he was. It was best not to think about it.

He took one last look at himself in the mirror, adjusted his tie and got out of his car.

Meg was waiting for him outside of the classroom, with her cellphone in hand, but she put it away in her pocket as soon as she saw him coming.

“I was about to text you!”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I, uh… got stuck in traffic.”

“Well, no matter. You’re here and you’re just in time.” She took a step backwards and looked at him up and down, a smirk blooming in her lips. “And you even dressed for the occasion.”

“Too formal?” Castiel asked, eyeing his black suit and blue tie.

“A little bit.” She laughed and he tried not to point out this was coming from the woman with a pencil skirt and shirt outfit. “But you’re just fine. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Castiel still gave himself another moment to take a deep breath before he followed her inside of the classroom.

The club’s assistance was rather small. Besides the twin, who were chatting amicably with another boy (well, Jack was chatting while Claire drew in the margins of her notebook, pointedly ignoring them), Kaia, Alexis and one more girl who sat a little away from the crowd, with her arms crossed
over her chest and her eyes downcast, as if she was embarrassed or unsure about being there.

Definitely a manageable crowd. He could do this.

“Allright, everybody, Mr. Novak is finally here,” Meg announced and the chatter and whispers around the classroom died out. Claire and Jack looked at him and then frowned at each other. Castiel decided to ditch the suit the next time. “As I was saying, we’re here to learn about the basics of creative writing: fiction, poetry…”

The shy girl opened her book and started scribbling quickly, which was strange. Meg was only giving a general presentation, saying that they were planning on meeting every Thursday and such. No one else was taking notes of all this.

“… so, without further ado, I leave you with Mr. Novak.”

“Please, call me Cas,” he said. “Most of you already do anyway. It’s nice to see you, Alexis.”

“Hi!” Alexis greeted him kindly.

Claire ostensibly rolled her eyes as Castiel learned the other two kids in the group were named Ben and Patience, respectively.

“Very well. So the first thing we have to talk about…”

Patience’s hand shot up in the air. That unbalanced Castiel. He had rehearsed what he wanted to say to them and now all his thoughts had been cut short.

“Umh… yes?”

“Are you going to be reviewing our work?” she asked.

“Well, yes, Meg… Miss Masters and I are going to be reading them and possibly giving you constructing criticism,” Castiel said. He was puzzled. He figured that was something that was implied. “We’re also going to encourage everyone to read them aloud so we can discuss them as a group. We’re going to be working on two things: grammar and spelling on one hand and writing techniques on the other…”

Patience lifted her hand again. Everyone in the classroom turned her eyes, with a mixture of confusion and amusement.

“Yes?” Castiel asked.

“What would be these techniques?”

“We… will be discussing things like plot, dialogue, characters, world-building. We’re also planning on having some meetings dedicated to poetry… yes, Patience?”

This time he caught her before her hand was all the way up. Patience cleared her throat, apparently growing a little self-conscious that she was asking too many questions.

“So, uh… how would we… know?”

“Know what?” Castiel asked, tilting his head slightly.

“That we are, you know. Doing a good job. Getting better,” Patience explained. “At writing.”
This question rendered him speechless, even more so than the ones that came before it. He opened
his mouth and closed it again, but before he could bury himself by saying something inappropriate,
Meg intervened:

“Of course we’ll tell you when you’re getting better, as well what your weak spots are. But since this
is a club, there won’t be grades or homework or any of those things. If your schoolwork doesn’t
allow you to write at the rhythm you’d like, that’s fine, too. But just like every other form of art, it’s
all very subjective and what you like writing might not be what another person might like reading. In
the same sense, there’s no wrong or right way to go about it.” She made a pause to look at the six
kids sitting in front of them. “You’re all here to learn and grow. But most important, you’re here to
have fun. So don’t lose sight of that.”

Patience shifted awkwardly in her chair, as if that wasn’t the answer she was looking for, but the rest
of the kids seemed pretty happy about it. Jack was even nodding along each of Meg’s words as if he
approved wholeheartedly of them.

“And on that note, we have prepared an exercise for you,” Castiel said, because if they kept going
with the presentation, he was sure Patience would come up with thirty more questions. “Does any of
you know what an exquisite cadaver is?”

“Is it some sort of barbecue?” Ben suggested. “Cause if it is, I’m vegetarian, so I can’t really
participate.”

Most of the others chuckled. Patience, however, diligently raised her hand, but so did Kaia this time.
Castiel let her answer.

“It’s a game that surrealists used to play. Someone writes a word in a piece of paper, then they fold it
and give it to the next person. They’re not allowed to read what the other person wrote as they add
another word and so a sentence comes out that is very, uh…”

“Surreal?” Claire suggested. Kaia smiled at her as Ben and Jack snickered.

“So… kinda like Consequence,” Alexis said.

“A bit like that, yes. Jack, can you lend me a paper?”

Jack ripped out a page of his notebook and handed it over. Castiel folded it in six, wrote down the
word “the” and gave it back to him.

“The first person writes an adjective. The second a noun…”

The paper passed from hand to hand. Sometimes the kids looked around as if searching for ideas but
Castiel urged them to just write whatever came to their minds first. Patience was the last person, and
also the one who had more trouble with it. She looked at the page in front of her, lowered her pen,
then took it away, then finally wrote something. Meg took the paper away when it became obvious
that Patience was about to crossed it out and write something else.

Castiel unfolded it and let out a chuckle.

“I’ll try not to take it personal,” he said, as he grabbed a chalk and transcribed the sentence unto the
board:

*The smart professor proudly wore the ugly tie.*

Ben was the first one to burst out laughing and soon the rest of the Inksters followed. Castiel raised
his arms and bowed his head in defeat.

They played the exquisite cadaver game a couple more times and obtained some decidedly surreal sentences (“The purple spider frantically danced the angry play” and “The sad woman greatly played the odious hat”, among others) before the hour was up. Castiel encouraged them to write down those sentences, choose one and write something based on them.

This sent Patience into an almost panic.

“We’re just supposed to start writing? Just like that?”

“Anything you feel like,” Castiel said. “A short story, a poem. Anything that comes to your mind. We’ll read it next week and we’ll start working there.”

The way she twisted her mouth indicated that she really didn’t like this idea. She picked up her notebook and left alone, while the other kids stuck around outside of the classroom talking.

“We’re gonna have some problems with her,” Castiel told Meg, lowering his voice so that the others wouldn’t hear it.

“Patience? No, I have her in one of my classes. She’s extremely smart and dedicated,” Meg said, frowning.

“Exactly. Overachiever kids have a hard time letting go of their inhibitions and just being creative. Especially in front of others,” he explained. “I should know. I used to be one.”

That garnered him another soft laugh from her. He was really starting to like that sound.

“You managed them very well,” she commented. “Did ever teach?”

“I did, for a short while. But then Claire and Jack came to live with me and well… they were a handful.”

“I can’t imagine that. They’re a delight to have around…”

“I WILL END YOU, BEN BRAEDEN!” Claire roared at the top of her lungs. “GIVE IT BACK!”

There was a kerfuffle of some kind in the hall: Ben held a notebook over his head while Claire attempted to jump at it to get it back, while Jack, Kaia and Alexis looked slightly taken aback.

“I… I would do what she says,” Jack suggested.

“Oh, come on, I’m just having a little…” Ben started saying, but then his voice became a pained whimper. He dropped the notebook as he staggered backwards, rubbing the place where apparently Claire had kicked him.

“What’s going on here?” Meg asked, approaching them.

They all went quiet at the same time and stood very rigidly, except for Claire, who calmly leaned down to pick up the notebook.
“Nothing,” she said, staring unblinkingly at Meg’s face.

Castiel rubbed his eyes and decided to get them out of there before she could get into any more trouble.

“Do you need a ride, Miss Masters?” Jack asked as they headed to the parking lot. “Because, you know, we have two cars, so I’m sure one of us could drive you and Kaia home…”

“That’s very kind of you, Jack,” Meg replied. “We’ll just take the bus as always.”

“I need a ride home,” Ben said, but when Claire glared at him, he raised his hands and added: “Or I could walk.”

“I’ll come with you to the bus stop,” Alexis said.

For some reason, that caused Claire to scoff and roll her eyes. But a second later, she recovered and called:

“Hey, Kaia. Don’t forget this.”

She handed her the notebook that she and Ben had been fighting over. Kaia looked a little flustered as she recovered it and placed it back on her backpack.

“Thanks.”

And with that, the first meeting of the Inksters was over.

As far as ice breaker went, Castiel figured that one hadn’t been so bad.
Chapter 8

... October always brought odd things. Something about the seasonal change and the proximity of Halloween made it easier to believe that there was a thinner veil between the worlds; wandering spirits watching over her every action. Holding unto her hat so the wind wouldn’t blow it away, she headed back into the house.

Alexis put down her notebook and observed the faces around the circle they had formed with the chairs. There was a moment of silence that followed the end of her story, and as always, Jack was the first one to speak.

“It was really good. I liked the part where she talks with the old man under the tree and she doesn’t know if it’s her grandfather or not.”

“It’s a very melancholic tale,” Castiel agreed. “It really does convey the feeling of fall and the changes it brings. Very well done, Alexis.”

There was some half-hearted applause, or at least Claire wanted to believe that it was half-hearted. She hated that Alexis was actually mildly okay at this, because it definitely would’ve been easier to stay mad at her if she had been really bad and the reasons she’d joined the club were obviously all related to Kaia.

“So, criticisms,” Castiel said. “Does anybody have some?”

“The ending was weak,” Claire said, immediately. She didn’t want to drill on Alexis, she really didn’t, but it was the first time she actually had something serious to say about it.

Alexis looked at her with narrowed eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if you turned the sentences around and finished with the part about October bringing odd things, it would resonate more.”

“Well, I like the idea of her going back into the house,” Alexis replied. “I think it reflects her accepting who she is.”

Of course she did. Alexis wrote some really beautiful tales, but she went overboard with the symbolism and things like that. It was like she was trying to prove how smart she could be instead of trying to write something actually entertaining.

“Maybe you can put that before the phrase about October?” Kaia said. “Also, the whole thing about thinner veil and wandering spirits kind of takes away the ambiguity. You’re sort of confirming that the old man was a ghost. It’s like explaining a joke.”

Claire caught herself smiling in Kaia’s direction. She was always so kind and clever in her criticism, it was hard for anybody to disagree with her.

Alexis twisted her mouth a little, the way Claire knew meant she was annoyed, but in the end she smiled.

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”
“Anybody else?” Castiel asked. “Ben, how about you?”

“Yeah, I’m having a problem with the ending of my story.” Ben gesticulated a little. “It currently doesn’t… have one.”

Ben was prone to writing himself into corners, Claire had noticed. For the past two weeks, he had brought incomplete stories that he read and concluded with a “That’s all I got so far”. He then took suggestions on how to possible end them, but he never brought them back to see if he had actually finished them.

Castiel, however, never pressured him.

“Alright, you keep working on that then. Patience?”

“Oh, uhm… I-I didn’t write… anything,” she stammered, holding her notebook to her chest as if it was a shield. “I’m sorry.”

That was the third time in a row. Claire was starting to wonder why she was there at all if she never wrote or refused to share what she did.

Castiel seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Very well. I don’t want to pressure you, but if there’s anything we can do to help you get ideas and get started…”

“That’s… that’s not the problem,” Patience said. “I just… I have been very busy with homework. Sorry.”

Castiel squinted his eyes at her as if he thought Patience was bullshitting him… which in all fairness, she probably was. Everybody had been busy with homework, even if they had such a lax attitude towards it as Claire did, but she knew for a fact that Jack managed to do all of his and still write something for the club.

“Okay.” Castiel nodded and moved on: “Claire?”

Claire grabbed her notebook and stood up.

“The Harvest,” she read aloud. “The road seemed to stretch endlessly. Holly and Vince had been travelling in silence for hours…”

“Is it a horror story?” Kaia interrupted.

“Yes, kind of,” Claire said. She cleared her throat and started over: “Holly and Vince had been travelling in silence for hours. The last small town they had left behind miles ago…”

A movement out of the corner of her eye distracted her. Kaia had stood up and went to speak to Miss Masters, who was leaning next to the door. Miss Masters nodded and patted her in the back and with that, Kaia left the classroom.

Claire bit the inside of her cheek before she continued reading, but her heart was no longer in it. This was the second time Kaia did this: whenever Claire started reading her stories, she would get up and ask permission to go to the bathroom and return only when Claire was receiving the criticism.

She tried not to take it personally. But it was just… hard not to.

And her story was good, too. She had worked hard on it. It was about Holly and Vince, a couple on
a road trip for their anniversary, who got trapped in a small town in the Midwest where everyone was very amicable and offered to fix their car. The town, of course, was cursed by an ancient god of harvest that demanded a sacrifice every year and Holly and Vince had to escape before they got eaten. They got eaten at the end, because Claire was very much into people getting horrifically killed at the end of her horror movies. None of that PG-13 crap.

Judging by the faces of the other members of the club, maybe she had gone a little overboard with the description of how the god of the harvest eviscerated them.

She still sat down with her chin up, waiting for someone to say something.

Castiel cleared his throat.

“That was… some very vivid description, Claire. Thank you,” he said. “Uh… does anyone want to say anything?”

“… they… they never had a chance,” Jack muttered. He was looking at Claire with eyes wide open, as if she’d just gutted someone for real right in front of him.

“Well, I mean… they were going up against a god,” Claire pointed out.

“No, homeboy’s right,” Ben said. “These guys are idiots. Like, the moment they found the mechanic was lying to them about their car, they should have ran out of that town on foot. No wonder they end up eaten.”

“It didn’t actually eat them. It just sprayed the crops with their blood,” Claire explained.

“Same difference,” Ben scoffed. “They were too stupid to live. It was obvious that they were not going to survive that whole ordeal.”

“It was a horror story,” Claire argued, rolling her eyes at him. “Of course they weren’t going to make it!”

The discussion was interrupted by Kaia walking back into the classroom. Claire lifted her eyes at her, but Kaia didn’t look back as she sat down again in the circle.

“Ben is right.”

The voice startled Claire. She turned toward Patience, who seemed just as surprised as everyone who had spoken until now.

“Patience?” Castiel inquired.

“I think Ben’s right,” Patience repeated, a little louder. “Even if by genre conventions, they can’t make it out alive, it should feel like they have a semblance of a chance. At least give us the illusion that they’re going to make it. And you know… it’ll make the disembowelment feel even worse because we were rooting for these guys.”

Claire was about to protest about the entire notion of Ben being right, but the last thing that Patience said made more sense. Good horror came about when the director and scriptwriters made the audience care about the people getting killed.

But then again, she might have played herself, because she had no idea how to make straight people relatable.
“I’ll keep it in mind,” Claire said.

“Very well, then.” Castiel looked at his watch and then smiled at them. “That’s all the time we have for today. We’ll see each other next week when we’ll see what corrections you’ve made and I hope that everyone will have something to share then.”

He threw a significant glance at Ben and Patience. Ben gave no signs of getting the hint, but Patience lowered her eyes as she pushed her things into her backpack and more or less escaped the classroom.

“Kids, wait for us outside,” Miss Masters requested. “I need to go over some things with Mr. Novak.”

“Yes, Miss Masters,” Jack said, flashing a smile at her.

Claire knew he was thinking that Miss Masters and Castiel were more or less planning their wedding and naming their children. It was more likely they were discussing the writing exercises for next week. But there were more important things to consider than Jack’s bubble.

Kaia was standing next to the lockers, looking away. Alexis had left already and this was her chance, maybe the only one she’d have to talk to her again.

“Hey,” she called her, walking up to her. “I really liked the poem you read today.”

She meant it. Claire was more of a prose person and she’d never quite understood the appeal of poetry, not until she’d heard Kaia’s voice musically weaving words together.

Kaia smiled at her.

“Thank you. Umh… wish I had heard your story, but I had to go to the bathroom.”

“Yeah.” Claire scratched her arm and decided that she really had nothing left to lose at that point. “That always seems to happen to you whenever I’m about to read my work.”

The change in Kaia’s face was instantaneous. Her smile faltered and she lowered her eyes, as if she wanted to avoid looking directly at Claire. She pressed herself against the wall, nervously.

“Oh, uh… no, that’s just…” she muttered.

“Oh, good, you’re still here!” Ben shouted, as he stopped running.

Claire immediately got her guard up. Ben wasn’t a bad guy, not a bully like Ryan Humphrey of the sort, but he had a kind of sense of humor that could be best described as brusque. He hadn’t tried anything like taking Kaia’s notebook and fake he was going to read it again, but Claire wanted to believe that was because he had learned his lesson.

“What do you want, Braeden?” she asked him, narrowing her eyes at him.

“You know, I know I’m not your favorite person in the world, Claire, but you could at least pretend you like me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Cause I’m about to invite you to a party!” Ben smiled wide. “My mom and my stepdad aren’t going to be home the last weekend of October.”

“They’re leaving you alone an entire weekend?”
“I know, right? Questionable decision,” Ben agreed. “Anyway, I’m throwing a Halloween party and it’d be cool if you came.”

“Oh, that’s really great of you to invite us,” Jack said, because of course he was going to say that. “Parties aren’t usually our scene, but we appreciate it nonetheless.”

“Yeah… you guys aren’t really getting it. I need you to be there,” Ben insisted.

“Why, exactly?” Claire asked him, with suspicion.

“Cause I sort of told some people that I was friends with cool seniors and it’d be great for my social life if you showed up there and confirmed it.”

“You think we’re cool?” Jack asked, completely missing the point.

“So you lied.”

“I might have exaggerated the closeness of our relationship,” Ben admitted. “But come on, I’m sure we could be friends if we hanged out more outside of club activities.”

“That is really sweet of you, Ben.” Jack stepped closer to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “We also think you’re cool.”

“Speak for yourself,” Claire groaned and to her satisfaction, Kaia chuckled softly.

Ben stared at Jack for a moment and opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something. He closed it again and just smiled, his cheeks growing slightly pink. Claire couldn’t explain to him that Jack wasn’t joking, he really thought everybody and their moms were cool and treated them as such, but she had the feeling Ben was understanding that anyway.

“So… uh…” Ben cleared his throat. “You’ll come?”

“We’ll ask our uncle,” Jack promised and Claire hoped to God that Castiel would say no.

“What about you, Kaia?”

Kaia shifted the weight from one foot to the other. It was almost as if she was hoping they’d forgotten about her.

“Yeah. I’ll also ask.”

“Cool, ‘cause I already told Alexis and Patience,” Ben continued. “And it’d be awesome if we could all be there, don’t you think? Maybe we can all have like, scary costumes and take pictures of the Inksters or something.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Jack said. “That would be amazing, Ben.”

“Alright.” Ben smiled and walked backwards. “I’ll see you around…”

He stumbled unto the water fountain, laughed awkwardly and walked away at a brisk pace.

“Do you have to be so mean to everyone, Claire?” Jack asked.

“Do you have to be so nice?” she shot back.

“Ben made a joke you didn’t like and you decided you hated him forever,” he said. “Why are you
like that? Have you heard of giving people second chances?”

“For what, so they can prove to me they’re dicks twice?”

Castiel and Miss Masters exited the classroom, cutting their bickering short.

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing,” Claire and Jack exclaimed in unison.

Miss Masters chuckled a little while Castiel raised his eyes to the ceiling, a way of showing how exasperated he was with the two of them. Jack once again offered for “someone” to drive Kaia and Miss Masters to their home and once again they politely refused.

Claire stared at the back of Kaia’s neck and wondered why the hell she had to say that thing about Kaia never listening to her writing. How entitled and awful that’d sound. She had to do better if she wanted Kaia to go out with her instead of Alexis.

“So what were you talking about with Miss Masters?” Jack asked Castiel.

He probably expected to hear that they were planning a summer wedding and choosing baby names. Castiel just looked at them with a smirk.

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough,” he told them as got in his car.

That did nothing to calm Claire’s fears, but Jack’s eyes became a little brighter.
To Claire’s surprise and slight dismay, Castiel was more than willing to let them go to Ben’s Halloween party.

“You’ve been doing all your work and chores… well, mostly,” he said, throwing a sharp look at Claire. “And Ben seems like a good kid, if a little energetic…’’

“That’s not the word I would’ve chosen,’’ Claire said.

“… I don’t see why you shouldn’t have some fun,’’ Castiel continued, ignoring her. “You’re young. You should be enjoying your life and making friends.”

“No, come on,’’ Claire protested. “You’re supposed to tell us we shouldn’t be wasting our time in frivolities such as parties and that we need to work hard for our future.”

“Come Claire, it’ll be fun,’’ Jack said. “Kaia might be there.’’

Claire wanted to say that wasn’t what convinced her to go, but she was weak. As she washed the dishes that night (her ten weeks were almost up, thank God) she kept imagining what it would be like to talk to finally talk to Kaia in a place as informal as a party. She didn’t sit with them to have lunch so often those and they never had a chance to speak alone after the club meetings.

So perhaps the party could be perfect to try her chances. She could ask her to dance or maybe she’d managed to convince enough people to play the spinning bottle. It was dumb, but maybe it would give her the chance to actually kiss Kaia and perhaps…

The soapy plate she was washing almost slid from her fingers at the thought. She managed to catch it on time before it crashed on the sink and shattered.

She had it bad.

And that was a problem, because all of this was, after all, her own damn speculation. What if Kaia just wasn’t as interested in her as Claire was? The fact she kept leaving the classroom for her stories indicated that maybe she just didn’t like her at all. Maybe she liked someone more levelheaded and kind, like Alexis. Maybe Claire was setting herself up for pure heartbreak, because she was making all these plans and imagining all these scenarios and what if none of them came to pass at all?

She turned off the tap and sighed deeply.

Well, whatever it was, she wasn’t going to shy away from it. And she was going to find out on Halloween.

Jack couldn’t deny that he found certain joy in dressing up that Claire didn’t quite seem to share. He was grateful for his life and everything in it, of course he was. That wasn’t the issue at all. It was that… just sometimes, it was fun to pretend to be someone other than himself. Someone a little braver and wittier, someone who didn’t shy away from the things he wanted to do and didn’t make people uncomfortable by missing out on social clues. Someone a little more like his sister.
He tried to convince Claire that it would be fun to dress up as Agatha and Jasper from their uncle’s books, because, after all, they were them, but Claire wouldn’t hear about it.

“You used to love Agatha and Jasper,” Jack bemoaned when she rejected his brilliant idea. He followed her up all the way to her bedroom while Claire pretended that she couldn’t hear him.

“When did you stop?”

“When are you going to stop?” she shot back. “You do know that they’re just sentimental bullshit Castiel wrote to entertain us when we were kids, right?”

Jack gasped, offended.

“You take that back!” he demanded.

“No,” Claire said simply, and she closed the door in his face.

Obviously, to her what she’d said wasn’t a big deal and Jack tried not to let on just how much her words had affected him. He tried to be patient with Claire, he really did. He knew she was temperamental and closed off to other people, but sometimes he couldn’t wrap his head around how tough she was about some things.

Like Ben, for example. Ben was obviously very excited to host this party. He came over to Jack several times on the weeks leading up to it, first to confirm they would be there and then to inquire if he had some sort of preference regarding food or drinks.

“I’m sure anything you serve will be just fine,” Jack told him. “The important thing is that we’ll all be there and we’ll all have fun, won’t we?”

Ben gave him a quizzical look and Jack understood this was one of those times when he had said something that was a little bit strange for others.

“Umh… I mean, it’s your party. You should be making these sort of decisions, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Ben said, with a shrug. “I’m just trying to be accommodating, dude. Like, do you like sausages or are you a vegetarian?”

He looked up at the ceiling, as if just asking that question had made him very uncomfortable for reasons that were beyond Jack’s comprehension.

“I’m not a vegetarian,” he said, just to not let the conversation end in an uncomfortable note.

“Oh, cool. I’m not either,” Ben said. “Like, nothing wrong with veggies, but I’m also a big fan of red meat. My stepdad makes these great cheeseburgers. Maybe one day we should invite you over when we have a barbecue.”

“That would be really nice.”

They reached the end of the hallway. Ben stopped and fidgeted with the strap of his backpack, even as Jack took two steps towards the right.

“Uh… I have to go this way now,” he announced.

“Do you have like… a favorite sweet, then?” Ben asked.

Jack didn’t even have to think about it this time.
“I like nougats,” he said.

“Nougats,” Ben repeated and clicked his tongue as he formed a gun with his thumb and his index finger. “Gotcha.”

He walked away before Jack had time to tell him not to feel obligated to get some on his account. But even if he did, that was a nice gesture of him and proof that he wasn’t the complete uncouth moron Claire had decided he was.

In the end, even though he couldn’t convince Claire to be Agatha, Jack dressed up as Jasper anyway: with the brown pants and white shirt, a fake Sword of Virtue that Jasper had gained in *The Hidden Treasure* after they looted the dragon’s lair and the Crimson Cape that Queen Pearl had weaved for him as thanks for helping her recover her throne in *The Captive Princess*.

Claire took one look at him and scoffed, even though her costume was decidedly more boring: just a white shirt stained with fake blood and a headwear that made it seem as if someone had driven a knife through her skull. She had done something impressive with her make-up, though: making herself seem paler and with even darker than usual circles underneath her eyes. Her lips seemed chapped and there were smears of blood in her forehead and cheeks.

Castiel did a double take when he saw her, but he said nothing about it.

“Very well,” he said when they announced they were leaving already. “Drive carefully. Don’t drink anything a stranger offers you. And if there’s a problem, any problem at all, call me. I promise I won’t be mad, just call me.”

“We’re not gonna drink and drive,” Claire promised him.

“Yes, please, don’t do that,” Castiel begged them. “Be safe. Have fun.”

Jack could almost hear the biting remark Claire had ready for that, but she held it back while they got inside their car. Only then she looked up and down at him, taking in his costume.

“You look like a sixpenny Disney prince,” she told him.

“And you look like an extra in a zombie movie,” Jack replied.

He was really bad this whole insulting people of thinking up comebacks, because Claire smirk as she turned the key in the ignition.

Ben lived only a few blocks away in their same neighborhood. Everybody lived in their same neighborhood, in fact: it was a small town and everybody knew everyone. Yet, when they arrived to the party, Jack found that most were juniors like Ben and Patience that he only knew by sight. Some were wearing costumes, but others, like Patience, had opted out of them. The only other senior there that he recognized was Alexis, who was wearing a long black dress obviously meant to resemble Morticia Addams. Despite her and Claire’s… animosity, she still greeted them with a smile when she spotted them.

“So glad you guys could come!” She immediately hanged unto Jack’s arm and talked softly to him: “We need to help Patience out.”

“Why? Is she in some sort of trouble?” he asked, standing on his toes and looking around until he spotted her.

Patience was sitting on the couch, looking very uncomfortable with herself. Unlike other people who
were chatting or standing around in the living room, she wasn’t wearing a costume, instead sporting a pair of jeans and a nice top. She looked okay for a party, Jack thought, but also very uncomfortable: she had scooted to the side of the couch, as far as she could from the couple who were having an animated chat right next to her.

“I just think she needs someone to help her… come out of her shell,” Alexis explained.

"Why? Have you consider maybe she likes it inside of her shell?” Claire asked.

Jack and Alexis exchanged a look and in that moment, Jack felt as if Alex was the only person in the world who understood exactly what it was like to deal with Claire on a daily basis.

"Is Kaia here?” his sister asked, ignoring completely the Patience problem.

"I haven't seen her," Alexis replied.

Claire tilted her head at her, with suspicion.

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, fair's fair." Alexis raised her hand. "I was planning on giving you a chance to ask her to dance so she can reject you before I ask her and she says yes."

Claire rolled her eyes. "I'm gonna go get a drink."

"Good idea," Jack said, even though Claire was disappearing in the kitchen's direction without waiting for them. "I'll go say hi to Ben and I'll bring you something to drink. You can talk to Patience in the meantime."

Jack had the impression that in the five minutes they'd been talking to Alexis, even more people had arrived. He asked a girl wearing a Supergirl costume if she'd seen Ben and she directed him to the kitchen.

Ben donned some ragged clothes and green make up in his face, and two bulges sticking from his neck that Jack deduced were supposed to be bolts. He smiled at Jack, revealing some crooked, yellow teeth.

"You want some fingers?"

They weren't actually fingers, Jack realized as he picked one. They were just mini-sausages wrapped in puff pastry decorated to look like fingers and laced with ketchup to simulate blood. All the food that was peppered over the kitchen counter seemed to have that same theme going on: Jack spotted candy shaped like eyes, chicken that had been cut in the form of small gravestone and even cookies in the form of ghosts.

"It's all really cool how you made all this," Jack commented, as he bit into the finger.

"Thanks!" Ben said. He hit his forehead as if he'd just remembered something and picked up another plate. "I got you nougats. I... couldn't figure out how to make them seem scary, so... I just cut them up in vaguely squared shapes."

"Oh, you shouldn't have," Jack said, picking up the plate. "Thanks."

"How is it going out there?” Ben asked him nervously. "Is it like, a decent crowd?"

"I would say so, yes." Jack picked up a nougat and pensively took a bite out of it.
"Good." A slow smile bloomed in Ben's lip. "Time to get the party started, then."

Jack didn't have time to tell him that he thought the party had already started before Ben strolled out of the kitchen carrying some of his scary food with him. Jack looked around the kitchen, but didn't find anything resembling a cup or something to drink, and it felt wrong just going through Ben's fridge, so he followed him back to the living room.

"Alright, everybody, I know the costumes might have fooled some of you, but this isn't The Walking Dead!" Ben was saying. "So look alive, come on!"

He turned on the stereo so loud that Jack felt the drums booming inside of his stomach. Some of the people who had been talking groaned at having their conversations interrupted, but most just cheered and moved to the center of the room to start dancing and shaking to the rhythm of the old rock song.

Jack finally spotted a punch bowl and filled two plastic cups with it before he went back to the spot on the couch where Patience and Alexis were still sitting. He handed the cups to them and they said something, but he couldn't hear them over the loud music.

"What?" he screamed, but then someone patted him on the shoulder.

Supergirl smiled at him wide.

"Do you want to dance?" she said, talking loudly to make herself heard.

"Oh." He turned to look at the girls, who both smiled at him and beckoned him to go. "Yeah, okay!"

Jack wasn't great at dancing, but he tried to keep up with Supergirl as best as he could. After a song, she was laughing and shaking her head happily. They moved to a more private corner, but talking was still a little hard to do.

"I'm Kat!" she introduced herself.

"I'm Jack!"

"Yes, I know! Jack Kline!"

Jack wondered how she knew his name, but wondered if this was a good chance to get Patience, as Alexis had said, "out of her shell".

"Hey, Kat, do you have someone who could ask my friends to dance?" he asked her, pointing at the girls, who were still on the couch.

The couple next to them had started to furiously make out, completely unaware of the people around them. Alexis and Patience looked like they wanted to get away, but they also had nowhere else to go at the party.

Kat smiled and made the "Time Out" sign. She left to talk to a couple of guys dressed up in pinstripe suits, for some reason and after a moment, both guys headed towards Alexis and Patience and extended their hands at them.

So that was solved.

Ben was on the side, speaking with some of his guests, making wide gestures with his hands and he must have been saying something funny, because his listeners were laughing. There were still no traces of Kaia... or of Claire, for that matter.
Jack spun on himself, trying to catch a glimpse of Claire's blonde hair or her blood-stained shirt, but she was nowhere to be seen.

That was odd. Claire usually got her party blues after a couple of hours, but she had been so grouchy about this party in particular that it wasn't odd for her to have made her escape to somewhere quieter already. Jack recovered his nougats, got some punch for himself and set on to search for his sister.

Just as he suspected, he found her on the deserted backyard, nursing a cup of punch with her back against a tree and looking forlornly at the distance.

"Hey," he called her, startling her. "Nougat?"

"What are you doing here?" she asked, but she did pick up one and chewed on it pensively.

"I was just wondering where you had disappeared to."

"No, I got that. But aren't you supposed to be in there, having fun?"

Jack shrugged. As always, he found it hard to understand his sister's introversion. For someone who liked loud music and going to rock concerts all the time, she really seemed to hate parties. He told her exactly that and she scoffed.

"It's different. When you go to a concert, you go, you listen to the band, and if someone keeps trying to talk to you, you're allowed to punch them in the face because they're distracting you from the band. Here, you're supposed to... socialize."

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing."

"Dude," Claire said. "You say that because you're really popular."

"I'm not popular!"

"People always want to be around you," she pointed out. "It's like you're a capybara or something. You make friends wherever you go."

"Yeah, well." Jack lowered his eyes to his shoes, but then raised them up again. "But then I lose those friends just as easily, you know?"

That got Claire to look at him quizzically.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jack nervously took a sip from his punch. It tasted strange, kind of bitter and it made him cough, but it helped deflect the answer for a second or two.

"Nothing," he said in the end. "Just that you're my best friend and you'll never leave me. And I'm sure you could go in there and get any pretty girl you liked right now."

Claire stared for a second or two, but then she shook her head.

"Yeah, well. The pretty girl I wanted to talk isn't here, so..."

That was odd. Claire had dated girls before, but usually just for some months. She fell hard for them, but then she became disillusioned with them just as easily. Usually, if it took her too long to get her current crush to go out on a date with her, she ended up simply moving on. She reminded Jack of the fox and the grapes: “She was probably straight anyway” or “Her music taste sucked”.

That begged the question… what was different about Kaia?

Before he could ask it, someone came up from behind him and covered his eyes with their hands.

“Hey!” Supergirl-Kat said when he turned around. “You left me alone in there.”

“Oh,” Jack muttered awkwardly. He hadn’t realized Kat wanted to dance another song with him or that she wanted to talk. “I’m sorry. I just came to check on my sister.”

“Does she need someone to dance with too?” Kat asked. “Because I have a friend who just broke up with his girlfriend and…”


“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about me. Go have fun.”

Jack opened his mouth to double check, but Kat had already grabbed him by the hand and was dragging him back to the house.

It was even more crowded than before, if that was even possible, but they still found a spot on the dancefloor. Jack knocked back down his cup of punch (wincing at the taste, but he didn’t feel good just leaving it around) and started swaying along with Kat.

After a few moments, he started feeling… strange. Not bad, just a little lightheaded and giddy. He had the impression his feet couldn’t quite find the right way to move and maybe it was the lights, but Kat’s face looked blurry even though she was right in front of him. It was a relief when the music change into a soft, calmer ballad. Some people protested loudly but moved away from the dancefloor. Jack was going to ask Kat if she wanted to take a break, but instead, she put her arms around his neck and stood so close to him that Jack had to place his hands on her waist in order not to fall.

“You know, I’ve wanted to talk to you forever,” she commented.

“You… have?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “You probably don’t even remember, but I was in Advanced Trig with you and you lent me a pen. I never gave it back to you.”

“Well, that’s… that’s not nice,” Jack said, even though just as Kat had suspected, he didn’t remember such an incident. “You should give it back.”

Kat laughed again. Her cheeks were red and her eyes shone brightly. The slow song ended and Jack offered to get something to drink. It was hot in there, from all the dancing and the people, but drinking a second and then a third cup of the bitter punch didn’t really help much. He felt sweaty and warmer and even less coordinated than before. How long had he been dancing with Kat? How had they ended up so close to the stairs?

“Hey,” she said. Her words sounded weird. “I want to… I want to show you something. It’s upstairs.”

The fleeting thought that it didn’t make sense that she wanted to show him something in a house that wasn’t hers passed through Jack’s mind, but vanished in his confused state before he could properly
apprehend it. He was so busy making sure his feet landed on the right step (why was it so hard? Why was he so dizzy?).

The noise of the party was somewhat muffled up there and Jack blinked several times. The walls were combing around him, so he hoped that whatever it was that Kat wanted to show him, it would be quick so he could sit down a little.

“What… what is it…?”

Kat stood on the tip of her toes and crashed her lips on him. Jack was startled, but he didn’t dare to move. His knees were like jelly all of the sudden.

“You’re so cute,” Kat told him, smiling. “I really, really like you.”

Jack looked at her, trying to find something in his perplexed mind to say…

The world jerked around his head. He doubled over and vomited all over Kat’s shoes.
Claire had collected enough empty cups of punch to start her own beer pong competition, without the beer, the ping pong ball or the competition. Basically, she had just lined up a bunch of cups and was trying to see if she could throw the pebbles she had collected in her pocket in them.

She had failed three out of five times, but she was absolutely certain this time would be different. She just needed to flick her wrist in the right way.

“Claire!”

And of course Alexis came to interrupt her just as Claire was about to get her winning streak. She sighed and watch her run across the backyard, not making any attempt to meet her halfway.

“What?” she snapped, but Alexis’ face looked pale and there a crease of worry right between her eyebrows.

“It’s Jack. We think he’s sick or something…”

Claire happened to know as a matter of fact that his brother was healthy as a bull. It was almost supernatural: she would come down with the flu every single year, no matter whether she had got her shots or not, while Jack gracefully floated the whole year without ever having so much as a headache from having to look at his sunny smile in the mirror every day.

So that claim was strange to begin with. It got even stranger when Alexis guided her to a bathroom upstairs where Patience and Ben were looking inside with clear concern on their faces. Supergirl was nowhere to be seen. As soon as Claire stepped inside of the bathroom, she realized it hadn’t been an exaggeration: Jack was draped on the floor, half-wrapped on his cape and hugging the toilet for dear life.

“Jack? Are you okay?”

Jack looked up blinking and groaning as if the lights of the bathroom were too bright for him.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I must have…” he started saying, but he propped himself to the toilet again and barfed loudly.

“I don’t know what happened!” Ben said, looking very concerned. “All the food is good, I bought it today…”

Claire had a faint suspicion of what’d happened, but she was going to need a punch cup to prove it. It wasn’t hard to find one. All she had to do was step back into the hallway and pick up the one someone had abandoned on the floor. It even still had a little of liquid inside. She stuck her nose into it and sure enough, the strong stench of alcohol gave away exactly what had happened.

“It wasn’t the food,” she told Ben, handing him the cup. “Someone spiked your punch.”

Ben smelled it too and grimaced.

“Oh, come on! I promised mom there wouldn’t be alcohol in this party!” he protested. He turned heel and headed back downstairs while Claire returned to the bathroom and knelt next to Jack.

“Come on, bro,” she said, grabbing one of his arms. “Help me out here. You’re no featherweight.”
Jack groaned, but he held unto the sink and clumsily got on his feet. He swayed a little, pushing his weight against Claire. They both would have ended up back on the floor if Patience hadn’t ran around and grabbed his other arm. Claire would’ve thanked her, but she was too busy encouraging Jack to move.

“Baby steps. There we go.”

“We’re going?” Jack slurred. “Where are we going?”

“Home, for starters,” Claire said. “And then we’re going to find a way to not tell Castiel you’re hungover.”

“But… I gotta… I gotta say bye to Kat…”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t worry too much about her,” Alexis said, following down the stairs. “She stormed out screaming about her ruined shoes a few minutes ago.”

Claire tried not to laugh. Luckily for them, Ben had turned off the music and was currently standing on the coffee table, hanging unto the half-empty punch bowl.

“… whoever did this, you’re an asshole and I don’t like you,” he declared. “Now, if any of you is feeling tipsy or outright drunk, I’m gonna to encourage everybody to use the buddy system to go home with someone who hasn’t tried the punch. If you have no one to drive you, let me know so I can call you a taxi…”

Claire walked out the door and half-dragged, half-helped his brother to their car. She struggled with the keys, but Alexis got them from her hand and opened the passenger door for them. In any other occasion, Claire would’ve been humiliated from having to receive help from them, but she was far too worried about Jack to care about those things.

Weird things happened at music concerts, though she’d never had anything stronger than a beer. She had been drunk a couple of times, but never to the point when she couldn’t stand up straight or tell what was going on around her. As far as she was aware, Jack had never had anything stronger than some watered down eggnog every other Christmas.

And she had no idea what had been in that punch or how much of it he’d drunk.

She adjusted the seat belt around him and gave him a few slaps on the cheek until he groaned and opened his eyes. They looked misty and confused as the settled on her.

“Hey, Claire,” he said. “The punch… it tasted kinda funny.”

“Yeah, I bet it did,” Claire said, placing her hand on his forehead

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure you don’t have hypothermia from the alcohol poisoning?”

“Do I have alcohol poisoning?” Jack frowned, worried.

Claire sighed. “No, you’re just really wasted,” she clarified. “I’m taking you home. Let me know if you need to vomit so we can stop.”

“Okay. I think I’m gonna take a nap.”

Claire closed the door and he proceeded to lean his head against the window’s glass and close his
eyes. She sighed and turned around, surprised to see that Alexis had left, but Patience was still there.

“Uh… you need something?” Claire asked her, frowning.

“Well, Ben said we should use the buddy system to get home,” she said. “I only have one cup of the punch, but maybe it’s better that I go home, but I don’t want to walk now that it’s dark and it’s late and I don’t trust cab drivers. So I was wondering if… maybe… you could give me lift?”

Claire stared at her. She didn’t think she’d ever heard Patience speak so many words together in the month they’d known each other. Patience seemed to realize she’d been babbling non-stop, so she folded her arms across her chest and looked down at her shoes.

“I, uh… it’s okay if you have to go home fast. For your brother.”

But the dread in her expression when the music started again in the house gave away exactly what she was thinking.

“That’s not really your scene, is it?” Claire asked, pointing at the house.

“No.” Patience let out an uncomfortable chuckle. “Not really.”

And well, Claire just couldn’t let a fellow introvert stranded like that.

“Hop in. We’ll make a quick stop at your house.”

“Oh, thank you!” Patience exclaimed with undeniable relief. “Thank you so much! It’s not far away, I just… don’t want to walk in the dark and it seems like Alexis planned to stay a while…”

“Seat belt,” Claire indicated and she pulled away from the Braeden’s driveway.

“You’re very nice, Claire,” Patience commented, perhaps to fill the awkward silence. “I don’t know why Kaia thinks she can’t talk to you.”

Claire had to make a real effort not stomp on the breaks and turned to stare at Patience.

“What? She… you and her… are you two friends?” she asked, trying (and possibly failing) to sound casual.

“Yeah, we hang out. I’m in a lot of advanced placement classes and she lives around the corner, so we ride our bikes together to school,” Patience said. “I’m saving up for my own car,” she added quickly, as if she thought Claire was going to judge her for her lack of a faster method of transportation.

“Huh.” Claire stopped at a corner, even though she saw no other car coming. She just needed a moment to find out what she could with this information. “So, she… talked to you about me?”

Patience hesitated.

“Look, I don’t know if I should say anything…”

“I’m not gonna tell her,” Claire promised immediately.

Patience looked out of the window and Claire was begging she wouldn’t remain like that for the few blocks they still have left to drive.

“It’s just… she wants to talk to you and get to know you better, but she thinks you’re a bit… uh…”
intense,” she concluded.

Claire pretty sure that wasn’t the word Kaia had used, but she decided not to press the issue for the time being.

“Yeah. A lot of people think that,” she said, trying to keep the good mood going. She stopped the car right in front of Patience’s home and turned to look at her. “So, do you know why she didn’t come to the party?”

Patience shrugged. “She wasn’t too sure she would come to begin with, but she didn’t tell me why.”

Claire nodded and pretended that made perfect sense to her. She said goodbye to Patience and watched her until she was inside of her house. For safety, she told herself. Not because she needed time to think about what to do with this information.

She eyed Jack who was snoring softly with his face still pressed against the window’s glass. She should dry home, get him to bed, make sure he was in a position where he wouldn’t choke on his own vomit. Get him to drink some water so his hangover wouldn’t be so bad in the morning. She could talk about the party and why Kaia hadn’t gone to it with her on Monday, try to come up with a way to show her she wasn’t… “intense.”

Jack opened his eyes wide and looked at her.

“You should… you should go talk to her,” he suggested.

Claire was taken aback.

“Were you listening to us?” she asked him.

“Little bit,” he admitted. “Here and there. I know you care about her, right? So you should go talk to her.”

“Right now?”

“No time like the present,” Jack muttered and slumped against the window to seemingly fall asleep again.

A part of Claire knew that listening to her inebriated brother about this topic wasn’t the wisest decision. Then again, that same part didn’t exactly care as she turned around the corner, reading the names on the mailboxes to try and find Mrs. Masters’ home.

She wasn’t going to talk to her, of course. That would be stalkerish and weird. She just wanted to drive by in front of her house even though it was out of her way in order to make sure that Kaia was fine. Nothing else. Because that wasn’t stalkerish and weird, was it?

This was a really, really bad idea either way. But near the end of the street, Claire saw her.

They were the last house on the row, so Clair could park the car on a side street hidden underneath some overgrown trees. The light in the room on the second floor of the house was the only one that was on, and the only one that was shining on several houses. That was how Claire had spotted her: Kaia’s silhouette against the golden soft light was visible even from a distance. She had a book in her hand and she looked a little bit sad.

Or maybe that was the impression Claire got because she wanted an excuse to cross the street, climb the fence and throw a pebble at her window. She wanted to tell her all the thoughts that ran through
her mind every time she saw her, but that made her act all tongue-tied and weird, and she wanted to apologize for whatever it was that she’d done to Kaia that had made her walk out every time Claire was reading her stories.

Maybe she should go home and prepare a speech. That seemed like the most rational course of action.

Of course, by the time Claire was standing in Kaia’s backyard, toying with the pebble that she’d picked up at Ben’s, she realized she’d left rationality in the car along with the sleeping Jack and her hoodie, which she probably should have put on because the autumn night was getting chillier.

Well, she’d gone this far, so it was too late to turn back now.

She took three step backwards and threw the pebble. It drew an arch, hit against the window’s ledge and was lost forever in the dark as it fell away. Kaia lifted up her head from the book she was reading and looked around, confused. Claire leaned down, picked up another pebble from the floor and threw it again. This time it right on the glass and it made a vibrant sound that was scandalously loud in the middle of the otherwise calm, quiet night.

Kaia looked outside, but Claire didn’t know if she spotted her or not, so she stepped into the small square of light that her lamp projected.

“Hey!” she called, waving a hand and suddenly wondering if she too hadn’t drunk from Ben’s spiked punch.

“Claire?!”

Claire hushed her, putting a finger against her lips.

“Not so loud, you’ll wake Miss Masters.”

“What are you doing here?” Kaia asked, with eyes wide open. “It’s two in the morning.”

“Well, you weren’t sleeping,” Claire pointed out with a shrug.

“Is that blood on your shirt?”

Claire looked down with a grimace and remembered what she was wearing and why.

“Fake blood,” she explained. “I just came back from Ben’s party. It’s actually why I dropped by to see you,” she added, thinking quickly. “You didn’t go and I was worried about you.”

Kaia’s perplexed expression softened noticeably. Or maybe that was what Claire wanted to believe once again.

“You were?”

“Yeah.” Claire hugged herself and pretended she was colder than she actually was. “Can I go up? It’s kind cold down here?”

“What do you mean come up?” Kaia asked, nervously.

“I can climb the drain pipe…”

“Oh, my God, no!” Kaia shook her head. “You could fall over!”
“It’s not that high of a fall,” Claire argued, shrugging, before she realized there must have been a reason for Kaia not to want her up there. “Or maybe, you know, I can just go and we’ll see each other on Monday…”

“Wait.”

Claire stopped mid-step and looked up. She almost didn’t dare to hope, but after hesitating for a few seconds, Kaia sighed.

“Go around. I’ll open the backdoor for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, don’t worry about Meg. She sleeps like a log.”

Claire still made sure to hunch over and be silent as a mouse as she waited next to the door. After some seconds, a light appeared. Kaia stood on the dark doorway, illuminated only with her cellphone’s flashlight. She was wearing tartan pajamas and an oversized hoodie. Her curly black hair was a mess on top of her head and Claire found herself thinking that there was nothing she wanted to do more than to run her fingers through them.

“Hey,” Kaia said, smiling shyly.

“Hey,” Claire repeated.

Kaia stretched a hand to grab hers and gently guided her inside of the house. Claire couldn’t really appreciate much of it, since it was covered in shadows and if she wasn’t focused on not stumbling against anything and making a noise, she still wouldn’t have been able to focus too much on it.

The warmth of Kaia’s hand in her sent electric signals through her skin, making her heart beat faster and her breathing shallower.

They stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Kaia looked up and then back at Claire. Her face seemed paled in that silver light and her eyes were wide and suddenly scared. Claire decided this had gone too far already.

“I can’t stay long,” she whispered. “Jack is asleep in the car. He… drunk too much punch.”

“Oh… oh.” The disappointment in Kaia’s voice was palpable. Claire archive that under the long list of questions that she wanted to ask her. “Well, we can sit here and talk for a little while then?”

Claire agreed to that idea, especially when Kaia turned off the flashlight and they were covered in complete darkness. They sat side by side, their arms touching softly. Kaia hugged her knees to her chest, and Claire had to resist the urge to put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

“So why weren’t you at Ben’s party?”

“You really came all this way just to ask me that?”

Claire found that it was easier talking to her if she didn’t have to look at her face directly.

“I don’t know, it’s just… I don’t usually go to parties, but I went to this one because I thought you’d be there. And I really wanted to see you. Ask you out for a dance. You know. Party stuff.”

Kaia chuckled softly.
“Party stuff,” she repeated, as if the concept sounded very strange. She moved a little, but Claire couldn’t see the expression on her face as she asked: “Can I… can I tell you a secret?”

“Yes, of course.”

There were a few seconds of silence while Kaia shifted in her place, nervously.

“I… I got night terrors,” she said. “Bad ones. And all this stuff, all this Halloween stuff… I know it’s silly and I know those movies are stupid and special effects and whatnot, but… they make me have them and then I’m scared to go to sleep and then I’m tired and being tired makes them all the more vivid…”

“Wait.” Something clicked inside of Claire’s brain. “Is that why you always walk out of the classroom whenever I read a story?”

“Yeah. You’re always writing about murders and ghosts and stuff like that… I mean, you’re into those things and I get that, it’s just I… I don’t…”

“Kaia, no. You should have told me.” Claire searched for Kaia’s hand and found it just inches away from hers.

“No, it’s dumb…”

“It’s not dumb,” Claire insisted. “I don’t ever want you to feel afraid around me.”

Now that her eyes had got used to the darkness, Claire could tell that Kaia had turned her head and was looking straight at her. She could tell their face were so close that Kaia’s breath was grazing her cheeks. She could tell that if she leaned in just a little closer, then…

A loud, sharp sound startled them both. They jumped up, Claire’s heart beating hard in her chest and they both looked at the door, eyes opened wide. What kind of lunatic was ringing the bell at that hour of the night?

The answer came a second later, when the person on the other side started knocking.

“Hello? Hello, Miss Masters?” Jack’s voice called. “I’m sorry to bother you! I… I think I lost the keys to my car!”
“Shit. Oh, fucking shit.”

Claire was aware that was not the most eloquent phrasing, but she couldn’t really think of anything else to say under these circumstances.

“You said he was asleep!” Kaia said.

“He was!” Claire protested. Goddammit, Jack, what kind of drunken logic…?

A golden light was turned on upstairs. Claire and Kaia stared at each other in panic for a moment. Kaia was the first to react: she grabbed Claire’s hand and without a word, open the wardrobe underneath the stairs and pushed her inside. Claire crashed against a bunch of winter jackets and covered her mouth with her hands, trying not to make a sound as some heavy steps echoed above her head. The living room’s light poured in through the slits of her hiding place.

“Kaia? What the hell…?” came Miss Masters’ voice.

“I don’t know!” Kaia said, and she managed to sound genuinely surprised. Or maybe it was the fear of getting caught that gave her voice all high-pitched. “I think… it’s… I think it’s Jack Kline?”

As if to confirm it, Jack rang the doorbell again. If he said something else, Claire couldn’t hear it until Miss Masters opened the door.

“Jack? What the… what are you doing here?” Miss Masters said, containing herself just in time not to swear in front of her student.

“Hello, Miss Masters!” Jack greeted her. His usually cheery tone sounded ridiculous when he was so obviously slurring his words and unable to form coherent sentences: “I just… I just was here, because I was at the party at Ben’s house… but then I… I think I left and I can’t find my keys, and well… it’s a long walk home and I was hoping you could help me, because you’re always so nice to me…”

“Jack, are you drunk?”

“I… I don’t think so.” Claire could just picture him doing his usual head tilt as he tried to wrap his mind around that question. “The punch tasted kinda weird, though.”

“Okay.” Miss Masters sighed. “Come on in. I’m going to call your uncle.”

“Oh, thank you! You have such a lovely house…”

“Yes, yes. Sit down here. Kaia, why don’t you go get him a glass of water?”

Claire was hoping that she would go upstairs to get her cellphone, so that the way would be free so she could grab her brother and make a swift escape. But no, apparently Miss Masters left her cellphone charging downstairs (who the hell didn’t take their cellphones to bed with them?!), because the next thing she heard was:

“Hello, Cas? I’m sorry to wake you, but Jack is here…”
Castiel was going to kill them.

First, he was going to make sure that they were both okay and unharmed, of course. And then he was going to kill them.

Meg opened the door for him as soon as she heard his car pulling up on the driveway. She had tied her dark brown hair in a ponytail and she wore a long, violet robe that covered her all the way to her feet. Castiel started apologizing before he even put a foot in her house.

“I am so, so sorry about this, Meg.”

“Hey, it’s okay. The important thing is that he wasn’t driving,” Meg pointed out.

Castiel figured that was a silver lining that they could contemplate. Jack was sprawled on Meg’s white couch, protecting his eyes from the light with his arm. His Jasper costume had green stains and dirt on it, as if he had taken a tumble through the grass. His usually smiling face scrunched up in a grimace of pain and annoyance when Castiel lifted his arm to examine his bloodshot eyes.

“Jack, what did you drink?”

“What? I don’t drink,” he slurred. “I’m not supposed to.”

So that line of interrogation was going to get them nowhere.

“Where is your sister?” Castiel asked instead.

“I don’t know.” Jack shrugged, slightly. “She was… I think she was at the party?”

Castiel’s fury at the fact that Jack had showed up drunk at Meg’s house and scared her and Kaia dissipated a little. He turned towards Meg, who shook her head.

“Claire wasn’t with him.”

“I haven’t seen her,” Kaia said, a little too loud and a little too fast.

Castiel attributed it to the fact that it was late at night and she was a little scared at the spectacle that Jack was giving. He took his cellphone out and dialed Claire’s number.

Claire cursed under her breath as she pressed her cellphone against her stomach to muffle the sound. As soon as the call ended, she quickly fumbled with the screen to silence it and exhaled with relief when Castiel said:

“She’s not picking up.”
“Maybe she’s driving or she can’t hear it over the noise of the party,” Meg said. “She might not have even noticed that Jack is gone.”

“Maybe.” Castiel tapped his fingers against his leg, trying to think about what to do next.

“You should… perhaps… go look for her?” Kaia suggested. “Or take Jack home and then go look for her?”

“That seems like the best idea,” Meg agreed. “I’m sure they just got separated at some point. Claire would never let her brother wander around on his own when he’s like this.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Castiel looked down at Jack and grabbed his arm, gently pulling from him to get him to his feet. “Let’s go, Jack.”

“But we just got here!” Jack protested.

“It’s time to go home now,” Castiel insisted. “Say goodbye to Mrs. Masters and Kaia.”

“Okay.” The disappointment in Jack’s voice was unmistakable. “Night, Kaia. Night, Mrs. Masters. And thank you.”

“Goodbye, Jack,” Meg replied.

Castiel managed to half push, half drag Jack towards the door. The boy had got tall, almost as tall as him. Castiel remembered when Jack was so small that he could scoop him and Claire up in each of his arms and carry them upstairs towards their beds as their fruitlessly wriggled and protested because bed time was never fun.

And now they were all grown up and going to parties and getting drunk. There was suddenly a lump on his throat and his cheeks burned a little as he thought about that (oh, God, what would Kelly say if she knew that he had let Jack drink?). He was so distracted getting Jack into the passenger seat and adjusting his belt that he almost didn’t realize that Meg had followed them out.

He startled when he turned around and found her standing in the beam that the porch light casted. Her face looked a little pale without her make-up and her hair, usually tied up in a bun or a pony tail, flowed freely and bushy over her shoulders. She was so tiny without her heels, wrapped in her negligee instead of her blouses and skirts.

Not for the first time, Castiel was hit with the realization that she was a very beautiful woman.

“I am so sorry,” he apologized again. “I don’t know how he even found out where you lived. I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah, about that.” Meg glanced at Jack, who peacefully slumbered with his head against the window. “I’m gonna have to talk to Sam about this.”

“Sam?”

“Mr. Winchester? The school counselor?”

“Right.” Castiel closed his eyes, trying to take that in. “Well, Jack does respect him a lot, so maybe that will be the best thing. Umh… thank you for not calling the police.”

That got her to chuckle a little. As embarrassing as this entire thing was, her laughter gave Castiel hope that one day they could look back and laugh at this entire deal. She stretched her hand and
placed it gently on his forearm.

“Take care, Castiel. I will see you on Thursday.”

And with that, she turned around and walked back into her home. Castiel watched her silently until she closed the door behind her.

As soon as he climbed on the car, Jack’s phone began ringing, waking him up with a startle. He fumbled with it painfully, to the point Castiel thought it’d be easier to take it from him and answer the call himself.

“Where the hell are you?” Claire’s voice came.

“Hello, Claire,” he said. He was still irritated, but at least he was happy to know she was fine.

“Oh, shit. Is he with you? Did he go home?”

“Something like that,” Castiel said, casting a look at Jack, who had fallen back asleep.

“Okay, look. Don’t get mad at him. The punch was spiked. We didn’t know. I tried getting him to the car, but he… must have wandered off. It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have left him alone.”

She sounded panicky enough that Castiel was inclined to believe her. In any case, the worry and embarrassment he had gone through had left him exhausted, so he decided to try to figure out exactly how they’d ended up there after he’d have some hours of sleep.

“Just get home, Claire. We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

Claire ended the call and leaned over the wheel, waiting for her heart to stop racing. As soon as Miss Masters had stepped outside, she’d bolted out of the closet (there was a joke to be made there, if she had been in the mood for it) and whispered to Kaia that she’d seen her on Monday as Kaia urged her to get out of there. Claire had sprinted through the backyard and jumped over the fence, carried on by the surge of adrenaline of almost getting caught.

She almost couldn’t believe she hadn’t got caught.

With trembling hands, she started the car and backed into the street.

Even though she was in a bit of a hurry, she couldn’t help but to look again at the Masters’ household. Kaia’s window was dark and Claire supposed she had gone to sleep after all this mess.

However, after a few seconds, the light came on, golden and bright, and Claire smiled like a fool to herself for the rest of the night.

Jack’s head pounded painfully the following day, as if someone was wildly swinging a hammer inside of his skull. He ached all over, like a truck had run him over, back-tracked and run him over
again. Maybe that was why he couldn’t exactly appreciate everything Castiel was telling him.

“I don’t care if it was late or if you were ashamed. You should have called me to pick you up the second you realized you were lost. You’re lucky Meg was so kind to you.”

“Yes, Uncle Cas,” Jack muttered, pressing the ice pack against his forehead. His breakfast laid untouched in front of him, because just the sight of it had been enough to make his stomach churn.

“Good.” Castiel finished his mug of coffee and put it down again. “I hope this doesn’t happen again, Jack.”

“No, Uncle Cas,” Jack said, miserably. He raised his eyes (not too much, because the light was so bright it made his headache worse). “Am I grounded?”

Castiel looked at him with something that could only be described as pure pity.

“I think the way you’re suffering right now is punishment enough.”

Claire coughed into her own coffee. If Jack hadn’t been so focus on his own pain, he could’ve sworn it was a laughter she was suffocating.

“I’ll be in my studio,” Castiel announced, standing up. “Don’t forget to do the dishes.”

Jack winced, because he was sure that meant him, since Claire would do everything in her power not to wash a single dish now that her ten weeks were over.

He underestimated just how pathetic he must have looked, though, because Claire patted him on the shoulder and proceeded to pick up the remains of the breakfast herself.

“I’m never having alcohol again,” Jack swore.

“Sure, buddy,” Claire said, but she sounded a lot less sarcastic when she added: “Thanks for not telling him.”

“Umh… you’re welcome.” Jack blinked at her, disconcerted. “Not telling him what?”

Claire dropped all the dishes in the sink with a clatter that made the hammer in Jack’s head move faster.

“You… don’t remember anything about last night?”

“Not much,” Jack confessed. He placed the ice pack against his other temple. “I… I remember falling on the grass… and Miss Masters was there. Before that, we were at the party and… I think… I kissed a girl?”

Claire stared at him with a crooked eyebrow and Jack realized just how ridiculous what he’d just said was.

“No. That can’t be right.”

“No. Definitely not,” Claire agreed with a chuckle. She opened the fridge, poured a glass of water and placed it next to him. “Drink up, party animal. You lost a lot of fluids last night.”
November came with cold, chilling rains, which was great for Claire’s mood. The sun and blue skies always were more of a Jack thing, who liked to sit outside and talk to people. She preferred kicking back with her guitar, maybe a good book or graphic novel and drink lots of different coffee and the fact that it was raining made it socially acceptable to do just that.

Also great for her mood: after their talk during Halloween, Kaia started hanging out around her again. They sat together with Jack in the cafeteria and sometimes without Jack in the library and they shared earphones to listen to music in Claire’s phone, so close to one another that their arms and heads brushed. They talked and laughed and Kaia started accepting the twins’ invitation to drive her home after classes sometimes. She always sat in the backseat, though, because Jack wasn’t getting the memo that Claire wanted Kaia by her side. Sometimes Patience joined them too. It wasn’t ideal, but at least Kaia wasn’t walking out on her during the Inksters meetings anymore, so Claire counted it as an improvement.

She still needed to find the perfect moment to ask her out, but for some reason she had the feeling like her uncle was going to help her do exactly that.

“We have noticed some of you have been struggling with certain aspect of the process of writing,” Castiel announced the Thursday immediately after Halloween. “So we have designed and exercise to help you out, provided you all agree to do it.”

“Oh, this should be good,” Claire muttered. Kaia giggled, but Jack hushed her. Obviously he’d be okay with whatever the exercise was.

“We’re going to set you up in pairs,” Castiel said. “At last once during this month, we want you to work with your writing partner to produce a piece. This might encourage you to leave your comfort zone, to find new ways to fight the weak spots in your work. We just want you to take away as much as you can from working with someone else. Yes, Patience?”

It was amazing. After almost a month, Castiel could predict exactly when she was about to raise her hand, even before she actually did it. Patience sheepishly put her hand down.

“But if we don’t have the time to…?”

“That’s why we only ask you for one piece,” Castiel said, smiling to her as if to address her doubts. “You have the Thanksgiving weekend or any day that you might get together. You can work through Skype or Vine or whatever is it that you children do these days with your phones…”

“Snapchat,” Ben suggested.

“Vine wasn’t for that, Uncle Cas,” Jack clarified. There was some general laughter as Castiel threw his hands in the air, as if he had given up entirely with trying to keep up. Even Miss Masters laughed.

“Anything is fine,” Castiel continued. “Long, short, a story, a poem, a portrait of something. Anything you feel like.” He picked up a plastic bowl from his desk and handed it to Patience. “Pick a name. If you pick your own, put it back and get another one. Tell us who you got so everyone has a partner.”

“I got Jack,” Patience said. It was impossible to tell from her voice what she thought about that.

Or maybe Claire just wasn’t interested in thinking about Patience. This was her chance. She was
going to pick Kaia’s name and they would have a moment alone and she could finally asked for a coffee or a movie (not a horror one, of course) and then…

Her enthusiasm lasted for about ten seconds.

“I got Claire,” Ben announced.

Claire’s stomach became a knot even before Castiel said:

“That means Kaia and Alexis will be working together then.”

“Wonderful!” Alexis exclaimed, turning her head towards where Claire and Kaia were sitting. Her smile was sharp like a cat that had just spotted a very fat mouse.

Claire was going to have to find a way to rig that goddamn bowl.

Or maybe that wouldn’t be necessary, she thought as they all headed to the parking lot, like every Thursday. Maybe she just needed to make her move now while she still had the chance. Maybe this was a sign that the time was now.

“Hey, Kaia, can I talk to you for a sec?”

She said it too loud. Everyone’s head turned towards them but luckily enough, Kaia slowed down to walk next to her.

“Sure, what’s up?”

Claire stopped and waited a moment for the rest of the group to get a little further away. Jack (goddamn his niceness) stopped completely and looked at them with big, curious eyes. Claire clenched her jaw and shook his head and luckily, that was enough to indicate to him that this was supposed to be a private conversation. He moved away quickly.

“I was just wondering,” Claire said, as she turned her attention back to Kaia. “Would you… uh, would you like to go out with me on Saturday?”

She tried to ignore the fact her face was burning up as if someone had lit her entire head on fire. Kaia blinked at her, taken aback. Then slowly, a smile appeared on her face and she looked down at her shoes for a second.

“Really?” she asked. “Are you… are you asking me on a date?”

“I guess I am,” Claire said, with a confidence she didn’t feel. But the fact that Kaia hadn’t laughed in her face or told her no outright gave her some hope. “So, what do you say?”

Kaia’s face was so bright and her smile so wide that Claire’s breath got caught in her throat.

“Okay,” Kaia said. She chuckled a little, as if she couldn’t believe. “Okay, yes. You took your damn sweet time, Novak.”

Claire had to giggle as well. This has been so easy, it felt so right. Why hadn’t she done it before?

“Wait, no, I can’t.” Kaia closed her eyes and Claire’s heart skipped a beat. “I have a lot of homework to finish this Saturday.”

“Oh.” Claire barely had time to feel disappointed before Kaia added:
“But I’m free next Saturday, though.”


Kaia laughed again and Claire could have sworn there was no better sound in the world. Kaia stretched her hand and Claire grabbed it without hesitation to walk with her to the parking lot where their families were waiting for them.

Claire was in a strangely cheery mood that lasted all through Thursday evening (which Jack took advantage of to get her to do the dishes) and up until around Friday lunch, when she almost slammed her platter on the cafeteria table.

“I need you to lend me your arcade card,” she announced, without even saying hello or asking how Jack’s day had been.

“You have your own arcade card,” Jack said, tilting his head.

“I lost it. I’ve looked in my room and my locker, but I can’t find it anywhere.”

“If you were more orderly, you wouldn’t have that problem.”

“Okay, Uncle Cas.” Claire rolled her eyes at him. “Can you lend me yours or not?”

“Why do you need it? We haven’t been to the arcade in ages.”

“Well, neither has Kaia,” Claire explained. “And I want to take her. Ergo, I need your card.”

“Oh, you’re going with Kaia?” Jack smiled. “That sounds fun! Maybe we can all go together…”

“Oh… Jack?” Claire interrupted him. “I don’t think you got it. I’m only going with Kaia because it’s a date.”

“Oh,” he muttered, and then a little louder: “Oh!”

“Yeah.” Claire chuckled and her eyes lit up. “I can’t believe it took me this long to just ask her, you know? God, she’s so pretty and so smart… don’t tell her I said that.”

“Okay,” Jack said, though he couldn’t really see what would be the problem. If they were going on a date, Kaia must have known that Claire liked her. “Yeah, you can take it. I’ll give it to you when we get home.”

“No!” Claire lifted a finger as if to physically stop him right then and there. “If you give it to me now I’m going to lose yours too. Give it to me next week, right before I leave to pick Kaia up.”

“Sure,” Jack said. Again, he was a little confused by how specific Claire was being about all of this. “You do know that you can take out a new card, right? It’s not like a credit card or something like that.”

Claire snapped her fingers as if that idea had only just now occurred to her.

“Yes! I could go tomorrow and get a new one so next Saturday when I go with Kaia I don’t have to
“You’re welcome,” Jack said, though he wasn’t sure he had said anything that insightful and he didn’t know why Claire stood up and ran out of the cafeteria without even touching her food.

It didn’t matter too much, though. Claire always went a little crazy when she had a date. He didn't get it, but maybe that was because he’d never felt that way about anyone. It wasn't something that particularly worried him or made him feel bad, it was just... something he had never experienced.

It didn't matter, though. Whether Claire and Kaia's date ended up being good or not, they would probably only be together for a little while (Claire's longest relationship had lasted around three months) and then his sister would go back to being her usual grumpy, anti-social self again. He just hoped the inevitable break-up with Kaia would be amicable. He liked her a lot and enjoyed being in the Inksters with her. It had started as a ploy to get his uncle and Miss Masters together, but Jack was discovering that he really did enjoy it and the friends he had made through it.

That's what he told Mr. Winchester hours later when he called him to his office to talk about what Claire had come to refer as "the Halloween incident".

"I know it was very inappropriate, and believe me, it's never, ever going to happen again," Jack told the counselor. "But it wasn't prompted by anything in particular. It was an accident. I'm doing fine."

Mr. Winchester threw a skeptical look at him and Jack couldn't blame him. He, too, would've been a little suspicious in his place, all things considered.

"Very well. I believe that it wasn't your intention to get drunk and show up at your teacher's home," Mr. Winchester said in the end. "But are you really doing as well as you say, Jack?"

"Why would I lie about that?" Jack almost wanted to laugh.

Mr. Winchester didn't say anything to that, almost as if he expected Jack to come to the conclusion by himself. When Jack shrugged and insisted that everything was fine, Mr. Winchester continued:

"And what about the writing club? What is it that you call it?"

"The Inksters." Jack smiled wide at the mention, because it meant they could finally move on from the embarrassment of the "Halloween incident". "It's great! Everybody really enjoys it and I think it's even helping my uncle with his work."

"What about you?" Mr. Winchester said. "Do you enjoy it?"

"Of course! I mean, why would I go there if I didn't enjoy it?"

"That's great." Mr. Winchester nodded. "So, what have you written?"

The question caught Jack off guard. Why did Mr. Winchester care so much about his artistic exploits?

“Well… not much,” Jack said, laughing softly. “I mean… I’m more of a reader than a writer. Claire and Uncle Cas, they’re both great at it. Claire is always coming up with these awesome short stories, Kaia writes some beautiful poems and even Alexis…”

“I asked about you, Jack,” Mt. Winchester interrupted him.

Jack shifted in his seat, a little uncomfortable now.
“I haven’t really… I mean, I’ve written some things. Like, descriptions and stuff.”

“And did you enjoy doing that?”

“Yeah.” Jack let out a chuckle. “Yes, of course I did.”

“That’s good.” Mr. Winchester nodded again. “I would hate it if you were in the club just to please your uncle instead of because you really want to.”

“Oh, no, not at all. In fact, we had to rope him into doing it,” Jack explained.

“We?”

“Miss Masters and I,” Jack said. “And then Claire. But Miss Masters wanted him to participate from the beginning.”

“I see.” Mr. Winchester wrote down something in his notebook and before Jack had time to wonder why, he asked something different: “So you helped her with that. You really care about Miss Masters’ opinion of you, don’t you?”

“Sure. She’s a really great teacher.” Jack frowned. He really didn’t get where this line of interrogation was going. “I… I enjoy her class. And she makes all sort of nice suggestions in the club.”

“Are you thinking about studying something related to English and literature?”

“Umh… well, I haven’t yet decided what I’m going to be studying,” Jack confessed and immediately cringed. It had been months since Mr. Winchester had urged him to take the vocational tests and try to find out what to do about his future, but Jack had simply… never got around it.

Mr. Winchester didn’t bring that up, though. He just took more notes and looked up at him again.

“Is it okay if I ask you something personal, Jack? You don’t have to answer it if you don’t want to.”

“Go ahead.”

“How’s your… personal life?” Mr. Winchester asked.

“I’m not sure what you mean?” Jack said, leaning back in the chair.

“Is there a girl you like or you’ve been dating? Or a boy? This is a judgment free zone, so you can tell me. Or not tell me. As I said, you’re free not to answer this.”

Jack almost wanted to laugh, not because the question was funny (though it was, a little) but because of just how strange and uncomfortable it was. He had no idea what would prompt Mr. Winchester to ask something like that or what that had to do with “the Halloween incident”, but he decided the counselor must have had his reasons.

“No. No girls. No boys either.” Jack shrugged. “I’m not gay. I don’t think I am, at least. Claire said she always knew she liked girls, but I’ve never had those kind of feelings. For anyone, really. Maybe I just haven’t met the right person yet.”

His voice trailed off. That was a longer answer than he was planning on giving. Mr. Winchester kept staring at him and nodding encouragingly and suddenly Jack felt a little uncomfortable.

“I don’t… care too much about those things. Like, dating and stuff,” Jack clarified. “You think I
should? Try to date someone?"

“I don’t think you should do anything you don’t want to do, Jack,” Mr. Winchester said. “If you want to put your attention on other things, like your family or your studies, that is your choice. Dating someone can be fun, but it should stem from liking a person and wanting to know them better, not because it’s something everyone else is doing. And you’re still very young. I’ll reckon you’ll have plenty of opportunities to meet someone your age that you like that way.”

That was a weird way of phrasing it, but Jack appreciated it nonetheless. Mr. Winchester reminded him that if Jack ever needed to talk to someone his office was always open and finally let him go.

Jack almost ran into Patience outside.

“Hey, Patience!” he greeted her. “You’re coming to talk to Mr. Winchester too?”

Patience didn’t seem too happy to be running into anyone there. She held her notebooks against her chest like they were a shield and slumped her shoulder slightly, as if she wanted to make herself look smaller. She was almost as tall as Jack, though, so it wasn’t a successful attempt.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Yeah, I come to talk to him sometimes.”

“He’s a cool guy, right?”

Patience sighed with relief and relaxed a little bit.

“He really is.” She smiled at Jack shyly. “Oh, Jack. Do you want us to get together next Saturday?”

Jack blinked at her, a little confused. He knew that Claire and Kaia re having their date that day, and that Patience and Kaia were friends. Maybe she needed someone to hang out with her…?

“For the Inksters’ thing we’re supposed to be doing?” she reminded him.

“Oh, that. Yeah, of course. Next Saturday sounds great. Do you want me to go to your home…?”

“That was a bit strange. Why would she want to meet in a coffee shop when they could be more comfortable and work better at their homes? But perhaps she just didn’t want him intruding in her house and she didn’t know him well enough to go to his place. It was fair.

“Alright, yeah. Do you have my number?”

“Kaia gave it to me. I’ll text you the address.”

“Perfect, then. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

Patience nodded and went inside Mr. Winchester’s office.

Jack was halfway to the parking lot when the realization dawned on him that perhaps the fact that Patience wanted to meet in a coffee shop wasn’t so innocent after all.

Claire was already waiting for him in the car and took out her earphones when he climbed inside.

“Whaddup?” she greeted him, putting her cellphone away.

“I… I think I have a date with Patience?” Jack said.
Claire glanced in his direction and then burst into laughter.

“Sure you do, champ,” she said, starting the engine.
Chapter 13

Castiel was having an overall good day. He'd managed to finish two entire chapters to send to his agent, which was guarantee that she would stop sending incessant emails asking about the manuscript. He had a good feeling about this book. It might have been Agatha and Jasper's last, but despite that, or maybe because of that, he felt like it was going to be the best ever. Even though he still had no idea how it was going to end, but still. He had made great progress.

And on top of that, Meg was texting him. She said she was bored in the professor's lounge and she was actually supposed to be grading some essays the kids had delivered. She found some funny excerpts and sent it to him, so he could share her amusement and dismay at some of the ridiculousness her students tried to pass off as critical interpretation.

> *This one just watched the movie. Not even the original one, I'm sure of it.*

Castiel laughed.

> *Well, can you blame them? It was a good movie. Even if it was a remake.*

> *The original one was better and you won't convince me otherwise.*

Castiel sipped from his mug of freshly brewed coffee and thought about what exactly to answer next. He was tempted to tell her that perhaps they should pick the two movies and watch them back to back to make comparisons. He knew for a fact that Kaia and Claire would be out next Saturday (because Claire had announced she was going to need new clothes and planned to use his credit card to get them) and Jack... well, the boy was a bit oblivious sometimes.

But then again, they were friends and colleagues of sorts, even though Castiel's collaboration with the Inksters was not an official school position. Was it unprofessional to ask her that? It wouldn't necessarily have to be a date. Just the opportunity to spend some time with her away from the kids and perhaps...

His cellphone screen lit up with a call and Castiel's heart sank. All the good mood he had managed for the day was gone as soon as he saw that name. Why was she calling him? That couldn't be good news at all.

He could just ignore the call. Pretend he hadn't heard it or he was out of battery. But if he knew her (and he knew her well), it was just perfectly possible that she would call three more times in a row until Castiel finally picked up.

Best to go through with it now. With a sigh, Castiel tapped the green button and placed it against his ear.

"Hello?"

"Why did it take so long for you to answer, Castiel?" she asked immediately. Not even 'hello'. Not even asking him how he was.

"I was busy," Castiel said. "How are you, Aunt Amara?"

Aunt Amara was the Novak's matriarch, if they could be considered to have anything resembling that. After Castiel's father passed, she had taken charge of the family's business and immense fortune and she had ruled it with an iron fist. She didn't have children on her own, but that only meant that
every once in a while she decided to become involved in his nephews and grand-nephews lives.

"I am in a hotel in New York City and the treatment they give their guests is just dreadful," Amara complained. "Never come here."

"I'll keep it in mind," Castiel said, ignoring the fact that there were few chances that he'd ever found himself in New York City and that even if he did, she hadn't told him the name of the hotel. That wasn't a problem, though: he should simply Google the city's most expensive hotels and wager that Aunt Amara had stayed in one of the top three. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, not anything I need," Amara replied. "I'm just calling you tell you I will be spending Thanksgiving with you and Luke's children."

It didn't sound like a request or a question. More like she was informing Castiel of that fact.

"Oh," Castiel muttered, trying to recover from the forcefulness of it. "Oh. Umh... are you sure? You don't really like South Dakota and..."

"No, I do not," Amara said. "And honestly, Castiel, I don't know why you insisted on staying in that one-horse town when you could have given the twins a better life in the city..."

Castiel let her ramble. He had explained to her, several times, that this had been Kelly's hometown, the place where she had moved back to after her divorce from Luke and the place where she'd died. The kids had been too young back then and moving them from the only home they'd known might have upset them greatly. With time, the idea of uprooting them became harder and harder, since everything they'd known was there: their friends, some of Kelly's cousins (who were also their family, even if they only saw them sporadically) and even their mother's grave that they visited when they missed her. This was their home, despite Amara's opinion of it.

"... I want to talk to them."

Castiel snapped back to the present.

"With whom?"

"Jack and Claire, of course. This is their senior year and I'd like to know how they are doing and what plans they have for the future."

"Why?" Castiel asked, almost scared to hear the answer.

"My brother wouldn't have wanted his grandchildren to submit themselves to debilitating debt," Amara declared. "So, I am willing to create a trust fund for them to afford their superior education."

Castiel blinked. He'd heard her right; he just couldn't quite believe it.

“I don’t know what to say,” he confessed in the end. “Aunt Amara, that is so generous of you…”

“What I am not willing to do, however, is squander the family’s money,” Amara interrupted him. “Before I invest in the future of these children, I want to learn what they plan to do. And if they are anything like their father…”

Well, of course. That made a lot more sense.

“They’re not,” Castiel promised her. “They will be very thankful for this chance you’re giving them.”
Or they would learn how to fake it with sufficient conviction once Castiel had talked to them.

“We’ll see about that.”

And she ended the call just as abruptly as she had started it.

Castiel stood in the kitchen, staring at the phone for a moment. Suddenly, all of his good mood had vanished in thin air, but he wasn’t willing to let that prevent him from making a good dinner.

Three hours later, when Claire and Jack finally arrived from school, the kitchen was a mess of dirty pots and dishes. Castiel continued rolling the crust while he heard them coming in.

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you. I’m just saying that if the word ‘date’ was never pronounced, then you might be jumping to conclusions,” Claire said.

“But why would she wants us to meet in a coffee shop if that wasn’t the case?” Jack argued.

“Do you even want it to be a date? Are you into Patience or something?”

“No, but that’s just the thing, Claire. I should let her know…”

Claire opened the door to the kitchen and Jack almost crashed into her because of how suddenly she’d stopped walking. They stopped arguing about whatever it was as they looked around. Castiel pretended not to notice the confusion on their faces.

“Hello, kids,” he greeted them with a smile. “I decided to make lasagna. It’s going to be ready a little after our usual dinner time, so if you’re hungry just eat a fruit or something.”

Claire and Jack exchanged one of those looks that made Castiel think they had some sort of telepathic connection. Claire jerked her head towards him and Jack nodded. He approached the counter where Castiel was separating the noodles while Claire headed towards the fridge.

“Hey, uncle Cas… is everything okay?” Jack asked him.

“Everything is fine, Jack. Why are you asking?”

Castiel grabbed a baking dish and started assembling the lasagna.

“We… are just wondering. Because you’re…” Jack gestured towards the kitchen.

“Oh, don’t worry about the mess. I’ll pick it up while the lasagna is in the oven.”

“No, we mean because…”

“You’re stress-cooking,” Claire finished.

“I’m not stress-cooking.” Castiel covered the baking dish with aluminum foil. “I just thought I’d do something special today. For no reason at all.”

“Yes. Exactly,” Jack insisted. “Whenever you’re stressed about something, you cook.”

Claire joined her brother standing in font the counter with a water bottle in her hand.

“So… what gives?” she asked.

Castiel sighed and figured there was no point in trying to keep it hidden from them. He stopped
everything he was doing and told them about Amara’s call, her oncoming visit and what it meant for them.

Claire immediately wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Oh, fuck no.”

Even Jack, who was usually way more diplomatic and well-mannered, seemed a little concerned about this.

“It’s… it’s not that we don’t appreciate Aunt Amara’s offer,” he said. “It’s just that… well, we don’t mind taking student loans and working. It’s what we were planning to do in the first place, so…”

“Kids, you don’t understand.” Castiel shook his head. “Aunt Amara has been helping us all this time.”

That got them to be quiet for a minute and stare at him with identical sets of perplexed blue eyes.

“What?” Claire asked in the end.

“You know this place was your mother’s and she wanted you two to have it after her passing. But she had to take a mortgage to afford her treatment and well… Aunt Amara has been helping with that debt all these years.”

“Out of the goodness of her heart, I’d assume,” Claire said, while Jack frowned.

“What you think of Amara, you need to know that she would never abandon a member of her family,” Castiel replied. “No matter how much she disagrees with them. No matter what they do.”

“Why did you never tell us about this?” Jack asked.

“It wasn’t something you needed to concern yourselves with. You do need to think about your future and the chance that Amara is giving to is enormous. You cannot throw it away just because you don’t like her.”

Claire sipped from her bottle of water, slowly.

“What’s the catch?” she wanted to know.

“There is no catch,” Castiel said, before realizing that wasn’t quite true. “She’ll want to know a few things. She probably will ask to see your grades, know what colleges you’re applying to. Make sure you’ll graduate on time…”

“So, it’s like a scholarship,” Jack said.

“Yes, sure. Exactly like a scholarship,” Castiel agreed. If it helped them to think about it that way…

“Except is granted by an evil old hag who hates the very fact that we exist,” Claire said.

“Claire, don’t say that. Amara might be difficult, but she isn’t evil,” Jack replied. “Right, Uncle Castiel?”

“I actually don’t care if you think she’s evil or not,” Castiel said. “Just as long as you don’t say it to her face.”

“Yeah, okay, I can do that,” Claire agreed.
“Can you?”

“They haven’t given me detention since September, right?” she pointed out. “I can handle Amara for a weekend.”

Castiel hoped that optimistic attitude would last her for another couple of weeks and put the lasagna in the oven.

After that conversation, however, dinner was a lot more relaxed than Castiel expected it. The kids told him about how they were doing and how much homework they had and Claire teased Jack about his supposed date with Patience.

“Ah, you like Patience? I didn't know that,” Castiel said, mildly surprised. Claire was always the one who was either going on dates or through some sort of real or imaginary breakup drama. Jack had never had a girlfriend before, at least not as far as Castiel knew.

“No, I don't like Patience. I mean I like her, but I don't like her,” Jack explained.

“Eloquent,” Claire commented.

“I just think I should let her down gently,” Jack continued. "Tell her I'm just not interested in dating anyone at this point in time."

“Good idea. You're not gonna have to do it, though, because it's not a date,” Claire insisted.

"Why are you so sure it's not a date? You weren't there when she invited me!"

"I was there every other time someone did actually invite you on a date and you never realized it. So by that logic, if you think it's a date, it's probably not."

"That doesn't even make sense," Jack protested. "People never ask me out on dates."

"They do, literally all the time, and you always say no." Claire put her fork down so she could count with her fingers. "There was Jenny Wallace, Audrey Elmer, Laney Greenfield..."

"Those were all my friends, Claire, you're being ridiculous!"

"Oh, yeah? If I'm being so ridiculous, why did they stop hanging out around you when you turned them down?" Claire argued. Jack opened his mouth and then closed it again, obviously unable to find an answer. Claire leaned back on her chair, smiling smugly. "Check and mate."

They ate in silence for a few seconds until Jack snapped his fingers.

"Magda Peterson!” he said. "She asked me to go to the homecoming dance last year and I said yes!"

"Yeah, and then you proceeded to be such an awful date I ended up hooking up with her behind the bleachers."

"Claire!” Castiel exclaimed, scandalized.

"What? It's not like I could get pregnant from it."

Castiel leaned his face in his hands in his face. He shouldn't. It wasn't good. He would be a bad guardian if he did...

"Cas?" Claire's voice sounded worried. "I'm sorry. I didn't actually hook up with Magda. We just
made out for a little while..."

And despite how hard he was trying not to, Castiel burst into laughter.

"You two..." he said, trying and failing to suppress his chuckles. "Oh, you two are going to kill me."

He grabbed a napkin to wipe away the tears rolling down his cheeks. Jack smiled at him, even though he was probably not getting the joke, while Claire shook his head, likely thinking he wasn't sane.

And that was really all Castiel needed for his day to pick up again at the last second. After the kitchen was clean, he climbed up the stairs and listened in. Claire was playing her guitar, a slow, calm melody for once instead of the angry rock riffs she usually favored. After a few minutes, though, she stopped and Castiel assumed she had gone to sleep, or at the very least, that she was lying in bed with her cellphone. A little further down the hall, he noticed light seeping in under Jack's door. Castiel rapped at it softly.

"Come in."

He was already in his pajamas, lying in bed with a book over his chest.

"You're reading that again?" Castiel asked, when he noticed it was the fifth Agatha and Jasper book, *The Winter King*, in which a mad wizard tried to bring eternal winter to the Valley of Kelliaadot and the twins had to stop him.

"It's my favorite one," Jack said. "I'm at the part where they cross the lake, the ice breaks underneath Jasper and Agatha jumps in to rescue him even though they were fighting about the lost compass a second before. It's a very tense moment, but I love it."

Castiel smiled. Sometimes he had the feeling that Jack loved the Agatha and Jasper books more than Castiel himself did. He didn't even remember clearly the scene that Jack was describing.

"Which one is your favorite?" Jack asked him.

"That's a difficult question." Castiel laughed. *The Other Side of the Valley*, perhaps. I know it's the first one and I improved a lot afterwards, but, it just has a special place in my heart."

"I remember when you showed us the first draft. We could barely even read," Jack pointed out and Castiel laughed again.

"That didn't deter you at all." He sighed. "Things were a lot simpler back then."

"I don't think they've changed all that much," Jack said. "I mean, Claire and I are still like Jasper and Agatha, right?"

"Right," Castiel said. "I'm going to go write for a while, so if you need me, I'll be in my studio. Don't stay up late."

"Okay. Goodnight, Uncle Cas."

Castiel wished him goodnight back and closed the door behind him. What he had said stayed with him for a moment. Yes, his nephews were still like Agatha and Jasper in that they loved each other unabashedly and bantered and got into all sorts of trouble together. Their relationship with one another hadn't changed and there was little chance it would ever change.
But if he was being honest with himself, Agatha and Jasper were nothing like their real life counterparts when it came to their individual personalities. Jasper had a tendency to be a lot more serious and intense than Jack ever was, perhaps because Castiel was writing him being a bit like what he imagined Jack would be once he'd grown up and spent some time in the real world a little. As for Agatha, well, she was impatient and had a tendency to get in bad moods over small things like Claire, but Castiel realized there was a part of her personality that he had been neglecting. He hadn't been entirely truthful in her portrayal of her and maybe that was why Claire didn't like the books as much as she used to.

He sat in front of his desk and opened the document.

The Agatha and Jasper books followed a formula that had worked all these years for him. It started with the twins in the real world, dealing with some sort of problem (in this case, just like Claire and Jack, they were in their last year of high school) when suddenly they found themselves back to the Valley of Kelliadoth. The sovereigns of the land had the right to call on the legendary adventurers the twins were there whenever a new danger arose. There was a new queen, king or princess every book, sometimes good, sometimes evil or selfish, someone who could have solved the problem for themselves, but didn’t care to. The twins fulfilled the mission, returned to the king to be granted honors (if he was evil, they also found a way to depose him or rein in his power) and were sent back home having learn some valuable life lesson.

A simple formula that had varied very little over the years, because it worked and because it allowed for each adventure and each royal command to be different. He hadn’t decided yet what the adventure would be this time, but he already knew that it would be revealed there was a limited number of times that a king or queen could call on the legendary adventurers, and this was the last one. The twins wouldn’t return to Kelliadoth once they’d finish the mission. So this was Castiel’s last chance to tie up all loose ends and showcase who the twins really had grown to be through all these books.

And that was why, he decided, he needed to be more honest in his portrayal of Agatha.

The twins always appeared in the Whispering Woods, where they had a cache with the weapons and gifts they had collected during their visits. This was the part of the story where they usually met a companion, animal, human or magical, that would accompany or guide them for the rest of the journey and who happened to have some sort of ability that would come in handy around the climax.

“I swear, Jas, if they called us back because they can’t find the royal remote control or something…”

Jasper hushed his sister.

“Do you hear that?”

“I don’t hear anything.”


Agatha stopped her protests and listened. Jasper was right. The Whispering Woods were known for the incessant chatter of its Trees, who were always gossiping about the latest news in the kingdom. The Trees were probably the only beings in Kelliadoth that lived long enough to recognize the twins every time they returned, which was why they were assigned to care for the belongings they left there. The fact they were silent now, not even muttering a passing greeting, gave Agatha an immediate bad feelings.
“We need to get to our cache…” she said, but before they could take another step, the trees’ branches shook.

The twins immediately stood back to back, adopting their fighting positions even though they were unarmed and a second later, they were happy they did, because three cloaked figures landed in front of them, surrounding them.

“State your business, travelers!” one of them demanded. “Or pay the toll, because you’re in our woods.”

They raised weapons Agatha recognized immediately.

“Hey!” she objected. “That’s my brother’s sword! And that bow is mine!”

It wasn’t any bow, either: it was the silver bow that had been given to her by Queen Marigold the very first time the twins had stepped in Kelliadoth. The carvings on the limbs were runes that told the tale of their first mission.

“No, it isn’t,” said the figure closer to her, that was pointing an arrow at her. By her voice, Agatha guessed she was a girl. “We found them in some ruins and they’re ours now.”

“Ruins?” Jasper repeated. “What do you mean ruins?”

“They said they belonged to the legendary adventurers…”

“Raven!” one of the others, a boy, protested. “Stop it with those fairytales.”

“They’re not fairytales!” Jasper exclaimed.

“Hello? Don’t you recognize us?” Agatha said. “We’ve only save this place like a dozen times…”

Raven slowly lowered the bow and threw her hood backwards. Agatha was speechless at the beautiful face that hid underneath: she had light brown skin and big dark eyes that stared at her, glimmering. A pair of pointy ears poked through her black, curly hair, revealing she was an elf.

“Really?” she asked, reverence making her voice softer. “You’re Agatha and Jasper?”

“No, they’re a couple of liars, it’s what they are,” the other girl, the one who had first threatened them, intervened. “The legendary adventurers hadn’t been seen for a hundred years.”

Agatha’s protest died in her mouth. She turned her head, but even without looking at him, she knew Jasper was just as stunned as she was.

“A hundred years?” he repeated. “They hadn’t called us back in a hundred years?”

Castiel stopped writing and leaned back on his chair, a satisfied smile spreading through his face. Yes, the story was finally starting to find its pace.
“Look, I’m not saying your ideas are bad,” Ben said. “I’m just saying they don’t exactly inspire me, you know?”

Claire didn’t have time for this. She had been Skyping with Ben for the last two hours and presented him with several ideas of what they could write for the Inksters’ assignment and he had rejected them all out of hand, because apparently they weren’t sufficiently inspirational for his taste. Claire was two seconds away from throwing the computer at the wall and the only reason she didn’t was because she knew she would get grounded and she couldn’t have that when she was just hours away from her date with Kaia.

Claire decided it was time for a dose of her signature brutal honesty.

“I don’t give a shit,” she said. In the computer’s screen, Ben startled a little at her bluntness. “Inspiration is for amateurs. You want to create something and be good at it, you put the work in day in and day out. If you never finish something because you lose your inspiration, then I don’t know what to tell you, Braeden. Suck forever. I gotta go.”

She ended the call before Ben could protest and stood up.

“How is that going?” Castiel asked her, casually walking into living room with a mug of coffee. It was the third one he made that morning. He hadn’t changed out of his pajama pants and old shirt. He was squinting in the light and there were bags underneath his eyes. Claire knew that meant he had spent the night in his studio.

“Not as good as yours, apparently,” she told him. “Good night of work?”

Castiel sipped from his mug with a content hum.

“I feel like this might be the best book of the series, Claire. You’ll like it when it’s done.”

He said that about every single one of the Agatha and Jasper’s books. It wasn’t that Claire hated them or anything like that. She just considered herself to grown up for them and if she was being honest, she only knew the plot of the last couple ones because Jack and Castiel were babbling about them all the time.

“Sure, okay. Can I borrow your car?” she asked. She still had some time and she could have taken the bus, but she didn’t want to be late.

“Don’t you have your own?”

“It’s Jack’s weekend,” she said, as if she was talking about a child with shared custody. “And he has to go to his non-date with Patience, so…”

Maybe it wouldn’t have worked in any other morning, but Castiel was tired, insufficiently caffeinated and eager to get back to work. All things Claire knew perfectly well before she even asked. She could have asked to have a wild party with hookers and blackjack in the backyard and Castiel would have said go ahead, as long as you don’t make too much noise and disturb the neighbors.

“Very well,” he said, taking another sip from his mug. “Be careful though. If it gets any scratches, you’re paying for that.”
And with that, he scurried back upstairs. Claire smiled victoriously to herself and ran to the bathroom to give her makeup a finishing touch… and found that Jack had decided that was the perfect day to get in her way. What was wrong with men?

“Jack!” she called, knocking on the door. “Come on, your face is unfixable! Let me get in!”

“Can you give me two seconds so I can finish with my hair?”

“Your hair is beyond hope too!” Claire replied. “Why are you even trying? I told you, it’s not a date!”

Jack opened the door and gave her an irritated glare. Just as Claire had suspected, he had tried combing his hair in a different direction and completely failed to make it look any different than it usually did.

“All yours,” he said, raising his hands in defeat.

“Was that so hard?”

She closed the door behind her and looked at herself in the mirror with a sigh. She supposed she should have been worrying about herself at this point, but guilt gnawed at her until she opened the door with a sigh and shouted Jack’s name. He wasn’t in the hallway, so she had to hurry downstairs to catch him just as he was just about to open the door.

“Your hair looks fine,” she told him.

Jack startled a little and looked up at her.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your hair. It’s fine,” Claire repeated. “I mean, you don’t need to worry so much about it. Even if it’s a date, Patience has seen you like this every day. It’s probably nothing new to her.”

Jack tilted his head, as if he was taking in Claire’s words, and then nodded.

“Thank you,” he said. “Your make up looks fine too. I’m sure Kaia will like it.”

“Shut up, it’s an unmitigated disaster,” Claire stated, before she turned her back on him headed back to the bathroom.

She was glad they had that conversation, though. She still thought that it wasn’t a date, but even if it was… well, stranger things had happened. She just hoped that Jack could handle himself.

Back in the bathroom, she looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. She had work to do if she wanted to get perfect results.

Jack had no problem finding Moseley’s Mugs, the coffee shop Patience had mentioned. It was a small but crowded place, mostly by college-aged people who sat in circles with their mugs laughing about things he didn’t quite get. A waitress approached him to ask for his order, but Jack told her he was waiting for someone. Who should have actually been there five minutes before. He checked his cellphone, but he had no unread messages and it was too soon to call Patience and ask if she was
To calm his nerves, he took out his Inksters’ notebook and started turning the pages, but the more he stared at his handwriting, the most apprehensive he was. Castiel hadn’t pressure him to read anything out loud, but even if he had, Jack would’ve had nothing but incomplete ideas and snippets. It was strange, because Claire and his uncle could always weave words so perfectly, get them to come out and form a wonderful story. He had no idea how they did that, because when he looked at his ideas, he couldn’t even begin to think about an opening sentence.

Maybe he just wasn’t a writer. He shook his head. No, if he accepted that idea, that meant he couldn’t be part of the Inksters. He couldn’t spend time with Castiel and Claire and all the rest. He couldn’t make sure that Castiel and Meg got to know each other better. He had to try. He had to do better with his writing.

Patience seemed to have the same problem he did. Perhaps together they could figure out a way that worked for the two of them. From that perspective, and from the perspective of him not being really into her, he hoped Claire was right and it wasn’t a date.

Then again, wasn’t that strange? Patience was a pretty, smart girl. He should want to have a date with her. Anyone would.

She arrived before he had time to go further down that rabbit hole. She came in running and plopped down on the chair in front of him.

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry!” she exclaimed as she brought up her backpack and started piling notebook after notebook over the table. “I didn’t realize it was so late and my dad wanted to know where I was going and I had to come up with an excuse… doesn’t matter.” She made a gesture with her hand as if she was wiping away all those issues. “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“It’s… it’s fine,” Jack assured her. “What’s all this?”

Patience looked at her notebooks sheepishly, but she took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders as if she was about to say something very difficult.

“My writing,” she said in the end. “This is where I write all the prompts for the club. This is where I take notes on my original novel and this… well, I write transformative work of popular TV shows or movie franchises I like… and I post them online now and then.”

She awkwardly cleared her throat. Jack blinked at her.

“You write fanfiction?”

“Yes.” Patience brushed aside a lock of her hair that fell on her forehead.

“And you wrote a novel?”

“No.” She scratched her arms nervously. “I mean… it’s not finished yet.”

Jack was about to ask what different did that make when a large woman approached their table with a steaming mug and placed it right in front of Patience.

“There you go, honey, just as you like it,” she said.

Something strange happened in Patience’s face. She went from being super serious and embarrassed to smiling bright as the waitress passed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a semi-hug.
“Jack, this is my grandma, Missouri,” she said. “She owns this place.”

“Oh.” Jack stood up and quickly offered up his hand to her. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Moseley.”

“And you.” Mrs. Moseley squinted her eyes at him. “You better be treating my girl right, boy.”

“Oh, no, grams, it’s not a date,” Patience said, with a chuckle. “Jack is in the same writing club as me.”

Jack sighed. So Claire had been right after all. He was happy at least they didn’t bet any money on this issue.

“So you’re a writer too?” Mrs. Moseley’s face softened as she pointed at Patience. “Have you read Patience’s stories?”

“Uhm… well…” Jack stuttered, but he had no time to say more before Mrs. Moseley kept bragging:

“I always tell people, she is gonna be the next Toni Morrison. Just you wait.”

“I don’t know about that,” Patience said, rubbing the back of her neck. Her cheeks were red, but she was smiling, obviously pleased at her grandma’s praising.

Mrs. Moseley turned towards Jack.

“Let me guess: you drink vanilla latte with extra whipped cream.”

“How did you know?” Jack asked, impressed.

Mrs. Moseley only tapped her nose and instructed him to sit, for she’d be back with his order soon. Patience laughed softly at Jack’s face.

“She’s a little bit eccentric, but she’s always been very supportive of me.”

“So is it true? You want to be like a serious writer? Like Toni Morrison?” Jack asked.

Patience ran her fingers over the edge of her mug, pensively.

“I want to write,” she said, simply. “I always come here, because I find it very inspiring, you know? I get to people watch, and drink coffee, and eat my grandma’s pies…”

“But your dad like doesn’t like you coming here?” Jack asked. Patience opened her eyes wide, but unlike Mrs. Moseley, he didn’t have a sixth sense to brag about. “You said you had to come up with an excuse…”

Patience shifted in her seat and Jack was about to tell her she didn’t need to answer that, but Mrs. Moseley returned with his latte and a piece of pie “on the house” for them to share. Patience didn’t talk again until she left.

“I used to wait tables here part-time,” she told Jack. “Grams thought it was important for me to have my own job, make my own money. My dad didn’t like it because he said I don’t need to be working, that he saved up enough money for me to afford college and that I should be focusing on my studies.” She made a pause to sip from her coffee. “He also thinks I shouldn’t be spending my time with boys, that they’re too distracting. I had to beg him for weeks to let me go to the Halloween party.”

Jack nodded. So, by that logic…
“He probably doesn’t want you writing either, right?”

“He just…” She sighed deeply. “He wants what’s best for me. He wants me to go to Yale or Harvard, some place like that. Become a lawyer or a doctor, someone important. He thinks I’m much too bright to ‘waste my time in fantasies’.” She drew air quotes with her fingers and sighed tiredly, almost as if she had heard those words far too many times. “So if he finds out that the club I’m going to every Thursday isn’t a debate club…”

“I can imagine,” Jack said. It must have been like living with Aunt Amara instead of having her visit every now and then. “But you want to write. This is important to you. You shouldn’t give up on your dreams. I’m sure if you tell him, he’ll understand.”

For some reason, that made her laugh.

“Mr. Winchester says the same thing. That I should talk to him, that he is my dad and that he won’t stop loving me just because I don’t want to follow the exact plans he has for me.” She takes another sip of her coffee and sighs. “But he is going to be pissed and… I just don’t think I’m ready to confront him like that.”

“I get it. Sometimes the things that are the most important for us are the hardest to confront, right?”

Patience tilted her head a little and for the first time, she smiled at him like she’d smiled to her grandma.

“Woah, you’re a really good listener, Jack Kline.” She finished her mug of coffee in one gulp and only then Jack realized he had barely touched his. “So, anyway… my problem is I’m terrified of people reading my stuff and judging it.”

“But what about your grandma?” Jack frowned, confused. “She seems to like your stories.”

“She’s my grandma. She loves me. Of course she likes them.”

“… and you said you post your things online sometimes?”

“That’s different,” Patience said, blushing once more. “The people who read that are complete strangers on the Internet. I don’t see their faces.”

“But I’m sure they let you know whether they like it or not, right?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted with a small shrug. “Some say they like it.”

“There you go. They’re strangers, they have no reason to say that, other than them liking your writing,” Jack pointed out. “And at least you write. I have so many ideas, but I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Drowned by plot bunnies, huh?” She nodded, as if she knew exactly what he meant. “Well, let me see that. Maybe I can offer you some insight…”

She stretched her hand towards Jack’s notebook and he instinctively put a hand on top to prevent her from touching it. Patience arched an eyebrow at him and Jack figured this was how she felt, all the time: afraid to let people see what she worked on for fear they might think it was stupid or just not good enough.

So perhaps what she needed was for him to show her it wasn’t that hard. He smiled at her and moved his hand away.
“Sorry. You know.”

“Yeah,” Patience giggled. “I get it.” She pulled the notebook towards her and opened it in the first page. “Let’s see what we’ve got here…”
Chapter 15

Claire parked the car in front of Miss Masters’ house and checked the time. She was five minutes too early. That was not a good look. She didn't want Kaia to think she was so eager to go on their date. She looked at herself in the rearview mirror and resisted the urge to retouch her makeup yet again. She had chosen dark eye shadow and eyeliner to match with her black leather jacket, belt and boots. It was very convenient to her that the day was chilly enough that her usual style wouldn't seem out of place…

The knock on the window startled her. When she turned around, she saw Miss Masters standing right outside of her car, looking at her with an eyebrow crooked.

"Are you going to come inside to pick up Kaia or are you just going to sit on the driveway?" she asked her.

Claire blushed furiously, but she got out of the car and followed Miss Masters to the house. The last time she had been there, she had been sitting in the dark with Kaia, their arms brushing softly against one another and whispering, terrified of getting caught, and then she'd fled the crime scene with haste. So as Miss Masters told her to have a seat while she went up to tell Kaia she was there, Claire had the chance to really look around the living room for the first time.

It surprised her to discover it was a little bit of a mess. Her uncle usually used cleaning the house as an excuse to procrastinate on his writing and he had always had Jack and Claire doing chores as an attempt to instill in them the value of order and cleanliness. Claire kept her room chaotic to make a point to him that order wasn't all that important and Miss Masters seemed to share that philosophy. Or maybe her living room was smaller than hers and that was why it looked more crowded with the shelf full of books on the right wall and the stereo by its side. There were three precariously balanced piles of even more books on the coffee table, along with an abandoned mug, a pen with a chewed up tip and some papers that Miss Masters had obviously been grading. Cat toys littered the carpet and there were forgotten jackets upon the armchairs.

That surprised Claire. Miss Masters got along so well with her uncle the she'd thought they shared the same manias and quirks.

"She'll be down shortly," Miss Masters announced. She looked different too: instead of the conservative dresses and skirts she wore to school, that day she was wearing jeans and an oversized sweater that slide too much down her right shoulder. "Why don't you sit? Glass of water?"

"No, thank you." There was a food court in the arcade and she didn't want to have to take a bathroom break in the middle of her date. "I didn't know you had a cat, Miss Masters."

"Oh, yeah, Milton. He's probably around somewhere," Miss Masters said, gesturing around the house as if she had no way of really knowing what Milton was up to.

Claire nodded and just when she was trying to come up with a topic to fill the awkward pause, Miss Masters asked:

"How's your uncle?"

"Good. He's doing good," Claire said, a little too fast and immediately became embarrassed at her mistake. “I mean, he’s doing well.”

"Is he?" Miss Master tilted her head. "Because last time I saw him in the club, he seemed
preoccupied and very eager to go home."

"Yeah, you're lucky he showed up at all," Claire said, laughing. She realized a second later that probably didn't make her uncle look too great. "I mean, inspiration finally came to him and he's been busy with the book. He's always a mess when that happens: he locks himself up in his studio and he completely forgets about the world around him."

"Is that so?" Miss Masters reached her cup and took a sip from it. "I was wondering why he wasn't answering to my texts."

Claire took a second or two to process that information. Well, of course they texted each other. They probably had things to discuss regarding the club's organization and whatnot. It wasn't weird.

Except that it was totally weird.

"Yeah, no... it's that," Claire stammered. "He's distracted, that's all."

Miss Masters nodded, the expression on her face unreadable. Claire was saved from another awkward silence by Kaia's steps running down the stairs.

"I'm here!" she announced. "Sorry. I was just..."

Claire didn't hear the next thing she said, because she was too busy being mesmerized.

Kaia had got all dolled up for their date. She was wearing a light cream blouse with frills and Claire didn't know what she had done to her hair, but her dark curls looked extra bouncy that day. Unlike her, Kaia hadn't gone overboard with the makeup, just putting some eyeliner and a bit of red lip-gloss, but it framed her face wonderfully.

Claire realized she was staring and looked away, but she couldn't help the smile that bloom in her lips or the way her knees got a little weaker.

"Hi," she said. She swallowed and then added: "You look very pretty."

Kaia's eye grew wider, as if she hadn't been expected to receive that compliment, but she grabbed one of her curls and playfully pulled from it as she laughed a bit nervously.

"Thank you. You too."

Miss Masters cleared her throat and Claire wasn't sure if her face felt like it was on fire due to Kaia's compliment or due to her having forgotten her professor was there.

"Take a jacket. The weather forecast said it would rain later tonight," Miss Masters warned them. Kaia obediently picked one up from the pile in the armchair. "Drive carefully and don't come back too late."

"No, Meg."

"No, Miss Masters."

Miss Masters threw a glance at them and Claire could have almost swear she was trying not to smirk with amusement at them. Instead, she grabbed her pen and the essay she had been graded.

"Have fun, girls."

They both muttered a hurried thank you and finally exited the house.
"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Kaia apologized again, staring at her shoes as they crossed the yard back to the car.

"Hey, don't worry about it." Claire stretched her hand and grab Kaia's. "You're worth the wait."

She was satisfied to see Kaia staring back at her with her lips lightly parted at that comment. Claire smiled back and opened the door for the passenger seat for her. No one could ever say that she didn't know how to treat her dates right.

"So, are you ready for the arcade?" Claire asked as they adjusted their seatbelts.

"Am I?" Kaia laughed. "I haven't gone in ages!"

Claire smiled as she turned on the radio. Later she couldn't even remember what songs came out of it, because she and Kaia chatted all the way. It didn’t matter about what. Just that the road was open in front of them and Kaia was laughing and the way her eyes glimmered made Claire’s heart skip a beat.

She was floating in the clouds and literally there was nothing that could pull her down from it.

The lights and sounds of the arcade enveloped them. Kaia almost jumped from game to game, as if she wasn’t sure where to even begin. In the end, she grabbed Claire’s hand and immediately lead her to the air hockey tables. They played a game (Claire might or might not have let Kaia win, just because it was adorable how she threw her hands in the air and hooted whenever she scored a goal) and later they had a vigorous sessions of whac-a-mole. Everything was going amazing, until Kaia waved her hammer around a little too enthusiastically and almost whacked a nearby guy who was waiting around for his turn instead of the plastic mole she was aiming at.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry!” Kaia said, even though the guy stepped back. “So sorry! I didn’t see you!”

“What’s your problem?” the guy asked, frowning at her.

Claire immediately moved to put herself between Kaia and the guy.

“What’s your problem?” she asked back at him. “She said she was sorry. And she didn’t even hit you, dude.”

The guy stared down at her nastily and Claire clenched her fists. Fighting a bitch in the middle of the arcade wasn’t what she was planning to do on that particular day, but she guessed that was what she was going to have to do now. He was taller than her by a head, but if she kicked him in the shins hard enough and he went down…

Kaia grabbed her by the shoulder and squeezed softly.

“Claire, it’s fine,” she said. “It’s fine. It doesn’t matter.”

Claire disagreed. It did matter, a lot, that this guy was giving Kaia attitude. But she guessed there were a lot of games they hadn’t tried yet. If only for the sake of not being kicked out, she was going to have to let this one go.

It was so tempting to punch his ugly face, though. Just once.

She stared at him for a second longer and took a deep breath. She glared at the guy one last time and then very pointedly turned her back on him and let Kaia drag her away from there.
“Can you believe that asshole?” she commented when they were out of earshot. “I swear, some people just want to fuck around for the sake of being asses.”

Kaia said nothing to this. Claire continued ranting about the guy until she realized that Kaia wasn’t joining in.

“Hey,” she said, stopping on a corner near the food court. “What is it?”

Kaia looked up and forced out a smile.

“Nothing!” she said in a tone way too cheerful to be convincing. “I’m having a lot of fun, Claire. Don’t worry.”

“Right.” Claire tilted her head. “That’s why you’re lying to me right now.”

Kaia sighed and shrugged a little.

“Do you want to have a milkshake? My treat,” she offered.

Claire agreed, but she was not going to drop the topic. Kaia seemed to realized, because as soon as they were sitting in a relatively quiet corner with their shakes (Kaia ordered strawberry, Claire liked chocolate better), she started:

“I’m sorry,” she said, cringing. “It’s just… I didn’t want to believe that Alex was right about you.”

Claire took a second or two to process those words.

“You talked to Alexis about me?” she asked in the end. Oh, that wasn’t good. That couldn’t possibly be good. Not with the way things had ended with her and how pissed off Alexis had been at her.

“I did. I’m sorry,” Kaia apologized again, lowering her eyes and fidgeting with the shake’s straw. “I just wanted to know how you were from someone who actually knew you, from someone who…”

“Dated me,” Claire completed.

Kaia nodded, not even trying to deny that had been her intention.

“She said you were volatile,” she explained. “And that you were… voluble. That you wanted one thing one day and another the next; you don’t take things seriously. And that you fell out of love with her one day and that was it. It was over and you were sick of her.”

Claire wasn’t sure how to react to that. On one hand, she was furious with Alexis. She liked Kaia too, so of course she was going to take that opportunity to talk shit about Claire. On the other… it wasn’t anything that Alexis hadn’t said to Claire’s face or that Claire didn’t know about herself. Yes, she had a temper. And yes, maybe after a while the butterflies in her stomach tended to die out or she found something she didn’t like about the girl she was in and that was when things started going downhill. But she thought it was pretty unfair that Alexis had characterized her like that to Kaia.

“She’s not entirely wrong,” she admitted. “I’m pretty sure you were there that day in the field when I fought Tracy.”

“Oh, yeah. What was that about?”

“She was mean to Jack,” Claire explained. “I’m the only one who’s allowed to be mean to him.”

For some reason, that made Kaia giggle. The conversation flowed a little lighter afterwards.
“I don’t go out looking for fights and I don’t get into them just because they’re fun or whatever,” Claire continued. “But if they hurt someone I care about… I’m not holding back. And I didn’t just fall out of love with Alexis one day. She… it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“What happened?”

“Do you really want us to spend time talking about my ex?” Claire asked. Kaia put her elbows on the table and then set her chins on her hand. And well, there was not much Claire could argue against that. She settled back in her chair and sighed. “Look, Alex is brilliant. She’s going to be a doctor and she’s going to win a Nobel Prize for finding a cure to some unpronounceable rare disease or something, I’m sure of it. But she’s so… down to earth.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Kaia asked, frowning.

“I mean, yeah. Sometimes. She was like ‘Let’s make a ten year plan! How many cats do you want us to have and what are we going to name them?’ You know?” She was proud that made Kaia laugh again. “And it’s not that I didn’t take our relationship as seriously as she did, but… we’re seventeen. Plans are important, but we have time to figure things out. And we can’t know for sure what tomorrow will bring. I know what I want to do: I want to draw, I want to play music. But that might not work out for me, so I have to be ready to see where everything goes.” She stopped. She was talking too much about herself, more than she would normally do on a first date. But it was just so easy to talk to Kaia… “Anyway, I think it was just that our idea of ‘serious’ didn’t match.”

Kaia’s big dark eyes were fixed on her. Claire took a sip from her milkshake and decided to throw the ball back to her court.

“Your turn. You tell me about one of your exes now.”

“Oh.” Kaia lowered her gaze and fidgeted with her straw again. “Umh… I… actually… never…”

“What?” Claire’s eyebrows shot up. “For real? You’ve never had a girlfriend?”

How was that possible? She was so pretty and so smart and talented, there was no way someone hadn’t noticed that in the past.

“I changed foster homes a lot,” Kaia explained. “There were girls I liked, but I never stayed long enough anywhere to actually date them. I didn’t want to disappoint them when I inevitably moved away.”

That made sense. Claire still couldn’t believe none of those girls had taken the chance to have their hearts broken by Kaia.

“Well, you’re staying here, aren’t you?”

Claire stretched her hand over the table and grazed hers.

“For now,” she said.

“I like ‘for now’,” Claire replied, shrugging.

The edge of Kaia’s lips twitched, as if she was trying not to small. But Claire did nothing to hide her elation when she turned her hand and intertwined her fingers with hers.

“Oh, Skee-Ball!” she exclaimed. “Can we play that next?”
“Sure.”

They left their milkshakes unfinished and this time, Claire didn’t even try to hide just how good she was at this particular game. She managed to get ball after ball in the smallest hops, to Kaia’s cheer and amazement. In the end, they had arms full of tickets that they decided to change right away.

“That one!” Kaia indicated the clerk.

“Really?” Claire asked, a little surprised when the clerk returned with a medium-sized plush panda bear.

“Yeah, it’s cute,” Kaia said, holding up next to Claire’s face. “Kinda reminds me of someone.”

Claire scoffed. Was she taking a dig at her makeup? Surely, she wasn’t. It was just a dumb comment. She shook her head and put it aside as Kaia held her hand and told her it was time to go home.

The storm that Meg had warned them about caught them halfway to Kaia’s home. It started as a soft drizzle that gently tapped against the windows, but soon enough it became a pouring torrent that slid down the car and the streets.

“I should’ve brought an umbrella,” Kaia complained when they finally parked in front of her house.

“Hold on,” Claire said.

She got out of the car and held up her own jacket above her head, ignoring the cold water hitting against her back. She ran around the car, the water splashing her boots and jeans, and planted herself next to Kaia’s door.

“Come on!” she shouted to make herself heard over the sound of the rain.

Kaia stared at her through the window, open-mouthed.

“You’re not going to walk me to the door like that!” she protested. “We’ll both get wet!”

“But we’ll get a little less wet than if I don’t,” Claire argued.

Kaia let out a sound that could have been a laugh. She opened the door and stood underneath the flimsy refuge that Claire’s jacket offered.

“You’re unbelievable,” she said.

“All because of what Kaia did next: she put her hands on both of Claire’s cheeks and stood on the tip of her toes. Claire knew it was coming, but the warmth and softness of her lips still came with an electric shock that shook her to her very core. She closed her eyes and had to resist the urge of lowering her arms and pulling Kaia closer to her. The smell of her hair, something sweet and flowery, invaded her senses until Kaia stepped back a second closer, a huge grin expanding through her face.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She turned around and ran through the garden, apparently not even caring about the wall the water formed in front of her.
Claire slowly lowered her jacket. At this point, it was soaked and did very little to keep her warm. But she still didn’t feel cold at all as she drove back to her home.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire was in such a good mood that she almost didn’t get irritated when she walked in and saw Jack fresh and dry as if he hadn’t seen a drop of water in his entire life, sitting on the couch with his legs stretched over the coffee table and a book in his hands.

“How come the storm didn’t catch you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

“It did, but Mrs. Moseley lent me an umbrella,” Jack replied. “She was really nice.”

Instead of pointing out that told her nothing about who Mrs. Moseley was since Jack would say about his worst enemy, Claire rolled her eyes and dragged her feet upstairs, leaving a trace of wet poodles behind her. Jack hurriedly went after her.

“How did it go with Kaia?” he asked.

Claire was glad all he could see was the back of her head. The smile that appeared in her lips might have killed her reputation as a tough girl forever, because Jack didn’t know how to keep his trap shut.

“It went well,” she said simply before closing the door of her room behind her and discarding her wet clothes on the floor.

“Really? Did you have fun?”

“Will I be telling you it went well if I hadn’t?” Claire argued. She put on a pair of sweatpants and an old shirt on, stepping outside barefoot and ignoring Jack as he followed her to the bathroom. “The real question is, did you?”

That gave Jack enough pause that Claire could calmly walk into the bathroom and grab a towel to start drying her hair.

“You were right,” Jack admitted softly.

“Ha!” Claire exclaimed, but she kept quiet while Jack explained about the things Patience had said and what they’d done.

“She gave me some good pointers to work on one of my stories and her grandma fed us what must have been an entire pie. I had a good time.”

His last sentence lacked any conviction. Claire stepped out of the bathroom and watched him with an eyebrow arched until Jack leaned against the wall and sighed.

“I kinda did want it to be a date,” he admitted.

“Really? I thought you only liked Patience as a friend.”

“I do, but that’s the issue.” Jack said. “I should like her more. I should have liked all the girls you mentioned the other day. It’s normal, right? You meet someone, you like them, you want to date them. That’s how it works for you. That’s how it seems to work for everybody. That’s normal.”
“I don’t know about normal,” Claire replied. “It is common, though.”

Jack ran his fingers through his hair nervously.

“Maybe I’m gay?” he suggested.

Claire let out a chuckle that she immediately repressed when she realized Jack was completely serious.

“Come on!”

“Maybe it’s a genetic thing!” Jack insisted just as Claire turned her heels and walked away from him. “Maybe we’re both gay! Have you considered that?”

“No, because I am the troubled gay twin,” Claire declared. “Don’t try to steal my thing.”

“I’m not trying to steal it. I’m just saying, maybe I didn’t realize until now because I thought I was only supposed to date girls.”

“Okay, dude.” Claire stopped in front of Castiel’s studio. “You try kissing a guy and let me know how that works out for you.”

She knocked on the door to signal that conversation was over. There was no answer from the other side.

“You think he’s okay?” Jack asked, frowning.

“He might have died,” Claire suggested. Her brother didn’t find it funny. Claire sighed and pushed the door opened.

Castiel wasn’t dead, but he was asleep over his desk. There were papers spread out everywhere and empty mugs of coffee abandoned on every shelf in his library and next to his computer. Claire and Jack exchanged a look. So they were at this stage of his creative process.

“Uncle Cas?” Jack called softly as they both entered. He grabbed him by the shoulder and Castiel jolted awake, gasping for air, with a sheet of paper stuck to his cheek, and blinked owlishly at the twins.

“I’m sorry… I was just… weren’t you supposed to be out with your friends?” he asked. He moved his head from one side to the other and grimaced in pain. Claire didn’t even want to imagine how stiff his neck was right now.

“It’s almost dinner time,” she announced.

“Is it?”

“You told us to come get you when we were back and it was dinner time,” Jack reminded him.

“Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you,” Castiel mumbled. He still seemed like he wasn’t sure if he was awake or not. “Give me a moment and I’ll go cook something for you.”

“Hell, no. You’re gonna burn the house down,” Claire said. “Go take a shower and shave. You’re an adult.”

Castiel felt up his face (his five o’clock shadow was starting to turn into a full beard at that point) and grabbed the sheet of paper. He stared at it with surprise and then put it back in the desk.
“But…” he tried protesting.

“We’ll order a pizza,” Jack suggested. “And we’ll clean a little here. You need to take a break.”

Castiel seemed reluctant, but in the end, he nodded and stood up.

“Thank you, children.”

“Get out of here, you stink,” Claire told him with dismissive hand gesture.

Castiel dragged his feet towards the door. Claire went to follow him when Jack called her in such a soft voice that she thought she had imagined it for a moment.

“Claire,” he called again and Claire stopped at the studio’s doorway. “Look!”

He picked up some of the papers that Castiel had piled on his desk. His eyes were shining.

“Do you want to take a quick peek?”

“No, not really,” Claire said, rolling her eyes at her brother. He probably thought this was incredibly mischievous of him.

“Come on!” he insisted. “I’m dying to know what happens!”

“I’ll tell you what. You read that and I’ll be your lookout,” she suggested.

“Yes!” Jack said. His eyes were shining bright as he gather the papers all together and sat on Castiel’s chair.

Claire stayed on the doorway, thinking about how ridiculous he was. She wasn’t expecting him to start reading out loud.

“Jas,” Agatha called softly. “Jas, wake up!”

Jasper shifted softly and opened his eyes. His head hurt awfully after the hit he’d taken and it took him a few seconds to assess their situation. The outlaws had knocked them out after a brief scuffle and apparently, they had tied them both up against a tree, the ropes biting into their skin tightly. Not far from there, he could glimpse a fire’s glow, but they were far enough that Agatha only bothered to lower her voice a little as she kept calling.

“I’m up,” he told her and heard her sigh with relief audible. “Where are we?”

“Still in the Woods, I think.” She made a pause, and then added in a worried tone: “Jasper, it’s not just the trees. The birds, the talking animals… everyone is gone. Except for these three, apparently.”

Jasper eyed their captors, who were cooking and talking around the campfire. Their voices sounded muffled in the distance. Now that they weren’t wearing their hoods, he could see it was two girls and a boy, maybe around their own age. Well, except the elf. It was always hard to tell with elves.

“Something’s really wrong,” Jasper agreed. “We need to get to the palace.”

“Of course. The palace. Hadn’t thought of that,” Agatha replied, wryly. “How exactly are we going to do that?”

Jasper looked around in silence for a moment.
“They have horses,” he said. “When they go to sleep, we steal their weapons, take the horses and ride out of here.”

“Fantastic plan. I’m all for it. Quick question: have you noticed that we’re tied up?”

Jasper sighed. He knew that Agatha became more and more sarcastic the direr their situation was, but in this case, it really wasn’t helping much.

“I’m working on it,” he groaned.

“Well, work on it faster.”

“There’s gotta be a way to cut it…” he started suggesting, but he went quiet immediately.

One of the three shadows by the fire walked towards them. It was the elf the others had called Raven, carrying a plate along with her.

“Don’t bother trying. This is elven rope,” she informed them. “You can’t just cut it with normal knives.”

Jasper closed his eyes, defeated. Of course she had overheard them; elves had better hearing and sight that most humans.

“And did you really think we’re stupid enough not to sleep in turns?” Raven asked as she knelt in front of him. She lifted a spoonful of porridge towards him. “Say ‘ah’.”

Jasper usually wouldn’t have accepted any food from someone who had stolen their weapons, beat them up and tied them, but he was tired and hungry. He needed to keep his strength if the opportunity to escape arose. He opened his mouth and let Raven feed him.

“You’re stupid enough not to see what’s right in front of you,” Agatha said.

That made Raven stop in her tracks. It was too dark to see her expression, but she slowly stood up and walked around the tree to talk to Agatha.

“You’re still claiming you’re the Legendary Adventurers?”

“We’re not claiming anything,” Agatha insisted. “You’re a good archer, aren’t you?”

Jasper frowned, but his sister’s intentions became clear when Raven said:

“I was the best of my clan.”

“Yet you can’t use that silver bow properly. The arrows never hit their target, the string keeps breaking. Sometimes it’s too heavy for you to even lift.”

Raven stayed in silence for a moment.

“How do you know that?” she asked in an impressed whisper in the end.

“Because it’s mine,” Agatha said. “Queen Marigold enchanted it so only I could use it. The bow knows you’re not its true master, so it won’t do what you want it to.”

There was another pensive pause and for a second, Jaspers dared to hope that it would work: they could convince the outlaws of their identity, they could ask them to come with them to the palace. They would find the King or Queen of Kelliadoth there and they would discover why everything
seemed so strange in the Woods…

“That’s ridiculous. There’s no magic like that. Not anymore.” Raven stood up and moved away from their tree. At the last second, though, she looked at them over her shoulder. “And if I were you, I wouldn’t worry so much about how to get to the palace. We’re taking you there, so maybe spare us the problem of having to recapture you?”

“Wait!” Jasper called her. “Why are you taking us to the palace?”

“We’re bounty hunters,” Raven said, with a shrug. “We’re supposed to take any strangers we encounter there for a reward.”

And with that, she stalked back to the circle of light the fire casted…

“Wait, wait, wait!” Claire stepped inside the studio again and planted herself in front of the desk. “That can’t be right. They’ve been captured by bounty hunters and they haven’t even gone to the palace yet?”

“That’s what it says,” Jack said.

Claire snatched the papers from his hand and scanned it quickly, but there was no mistake: it said exactly what Jack had read out loud.

“Why?” she asked, confused. “That’s not how this works. First they get to the palace and there’s a banquet or a dance or whatnot to honor them, then they get their mission from the king and that’s when everything goes south. It’s too early in the story for them to be in this much trouble.”

Jack lowered his eyes to the page. Obviously, he’d been too lost in the story details to really think about all the implications of what he was reading.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “And how did the bounty hunters get to them? Why aren’t the trees helping them?”

“Or like a magical squirrel that can chew off the rope or something,” Claire suggested. “And what’s the deal with this elf chick? Why is she shit-talking Marigold?”

“It’s just a first draft, kids.”

Claire dropped the pages as Jack startled and stood up, his cheeks reddening fast.

“We’re sorry!” he said. “We didn’t mean to… we just… we really wanted to know what happens!”

Castiel stood on the doorway of his studio, his wet hair dripping over the towel he kept around his shoulders. He’d changed into a new shirt and sweatpants, but still hadn’t taken Claire’s advice to shave. He looked at them with a serious look in his eyes, but the edge of his lips were twitching, as if he was barely holding back a smile.

“It’s okay,” he said, coming in and getting all the pages together again. “Glad to see you’re interested again, Claire.”

“I’m not,” Claire protested, though it was hard to justify what she was doing there if that wasn’t the case. “I’m just… you know. Curious about what the hell is going in there.”

“Well… you’ll have to wait and see,” he said, putting the pages away in one of his drawers.

That was such a bullshit answer that Claire had to do a double take.
“Wait, you don’t know what’s wrong with Kelliadoth either!”

“Of course he knows what’s wrong!” Jack argued. “He’s the writer.”

“Yeah, a writer who doesn’t do outlines and has been stuck trying to figure out what’s wrong for the last week,” Claire pointed out. “That’s why you’re such a mess. That’s why you haven’t been answering Miss Masters’ texts!”

That got Castiel to turn his head around so fast it was a miracle he didn’t break his neck in the whiplash.

“Who told you that?” he asked, with eyes almost popping out of their sockets.

“You’ve been texting Miss Masters?” Jack asked. A wide, excited grin appeared in his face and suddenly, Claire was wishing she’d kept his mouth shut.

“No!” Castiel said, defensively. He then straightened his shoulders and realized there was no point in lying. “Yes. But only because of club related activities.”

Claire was perfectly willing to accept that explanation, but one look at Jack and she realized they were back on the train to “Get Castiel a Girlfriend” town and that it was all going to go downhill from there.

“It’s nothing improper!” Castiel insisted. “She is just a very smart woman and we’re working together. Don’t think it’s something else, please.”

“I’m not thinking that,” Jack said, even though Claire knew him well enough to know he was lying through his teeth. “Claire?”

“I’m thinking I want pizza.”

“Yes, pizza!” Castiel approved, clearly relieved that Claire had changed the topic as he sat behind his desk. He turned on his laptop and started typing the site. “What toppings do you want?”

“Can we get pineapple?” Jack asked, moving behind the desk to peak over Castiel’s shoulder.

“No! Hell, no!” Claire protested. “You’re not ordering that abomination of a… a…”

She stopped to inhale several times and then sneezed loudly.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, rubbing her nose on her sleeves.

“What kind of toppings do you think Miss Masters likes?” Jack wondered out loud. He seemed completely oblivious to the glares both Claire and Castiel threw at him.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys. I'm going on hiatus for the time being to deal with college and real life stuff. I hope you understand. I will try to get back on the writing the week after that, but for now, I can't tell when the next chapter will be up. Sorry.
“Jack!”

Kaia ran towards him the hall around lunch time. Jack smiled and waved at her as she approached him fast.

“Hello,” he greeted her.

“Hey.” Kaia stopped in front of him and looked around as if she was very confused by something. “Where’s Claire?”

The question unbalanced Jack for a second. He thought Kaia was coming to talk to him, to ask him if he wanted to have lunch with her. But of course, it made sense that she was looking for his sister instead. Jack told himself he wasn’t bothered by that (they were still friends, of course, even if Kaia was dating Claire) and smiled at her.

“She got sick,” he explained. “On Sunday she couldn’t stop sneezing and she woke up with a fever today. So she stayed home to rest.”

“Oh.” The disappointment in Kaia’s face was clearly visible. “I was hoping to talk to her before Thanksgiving break.”

“Well, you can talk to me,” Jack pointed out.

He didn’t understand why Kaia laughed. He was completely serious.

“I have to go to library to return some books,” she said. She rummaged through her bag and finally got a lavender envelope out. It was addressed to “Claire” with big, cursive letters. “Can you give her this for me?”

“Of course,” Jack promised.

They stayed in silence in the hall for a few seconds while the people around them passed them by on their way to the cafeteria. Kaia hesitated for a moment longer and then took a deep breath.

“Does she… did she tell you anything?” she asked. “About our… date?”

“Umh… no, not really.” Jack shrugged.

“Nothing?”

Jack opened his mouth to tell her that Claire had said she’d had a really good time and how she’d been in a really good mood up until her cold hit her. But at the last second, for some reason, he changed his mind. Perhaps because this was something private between the two of them and he didn’t want to intervene in it at all. Perhaps because that would’ve been the wrong thing to say (God knew Claire had urged him not to say anything to her dates in the past lest he put his foot in his mouth). Perhaps he was simply… just a little disappointed that despite them being friends first, Kaia was now only talking to him to find out about Claire.

“She doesn’t talk to me much about these things,” he said, which was technically true. “She says I don’t really get it.”

“Oh.” Again, Kaia’s disappointment was palpable, but before Jack could say anything to that, she
straightened her shoulders. “Well, I better run to the library.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jack said. “I’m gonna go have lunch. Hey, you can come sit with me when you’re done there.”

“Yeah, I’ll try,” Kaia replied. That was far from a promise, but Jack decided to take it anyway. “I’ll see you around.”

She walked off before Jack could add anything else. He stood in the hall in silence for a second, wondering why he felt that pit in his stomach. He fidgeted with the lavender envelope for a moment and then put it away in his backpack. He would have to remember to give it to Claire as soon as he got home.

Patience and Ben were on a table on the corner and they beckoned him as soon as they spotted him walking into the cafeteria. Well, Ben beckoned him. Patience was immersed in the book she held in front of her, her eyes wide open and her hand holding her fork up in the air, as if she was so enthralled she’d forgot to put it in her mouth.

“What’s up?” Ben asked with a smile when Jack sat with them.

“Not much,” Jack said. “How are you?”

“Oh, man. Your sister’s a miracle worker,” Ben said, holding his notebook up for Jack to see. He only could appreciate Ben’s messy handwriting, but he seemed excited about it, so Jack smiled politely. “The thing she said is helping me finish so many stories. I’m gonna have so much to read after Thanksgiving.”

“You could have before if you hadn’t been so damn dead set on being a perfectionist,” Patience commented, not taking her eyes off her book.

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear your negativity over the sound of my mighty quill.”

His dramatic gestures made Jack chuckle and for some reason, it looked like Ben’s smile grew wider at that.

“I better get it done, too. Miss Masters’ probably want to know how I’m doing,” he added.

“You’re seeing Miss Masters over Thanksgiving?” Jack asked, frowning. That wasn’t something he was expecting to hear.

“Yeah. Sam invited her over.”

That even made Patience put down her book.

“Sam, as in… Sam Winchester? As in, Mr. Winchester?” she asked.

Ben had just popped an entire meatball into his mouth, so Jack and Patience had to wait until he chewed it and swallowed it down.

“He’s sort of my uncle. Didn’t I ever tell you about that, guys? My mom’s dating his brother Dean. Like, for the last couple of years, actually. He’s a cool guy. I think he’s waiting until I graduate to pop the question to my mom.”

“That’s… well… good for your mom?” Patience said. She exchanged a look with Jack. She didn’t have to tell him she was just as confused by this new information as him.
“So wait, why did Sam invite her?” Jack asked.

“He found out Meg… I mean, Miss Masters and Kaia are going to be alone for the holiday,” Ben explained. “He thought it’d be a nice gesture to have them over and my mom said yes.”

“Wow.” Patience chuckled. “Small world. Question: does Mr. Winchester wear those dorky sweaters in private too?”

“Sometimes,” Ben admitted and Patience laughed again. It was hard to imagine the counselor wearing anything other than that.

Jack laughed as well, but there was something in the back of his mind bothering him greatly.

“So… what sort of… relationship do Mr. Winchester and Miss Masters have?”

“Besides being friends? I don’t really know,” Ben admitted. “I think he might have a crush on her, though.”

“Huh,” Jack muttered.

“Yeah.” Ben laughed awkwardly. “I hope they don’t actually start dating this year. It’s bad enough that Sam already reports everything I do to my mom.”

“Yet, that’s never actually stopped you from being a complete clown in class,” Patience commented, turning her attention back to her back.

“I demand you take that back!” Ben said, gasping as if he was deeply offended. “I’m not the class’ clown. My humor is sophisticated and refined. I am the class’ stand-up comedian. I am the class’ late night host!”

Jack kept laughing at Ben’s buffoonery, but what these new revelations rattled in the back of his mind.

Claire looked at the half empty bowl of chicken soup in front of her and groaned. Her throat ached every time she swallowed something and she wasn’t sure how long she could keep herself from sneezing loud enough to turn it over. Miserably, she grabbed her cellphone from her nightstand and pressed the button that she knew would make Castiel’s phone vibrate to let him know she needed help.

He showed up at her door a few seconds later and frowned when he saw the content of the bowl.

“You barely touched it.”

“I can’t have any more,” Claire said. Her voice sounded rough to her ears and she cringed.

Castiel sat by the bed and placed the back of his hand against her forehead.

“It seems your fever has cooled down a bit,” he commented. “But just in case, you should stay in here tomorrow too.”

Claire couldn’t find the energy in herself to make a sarcastic comment about that. She just wanted
him to take the platter and let her sleep.

“Yay,” she muttered.

“I hope this teaches you not to stand in the rain without an umbrella,” Castiel chastised her.

“In my defense, it seemed very romantic at the time,” Claire said. “Did Kaia get sick?”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“I don’t know. You could ask your girlfriend.”

Castiel scoffed, but Claire thought she saw his cheeks turning slightly red.

“Meg isn’t my girlfriend,” he said, picking up the platter.

“Whatever you say,” Claire mumbled as she crouched underneath the covers. “You definitely could have chosen worse.”

If Castiel answered something, she didn’t catch it. She was already losing herself in a slight slumber.

She didn’t woke up from it until hours later, when her room’s door burst.

“We have a problem!” Jack announced.

Claire opened her eyes and glared at him as he dragged her chair next to the bed and planted his ass down in it as if he was about to give her a lecture. That was the last thing she needed right now.

“Is it an actual problem or is it one of your fantasy scheme problems?” she asked.

“I think Mr. Winchester might be dating Miss Masters.”

“Oh. A fantasy problem, then,” Claire muttered. She tried turning her back on him and pulling the covers above her head, but she honestly should have known by now that Jack wasn’t going to give up so easily.

“Claire, this is serious!” he insisted. He grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her slightly. “I need to talk about this with you, please.”

Claire groaned to herself. One of these days, she was going to stop doing things just because her brother asked her to.

“Alright, fine.” She sat up, grabbed the box of tissue from her night table and blew her nose to clear her brain a little before she paid attention to Jack again. “What exactly is the problem?”

“I told you!” Jack sat back down in his chair and fidgeted with his fingers. “Mr. Winchester might be dating Miss Masters!”

Claire still wasn’t reacting as if that was the natural disaster that Jack seemed to think it was, so he threw his hands in the air, frustrated.

“Claire! That means that no matter how much she and Uncle Cas text, they’re not going to end up together!”

“Yeah. Truly tragic,” Claire said.
She should have dialed down the wryness. The more Jack thought that she wasn’t taking it seriously, the more he was going to insist that this was a disaster for the ages. Right now, for example, he had his nose scrunched up and he was blinking rapidly, as if he was barely holding back tears of frustration, so Claire blew her nose again and coughed a little before she spoke:

“Look, Jack, I know you want Castiel to get with Miss Masters. I know you think this will be good for him when we’re gone to college and whatnot. But, like… if they decide not to date each other, there’s nothing you can do.”

His eyes grew wide, as if what Claire was suggesting was absolute madness.

“We can… help him,” he insisted. “We can tell him that Mr. Winchester…”

“They’re adults. They’re in control of their own lives,” Claire argued. “You know whose life you’re in control of?”

Jack stared. After a few seconds, Claire realized she had overestimated her brother’s capacity to answer rhetorical questions.

“Yours, dummy,” she said. “Which you should be worrying about, because Amara is arriving on Wednesday night and she’s going to be all up in your business about it.”

“You mean, up in our business.”

“Not if I manage to stay sick long enough for this cold to turn into a pneumonia,” Claire said, blowing her nose once more. “I’m sure if Cas sees how miserable I am, he won’t force me to talk to Amara.”

“I mean, maybe he won’t,” her brother agreed. “But I’m sure Amara is going to insist on seeing you no matter what.”

“You don’t have to be such a killjoy,” Claire said. She was too weak to imprint the necessary irritation in her words, but she hoped sinking down in the covers and turning her back on Jack would be enough to have the same effect on him.

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Jack sighed. “It’s just… you really think a pneumonia is better than having to have dinner with Amara for a couple of nights?”

“Anything is better than having to interact with Amara, for any amount of time,” Claire said. She was letting her pessimism get the better of her, she was well aware, but in her current state, she couldn’t muster up the will to fight it. “I can only think of one thing worse.”

“What’s that?”

Claire looked over her shoulder and opened her mouth, but at the last second, she decided not to tell him about it. She knew well enough how that conversation was going to go: “He’s not that bad, Claire. Well, he’s not the literal Devil like you’re making him seem. I’m sure he had his reasons. I’m sure one day he’ll come around and we can be a family. You have to be willing to forgive and let go, bla, bla, bla.”

She didn’t want to hear about it. She didn’t want to hear about how she was supposed to be the bigger person and whatnot. And holy fuck, the last thing she wanted was to think about the guy when she was sick in bed and with a headache too strong to distract herself by binging on Netflix or something similar.
“Nothing. Doesn’t matter,” she mumbled. She turned around again and quickly returned to a topic that she knew would hold Jack’s attention long enough for him to forget about her comment. “Look, if it makes you feel any better, I think teachers aren’t really supposed to date each other.”

“They aren’t?” Jack asked, his face lightning up once again.

“Yeah, I’m sure I read it in the school’s rules or some place,” Claire said.

She wasn’t exactly lying, but she wasn’t telling the truth either. She was sure she’d heard it somewhere, whether it was from a random conversation with someone or from some gossip about some teachers whose names were suspiciously lost in people’s memories who had been fired for dating. Or maybe they were fired because they were creeping on the cheerleaders. Whatever the case, she supposed Jack’s mind would get stuck on it long enough for her to get a good night sleep. Or at the very least, wallow privately in her fever dreams.

“Speaking of, how was school?”

Jack snapped out of whatever thoughts he was having (probably related to how to get his hands on a school’s regulations for the staff) and blinked at her.

“You want to know about school?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“Well… Mr. Martin said we should start the exercises of page one hundred sixty…”

“Okay, let me rephrase that,” Claire interrupted him. “How was school for you?”

Jack cheerfully regaled her with the tale of how Patience and Ben had invited him to have lunch with them and what they’d talked about. Claire nodded patiently along. She didn’t want to ask about Kaia directly so as not to look too desperate for any information regarding her and what she’d thought of her date. Even though she was lowkey desperate to hear from Kaia.

But Jack didn’t need to know that.

Finally, he got to the juicy bit.

“And I saw Kaia, too. She was on her way to the library.”

Claire smiled despite herself. Of course she was on her way to the library. The girl was a complete bookworm.

“How was she? She didn’t get sick?”

“She seemed fine.”

“Did she ask about me?”

Jack opened his mouth and closed it again.

“She… she asked why you didn’t come today, yes,” he said.

Claire noticed his hesitancy. It was a thing he did when he was either lying or trying to conceal some information in order to spare someone’s feelings. She didn’t like that.

“What is it?” she asked, leaning over to watch Jack’s face closely. “Did she say something bad?”
“No, of course not,” Jack assured her. “Why would she say something bad? You said you had fun on your date, didn’t you?”

Claire narrowed her eyes at him.

“You are a horrible liar,” she accused him. “What did she say? Come on.”

“Nothing,” Jack insisted. “But… that’s kind of the thing, isn’t it? She said nothing else.”

Claire considered this carefully, but in the end, she concluded she had no idea what Jack meant by it. This must have reflected on her face, because Jack shifted in his chair.

“Look, I’m obviously not a relationships expert…”

“I’ll say,” Claire scoffed.

“But I do know you. Better than anyone,” Jack continued. “You’re my sister. More than that, you’re my best friend. And to be honest with you, I’m… a little bit worried.”

Claire tilted her head. Now she definitely had no idea what Jack was on about.

“Ever since you met Kaia… well, you’ve been so into her,” he explained. “More than any other girl you’ve been with before. Not even with Alex you were so worried about what she might think of you or what might happen between the two.”

Well… he had a point there. Claire hugged her knees to her chest while she looked for the words to best describe what was going through her head so Jack would understand them.

“It’s just… she’s different, Jack. She feels different,” she said.

“Different how?”

Claire shook her head. He wasn’t going to get it, no matter how she explained it. No matter how she told him that she felt like Kaia understood many things about her, as if they’d known each other forever, that she was funny and smart and it wasn’t like Claire planned to be this smitten.

“Just… different,” she said, a little frustrated. But she did have to concede a point. “Do you think I’m going too fast with her?”

“Maybe?” Jack shook his head. “I really don’t know. I just would really hate it for you to be disappointed if it turns out that Kaia isn’t in the same place you are.”

Strangely enough, that made a lot of sense. Claire leaned back on her pillows, thinking.

“You know, maybe you’re not so bad with the relationships thing after all,” she commented. She went to take another tissue from the box only to find out she’d run out. “Oh, that’s just awesome.”

“Hold on.” Jack stood up. “I have some more in my room.”

Claire sighed as she wrapped herself in the covers some more. She was glad to have Jack covering her back, even if he sometimes came up with ridiculous and implausible plans.
Jack stood in front of his desk, holding the letter Kaia had given to him in his hand. He couldn’t believe what he was considering. Yes, what he’d said to Claire was absolutely true, but that didn’t change the fact that this wasn’t his decision to make at all. Claire would know what was better for her. Just like she’d said, he wasn’t in charge of anyone’s life but himself.

But on the other hand, Claire was sick. She was in a bad mood and no matter what was written inside that envelope, Jack was sure she wouldn’t be receptive to it.

In the end, he put it inside of his drawer and, ignoring the guilt that was already starting to gnaw at him, he grabbed his box of tissues and went back with it to Claire’s room.
Chapter 18

The airport was bustling with activity. Castiel shivered and held his trench coat against his body to weather the November chill. Amara’s flight had arrived with an hour of delay, which meant she was going to be furious or at least, very irritated once she arrived. He needed to mentally prepare himself for that possibility. He’d also sent a text of warning to the twins, and they’d assured him they would handle dinner. To Claire’s chagrin, she had made a full recovery from her cold, which meant that she had no excuse to hide in her room and avoid all interaction for the weekend.

Finally, the passengers started coming out from the gate. There were smiles and cheers and people hugging each other, so happy to be reunited with their friends and family that Castiel couldn’t help but feel his heart thrumming with the contagious joy. He tried to hold on to that feeling when he finally saw Amara walking towards him, in very impractical high heel boots and an elegant long black coat. Her dark hair fell on elegant curls on her shoulders and she looked like the very model of a well-to-do middle aged woman with a wonderful fashion sense.

“Hello, Castiel,” she said, simply, and offered him her cheek to kiss.

“Aunt Amara,” he said and grabbed her suitcase for her. “How was your flight?”

“Dreadful,” Amara said, with her usual bluntness. “We had turbulence all the way and my food was tasteless and bland.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I left dinner ready at home and Jack and Claire will make sure to put it in the oven, so it should be ready for us when we get there.”

“If it is one of the concoctions you make, I sincerely doubt it would be any better than the food I got on the plane.”

Castiel forced himself to smile as if that was a very funny joke she was saying. Yes, his food used to be bad, but he’d improved overtime. Especially since he’d taken over having to care for the twins. But there was no point in arguing this early into the weekend. He put the suitcase in the trunk, opened the door for Aunt Amara and mentally prepared himself for the long drive home. Maybe Aunt Amara was tired and would like to sleep as he they drove.

If only he was so lucky.

“Now that we have a moment alone, Castiel, I would like to talk to you about a little something,” Aunt Amara said as they drove out of the airport’s parking lot.

“Oh, what about?” Castiel asked, even though there was nothing in the world he wanted to do less than talk about “a little something” with her.

“Have you communicated with Luke lately?”

Castiel bit the inside of his cheek. At least he hadn’t brought this topic in front of the kids. They were… sensitive about it.

“No. The last I heard of him, Gabriel told me he was embarking in a grand tour across Europe,” Castiel said. “Has he returned from it yet?”

“Not as far as I’m aware,” Amara said.
That made the question all the weirder. If she, the person who ran the family’s finances that Luke more than definitely lived off providing he wasn’t running some sort of Ponzi scheme, didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, why would Castiel?

“I expected he would take some interest in the twins,” Amara continued. “Or that maybe you’d invite him to their graduation ceremony.”

“That is still months away. And in any case, I don’t know if Luke would come,” Castiel argued. “He hasn’t been here for any sort of important event in Claire and Jack’s lives before.”

He hoped that his tone of voice sounded more matter-of-factly than bitter, but he wasn’t sure how successful he was at it. Especially when Amara threw him an undecipherable look.

“But you have,” she commented. “In fact, you abandoned your very lucrative career and essentially put your life on hold to care for them. One has to wonder why that was.”

It wasn’t the first time she asked such a question and Castiel’s answers were always evasive: they were family, he didn’t expect Luke to do a one-eighty and become a responsible father, he was the only one who didn’t have children of his own to care for already. The fact that she kept asking and asking after so many years was a clear indication that he hadn’t been convincing enough.

So, for once, he decided to tell her the full truth. He didn’t know if that would change her mind about anything (he doubted Amara’s heart was going to grow three sizes any time soon), but maybe it would lead her to see the children how he saw them for once.

“I’m trying to honor Kelly’s wishes about how she wanted them to be raised,” he said, simply. “She knew, even before their fallout and their divorce, that Luke wouldn’t be the right person to do that.”

He expected Aunt Amara to laugh at him or to tell him he was a sentimental sap or something of the sorts. Instead, she remained quiet for a very long time. She drew out a cigarette and without asking Castiel, she turned it on and took long drags out of it. Castiel grimaced. The cold wouldn’t let him open the windows, so his car was going to stink of smoke for the next couple of days at least.

“Awful lot of trouble you went through to honor Kelly’s wishes,” she commented in the end.

“Aren’t you, in a way, trying to honor my father’s wishes as well in everything you do with the family fortune?” he countered.

“That is different. Your father was my dear brother. We were blood. You owed nothing to Kelly.”

“But I did,” Castiel insisted. “She was my close friend, even before she met and married Luke. I introduced them, actually.”

“Ah.” Amara arched an eyebrow. “So you feel guilty about the way things turned out between the two of them?”

Castiel bit the inside of his cheek. He regretted dearly having given her a straight answer in the first place.

“No. That was Kelly and Luke’s choices that lead to that result,” he said firmly. “But I did care for her, a lot.”

Amara smoked in silence for a while, as if she was taking in Castiel’s words.

“There could have been other ways for you to honor Kelly’s memory,” she insisted. “You didn’t
have to abandon the firm.”

Castiel sighed and decided not to dignify that with an answer. No, he didn’t have to do any of the things he had done in the last fifteen or sixteen years. But he had done them because he wanted to.

“It’s no matter. They’re grown up now, and hopefully they’ve grown well,” Amara said. She took a last drag out of her cigarette and threw the butt out of the window before quickly rolling it back up again. “Which means you’re going to have a lot of free time in your hands.”

“I suppose I will,” Castiel said, tentatively. He had no idea where Amara was going with that comment and frankly, he preferred not to speculate until he had something more concrete to draw a conclusion from.

“It would be a perfect opportunity for you to come back.”

Castiel took a moment. He knew exactly what Amara meant, but he still felt compelled to ask innocently:

"Come back where?"


Of course. For her, this had been a terrible move on his part. He had been foolish and let Kelly manipulate him into taking in her orphans. His real life (which, for Aunt Amara, meant mostly his career) was back in that busy, noisy, impossible city he had left behind for the quiet of this small town and his artistic ambition as a writer. She would never understand why he'd done it, no matter how many times he explained it to her. She was never going to see that he didn't regret making this choice.

"That's something to think about," he said, cautiously.

"There's nothing to think about, Castiel." Amara scoffed. "What's gonna be left for you here once Claire and Jack are gone?"

Their childhood home, he supposed, that had also been Kelly's home. It had sentimental value, in a way, even though it was crawling with debt and far too big for one person alone. He could start a new book series, though he feared deep inside his gut that after he was done with the adventures of Agatha and Jasper, the well would dry and the words would never come to him again, that he would never have another story to tell like that one.

Meg's big brown eyes appeared before him and her laughter rang in his ears, but Castiel was quick to discard that idea. She was his friend. Nothing more. Yes, she was amazing and fun and they could talk for hours, but that didn't mean there was anything else there. She wouldn't miss him if he left. She had managed to get the club up and running and Castiel was certain that she would be able to keep that way even without his help. And about his other feelings, well... past mistakes had shown him that he wasn't exactly relationship material, so it was best to not even think along those lines.

He realized he had been quiet for too long and that Amara was staring at him, expecting an answer.

"I don't know," he confessed in the end. "I will have to think about it."

"Well, I'd advise you don't think about it for too long," she said. "The year is drawing to a close and in just a few short months, it'll all be over."

Castiel preferred not to tell her that was exactly what he was dreading.
"Put on some music," Amara demanded as she lit another cigarette. "This road is awful. Not even a scenery for one to entertain oneself."

Castiel was glad the sound of the radio drowned out any other attempt at a conversation until they reached home. The evening had fallen by then and there was a cold wind blowing. Castiel shielded himself from it with his arms as he opened the door and ran around the car to help Amara out. She came out of the car without shivering, of course. Her ice heart prevented her from feeling anything.

He froze in place for a second, with his hand on the trunk's handle. An ice cold heart. The Winter King had one of those. He had tried to freeze the land because he believed that he was doing people a favor by depriving them of the warmth of their feelings…

"Castiel?" Amara called.

The epiphany Castiel was having burst like a soap bubble. He hurriedly took out Amara's suitcase and walked with her towards the house.

The door opened, spreading a ray of golden light in front of them.

"Hello, Aunt Amara!" Jack greeted her with his usual kindness. "How was your flight?"

"Dreadful," Amara repeated, and just like she'd done with Castiel, she offered Jack her cheek.

He hurriedly complied: gave her a kiss and, once inside, helped her take her coat off.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Claire is making sure that dinner is ready," he said. "If you want to go upstairs and freshen yourself up, we've made sure the guest's room has everything you might need."

Amara was taken aback by that display of kindness and Castiel was suddenly certain that it had been the twins' idea for Jack to open the door. If Claire had been there, saying these things, she probably would have sounded either forceful or terribly sarcastic. Jack, on the other hand, sounded completely genuine. And that was because he was. Castiel didn't think the boy was capable of being rude to anyone, no matter what they'd done.

"Well... I appreciate that. I think I just might go upstairs for a bit," Amara said. "Would you be so kind to help me with my suitcase, Castiel?"

"I'll do it," Jack offered. "You must be tired from driving to and from the airport, Uncle Cas. Why don't you rest?"

"Thank you, Jack."

He watched them climb the stairs for a moment and then fled inside the kitchen, looking desperately for a notepad that he knew he kept there in case inspiration struck him while he was cooking.

Jack hadn't lied. Claire was in the kitchen, but dinner seemed to be completely ready: the meatballs and spaghetti served in their plates while she sat on the table and distractedly texted away in her phone.

"Has the Queen of Darkness arrived?" she asked without looking up.

"Don't call her that," Castiel said. He grabbed his pen and notepad, but Claire's hand descended upon the page with incredible quickness.

"No, sir. If I have to suffer through her presence, you don't get to escape into your little fantasy world
until she's gone," she threatened.

Castiel sighed.

"I suppose you're right," he said. "She'll be back down any moment. Why don't you take the dishes
to the table and try to pretend that you're happy to see her?"

"I make no promises," Claire replied, but she did grab two plates and left the kitchen.

As soon as her back was turned, Castiel grabbed the pen and took a few quick notes before ripping
the page and hiding it away in his trench coat's pocket. He promised himself he wouldn't go to his
studio to write until after Amara had gone to sleep and even then, only for a little while. He had to be
awake and alert to make Thanksgiving dinner the following day, after all.

Dinner went... well, Castiel thought it went well. Amara monopolized the conversation, talking about
the firm and how good business was going and the charitable fundraisers she had gone to. She didn't
bring up the topic of Luke, perhaps because she realized it was a delicate issue for the twins or
because she wanted to boast about the fabulous life Castiel had left behind in order to make him miss
it. Whatever the case, Castiel was grateful.

Claire said very little after greeting Amara and mostly sat in her chair, her presence as animated as a
little black cloud. Jack, on the other hand, kept Amara distracted by asking her to elaborate on the
people she knew and her life in the East Coast and how the firm worked. Amara seemed very
flattered by her interest.

"You should convince Castiel to visit me there one of these days," she commented.

"Yes, that would be amazing," Jack said. "Perhaps we can go during the Christmas break and stay
for New Year and watch the ball thingy they do."

Amara laughed for the first time in the evening, apparently amused by Jack's charm.

"I'm sure you and your sister would have fun," she said. She reached for her empty glass and Castiel
made sure to pour more wine into it before she took it to her lips. "Tell me, Jack, have you thought
about pursuing a career in architecture?"

"Oh." Jack shifted in his chair, apparently taken aback by the sudden change of topic. "Well, I
mean... maybe? I haven't really considered it."

"Maybe you should," Amara said. "It's a noble career your grandfather and all your uncles pursued.
And you could come work with the family firm once you graduate."

There were two or three insinuations in that phrase, at least as far as Castiel could count. One, Luke
was an architect too, but Amara had made a point not to mention that. Two, Castiel had been an
architect as well, but he had renounced to "write inconsequential children's books". And third, that if
Jack did join the family business, Amara would fully support his education.

"That's very generous of you, Aunt Amara," Jack said. "I will certainly think it over."

Amara smiled and took a sip of her wine. Her dark eyes moved towards Claire.

"Of course, that offer is open to you too, Claire. Provided you... apply yourself to your studies."

Castiel didn't miss the way Claire's knuckles went white around the fork.
"Gee, Aunt Amara, I really appreciate that," she said. She almost managed to sound sincere. "I already know what I'm going to study, though, and it's not architecture."

"Is it?" Amara arched an eyebrow. She was still smiling, so it was hard to tell if she was displeased. "Pray tell, what are you planning on studying and where?"

Claire, however, seemed to take this as a challenge.

"I'm going to the California Institute of the Arts," she declared. "I'm already putting together a portfolio for my admission."

"I see," Amara said. She drank her wine and settled the glass back on the table. The sound it made when it landed made Castiel shiver for some reason. "I hope that is not your only plan."

"Oh, no," Claire said. "The School of Visual Arts in New York is my second option."

Amara sighed and rubbed her temples as if what Claire was telling her was simply preposterous to her.

"Dear, I appreciate your passion and determination. I really do. Those are very important qualities to have, especially for a modern woman," she said. "But maybe you'd like to focus them on something more... practical?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to waste my twenties studying something that makes me profoundly unhappy only to have to quit that and have to start a career from scratch," Claire said. She jumped a little and exchanged a quick look with Jack. Castiel didn't have to be a genius to imagine that Jack had done something under the table to silence her.

"Desert, anyone?" he offered, standing up to break the tense silence that followed.

He might as well have stayed in the kitchen writing. When he came back, Amara and the twins were openly talking about him.

"I'm not saying what your uncle does doesn't have any value," Amara said. "I'm saying there are more grounded endeavors that he could have..."

"He chose to write and work from home to have time for us," Claire said, bluntly. "And honestly, I can't fault him for that."

Castiel was surprised. This had to be the most positive thing Claire had ever said about him in... ever.

Amara opened her mouth to reply, but Jack interrupted her:

"I think what he does is great. His books bring happiness to a lot of people. That's just as important as being a lawyer or an architect or a teacher."

Amara seemed disconcerted. She had obviously taken a liking to Jack and expected him to side with her on this argument.

"Well, you're still very young," she concluded in the end. "You'll understand one day. Oh, Castiel, no," she added when she saw that he was quietly cutting a piece of the chocolate cake he had prepared. "That'll be bad for my digestion. Thank you anyway. I think I will tuck in early."

"Are you sure?" Castiel asked, not because he actually wanted Amara to stay. He just felt he needed
to put up some sort of token protest.

Amara argued that she was tired and disappeared upstairs. As soon as she was out of earshot, Claire groaned loudly and sank her face in her arms.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this!" she complained.

"It's going to be okay," Jack promised, patting her in the arm. "You did great today. Mostly."

"Yeah, well. Saturday cannot come fast enough," Claire sighed.

Castiel smiled at them both and put servings of chocolate cake in front of them.

"I know this is a tense situation for you, kids," he said. "Would it help if I let you eat this in front of the TV and I pick up the dishes?"

Jack's grin grew wide, but as always, Claire was a little more suspicious.

"This is because we said nice things about you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Castiel admitted openly. "Take it or leave it before I change my mind about it."

They took it. Castiel caught a glimpse of them fighting about what to watch on Netflix after he finished putting the dishes away and started heading upstairs.

"We don't have to watch another horror movie! It's not Halloween anymore!" Jack complained.

"It's Halloween until it's Christmas," Claire replied. "So buckle up, sunshine."

Castiel smiled to himself as he climbed upstairs. He'd had his doubts, but that night, the twins had definitely shown him just how much they'd grown.

He closed the door of his office behind him and sat in front of his computer. He didn't even need to fish his notes out of his trench coat's pocket. He already knew what was wrong with Kelliadoth.
The twelve knights laid on the floor, thoroughly defeated. Agatha and Jasper stood in the middle of the throne room, back to back, their weapons drawn and their breathing heavy. They looked around: the courtiers that had stared at them with skepticism when they were first brought in had all taken a step backwards. Some of them even seemed a little scared, but no one dared to say a word until they put their weapons away.

"I am Jasper the Gentle and this my sister, Agatha the Brave," Jasper declared again, eyeing the Royal Chancellor. "We're the Legendary Adventurers, friends and protectors of the Valley of Kelliadoth and all its inhabitants."

"We were called and we have answered," Agatha said, with a satisfied grin spreading across her face. "So stop wasting our time and take us to the Queen already."

The Royal Chancellor opened his mouth to stammer an answer when a voice louder than his echoed through the room:

"The Queen is already here!"

The courtiers parted around a tall woman in an elegant black dress. She moved towards the Adventurers, her heels clacking loudly on the floor. She stood in front of them, her shoulders straightened and her chin raised, the very image of a noble queen.

Agatha and Jasper exchanged a look. The protocol indicated that they should now kneel in front of her and swear to fulfill their oaths, but neither of them was sure that was the right thing to do anymore. They had seen and heard so many things on their way there...

"My lady?" Jasper said. "Why did you hide from us?"

"You have my apologies, adventurers," the Queen said as she moved towards the throne. Her long black hair cascaded down her shoulders almost to the bottom of her back and her milky white skin almost glimmered under the candlelight. "I am Queen Daralis. They call me the Widow Queen because I didn't ascend to the throne by blood, but because of the tragic passing of my husband and stepdaughter. In the absence of another heir, the people have asked me to step in as their leader, but I wear this crown with a heavy heart.

Jasper sucked in a breath. If she wasn't the heir, that must have meant that Marigold's bloodline, which they'd sworn to protect, had come to an end. A lump formed on his throat. It was like losing their old friend and mentor all over again. They had felt that lost every time they returned to Kelliadoth and became aware Marigold's time had long since passed, but this time it was even more patent.

"I'm afraid the Valley of Kelliadoth isn't what you remember," Daralis continued. "There are many who would harm me, even though I am doing nothing but trying to protect us from a terrible threat."

"What terrible threat?" Agatha asked.

"There will be time for that." The Queen stood in front of her throne. "For now, I declare that these strangers are no strangers at all, but exactly who they claim to be! Jasper the Gentle and Agatha the Brave, I beg of you to recognize me as the queen."

She spoke like a queen. The courtiers stared as her as if she was a queen. In the absence of another,
Jasper so no reason why they shouldn't fulfill their oath to her. He placed his sword on the ground as he sunk to his knees.

Agatha didn't do the same, though, not immediately. She kept looking at Queen Daralis as if she expected to find something on her face. Queen Daralis simply waited in the tense silence of the room.

Finally, without taking her eyes of Daralis, Agatha placed her daggers on the ground and knelt next to his brother. Daralis regaled them with a smile that didn't reach her dark eyes.

"Well met, adventurers. We're thankful for your presence in these trying times more than ever."

Castiel leaned back on the chair and rubbed his eyes. The clock in his computer indicated it was almost four in the morning. He'd heard Jack and Claire's footsteps marching to their rooms hours ago. Despite his intentions of writing only a little that night, he had ended up finishing two chapters in a row. He'd finally introduced the new queen (well, Agatha and Jasper thought so, at least) so now all he needed was to find a way to get Raven and her friends out of the dungeons so they could join them in the adventure. Which he already, finally, had an idea what to make. He didn’t have all the pieces yet, but he was more than pleased with the progress he’d made.

He saved the file and stood up, scratching his back as he did so. He was going to sleep in until noon. He had already bought everything for that night’s Thanksgiving dinner, so he would get up refresh, cook it and hopefully eat it without any of his family members murdering anybody else. He was feeling optimistic.

As soon as he stepped outside on the hallway, the guest room’s door swung open. Amara stepped outside, dressed up in jogging clothes, with her hair tied up in a ponytail, and stared at him with eyes that seemed way too open for that hour of the night. Morning. Whatever it was.

“Castiel?” she asked. “Are you just now going to sleep?”

Castiel decided to evade that question.

“You’re… you’re going out?” he asked.

“Yes. I go out to run for an hour every morning.” Amara declared, arching an eyebrow as if she thought that Castiel already ought to know that. “It keeps me healthy and helps maintain my weight.”

“Oh, well… that’s… very good for you, aunt,” he said.

He really didn’t know what to do with that information. One glance at the window informed him that it was still pitch dark outside and not only that, it was probably colder than the day before. It was great that Amara wanted to look out for her health, but couldn’t she make an exception that one day? For the holidays?

The fact she was already heading for the door was enough of an answer, Castiel guessed.

“Have fun.”

He turned around to head for his room, but Amara called his name again.
“Perhaps you’d like to join me?” she asked. “A healthy body means a healthy mind. And since you work with your mind so much, you ought to consider incorporating an exercise regime to your daily routine.”

Was she calling him fat? It didn’t matter. He was too tired to even try to figure out the meaning of her words.

“Gee, I’d love to, but there are many things I need to do around here,” he said, still avoiding to mention the fact he was about to fall asleep on his feet, like a horse. “But ask the kids? They might want to come with you.”

“Huh.” Amara tilted her head, as if she was just considering that. “Maybe I will.”

Castiel smiled at her (though he was sure it came out more like a tired grimace) and disappeared inside his room. He didn’t want to be there for when Amara discovered it was impossible to get Claire out of her bed before eleven.

Jack’s side hurt like hell. He was having trouble breathing, so he decided to focus on his sneakers, even though he could barely make them out in the gray light of dawn. He also could barely make out Amara’s silhouette, several steps in front of him. He was regretting every single life choice that had lead him to that moment.

“Claire, come on,” he’d said to his sister as she blinked owlishly at him and clenched her jaw in fury at the fact that he had woken her up at that, in her own words, ‘ungodly hour’. ‘She wants to share this with us, and who knows? It might be healthy for the both of us. Good exercise can improve your quality of life, you know?’

That was the exact same thing Amara had told him when she burst into his room and insisted he came with her, but he either didn’t deliver it with the same conviction or Claire just wasn’t in the most receptive mood.

“Yeah, well… I think I’ll just die fat, thank you very much,” she’d said as she pulled the covers over her head and refused to answer, no matter how much Jack called her or shook her.

In the end he’d given up and went down to the lobby where Amara was waiting alone.

“I guess it’ll just be you and me,” he’d said, trying to sound cheery.

“It would seem so,” Amara had nodded. “But I didn’t expect much from your sister, to be honest.”

Jack didn’t have time to answer to that comment. Amara had opened the door and bolted outside and he’d barely had time to register how cold and dark it was as he followed her.

Five minutes later, he was considering that maybe Claire had a point whenever she told him his inability to say no to people was a problem. For a woman her age, Amara ran extremely fast and for someone who only got a weekly session of exercise during P.E. at school, it was simply not physically possible to keep up with her. Jack tried, though, and the results were that in five minutes, he was huffing and sweating and wondering if screaming at Amara to please give him a second to rest would change her mind. But his lungs burned and he couldn’t find it in himself to raise his voice, so he simply kept running and trying to catch her.
Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Amara stopped next to a bench to stretch her legs and watched silently as Jack trotted miserably up to her.

“Not bad,” she said, with a smirk. It was impossible to tell if she was mocking him or if she was pleased that he at least made the effort, but it didn’t matter when she handed him her bottle of water. Jack emptied half of it in a single gulp. “It gets easier the more you do it.”

“Like… like everything in life, right?” Jack said, smiling through his panting.

“Exactly,” Amara replied. She seemed delighted that he was understanding her philosophy. “And you seem like you have the discipline to pull it off.”

“Oh, I… I wouldn’t know,” Jack said. “I think I just… I try my best.”

Amara nodded again.

“Like with school?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “I… I have good grades. I like it when… Uncle Cas says he’s proud of me.”

He didn’t know why he said that. The truth was that at some point during middle school, Castiel had stopped saying that. Jack hadn’t stopped studying hard and getting high marks, but at a certain point it just… became what was expected of him. Claire, on the other hand, only excelled at things she cared about, like Art and English classes, while the rest of her notes were barely the minimum necessary so she wouldn’t fail.

“Why the hell do I need algebra for?” she’d say whenever Castiel chastised her about it. “I’m not going to be a NASA scientist and I have a calculator in my pocket. It’s called a damn cellphone.”

Jack wished he had that sort of confidence and certainty about what the future held for him. In his opinion, there were so many options, so many ways life could go. He just couldn’t imagine making a decision and… maybe that was what Mr. Winchester was trying to tell him all this time. That he’d have to make a decision whether he liked it or not.

Amara was looking at him attentively.

“You care a lot about Castiel’s opinion, don’t you?”

“I… I mean… I guess so?” Jack stuttered, not entirely sure about what Amara was getting at.

“You shouldn’t.”

The remark came so sharply that Jack didn’t know how to react to it at first. Castiel had cared for and educated them since they were almost too young to remember anyone else ever doing that for them, why wouldn’t Jack care about his opinion? It didn’t make any sense.

“Castiel is a good person, I am sure, but he doesn’t have the most common sense in the world,” Amara determined. “He is simply too… giving. People would take advantage of a nature like that.”

“Oh,” Jack muttered, because he really had no idea what else to say to that.

“You need to learn to fend for yourself and work hard, boy,” Amara continued. “Nobody else is going to watch out your back if you don’t do it yourself.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Jack said, shyly. “Claire is always going to be there for me.”
Amara huffed and shook her head.

“Can I be honest with you?” she asked, and before Jack could say otherwise, she stated: “Clare seems like a selfish and lazy kind of girl. I’m sorry, I know she’s your sister and you care a lot about her, but she looks to me like she has her priorities and disregards anything that goes against them, whether that be logic or reason or even other people.”

Jack didn’t think Claire was like that, at all. But Amara’s words were so forceful, her presence was so intimidating, that he simply couldn’t come up with an answer to that other than a meek:

“What’s wrong with having one’s priorities sorted out?”

“Nothing, provided those priorities are the right ones,” Amara said. She gestured for Jack to pass her the water again and took a single sip. Despite having been running for a while, she had barely broken a sweat, unlike Jack, who felt as if his entire body had become a disgusting blob of salt water. “She reminds me of your father in that way.”

Jack swallowed nervously. He was sure that Claire would hate that comparison with her entire soul.

“Why would you… say that?” he asked.

“Well, she has no consideration for anything other than her own desires,” Amara said. “You may think I don’t know her all that well, not as well as I know your father and your uncles. But I’m a good judge of character. And I’m telling you, Jack, if there’s ever a situation in which she has to care for herself or her interests first, she’ll drop you and your uncle immediately.”

“That’s not… she wouldn’t…” Jack started saying, but he stopped.

The reason he had been worried about how Claire behaved around Kaia was precisely that everything regarding this new crush of her seemed to consume everything else. She didn’t spend as much time with him as she used to, she didn’t sit with him at lunch and every time they did talk, the topic immediately moved towards Kaia and what Kaia was doing or thinking or what should Claire do to get Kaia’s attention. And perhaps it was selfish of him to want that to be over, but they were siblings. They were best friends. He was going to be the one who would have to be there for her when she inevitably broke up with Kaia when she failed to live up to the pedestal that Claire had put her up on.

But it felt a little as if Claire didn’t really care for that at all. Like she really didn’t care for him anymore.

It had never occurred to him that perhaps Claire was aware of what she was doing and how he felt and simply… didn’t care. But Claire knew him better than anyone and she had always been the more perceptive of the two. Could it be that she was just seeing how lonely Jack was and didn’t care? He couldn’t believe it. But then again…

He didn’t tell any of that to Amara. But the way she tilted her head gave him the impression that she had read his mind nonetheless.

“You have to think about your own future,” she told him. “Because that is what Claire is doing.”

She took another sip of water and sighed, as if she was very satisfied about something.

“Okay, I think we should head back,” she proposed.

Jack, who was still tired and not completely out of his emotional turmoil, laughed awkwardly.
“Umh… Aunt Amara? Can we… maybe take it easier this time?”

Amara chuckled as if he’d just told her a very funny joke.

“Jack, darling: life never takes it easy on anybody,” she said. She turned around and without waiting for him, she started running once more.

Jack groaned to himself, but his options were either running back home or staying next to that bench and freezing in the morning air. So sighing deeply, he set out to follow Amara once again.
Eleven in the morning found Castiel and Claire sitting in an unusual state of calm in the kitchen’s table. They were both sipping dark coffee and not talking. Castiel stared into space, the steam from his mug ascending in the air as he made no attempt to take it to his lips. Claire, on her part, was wrapped in her winter robe, checking her cellphone obsessively.

She hadn’t got any texts from Kaia. Not that she was meant to send her a text or whatever, but it would’ve been nice to hear from her during this horrid weekend while the Queen of Darkness “blessed” the house with her presence. But it wasn’t just the texts, either: she had posted nothing on Facebook, or Twitter or Instagram. Complete and absolute radio silence.

“Maybe she doesn’t even celebrate Thanksgiving,” Claire muttered.

She didn’t realize she said it out loud until Castiel blinked and turned towards her.

“Who?”

Claire was tempted to deflect the question, but Castiel was “best friends” with Miss Masters. Maybe he knew what they were up and why there was nothing in Kaia’s social media.

“Kaia,” she clarified. “I mean, why would she celebrate a holiday that’s all about some starving English settlers killing and eating her people? It just seems insensitive. And also, not great for her night terrors.”

Castiel blinked at her several times.

“Well, you’re awfully morbid this morning.”

“I’m awfully morbid every morning,” Claire said, proudly.

Castiel nodded, as if it wasn’t even worth arguing over that point.

Jack walked back into the kitchen a second later. His hair was still slightly wet from the shower and he had changed into his usual jeans and shirt combo.

“Good morning,” he greeted them. “Did you sleep well?”

It was a bit of an affront to see him this awake and merry when he had walked into Claire’s room at five in the morning and tried to convince her to go for a jog. Like, had he never met her? If it was up to Claire, mornings would be banned.

Instead of telling him that (because honestly, it was a lot and the caffeine had still not quite kicked in), Claire lowered her eyes to her cellphone and kept stalking… checking on Kaia’s social media. She usually posted nice pictures of nature accompanied by a pretty haiku or a quote from a book that she liked and found meaningful. Except that day it just seemed like she hadn’t prepared anything. Why would that be?

“I had a great run with Aunt Amara,” Jack continued, as if someone had asked him. “Also a great chat.”

Claire scoffed. Amara’s conversation always versed over three things: money, how much money her job gave her and how much of a shmuck everyone who didn’t have a job as high-paying as hers
was. So Claire just couldn’t imagine what kind of “great chat” Jack could have possibly had with her.

“I’m glad you enjoyed that,” Castiel said, because he was definitely much nicer than Claire in every single aspect.

“I’m not sure if I enjoyed it,” Jack confessed. He opened the fridge and took out a bottle of water that he gulped down without breathing. “I feel… dry.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘dehydrated’, ” Claire commented, without looking up from her phone.

There was a pause in which no one laughed at her witty comment, but she didn’t care much. Jack and Castiel had always had trouble appreciating her particular brand of humor.

“I… made a decision. About my future,” Jack announced.

That got Claire to put down her phone and look up. If only because it sounded so serious it was almost out of character for him. One glance at Castiel’s face revealed that he was just as shocked as she was about this.

“That’s… great, Jack,” he said, though he sounded hesitant. “What is this decision, exactly?”

“I’m going to go to New York and become an architect, like you,” Jack said. He sounded just as happy as always, but Claire thought she heard a hint of doubt in his voice.

“And then what?” Claire asked, frowning. “You’re going to work as one of Amara’s mindless corporate drones? Design another square office building like a fucking giant eyesore?”

Despite her sarcastic tone, or maybe because of that, Jack’s smile faltered.

“I thought you’d be happy for me,” he said. “You’re the one who told me that I should be thinking about these things.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean…” Claire started and then, for the first time in her life, her brother interrupted her abruptly.

“It’s a great choice for me. A safe choice. I’ll be working close with the rest of our family. Why is that a bad thing?”

Claire opened her mouth and closed it again. She looked at Castiel for help, but he seemed far too stunned to make any comments about any of this.

“Jack, just because it’s a safe choice, it doesn’t mean it’s a good one or the right one for you,” she said, standing up to face him. “Do you even like geometry or design or any of those things you need to be an architect?”

“I can learn to like them,” Jack said, with a shrug.

“You can’t even learn to like girls!”

As soon as those words left her mouth, Claire regretted them deeply. Not because they weren’t true and she was wrong, but because the way Jack looked at her, with such anger, with such sadness, as if she’d somehow disappointed him, was something that cut her deeper than any insult he or anyone else might have screamed at her. She immediately wished she could take them back, but by then,
Jack had already settled the water on the counter and turned his back on her.

“Jack!” she called him out, but he ignored her. “Jack, come on!”

He was already gone. The kitchen suddenly felt slightly colder than before.

“You know I’m right!” she said, turning towards Castiel. “You worked for that bloodsucking place for ages, you know it’s going to break him!”

“Claire…”

“I don’t know what Amara told him, but you need to talk to him and tell him it’s a terrible idea!”

To her frustration, Castiel didn’t stand up immediately. He calmly finished his cup of coffee and stood up.

“I will talk to him,” he promised. “But you need to understand him, Claire. Not everyone aspires to be a world-changing wonderful artist like you do.”

“It’s not even about that!” Claire complained. “He’s going to be miserable there.”

“Perhaps,” Castiel conceded, raising a hand as if to calm her down. “But there are certain things people just need to discover for themselves. Do you know what I mean?”

Claire knew exactly what he meant. It didn’t mean she had to like it. She crossed her arms over her chest, irritated.

“Why did she have to come here?” she complained.

One thing that Castiel sometimes had over Jack was that he didn’t try to justify or explain away people’s terribleness. Sometimes he even agreed with her about people who were terrible and didn’t deserve any sort of consideration on their part.

“Try and keep it together,” he recommended. “It’s just two more days.”

He gave her a quick peck on the side of the temple and after reminded her to wash her mug, he left the kitchen as well. Claire did, hoping that it would be like one of those exercises in patience and whatnot that Kaia sometimes posted about. But it was as if there was a black, angry cloud hanging over her head the entire time. She just couldn’t calm down. She hated every single thing about this and she knew exactly who was to blame for it all.

She made a quick stop at her room to fix her hair and put on her make-up. She felt a little like it was going to be a confrontation that she needed to have her war paint on for.

Her heart was beating so hard it almost drowned out the sounds of her steps marching down the hallway. The guests’ room door was closed and for five entire seconds, she hesitated to knock on it.

Was she being selfish? Jack said it had been his choice, but Claire knew him. He tended to just agree with what anyone said was best for him without giving it much thought because he was just that much of a people’s pleaser. He had just that much faith in the idea that everyone was always watching out for him that Claire needed to constantly watch out for him for real in case… well, something like this happened.

And with that resolution in mind, she knocked on the door.

At first, there was no answer. She thought Amara might have been out on another run or something
equally horrible and masochistic. She called again and this time, she heard a voice coming in from the inside:

“… yes, I know it’s a holiday, Cecily, but if you could please be on top of this, I would appreciate it greatly,” Amara said. Her voice grew in volume as she approached.

The door swung open and Claire had to step backwards to avoid getting hit by it.

“Can I talk to you?” she mouthed.

If Amara was surprised to see her there, she didn’t show it. She beckoned her inside and then raised a finger to indicate her to wait.

“No, of course, if you can’t do it, I completely understand,” Amara continued telling Cecily. “I guess I’ll have to see if Peter is up for it. No, don’t worry about it, I don’t mind asking him. Happy Thanksgiving, Cecily.”

She ended the call and sat down in front of her desk. Her computer was on it and the screen displayed a spreadsheet of some kind. Amara sat down and added some numbers unto it before turning in her chair to finally pay attention to Claire.

“Yes, darling, what can I do for you?”

Claire tried to remember she’d just walked in a room in her house and not the office of an angry manager she needed to ask a raise from.

“Umh… I just needed to…”

“Apologize for not coming out for a run with me and your brother this morning?” Amara asked, with a smile that could have made flowers wither. “That’s okay. You can come tomorrow if you want.”

Claire was so baffled that she stayed silent long enough for Amara’s phone to ring again.

“Yes? Oh, Cecily. No, I haven’t called Peter yet. My niece needed me for something, so I haven’t got around… oh, you will? That’s wonderful. Yes, please send it to me as soon as possible. Happy Thanksgiving to you too.”

She ended the call once more and turned her attention towards the spreadsheet. Claire wondered why the hell had Amara come all the way there to supposedly spend time with them, yet it seemed like all she wanted them to do was follow her around as she ran and then spend the rest of the day locked up in there working.

What a terrible existence.

“Actually, no,” Claire said, suddenly recovering her voice. “I wanted to talk to you about Jack.”

“Oh?” Amara muttered, without turning her back towards her. “What about him?”

Claire opened her mouth… and realized that she couldn’t do it.

Yes, Amara was obviously evil and exploited her workers even on the holidays. Yes, she had no idea if Jack would even enjoy being an architect and working for the family business. But this was a wonderful chance to at least have one of them not end in a pit shackled by horrible, debilitating debt from their student loans. And no matter what she thought about this idea, Castiel was right.

It wasn’t her choice.
Amara looked at her with wide eyes, as if she was surprised by her silence. Claire cleared her throat.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just… I think he’s very excited about the possibility of joining the family business.”

That was a lie, but only sort of. Jack hadn’t looked excited, precisely, he’d just sort of inform them of his decision rather matter-of-factly. For Amara, that didn’t seem like much a difference in any case. She let out a sound that was halfway between a chuckle and a scoff.

“Let me guess, and you’d like to know what would take for me to make you a similar offer?”

“Well…” Claire started, and then went quiet, because she was sure that turning her down outright could be misconstrue as an insult.

“I’ll be honest with you, Claire, I’m not too impressed by what I’ve seen,” Amara continued, looking her up and down. “Your appearance, your general attitude, your ideas about what is a worthy career. This isn’t a gift I’m making you, it’s an investment. You understand?”

“I guess so,” Claire said. She swallowed the impulse to tell her that of course she understood that for Amara, people weren’t people by means of making even more money. That would really be an insult.

“So if you can prove to me that you’re a smart investment, then I'll consider extending the same courtesy I did to your brother. Am I clear?”

“Crystal clear.” Claire forced out a smile. “Thank you for the constructive criticism, Aunt Amara.”

She hoped that did not come out as sarcastic as she meant it. In any case, Amara’s phone rang at that precise moment and it distracted her.

“Hello? Oh, Peter, dear, yes. No, don’t worry about it, I got Cecily taking care of that. You don’t have to… well, if you insist… I wouldn’t want to bother you over the holidays…”

Claire closed the door behind her and sighed deeply. Her pulse was still racing, but she was a little proud of herself for not screaming in Amara’s face. The only regrettable thing was that no one had been there to see her and congratulate her in her restraint. People weren’t going to believe her when she told them she’d managed not to scream in Amara’s face like she wanted to do.

She headed down to the kitchen, where Castiel and Jack were both wearing aprons and apparently torturing the poor turkey that was going to be that night’s dinner. Castiel, at least, was elbow deep inside it, apparently trying to fish something inside of it.

“I don’t think they gave it to us,” Jack said. “So maybe we should start with something else…”

Castiel let out a yelp of victory and pulled his hand out. He held a plastic bag with what seemed a lot of raw meat inside of it.

“Just wait!” he said. His eyes glimmered with excitement. “We’re going to make something really special with this.”

“Gross,” Claire said, leaning against the doorway.

As soon as he realized she was there, Jack turned around and pretended to be very busy pulling out pans and other kitchen implements from the cupboards. Claire sighed. He was still angry at her, which had to be a record of some kind.
“Do you need something Claire?” Castiel asked, outright ignoring the tension around him.

“Just… wondering if you needed me to do something, actually.”

Castiel’s eyebrows shot up.

“You want to help prepare the dinner?”

“Better than being holed up in my room,” Claire said, with a shrug. Jack was still very pointedly not looking at her, but she thought he saw his head tilting slightly towards her direction.

Castiel, luckily, didn’t feel like interrogating her.

“Yes, of course. Umh… Jack, can you hold this? I need to go get an apron for your sister.”

“Oh… okay.”

Jack turned around barely in time to find himself holding a bag of turkey giblets and blinking disconcertedly. Claire laughed and grabbed a bowl for him to leave them there. Jack stared at her in silence for a moment, but he was just too polite to not say anything about it.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“You’re welcome.” Claire put the bowl aside and licked her lips. “Hey, listen…”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you this morning,” Jack said before she could get another word in.

“You know, if you keep apologizing over things that are actually the other person’s fault, Amara is going to eat you alive if you actually do end up working for her,” Claire said. She then closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe out. Her getting all angry again wasn’t going to solve this.

“Look…”

“I know you hate the idea,” Jack said. Once again, he was looking away from her as he spoke. “But I have been thinking about this for a while and I can’t make up my mind and I just…”

“Jack, stop,” Claire interrupted him. “Yes, I do think it’s a horrible idea and that it will make you extremely unhappy. That’s what concerns me. But like, what do I know? You might be great at it.”

Jack blinked at her.

“You… you really think so?”

Claire decided not to point out that being good at something and that thing making a person happy were too different things. This conversation was already tough enough as it was.

“I think you shouldn’t do something because someone wants you to,” she said, instead. “And that includes me.”

A slow, soft smile spread through Jack’s lips.

“I hate it when we fight.”

“Me too,” Claire admitted, with a sigh. “So, truce?”

Jack looked down at her hand… and then, in a move, that Claire really should have seen coming, he opened his arms and pulled her in for an embrace so tight that it knocked the air out of her.
“Okay,” she muttered, patting him in the arm to get him to let go. “You’re choking me.”

“Just let me have this moment,” Jack pleaded.

Claire groaned and attempted to get away, but it was mostly to try to save some face after she had already agreed to cook with them. That was a choice she came to regret as soon as Castiel returned with the apron she was going to be wearing.

“Oh, no. You have to be joking!” she complained as he attempted to hand it to her.

“Why? I think it’s adorable. Remember you gave it to me for my birthday?” Castiel said.

“Yes, when we were eleven years old!”

“Come on!” Jack laughed. Claire tried to fight it off but in the end, she just resigned herself to the fact that was the fate she’d signed up for.

“Very well.” Castiel smiled at them. “I’ll get working on the turkey, do you think you kids can handle the pumpkin pie?”

“Of course we can!” Jack said, because honestly, he would’ve thought that world peace was possible if everybody just held hands and sang enough songs.

Claire was in the middle of getting the flour from the upper cabinet when Jack called her name. She turned around just in time for him to snap a picture on his cellphone.

“This one is definitely going on Instagram,” Jack announced.

“Jack, no! I’ll kill you, I swear!”

What followed was a very intense chase around the kitchen island that Claire ended up losing because Jack posted the picture anyway. She protested and huffed, but deep down, she figured she deserved it.

Also, she was glad that Kaia had decided not to be online that day. The last thing Claire needed was for her crush to see her in a damn pink apron with the inscription “Kiss the Chef” across the chest.
Amara graced them with her presence a couple of hours later, after they had already cooked everything and set the table. Castiel’s turkey looked perfectly round and golden, the mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables to go with it added a splash of color to the table and Claire and Jack’s pumpkin pie… well, they had managed not to burn it. Castiel figured if anyone wanted something else for dessert, they still have some leftover chocolate cake.

“Well, this all looks very… appetizing,” Amara said. It was as if she was very impressed, but she refused to say anything more flattering than that, lest it would inflate Castiel’s ego.

“I’m glad you think so,” Castiel said. He moved the chair for her and they all sat down for what had to be the most awkward Thanksgiving dinner ever. And he’d had dinners with Kelly and Luke when they were in the middle of processing their divorce. He grabbed the fork and knife to start cutting it…

“Aren’t we going to say what we’re all thankful for…? Ow!” Jack screamed and turned to look at Claire with a frown. Castiel would have bet everything he own that she had kicked him underneath the table.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea!” Amara said, to Castiel’s despair. After the kids had been so tense that day, he was wishing that it could be over quickly and relatively painless.

“Very well,” he agreed, sitting back down. “Uh… I am thankful that we’re all here together for another year and that we’re all in good health.”

It was the most generic thing he could say, but he meant it. He turned to the right to look at Amara, who, put on the spot, suddenly didn’t seem as on board with the ideas as she had been before.

“I am thankful that this year has been… prosperous for us all,” she stuttered. “And I hope more will come.”

Castiel looked at Jack who, in true Jack fashion, had a lot to say about being thankful.

“Well, I am thankful about so many things,” he started. “I’m thankful we started our last year in high school and that we’re going to start new, exciting things next year. I’m also thankful we’re together as a family and… I’m thankful for Aunt Amara’s visit.”

Castiel exchanged a look with Claire and saw the exact same bafflement he felt reflected on her face.

“Is that so?” Amara asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Jack said. “I’m thankful because you’re someone we don’t always get to see, and in your own way, you try to help us and make us better. So I definitely think that’s something to be very thankful for.”

It sounded completely sincere and Castiel knew that it was, absolutely, coming from the bottom of Jack’s heart. His ability to see the best in people suddenly made him feel extremely petty that he had been internally complaining about and avoiding Amara at all costs.
That good will lasted for about fifteen minutes.

“Why, thank you, Jack,” Amara said, smiling a little. “It’s nice to be appreciated for what I try to do.”

Castiel attempted to ignore the passive-aggressiveness in that comment and stared at Claire next.

“Uh… ditto everything Jack said,” she muttered, with a shrug. “Can we eat? I’m starving.”

“Come on, there must be something you’re thankful for!” Jack insisted.

“You guys kinda already mentioned all the good stuff,” Claire complained. She then sighed and looked around the room, as if she was looking for inspiration. “I’m… thankful for the new people and the new friends we’ve met this year.”

Castiel smiled, guessing she met one person in particular, but that was good enough. He grabbed the knife once more.

“And pretty girls!” Claire added quickly. “I’m always thankful for that.”

Jack and Castiel chuckled and finally, finally, Castiel could sink his knife in the turkey and slice some pieces for everybody. Amara took hers with an unreadable expression and helped herself to almost all the potatoes.

For a little while, there was only an awkward silence in the table. Castiel figured that was better than people fighting over every little thing, so he made no attempt to break it. Again, that didn’t last very long.

Amara cleared her throat, loudly.

Castiel took a big bite of his sandwich and did the best he could to ignore it. Jack and Claire followed his lead and didn’t say a word, silently passing the salt shaker between the two.

Amara cleared her throat again, even louder this time.

Jack couldn’t with his niceness.

“Do you need some water, Aunt Amara?”

Obviously, Amara didn’t expect him to address her so directly. She forced out a smile.

“No, Jack, that’s okay. I just have a question for your sister.”

“Oh, yay, a question,” Claire said. Her tone was dripping with sarcasm. “That ought to be fun.”

Amara made that sound that was halfway between a scoff and a chuckle, a sound that Castiel knew was filled with derision and that she was about to say something that would piss Claire off beyond measure.

“Does anybody want more gravy?” he asked, picking up the boat from the middle of the table and waving it around a little. “The turkey is going to be very dry without it.”

Amara and Claire kept staring at each other from both ends of the table. Jack took pity on Castiel.

“I’ll take more gravy,” he said, reaching for it. “Thanks, uncle.”
“Here’s the question,” Amara continued, relentless. “Do you often flaunt your… lifestyle in front of people?”

Castiel closed his eyes. This wasn’t going to end well for anybody.

“My lifestyle?” Claire repeated, arching an eyebrow.

“I’m not judging you, dear, of course,” Amara said. “But there’s no need to rub it in everybody’s faces all the time.”

Jack finally caught on to what was going on and decided to try and help as well.

“The potatoes are great, uncle Cas,” he commented, a little too loudly to be inconspicuous. “They’re very, uh… golden and tasty.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Castiel answered quickly. “The trick consists in soaking them in vegetable oil before you put them in the oven.”

“Oh, that’s very interesting. Thank you. You really need to teach us how to cook these meals before we leave for college.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Claire was still hyper-focusing on Amara. If her eyes had been lasers, Amara probably would have been reduced to ashes. Or maybe not, because she was made of something so hard and cold she probably could have deflected it.

“I have a question for you, auntie,” she said, showing her teeth as if she was planning on biting Amara. “Would you have said it was rubbing it in everybody’s faces if Jack had mentioned girls? Or if I had mentioned boys? Oh, no, wait, you probably would’ve had an issue with that too.” She rolled her eyes. “You would’ve said I was a slut.”

“You’re trying to make this about something that it isn’t about,” Amara accused her, shaking her head.

“Oh, so this isn’t about me being a lesbian?”

“No,” Amara said, huffing. “This is about you being so… aggressive about it.”

“Aggressive how, exactly?”

“I really like these Brussels sprouts. They’re very tender,” Jack said, quickly.

Castiel wasn’t sure that trying to derail the conversation to be about the food was going to work anymore, but he went along with it anyway.

“Yes, they are. And to think you didn’t like them when you were young.” He forced out a chuckle, but once again, neither Claire nor Amara paid any attention to them.

“I’m just saying, there’s a lot of judgmental people out there and you might want to… tone it down,” Amara suggested. She was using that condescending tone that Castiel knew meant her “advice” was more like an order she expected people to follow to the letter.

“The tomatoes are really good too,” Castiel said. “Making appetizers with them is very simple. You just need some cream cheese and oregano…”
But this time Jack didn’t follow through. He was staring at Amara, his lips slightly parted as if he couldn’t believe what she’d just said to his sister.

Claire scoffed.

“I’m not going to tone down a damn thing,” she declared. “If people have a problem with who I am and who I love, then it’s their stupid problem to deal with.”

“I’m just giving you some well-meaning advice.” Amara raised her hands. “You don’t have to be so sensitive about it.”

“Gee, thanks,” Claire replied. Her cheeks were burning bright red and her hand holding unto the fork so tightly her knuckles had gone white. “But I think I’ll pass.”

The conversation mercifully died for a couple of seconds. Castiel breathed out, but he should’ve known they weren’t out of the woods just yet.

“See, this is why I offered to support your brother, but not you,” Amara said. “You are unable to compromise. You’re immature and you think the world is going to coddle you just because you demand it does. Jack is far more reasonable and smart enough to know what’s best for himself.”

Claire opened her mouth, but to her (and Castiel’s) surprise, she didn’t have time to say another word.

“No.” Jack put down his fork so suddenly that it tinkled loudly against his plate. “Aunt Amara, you got it all wrong.”

Amara stared at him, leaning back on her chair a little as if Jack’s words had pushed her back. Jack himself stopped for a moment, took a deep shuddering breath and then raised his eyes to stare directly at Amara.

“I didn’t accept your offer because I’m reasonable and smart. I did it because I wanted to work closer with my family and because… well, it just seemed easy. It’s easy to let someone else make the tough choices for you.” He stopped, swallowed and turned to Claire. “That’s one of the things I admire the most about my sister. She isn’t afraid to be who she is or to pursue what she’s passionate about. She’s unapologetically herself, even in the face of misunderstanding and bigotry, and I wish I had half the confidence she does.”

Claire’s eyes were opened so wide that they were almost popping out of their sockets. Castiel opened his mouth and then closed it again. This felt like one of those occasions when he simply had nothing to add. It seemed odd, given how adverse Jack was to confrontation, but it was also healthy that he was speaking for himself for once and well, Castiel wasn’t about to interrupt him.

Amara also was stunned. She remained perfectly immobile, her lips tightened and her eyes fixed on Jack for several seconds.

“Jack, it’s… admirable that you think so highly of her…” she started.

“You said offering to pay our tuitions was an investment,” Jack interrupted her. “But you’re making the wrong investment. I’m not sure I will like being an architect. I’m not sure if I will be cut out for it. You should invest on Claire instead, because when she sets her sights on something, she is sure to get it. And she’s wanted to go to Art School since she we were eight.”

“Jack…” Claire muttered. But she couldn’t go on. She looked away and Jack and Castiel did the polite thing and noticed the way she grabbed a napkin and quickly wiped her eyes with it.
Amara was scandalized.

“Are you trying to tell me what I should and shouldn’t do, boy?”

“Of course not. You’re always going to do what you want, aunt.” Jack shrugged. “I’m just saying that if you think it’s worth investing in me, then it’s worth investing in Claire as well.”

“Well, I disagree,” Amara stated, coldly. “And I have to say, I’m sorely disappointed. I thought you were more reliable than that, Jack.”

Castiel had heard use that word enough times to know what it was code for.

“He is reliable. They both are,” he intervened. “They’re just not doormats who will do anything you want them to.”

That was more than what Amara was obviously willing to endure. Her face was livid with rage and Castiel braced himself to have her screaming at them about how rude an ungrateful they were. But in the end, Amara simply put down her fork and knife, threw her napkin on the table and stood up. They remained in silence while she stomped up the stairs and then slammed the guests’ room door.

They all stared at each other in silence.

Claire was the first one to speak.

“Jack. Don’t take this the wrong way, but, like… I think you just threw your entire future out of the window.”

Jack looked very uncomfortable, but he still straightened his shoulders and smiled at Claire.

“That’s okay. You were right. I should have thought it over a little more before I accepted. It’s better this way, I think.”

Claire let out a strangled chuckle. She covered her mouth with her hand, but steadily her chuckles became a full on laughter.

“Oh, my God. Did you see her face?”

“I don’t think she was very pleased with us,” Jack said, shrugging.

Claire laughed even louder at that obvious understatement. Jack giggled a little himself.

Castiel watched them in silence, feeling incredibly proud of them. It had taken him years to find the courage to defy his family’s expectations, well into his adult life, and he wouldn’t have if it hadn’t been for Kelly’s support. And here they were, so ready to do what they loved and so sure even at such a young age. They looked a lot like the Novaks. But this resolution to do what was right and be who they were came from their mother, without a doubt.

“Cas, are you… crying?” Claire asked, tilting her head at him.

“Yes,” Castiel said, but he was also laughing along with them. “Do you kids want us to jump straight to the dessert? See how your pumpkin pie turned out?”

“Yes!” Jack exclaimed.

“Do you even have to ask?”
Amara spent all of Friday sulking in her room. Her anger was so great that Castiel, Jack and Claire decided to avoid the upstairs floor as if it was infected somehow, so the twins had a series marathon on Netflix while Castiel typed away in the living room table instead of up in his studio.

Daralis was evil, of course. She convinced Jasper easily that she was the one they were meant to serve, but after some digging, Agatha came upon the truth: Daralis’ stepdaughter, and the rightful queen, was still alive somewhere in the kingdom and that she had been called them. He still had no idea how to break Raven, Amber and Bandit, the three bounty hunters that had captured the adventurers, from the prison, but he had the idea that Agatha wasn’t going to leave them behind when she and Jasper fled the palace.

That was good. He needed Agatha and Raven to become friends for what he was planning next.

Around dinner time, they served out the leftovers from the previous day and argued loudly about who was going to tell Amara to come down or, in any case, take food up to her room.

“Well, she definitely doesn’t want to see me, so I’m not going,” Claire declared.

“I’m sure she’s not too thrilled with me either right now,” Jack said.

Castiel decided to take one for the team and climbed the stairs while the twins still discussed which one of the two had offended her worse.

Amara was, as always, perfectly put together when she opened the door: not a hair out of place and impeccable make up, as if she was planning on going out instead of staying inside of her room “working” as she informed Castiel that she was going to do.

“Oh, and I’m going to need you to drive me to the airport tomorrow morning,” she added when Castiel was about to walk away.

“But your plane doesn’t leave until the afternoon…” Castiel said, confused.

“Change of plans. Turns out I am needed back in the headquarters and I have to cut this visit short, sadly.”

Castiel couldn’t even count how many lies were in that statement. Nobody needed back at the offices because it was Thanksgiving weekend and people were probably still waking up from their food-induced comas. Also, he didn’t believe for a second that she was “sad” to cut her visit short. So if Amara wasn’t going to give him the courtesy of being honest with him…

“Well, I’m really sorry to hear about that. I’m sure the kids will be disappointed that you’re leaving so soon.”

Amara glared at him, probably suspecting that he was being mildly sarcastic.

“I assume this means you’re also not going to be taking me up on my offer.”

“Well… no, I don’t think so,” Castiel replied, with upmost sincerity this time. “My place is here. So the kids always have a place to come back to.”

He thought Amara was going to protest against his sentimentality or something of the sorts. Instead,
she simply scoffed and closed the door in his face.

Castiel didn’t even have time to feel offended about that. He was too busy being relieved that this weekend was coming to a peaceful end after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thursday 15th 2018 - Sorry I skipped the Monday update with no warning. I was busy finishing my fic for the Megstiel Big Bang.

BTW, if you'd like to help me decide what should I write next year, [here's a survey](#) with all my plot bunnies so you can vote on it. You have time until December 15th!
Jack had been staring at his phone for the past twenty minutes.

Claire was only half paying attention to him, because she had spent the entirety of Monday morning discreetly searching the halls for any sign of Kaia. She wanted to ask her about her strange radio silence over the weekend. In fact, she had been silent the whole week. She hadn’t even sent Claire a “get well” text when she’d been sick and Claire knew for a fact that Kaia knew she had been sick because Jack had told Kaia so. So this was strange and disquieting, but Claire was too proud to text first.

So for a while, she didn’t make anything of the fact Jack had barely lifted his eyes from the screen, but as the minutes ticked by in their lunch (and Kaia didn’t show up in the cafeteria), it became pretty obvious something was up with him.

“What are you doing?”

“Vocational and psychological tests,” Jack said, tapping his screen with his eyebrows tightly knit in a frown of concentration. “Mr. Winchester said I should take them all the way back in September, but I never got around to.”

“And why are you doing them now?”

That got Jack to look at her.

“Well, you know… all this business with Aunt Amara just got me thinking,” he explained, with a little shrug. “He was right. I need to figure out what to do with myself in the future, you know?”

“Yeah.” Claire didn’t tell him it was a relief to see him finally trying to make a decision for this. “So how is that working out for you?”

Jack tapped his screen a couple more times and tilted his head with confusion at the result that came up.

“It says I have high levels of empathy and interpersonal intelligence,” he read. He thought about it for a moment. “Do you think that’s right?”

Claire was about to tell him that the test must have been broken, but then she stopped to think for a moment.

“Yeah, kinda. I mean... you get along with everyone,” she pointed out. “What does it say you should study?”

“Politics and diplomacy,” Jack though about it for a moment and then shook his head. “I don’t think I’m cut out for that. Teaching? Social work. Counseling…”

“Huh. I could see that.” Claire nodded.

“Really?”

“Yeah, you could wear dorky sweaters and tell kids to cut their bullshit out… except nicely. Like Mr. Winchester.”

Jack blinked and didn’t say anything, perhaps reflecting on it. Claire no longer paid attention to him,
however. Kaia had just come through the cafeteria door along with Patience.

“Give me a sec,” Claire muttered to Jack and quickly stood up to go to them.

Patience was picking up a scarf she had forgotten on a chair.

“… Grandma would’ve killed me,” she commented as she placed it around her neck.

“Hey!” Claire greeted them.

The silence that followed her comment and the glares that both girls threw at her left her paralyzed for a moment. What was wrong? Why was Kaia looking at her with her lips tightened and her hands on the strap of her backpack, closed and withdrawn as if she wanted to run from Claire? And why was Patience putting a hand on Kaia’s shoulder and stepping forwards as if she wanted to serve as a barrier between them?

“Lunch time is almost over,” Patience said, in a very calm and polite voice. “So we’re leaving now…”

“… okay.” Claire frowned. “I just wanted to talk to Kaia.”

“Oh, now you want to talk to Kaia?” Patience asked. Her tone was incredibly forceful and hostile, which took Claire completely by surprise. She hadn’t imagined the timid and always nervous Patience could sound that aggressive.

“It’s okay, Patience,” Kaia said, taking a step forwards. She raised her chin up at Claire, still not smiling. “What do you need, Claire?”

“What do I need?” Claire repeated. What the hell was going on there? “I just… wanted to talk to you. We haven’t really… done that all this week.”

“Yeah. I guess we haven’t,” Kaia said. Unlike Patience, she didn’t sound angry or offended, just cold. “So why start now, huh?”

Claire was so stunned by that comment that she couldn’t find an answer. The bell rang and Patience and Kaia both turned their backs on her and strolled out of the cafeteria without another word.

“Uh… what was that?” Jack asked, coming up behind Claire.

“I… I have no idea.”

It was not a good week.

Not only was the weather growing increasingly colder and shittier, Claire’s mood became fouler and gloomier with every passing that Kaia was still not talking to her.

“You could just ask her why she’s mad at you,” Jack suggested on several occasions.

“She’s mad at me because I didn’t text her,” Claire said, because that was the only conclusion she could come to after several hours of reflecting and brooding over the issue. “It has to be that. God, some chicks are so needy, but I didn’t think Kaia would be like that!”
Jack kept staring at her as if she had no idea what she was saying and Claire just shook her head and groaned as she sank in her bed. She didn’t feel like doing her homework, or playing guitar or drawing or anything like that. Every time she started she couldn’t help but to think about the snappy conversation she’d had in the cafeteria with Kaia and she got angry and sad all over again.

“But why didn’t you text her, then?” Jack asked.

“Well, first, I was too busy coughing my lungs out,” Claire said. “Then Aunt Amara came to visit. And in any case, you were the one who told me I shouldn’t.”

Jack tilted his head.

“When… did I say that?” he asked, clearly confused.

“You said that maybe Kaia wasn’t in the same place I was and that I needed to be careful!” she reminded him.

“Okay… but that doesn’t translate to ‘don’t text her’?” Jack tried to argue.

Claire threw one of her pillows at him.

“How was I supposed to know she wanted me to text first?” Claire huffed. “Like… she could have given me some sort of signal too, you know? I don’t know, she could have tagged in one of her inspirational quotes on Facebook or something. A message. Anything.”

Jack clearly didn’t want to discuss these sort of issues. At least, he looked even more uncomfortable than usual and Claire assumed it had to do with her overreacting to all of this.

“I mean… you’re right, I don’t know much about this, but…”

“How was I supposed to know she wanted me to text first?” Claire huffed. “Like… she could have given me some sort of signal too, you know? I don’t know, she could have tagged in one of her inspirational quotes on Facebook or something. A message. Anything.”

Jack clearly didn’t want to discuss these sort of issues. At least, he looked even more uncomfortable than usual and Claire assumed it had to do with her overreacting to all of this.

“I’m sorry,” she said, moving so she could sit on the edge of the bed so they could be face to face. “It’s just… this is all so frustrating.”

“No, I… I understand,” Jack replied. He moved awkwardly in his chair. “I mean… I’m sorry things are like this with Kaia right now.”

Claire clicked her tongue and remained in silence for a few seconds, thinking. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe it wasn’t about the texting at all, but something else she had done wrong. But Kaia wasn’t talking to her: whenever she saw her in the hallways, she turned around or she pretended to be very entranced in a conversation with Ben, Patience or (Claire’s stomach tightened every time she thought about it) Alexis. Claire had tried to speak to her twice more, but each and every time she’d obtained the same results: snappy, short answers and a lot of attitude.

So how was she to know what she’d done if Kaia simply refused to…?
An idea dawned on her, like a sun rising slowly in the horizon. She turned to look at Jack.

“Hey… you’re friends with all the other guys in the club, aren’t you?”

“They’re also your friends, Claire. You don’t have to…”

“Can you ask if any of them knows why Kaia is so pissed at me? Like, is it about the text or is it about something else? How can I fix this?”

“Or… you could ask them yourself?” Jack suggested.

“No, I can’t do that.” Claire stood up from the bed and started pacing around the room. “That’d look sad and desperate.”

“You… kind of are… sad and desperate,” Jack muttered. He lowered his eyes. “I… I didn’t know I’d affect you this badly.”

“Honestly, me neither.” Claire sighed and for the second time since she’d arrived from school after another failed attempt to talk to Kaia, she flopped down on the bed, sighing deeply. She covered her eyes with her hands, because suddenly they were getting extremely itchy. She refused to admit that she might have been about to cry over this. “I’m so stupid.”

“What? No, why do you say that?”

Jack sounded worried and goddammit, that was the last thing she needed right now. When Jack got worried about anything, he tended to try and overcorrect whatever it was that he perceived as being wrong. That’s how he’d ended up with the ridiculous plan to get Castiel and Mrs. Masters together in the first place. So Claire quickly wiped her eyes and sat up, putting on her toughest front once again.

“Just… you know, all of this is stupid,” she said, shaking her head. “It’d be nice to be like you and never have to fall in love with anyone in the first place.”

“I mean… just because I haven’t, it doesn’t mean… Claire.” Jack shook his head and went to sit next to her as he quickly changed the topic. “Look, I’m sure you can still make this right.”

“Yeah?” Claire snorted, skeptical. “And how do you imagine I could go about doing that?”

“Well, we’re going to see Kaia tomorrow at the club, right?”

Claire had completely forgotten that the following day was Thursday.

“Dammit,” she groaned, rubbing her eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Kaia won’t be…”

“It’s not that!” she interrupted him, sharply. “I didn’t write anything this week!”

“I think we’ve had some really great progress with the working in pairings,” Castiel announced the following day during the Inksters new meeting. “Patience, Jack, I’m glad you could find it in you to share your stories. Ben, it’s good that you finally finished something and your story about the cabbage patch was very fun. I hope they’re the first of many to come.”
Ben, Patience and Jack all smiled at him proudly. Castiel smiled back and turned towards the three remaining girls.

“Alexis, I liked how the description in your last tale was structured, how it flowed. It almost sounded like you were trying to write a poem of sorts through it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Novak,” Alexis replied, blushing slightly. “That would be Kaia’s influence. Her poems are always so vivid and pretty…”

Castiel didn’t miss the way Claire rolled her eyes and how Kaia was pointedly not looking in her direction. There was something going on there, but he hadn’t dared to ask what it was just yet. He had the impression Claire wouldn’t ask any direct questions about it, at least not for the time being.

“Claire, Kaia,” he called them. They both looked up. Neither of them was smiling. “It’s okay if you didn’t have anything prepared for today. Writer’s block sometimes… happens. I know you’re capable of working through it, so if you don’t have anything prepared to read today, you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Thanks, Mr. Novak,” Kaia muttered, before looking down at her notebook again and resuming the doodles she had been drawing on the margins of the page.

Claire remained stubbornly silent, with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Well, since it’s the last Thursday of November, it’s time to switch partners again,” Meg announced. She picked up the same bowl they had used the first time. “You know the rules: if you get your own name or if you get the same person as this month, just put the paper back inside and we’ll go again.”

She extended the bowl to Jack. He sank his hand in it and thoroughly mixed the little papers around before he picked one.

“Alexis,” he read out loud and then smiled at Meg. “Thank you, Mrs. Masters.”

Meg stepped back. Castiel thought he saw her smile falter, but she quickly moved to offer the bowl to Ben and then to Claire.

“I got Patience,” Ben announced, but his voice was drowned out by a strangled noise.

Kaia was grabbing her hair with her hands as if she had a terrible headache, while Claire stared at the paper she’d taken out, pale and slightly horrified.

So, there was definitely something going on with those two.
Claire was extremely unhappy for the duration of the following week.

Jack and Castiel were used to her mood swings and her general bad humor when things weren’t going her way and they knew the best way to deal with them was to not try to cheer her up in any shape, way or form. It was best to simply let her be: let her listen to her angry rock music and pace around the house like a lost spirit. She ranted against things that weren’t really related to whatever it was bothering her (something stupid a celebrity had said, something stupid a politician had said, something stupid a teacher had said) and usually she felt better after a day or two.

Except that after a day or two, it didn't seem like the black cloud that hanged over Claire's head was going anywhere.

"I don't know and I honestly don't care!" she screamed one night during dinner. "Geez, do you need a ladder so you can get off my back?"

Castiel was so taken aback by that disproportionate reaction that he couldn't even remember what it was that he'd asked her. Something about exams and the upcoming winter break, nothing that warranted her getting up in his face like that.

"Claire, I don't know what's got into you," he told her, firmly. "But I won't allow you to talk to me like that, do you hear me? There's no reason to be rude."

Claire had glared at him and for a full half-minute, Castiel was sure she was going to tell him that he could go to hell or that she could talk to people however she wanted to. Instead, she pushed her chair back, stood up and marched upstairs without finishing the rest of her dinner.

"What's got into her?" Castiel asked, turning to Jack.

Jack followed his sister's trail with his eyes before he turned to Castiel and gave him a shrug.

"I don't know. Maybe she's in like, one of those days."

"Really, Jack?" Castiel asked. "I thought I taught you better than to say that kind of thing about any woman."

Jack lowered his gaze, ashamed.

"I'm sorry. It's a joke Ben made, I didn't mean... I don't know what's wrong with Claire," Jack admitted. "It might have to do with Kaia."

"Of course it has to do with Kaia," Castiel sighed.

He wasn't sure if the two girls had fought or if something else had happened. Right before Thanksgiving, they seemed like they were as happy as they could be. He'd tried asking Meg about it, but she was just as clueless as him.

"Kaia's got a case of melancholia, I'm afraid," Meg told him when he called her about this issue. "She keeps looking out of the window and sighing sadly. At least for now she's not having any new night terrors."

Castiel tapped on the edge of his desk, pensively.
"Maybe we should intervene somehow?" he asked. "Perhaps they're not comfortable being partners in the club and they would prefer to switch with someone else."

"Well, if they are, they can come to tell us about that."

"Claire is too proud. She would never do that."

"Neither would Kaia. She'd take it as a challenge," Meg replied. "So if they're not saying anything, I don't think we should say anything either."

"But..." he tried protesting.

"Listen, Cas, they're almost young adults. Sometimes personal relationships and feelings are complicated and they need to learn to deal with that. Whatever caused this, they need to resolve it themselves and we can't say anything about it unless they directly request our help."

She was right, of course. Castiel leaned back on his arm chair. Talking to her always managed to soothe his raging thoughts, whether they pertained the twins or his writing. Meg ranted to him about the long hours at the school, about the children that submitted bullshit reports because they couldn't be assed to actually read the damn things. That night, the topic was Principal Crowley, who was always on her case about one thing or the other.

"It's like the man hates me for some reason," she complained. "I think he thinks I'm wasting the school budget by requesting certain books be stocked in the library and because I told him that the list of forbidden books put forwards by the parents is complete nonsense."

"That would definitely do it, yes," Castiel said, smiling.

It wasn't that he liked to hear about the hard times Meg had at her job or anything like that. She'd even asked him about it one time:

"You don't mind I tell you all of this, right? I'm sorry. I just have no one else to talk about these things and you're such a good listener."

"I don't mind," he'd guaranteed her. "I actually like listening to you. I spend so much time inside my own head, these chats... they're like an anchor for me. They remind me there's a life outside of my fantasy world and that I have to care for that as well."

He didn't tell her that, before, Claire and Jack had been the anchor that prevented him from floating too far away or for staying locked inside his studio for too long. Now that they were off having their own lives, learning things without his help... well, he realized just how lonely he had been. His best friend had been Kelly, his sporadic relationships hadn't brought him any kind of emotional or personal fulfillment and after the disastrous Amara visit, he was reminded once again why he didn't talk too much with his family outside of Jack and Claire.

It was nice having someone else, someone new, that he could connect with.

Whatsoever else he thought of Meg; that was no one's business. He was more than happy just being friends with her.

"Children should read," Meg insisted. "I tried telling him that, but he just keeps being obtuse about the entire concept of his students actually receiving some sort of education. 'Stick with the program, you already have your little club. What more do you want?' What a complete ass."

"It's things like these why I'm happy that I'm my own boss."
"Didn't you miss a deadline from your editor just this month? Twice?"

Castiel moved the phone away to stare at it, as if Meg could somehow feel the immense frustration that invaded him at that reminder through the line.

"I'm just having some issues figuring out how they're going to come about the missing queen," he admitted in a whisper. "It's not… I mean, I had an idea, I did, but I just sort of... forgot."

"And now you're stuck once again." Meg laughed, but there was nothing malicious on it. She sounded genuinely amused by his lack of general organizational skills. "I'm going to get you a day planner for Christmas."

The mention of the upcoming holiday disconcerted him slightly. It felt like Thanksgiving had been just yesterday, but no, they were only a couple weeks away from the end of the year. If he had bothered to go downtown or to visit the malls, he was sure he had been assaulted by Christmas music blaring through every speaker and wreaths and trees splashing everything with green, golden and red. But since he mostly stayed at home those days, the only clear sign that it was indeed December were the snowflakes that fell on his window ledge every morning and melted before the afternoon was done.

Another Christmas. It was going to be fourteen… no, fifteen years…

"… are you and the kids planning to do anything?"

Castiel snapped back from his thoughts.

"Uh, we don't… we're not big on Christmas."

It was true, they hadn't even put together a Christmas tree. He had tried for the longest time to get them into the spirit. After all, kids were supposed to love this holiday, they were supposed to wake up excited in the morning and rummage through the gifts and write letters to Santa. But at some point, when Jack and Claire were about eleven or twelve years old, they'd told him that if he didn't want them to celebrate Christmas in a big way, they didn't have to. They weren't too fond of the holiday themselves.

And so they hadn't really done anything for Christmas ever since. Some years, like this one, they straight failed to decorate the house.

"How come?" Meg asked him.

Castiel considered dodging the question, but he figured there was no reason to keep something like that a secret.

"Kelly… Jack and Claire's mother, she passed away on Christmas Eve," Castiel said. "She'd been battling cancer for the longest time and the doctors had told her she wouldn't make it past October. I think she lived as long as she did because she wanted to share that one last holiday with the kids."

He surprised himself at that confession. He rarely talked about Kelly with anyone, outside of Jack and Claire themselves. It was just... too painful a topic.

But Meg understood. Of course she did.

"It's hard when the memories are bittersweet, isn't it?"

"Yes." He sighed. "It's hard."
There was a pause, but it didn't feel uncomfortable. Castiel had the feeling he could stay in a room with Meg in silence for hours and it wouldn't feel like they needed to force a conversation in any way.

"Can I ask you a personal question? And you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Should I be scared?" Castiel asked.

"No, really, it's just… forget it, it's none of my business."

"Please, Meg. It's fine. You can ask anything."

There was another pause. Castiel was beginning to think that Meg would most likely not ask the question when suddenly, without any further warning, she did:

"Were you in love with her?"

Castiel's heart fluttered while the rest of him froze completely. He didn't know if he made any sound, but he must have, because Meg started talking quickly once again:

"Like I said, you don't have to answer. I shouldn't have asked, I'm sorry. This is clearly a painful issue for you…"

"Meg, no, it's…" Castiel stopped and gave himself a second to order his thoughts. "It's just... I think a lot of people assume I was and… well, no one had asked it as directly as you did."

"Well, that's me," Meg laughed. "Mrs. Awkward and Direct Questions. Seriously, if you don't want to tell me…"

Castiel looked outside his window. The night was pitch dark and cold and the glass was frosted. Kelly had died on a cold night with frosted glasses as well, at some point after midnight, which actually put her death on the early hours of Christmas.

"She… we became friends in college and we were very close. I care for her a lot."

That was the standard answer he gave whenever someone inquired why he'd decided to take care of children who weren't his own, going above and beyond what an uncle was supposed to do for them. But Meg deserved more than the standard answer.

"I don't know if I was in love with her," he confessed in the end. "I was young, I had no experience with the matter. I was dealing with a lot, between finishing a degree for something that I wasn't passionate about and the prospect of having to work my life away under my family's iron fist. Maybe I did have a crush on her, but it never felt like a right time to act on it. Sometimes I do wonder what might have happened if I hadn't introduced her to Luke and she hadn't married him. I don't resent her for doing it, though. My brother, with all his defects, was much more charming and much more confident than I ever was. Their relationship grew fast and burned down just as fast, and when the dust settled, well…"

"It was too late."

Castiel sighed. It was a relief that he didn’t have to actually come out and say it.

"She was still important to me, though," he admitted. "So when she asked me, in her deathbed practically, to care for her children… how could I refuse?"
“You went above and beyond what she asked of you, though.”

“Also not the first time I’ve been told that.” Castiel chuckled.

Unlike Amara, though, who had meant it as a reproach for Castiel’s choices, when Meg said it there was note of admiration in her voice. Perhaps that was just what he wanted to believe, though. He stopped thinking about it. Like with many other things he thought about Meg, there was no point on believing this was more than what it was: a friendship and nothing else.

Of course, a part of him realized he was fooling himself. Mainly because…

“I’ve… I’ve never talked about Kelly like this with anyone. Not even with Jack and Claire.”

“Why not?”

“Well, they… they’re young. There are things I don’t think… I don’t know,” he ended up admitting. “It’s just…”

“Complicated,” Meg suggested.

Castiel let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“Yes. Very complicated.”

He moved his head from one side to the other to release his neck and stared at the blank page in front of him. He had been meaning to write before Meg had called him and then he got sidetracked talking to him. And now it had been…

“Oh. Oh, it’s almost midnight.”

He hadn’t realized it got so late. When had that happened?

“Damn,” Meg muttered and then giggled. It was a sound that sent shivers down Castiel’s spine for reasons he didn’t want to dwell on. “We should hang up. I got school tomorrow and I’m sure you want to actually get to writing at some point.”

“Yes,” Castiel agreed.

Neither of them said goodbye.

“How’s the writing going, by the way?” Meg asked.

Castiel was glad they had found an excuse to keep talking.

“It’s going well, actually. Better than I had expected. I’m discovering many things. I think this is going to be the longest book in the series, but that’s alright. It has to tie up all the loose ends and give everyone a good farewell and… you know, my demographic is no longer middle school children.”

“How does it feel to know that so many kids grew up with your stories?”

“That sounds like a question that someone running a writing blog would ask me,” he said. That caused her to laugh again. “I don’t know. It’s strange. In a way, I grew up with these books too, as a writer, as a guardian. I don’t think Agatha and Jasper’s story is the only one I can tell about Kelliadoth.”

“But it’s the last story about them.”
Castiel wondered how the hell Meg always managed to read his mind like that.

“Would you…?” he started, but then he bit his tongue.

“What?”

“I… would you like to read it?”

He closed his eyes, immediately regretting having asked. His first drafts were always rambling nonsense and Meg was probably too busy with school and the club to make the time for his dumb children’s book. Just because it was special to him it didn’t mean it had to be special for anyone else and honestly, this was very out of character for him. The only other people he ever allowed to take a peek at his book before sending to his editor were Claire and Jack, when they were in the mood for it.

“You don’t have to…”

“I would love to,” Meg said.

Castiel’s heart started racing in his chest again. “Really?”

“I can proofread it for you,” she suggested. “And I think maybe bouncing your ideas off with someone would help you put them in order and write a little faster. How long have you been struggling with this book?”

Castiel didn’t want to admit it had been over half a year, but he figured Meg could deduce it somehow. She always read him easily.

“That would be great, actually. Yes. Thank you. I’ll email what I got to you right now.”

“Okay, but it’s gonna have to wait until tomorrow,” she said, laughing. “School, remember?”

“Right,” Castiel smiled bitterly to himself. “I’m sorry I’m distracting you so much.”

“I like being distracted by you.”

A tense silence followed that statement. Castiel hadn’t expected her to just come out and say something like that. Was it…? No. it was probably more of his wishful thinking.

“Well… I guess I can… provide plenty of distraction…” he mumbled, cringing at himself just as the words came out of his mouth.

“I expect you to,” Meg said. Her laughter was sultry and slow and Castiel once again found himself shivering from it.

“Umh… but… not right now?” he said. “School.”

“Right, school.”

They went quiet once again. Castiel desperately wanted to come up with another topic of conversation, but he just couldn’t think of one.

“Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight, Castiel.”
“Goodnight,” he repeated, like an idiot.

After she ended the call, he stared at his phone for the longest of times. He’d never been good at taking hints, he’d been told so by plenty of people. He was pretty sure Meg had given him one right now and he didn’t know what to do about it.

Mainly because he wasn’t even sure it had been a hint. It could have been just his wishful thinking.

Should he be thinking wishfully about Meg at all? She was the kids’ teacher, after all.

He opened his browser to email Meg the draft like he had promised. Then, once again telling himself how ridiculous he was being, he opened Facebook and searched until he found a picture of her: smiling to the camera, a violet scarf wrapped around her neck.

He didn’t save it because he liked her that way, he told himself over and over. She just had very interesting features that would make for a very interesting character. There was nothing strange about it.

It was a good thing that no one else could see inside his head, because he was sure he wouldn’t have been able to fool anyone.
Chapter 24

Jack had been watching her for fifteen minutes and it was getting on Claire’s every last nerve.

“What?!” she snapped at him, finally getting him to look down for a bit.

“Nothing,” he said, softly. “I was just… wondering if you were okay?”

“I’m perfectly fine, thanks for asking.”

“Okay.” Jack pushed the food in his platter around for a moment. “I’m saying because these last couple of days you’ve been… on edge.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Claire said, crossing her arms.

Of course, that was a lie and they both could tell it was a lie. Claire wondered why she even bothered to try and deny it. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling of the cafeteria and forced herself to calm down.

“Kaia texted me,” she confessed in the end.

“Oh? What did she say?”

It was too depressing to say it out loud, so Claire simply unlocked her phone and slid towards Jack for him to see. It was a simple question, direct and to the point.

> So how do you want to go about this?

“This” obviously meant the stupid partnership they were supposed to share for the Inksters. Claire was thinking about discreetly interrogating Castiel to find out if it had been him or Miss Masters who came up with that brilliant idea and then hex whoever she could blame for this.

Jack, as always, tried to look at the bright side of a situation that had none.

“But that’s good, right? That means you’re going to get a chance to get together and maybe… talk things out?”

“Does that look like the text of a person who wants to talk things out?” Claire huffed.

Instead of offering some optimistic advice as he would usually do, Jack lowered his eyes as if he was ashamed. Claire forced herself to not be furious and sad for two seconds to really look at him. He seemed pale and there were dark circles underneath his eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked him, frowning.

“Yeah.” He avoided her gaze and covered his mouth with his hand to hide a yawn. “Just… I’ve been having some trouble sleeping.”

“You never have trouble sleeping,” Claire pointed out. “You slept all the way to the Grand Canyon.”

“I… I don’t know what to tell you, Claire,” he said, speaking a little too fast. “Maybe it’s nervous energy, because we’ve had so much homework lately?”

“You get me day planners every Christmas,” Claire said.
Jack stared at her, blinking in confusion. He was definitely not at his sharpest if Claire had to explain to him what she meant by that.

“You have all your homework and study plans for upcoming exams organized. On top of that, you’re every teacher’s pet, so if you needed an extension, you could just walk up to them and ask them to give it to you. There’s literally no reason for you to be nervous about school.”

“You don’t know that,” Jack argued, weakly.

“So either you’re nervous about something else that you haven’t figured out yet or you’re lying to me,” Claire said.

Jack sat up straight as if a bolt of energy had gone down his back.

“Of course I’m not lying to you! Why would you think that?”

And if she needed any proof that he was definitely lying to her, that was it.

“Maybe your insomnia is a sign of a guilty conscious because you’re lying to me,” she poked him.

“Claire, come on,” Jack said. He seemed genuinely offended, shaking his head and puffing as if he just couldn’t believe she would even suggest something like that. “Why would I lie to you? You’re my sister, I have no reason to keep things from you.”

“I know. In fact, sometimes we go way overboard with the TMI,” Claire said.

Jack didn’t laugh at her joke. In fact, he looked more uncomfortable than before, if that was even possible. Claire watched him closely as she did a mental inventory of the things they’ve done and talked about in the last week. Nothing incredibly obvious or suspicious jumped at her, so she was just as clueless as to why Jack was lying as she had been before.

“Look, whatever it is, I’m pretty sure it’s not nearly as bad as you’re making it out to be,” she said. “So just tell me so you can take a damn nap, because you look like you need it.”

Jack opened his mouth, closed it again, and tapped his fingers on the table, pensively.

“It’s nothing, Claire,” he insisted. “Really.”

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Claire said, rolling her eyes. “Can you do me a favor, though?”

“Yeah, sure. Anything you want.”

Claire took a second to think about it. Perhaps whatever Jack was feeling guilty about wasn’t that big of a deal, but she could definitely take advantage of the fact he was feeling guilty to make her own life a little easier until he decided to spill the beans.

“Can you tell Kaia that I’m free all through the weekend and that she can come home whenever it’s okay for her? So we can just get this entire exercise in futility done.”

“Can’t you tell her that?”

“I mean, yeah, I could.” Claire shrugged. “But I’m feeling kinda bummed because my brother is lying to me about something and I can’t figure out what it is…”

“Fine!” Jack raised both his hands defensively. “I’ll tell her.”
Damn. This thing must have been bigger than Claire had imagined. At least, it certainly was in Jack’s mind.

Claire didn't go to the Insksters' meeting that Thursday citing homework related issues, so it was up to Jack to approach the others after Castiel and Miss Masters dismissed them.

“Hey, guys, wait up.”

They all turned to look at him in unison.

"Woah, man," Ben said, after doing a double-take at Jack. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Jack said. "Why are you asking me that?"

"You don't look so hot." Alexis pointed out.

"Understatement. You look like you've just risen from the grave to suck people's blood," Ben said.

"Are you sick?" Patience asked, taking a step forwards and placing the back of her hand against Jack's brow. "You shouldn't be here if you're sick."

"I'm fine!" Jack snapped. The others stepped back, surprised. Jack ran his fingers through his hair and forced himself to talk calmly. "I'm sorry. I just haven't been sleeping all that well."

"You should be careful with that," Ben commented. "You know, you can only go eleven days without sleeping before you start suffering from some kind of psychosis?"


Kaia stood behind Ben and Patience and seemed a little nervous when they turned to her. She fidgeted with her backpack's strap before she looked up at Jack with wide eyes.

"What about?"

"Claire says she's willing to meet with you this weekend. For the... the Inksters thing," Jack completed, his voice wavering as he watched his friends' expressions change. Alexis scoffed, Patience frowned at him and Ben opened his eyes in panic and shook his head, trying to indicate Jack to shut his mouth.

Kaia's face, however, remained unreadable.

"Oh, so now she's sending me messages with you?" she asked, rolling her eyes. "Great. That's just great."

Jack felt drops of cold sweat forming on the edge of his hair. He really hated confrontations.

"I don't... I mean... I'm sorry, I didn't..." he stammered, but Kaia huffed loudly.

"Tell her I'll be there on Saturday around three, if she can be bothered to open the door when I knock."
She turned her back on Jack and walked away in a hurry. Patience glared at Jack one more time and then she followed Kaia as she walked away.

"Did I say something wrong?" Jack asked, softly.

"Dude, you said everything wrong," Ben replied. He also seemed a little exasperated, but at least he didn't immediately walk away from Jack.

"I didn't mean to make Kaia angry," Jack said, lowering his eyes.

"I know." Ben put an arm around his neck as if to console him. "You know, sometimes chicks... are dramatic like that."

"But..."

"Kaia's mad because she wrote a letter to Claire, as if she's never heard of the Internet," Ben said, shaking his head. He clearly thought all that business was ridiculous. "But Claire never answered to it, never addressed it, never texted Kaia again after their date. I mean, don't get me wrong, I know she's your sister and all, but that is kind of a dick move."

Jack stared at him. Suddenly, there was a knot in the pit of his stomach that he couldn't undo, no matter how much he swallowed.

His discomfort must have shown in his face, because Ben cringed at him.

"Are you sure you're okay, dude? Do you need to go see the nurse? I can come with you if you think you're going to pass out on the hall or something."

"No." Jack's voice came out too deep and rough, so he cleared his throat. "No. Thanks. I think I just... I need to go to the bathroom."

Ben nodded, knowingly.

"Yeah. Thursday's Surprise Stew will do that to you."

Jack ran to the bathroom, but not because the surprise stew had given him indigestion. He suddenly felt like he was going to burn up from the inside out, or at the very least, burst into tears. He ran into a stall, locked the door behind him and sat on the toilet with his head between his legs.

Claire was right. The reason he wasn't sleeping or focusing on his homework was because, with every day that passed and with Claire getting angrier and sadder, he had been feeling progressively guiltier for hiding Kaia's letter. At first, he'd told himself it was because Claire was sick, then because she was dealing with Amara. But now it had been three weeks and seeing the effects that it had caused in Claire and Kaia's relationship, he had no excuse to keep it hidden in his desk's drawer.

Except that he was terrified. Terrified that Kaia would be angry with him and that would force the other members of the club to shun him and it would be terrible, because they were all such good friends and what he did could cause an irremediable rift between all of them. It would end with the club dissolving and Castiel going back to the house to being alone and depressed as he tried and failed to complete the book and not seeing Miss Masters weekly.

But most of all, he was terrified of what his secret being out would do to his relationship with Claire. He knew that she would be furious, and rightfully so. No matter what she'd said, he had crossed a line with his actions and he didn't know if he would be able to ever make it up to her. Every day that passed with him not coming clean, it felt like his guilt was a stone in his stomach, growing larger and
heavier and...

Someone knocked on his stall.

"Jack?" Castiel's voice called him from outside. "Are you there? Ben said you were coming here..."

Jack sat up, wiped his sweaty face and forced himself to breathe deeply before he answered:

"Yeah. I'm... I'm coming out now."

He flushed the toilet before he did so his uncle wouldn't know that he was hiding there in the middle of a panic attack. Another lie. Why couldn't he stop lying to people?

Castiel, of course, realized something was wrong immediately.

"Are you okay?" he asked and did the same thing as Patience: touched his face to make sure he didn't have a fever. "Ben said you might have an indigestion."

"It's... it's not an indigestion," Jack said, tiredly. He just couldn't gather the energy to deny that anything was wrong with him or to come up with a better excuse.

"The flu, then? I was afraid that might have caught it from Claire, but I didn't think..."

"It's not the flu either. I'm fine. Physically," Jack said.

Castiel raised his eyebrows and instead of asking him, he patted him in the shoulder and guided him out. It wasn't until they were in his car, adjusting their respective seatbelts, that he spoke again:

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Jack didn't want to talk about it. The last thing he wanted was to have to confess what he'd done out loud and having to face the consequences for it. But he figured that sooner or later, he was going to have to.

He leaned back on the seat, sighing deeply as he tried to put his thoughts in order.

"I did something very stupid."

Castiel drove silently back home, listening to Jack without saying a word. In a way, that was exactly what Jack needed: if Castiel had said anything or stopped him to interrogate him further, he would have clammed up again and dealt with it some other way.

"And now I can't sleep," he concluded. "I can't look at Claire in the eye. I... I can't figure this out, uncle. Help me figure it out."

Castiel stopped the car on a red light and slowly turned to look at him.

"You already know how to resolve this, Jack."

Jack didn't want to hear that. He looked outside the window.

"Everybody makes mistakes," Castiel continued. "And you're a good boy."

"Am I? Even if I ruined my sister's chances at happiness and love?"

"I think it's safe to say that Claire will find plenty of chances at love," Castiel said. Jack didn't know
if that was a joke or not, and either way, he didn't feel like laughing. "But even if she's fine after this, you still need to make it right. Because that is the right thing to do."

Jack groaned. That was the part he really, relly didn't want to think about.

"I don't even know why I hid it in the first place," he confessed.

"I daresay maybe you were jealous?"

Jack stared at Castiel's profile, not sure what to ask to get him to elaborate. Luckily for him, Castiel noticed anyway after a few seconds.

"Claire is completely smitten with this girl, even more so than she's ever been before. If I noticed, I'm sure you must have too. You were afraid that if she got too serious about her relationship with Kaia, she might have stopped spending as much time with you as she usually does."

He parked the car on the driveway and looked at Jack with a crooked eyebrow.

"No, that doesn't sound right." Jack shook his head, but even as he said it, he realized there might have been a small, miniscule, spark of truth in his uncle's words.

"Well, whatever the reason you did it, the results are the same," Castiel insisted. "You need to tell Claire the truth."

"Okay, fine." Jack stared at their yard for a while. The walk from the car to the porch and the door seemed like it was miles and miles long. "Can you be there, maybe? So she doesn't kill me?"

"I'm sorry, Jack. Much like Jasper with the Emerald Dragon, this is something you must face alone."

"Please, don't. Don't use Jasper against me." Jack cringed. "He never would have done something like this."

He left the car so Castiel could park it in the garage. His feet felt like lead as he marched up the porch and then into the house. He thought he was going to have a few seconds of grace, but to his dismay, Claire was lounging in the sofa, with the book they were supposed to read for Miss Masters' class two days ago opened over her lap.

"Hey, how'd it go?" she asked without lifting her eyes from the page.

"It was... it was good," Jack stammered. He pulled from the helm of his jacket nervously. Maybe he should go upstairs and leave it in his room along with his backpack before he said anything...?

No. He was stalling, like the complete coward he was.

"I... I saw Kaia. And I gave her your message."

Claire closed the book with a thump.

"Oh, and what'd she say?" she asked. Her tone was dead neutral and her face revealed nothing.

"That she'd be here on Saturday. But, Claire... there's something you need to know..."

"There's nothing I need to know," Claire said. She grabbed her phone and threw it at Jack. "Check that out. Posted fifteen minutes ago."

Jack looked at a picture of what seemed to be Kaia's Instagram. It was a selfie of her and Alexis,
standing cheek to cheek while Alexis held the camera. The caption read: "Where is my snow?!?!" with a snowflake emoji next to it.

"It's so transparent," Claire huffed, irritated. "And you know what? I'm done. Just completely done with the whole thing."

She picked up the book and walked past Jack on her way upstairs.

"But... Claire, you have to..."

"Nope!" Claire stopped in her room's doorway and raised a finger to shut Jack up. "Don't want to hear another thing about it!"

"But..." Jack tried to protest.

Claire slammed the door in his face before he could get another word in.

Jack stared at it, desolated. This was going to be even harder than he'd imagined.
Chapter 25

Friday was a weird day. Not only because it was, well, Friday, and all the teachers had suddenly decided that, with the Christmas break looming over them just… didn’t feel like teaching anymore, but also Jack insisted on talking to her about something she didn’t want to hear about.

“Jack, listen. I’m done. I built a bridge and I got over it. I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

Jack either didn’t believe her or thought whatever it was that he needed to tell her was important enough to keep trying to talk about it even after several negatives.

“Oh, I know you’re mad and all, but what if…?”

“I’m not mad,” Claire said. “Being mad would imply that I still care somewhat and I just don’t.”

Jack opened his mouth to say something else, but Claire turned on the radio very loud so it was impossible for him to say another word.

Not that it helped with the rest of the day. Jack kept following her down the hallways while they went from class to class and even between the classes that they didn’t share, he stalked her next to her locker, as if catching her by surprise was going to make her change her mind.

“Okay, but… let’s say, hypothetically, that you don’t have all the information,” he said. “That there’s some things that you just… aren’t aware of and if you were, that might change your perspective on the whole thing…”

“Nothing’s going to make me change my perspective on the thing, because there is no such information,” Claire replied, rolling her eyes. She slammed her locker closed and walked away, with Jack at her heels still yapping about this supposedly previously unknown information.

“But if it came to light… that there’s something you didn’t know, would you care again?”

“No. Because I’ve decided not to care, and that’s final!” Claire said. “Jack, you don’t have History with me.”

Jack stayed on the classroom’s doorway, almost as if he was wondering if he should come in and continue talking to her until Mr. Walker stepped up to him and asked him if he had lost anything there. And well, Mr. Walker was a pretty intimidating guy, so Jack squirreled away for the time being.

Claire already knew that Jack was going to keep on going about her and Kaia during lunchtime, so she decided to skip the cafeteria altogether. But that was easier said than done. It was too cold outside to sit by the line of trees next to the football field and besides… well, that was where she’d had her first real conversation with Kaia. The library was out of the question for the same reasons: she knew Kaia sometimes went there to read or work on her poems and Claire didn’t want to risk an awkward encounter.

Not that she should care about something like that (she didn’t, she had decided it was better for her not to), but she also wasn’t going to haunt those places as if she expected Kaia to pop up and start talking to her again out of the blue.

At which point, she would rebuff her. Because she didn’t care.
She wondered if Miss Masters classroom, the same classroom they used for the Inksters’ meetings, was free and headed there. She had nothing to lose by trying.

It turned out it wasn’t: Miss Masters was sitting behind her desk, eating what seemed to be a PB and J sandwich, and watching intently some printed pages in front of her. She raised her eyes when Claire opened the door.

“Did you need anything?” she asked, smiling after greeting her.

“Just, uh… looking for somewhere quiet to do some reading,” Claire replied, because she wasn’t about to admit that she was avoiding her brother because he kept trying to salvage her relationship with Miss Masters’ foster daughter. That might have been a little too complicated to explain.

“Well, come on right in,” Miss Masters said, gesturing towards the empty seats in front of her. “There’s plenty of space and I’m doing some quiet reading myself.”

Claire thanked her and dropped her backpack on a seat on the second row. She was a little nervous to pull out the book she was supposed to have read for three classes ago, but Miss Masters barely paid attention to her: she kept chewing a red pen and making some annotations on the margins of the pages in front of her. Sometimes she snickered and shook her head, almost like she didn’t realize that she was doing it at all. In the end, Claire’s curiosity got the better of her.

“Okay, so that report is either really bad or really good,” she said.

Miss Masters looked up blinking owlishly, as if she had completely forgot that Claire was there with her.

“Oh. Oh, no, this isn’t a report,” she said. “This is actually your uncle’s book.”

Claire opened her mouth, then closed it again, because she was sure she just hadn’t heard correctly. After a few seconds, though, it was obvious that those words weren’t going to make any more sense.

“The… Jasper and Agatha book? The Kelliadoth book?” she asked, knowing perfectly well that Castiel hadn’t written anything else. At least, nothing publishable or that Claire was aware of.

“Yes.” Miss Masters smiled. “Can you keep a secret? I actually find them very compelling.”

“I… I guess. For children’s books.” Claire shrugged. That really wasn’t the issue that she was trying to understand, though. “But, like… why are you reading it?”

“Cas asked me to.”

Oh, so he was Cas now.

Miss Masters must have read it on Claire’s face that this was not something that she could just say casually, because she tilted her head. “Is there a problem with that?”

“I… I don’t know if there’s a problem, per se,” Claire said. “It’s just… well… no, it’s dumb. Don’t worry about it.”

“Claire, you can tell me.”

Claire bit the inside of her cheek, trying to find the best way to explain it.

“It’s just… he doesn’t let anyone read the damn book until he’s finished with it,” she said. “At least, he never did in the past. He’s like, very neurotic about it. But then, when he finishes it, he always
asks me and Jack to read it first.” She stopped and realized that hadn’t been quite true for the last
couple of books. “Well, Jack more so than me. But still. He never lets anyone outside of family take
a look at his first draft.”

Miss Masters stared at her, her eyebrows raising slightly in surprise. “Oh. I see.”

“It’s… it’s not a bad thing!” Claire said. “I’m just sure it means he just… appreciates your opinion
very much?” she ended hesitantly, because what was she going to venture a conclusion over this.
Jack probably would have a field day if he had been the one to catch Miss Masters reading the draft.
On second though… “Maybe we shouldn’t tell Jack about this, though. Kelliadoth is sort of like a
sacred part of his childhood, so…”

“And what about yours?”

She just couldn’t catch a break, could she? She had fled Jack to avoid an awkward conversation only
to fall headfirst into another that was also very awkward, albeit for different reasons.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Claire said, shrugging. “I don’t know. I feel like I outgrew those books several
years ago.”

Miss Masters smirked for reasons that Claire couldn’t quite understand.

“You know, I used to think the same thing when I was your age. That I had outgrew fantasy books. I
thought I was so mean and tough and that reading books I genuinely had enjoyed for years was
going to somehow damage my reputation. So I hid away to read them.”

Claire looked at her professor with a little suspicious. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had told
her that her attitude and bad temper actually hid a vulnerable side of her, even no, that wasn’t the
case. Claire just didn’t suffer fools gladly and had a bad temper. However, this approach was new
and disconcerting, simply because it came from a tiny brunette woman in a long sleeve blouse and
pencil shirt. It was hard to imagined that Miss Masters had ever had a “reputation”.

“Okay…” Claire muttered.

“You shouldn’t abandon the things you love just because you think you’re too old for them.”

“It’s not that. I still re-read Harry Potter every couple of years,” Claire said. She went quiet, because
she wasn’t sure what she was going to say next was going to somehow get back at Castiel, but at the
same time, she felt like she owed Miss Masters the truth. “It’s just that… I’m not Agatha. And I can
never be Agatha. And it’s kind of… hard reading them knowing that.”

“What makes you say you’re not Agatha?”

“I don’t know, she’s just… so levelheaded and smart. She always seems to know what to do when
things get tough,” Claire explained. “I just get angry and punch stuff.”

At the very least, that made Miss Masters chuckled. The tension in the conversation lifted, even if
only a little bit.

“You know, Claire, I don’t think your uncle wants you to be Agatha,” Miss Masters said. “I think he
believes that you could be. That you will be, at some point down the line. And to be honest with
you, I do see some of her virtues in you.”

So this was getting way too personal for Claire’s taste. It was time to cut it off.
“Umh… thank you for that.” She looked at her phone and pretended to be scandalized by the time. “I should get going.”

“Very well. It was nice chatting with you.”

Claire picked up her stuff and headed for the door. Just as she was about to leave, Miss Masters brought up the elephant in the room:

“I’m looking forwards to see what you and Kaia come up with working together. I’m sure it’s going to be interesting.”

“… yeah,” Claire said, clumsily, because she couldn’t think of another answer, and left the classroom as if a giant crocodile was chasing her.

She didn’t have to think about Kaia for the rest of the day. That didn’t mean that she didn’t think about her, just that no one else brought up the topic.

And she was going to keep it that way.

“If you even breathe one word about Kaia, I’m kicking you out and you’re walking home,” Claire warned Jack as he got inside of the car.

He looked at her sheepishly, but did her the favor to be quiet.

At least, until they got to the house.

“Claire, listen. Maybe there’s another perspective that you can look at this…”

Claire fled upstairs, hoping the way she stomped on the steps would be enough indication that she was on the edge of losing her already limited patience.

That wasn’t enough to deter Jack. One would think that having known Claire his entire life he would know how to read her mood better, but no. He followed her upstairs, again telling her that she just needed to listen to him.

“For the last time, I don’t want to hear it!” she screamed at him. “Jack, I told you, I don’t care!”

Jack stood right in front of her, his eyes studying her face closely.

“You’re lying,” he accused her. “You do care. If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t spend so much time saying you don’t care.”

Claire gritted her teeth. He knew her all too well.

“Well, what difference is that going to make?” she asked instead. “Kaia already made her choice. And now I have to make mine.”

“But if you would just…”

For the second time in as many days, Claire slammed the door in Jack’s face. She understood that he was trying to help her, in his socially inept Jack way, but she was done with the whole thing.

Or at least, she was going to fake it until it was true.
She woke up late on Saturday and spent at least half an hour looking at herself in the mirror.

If she got dressed as she always did, she could signal to Kaia that she wasn’t particularly concerned with her presence. Why would she be? But then again, if she went all out as she did every day, styling her hair and putting on her makeup, then Kaia might think that Claire had done that because she did care about how she looked. Then again, if she just threw a shirt and jeans on, tied her hair up and wore no makeup, it would look like a casual Saturday outfit… but she didn’t want Kaia to think she had purposefully not put in the effort to look good.

But then, how would she know?

Claire clicked her tongue and decided that just a little bit of make-up wasn’t going to hurt her. She picked up her kit and headed to the bathroom to get ready.

But then, while she was halfway into applying her eyeliner, she remembered that Kaia had compared to a panda. Claire had thought it had been playful then, but what if she was just making fun of her? This whole hot and cold situation had her second-guessing all their interactions. And second-guessing how she was supposed to act around Kaia.

With a sigh, she picked up the towel to wipe away the eyeliner. But she held it inches from her face, wondering if she really wanted to let Kaia see that her comment had somehow affected the way Claire behaved and presented herself.

Maybe she wouldn’t even notice either way. She hadn’t even given Claire a chance to explain herself after all, so maybe Kaia had mastered what Claire had failed to do: find it in herself not to care.

In the end, Claire dressed up as if she would be going to school, make up and all. It was war paint there to ward off anyone from attempting to mess with her, it would be a demonstration of how little fucks she gave about whether Kaia wanted to compared her with a panda or not.

Having dressed up and decided on the best course of action for herself, she headed downstairs to poured herself some orange juice and call it a breakfast. It was too late in the morning to have an actual breakfast either way.

Castiel was sitting on the table, in front of a steaming mug of coffee, staring into the void with dark circles underneath his eyes. That was a clear sign that writer’s block was affecting once more and he had stayed up all night trying to write around it. She decided not to disturbed his half-awake meditation with questions or comments and turned to head back to the dining room…

“Has Jack talked to you?”

Claire startled and almost dropped her juice. Castiel’s voice had sounded so cavernous and came so suddenly he might as well have been speaking to her from beyond the grave.

“Uh… like in general or about one topic in particular?” she asked, confused.

Castiel blinked very slowly, as if the very act of moving his eyelids was a monumental effort for him.

“I guess that means no.”

“No, we talked. Like, all he does sometimes is talk, talk, talk, right?” She tried laughing, but Castiel didn’t follow her joke. “Why, was he supposed to tell me anything in particular?”
Castiel rubbed his eyes with one finger, yawning deeply as he did so.

“You should ask him that.”

He refused to say anything else. Well, it wasn’t like Claire asked him more: he just lowered his eyes to the coffee in front of him and sort of became a statue of a sleep-deprived writer. She doubted anything he’d tell her from then on would make any sense to her.

But that comment did get her thinking. For a couple of days now, Jack had been trying to tell her something about Kaia that she’d refused to listen to, because she’d thought it was going to be one of those Jack-isms about how everybody should hold hands and braid each other’s hair and try to find world peace. But what if it was something actually important? Something he knew about Kaia or Alexis that he thought Claire needed to listen to?

She drank her juice pensively, as she scribbled some ideas in her Inksters’ notebook. She wanted to have some topics that she and Kaia could write about ready, so that they could finish with the exercise as quickly and painlessly as it was possible. But now she couldn’t get Jack and his stammering out of her head. Whatever it was, he certainly seemed to think that she needed to know it and well, she could trust that Jack would be thinking about what was best for her the same way she always thought about what was best for him.

Well, she was going to gain absolutely nothing just by sitting there wondering. She gulped down the last of her juice, closed her notebook and went upstairs.

Just as she’d expected, Jack was in his room. When he opened the door, Claire could see all of his notebooks and his computer opened on a Wikipedia page. He was doing homework on a Saturday morning. Her brother was a complete and absolute weirdo.

Then again, it seemed like the only person in the house that had got a good night sleep was her, because Jack still looked like a vampire whose coffin had a crack that let the light on his eyes every morning.

That was a fun mental image.

“Hey, so what were you going to tell me?” she asked him point blank.

“What?” Jack asked, frowning in confusion.

“The thing that you were trying to tell me yesterday,” Claire reminded him. “What was it?”

“Oh.” Jack straightened his back, suddenly wide awake. He looked down at his slippers and then back up at Claire. He fidgeted for a moment and then sighed. “Okay, but… you have to promise you won’t get mad at me.”

Claire opened her mouth to assure him once again that, whatever it was, he was probably blowing it way out of proportion when…

“Claire!” Castiel’s voice came calling from downstairs. “Kaia is here!”
Chapter 26

It was awkward and frankly, more than a little weird.

Kaia sat in their living room, over their couch, with her hands on her lap and her backpack lying at her feet. Claire supposed that after Castile had opened the door, he had hidden his half-brain dead self away, perhaps to have a nap or a shower or both. It made no difference. Even if he had been there, Claire was convinced it wouldn’t have been any less uncomfortable.

Kaia turned her head when she heard Claire coming down. Goddammit, why did she have to look so pretty with her curly black hair and her big dark eyes? It wasn’t fair.

“Hello,” she greeted Claire. Her voice was monotonous and her face, completely emotionless.

So that was how they were going to play it. Fine. She could do that.

“Hey,” Claire replied.

She wasn’t sure where to go from there, but she wasn’t going to let Kaia know just how self-conscious she felt. She took a step forwards…

Jack came barreling down behind her, almost stumbling against her.

“Hi, Kaia!” he said, in the high pitch voice that Claire knew meant he was nervous. “Welcome to our house! How are you doing?”

“Umh… good, thanks,” Kaia said. At least the confusion of seeing him there put some sort of expression in her face. “It’s good to see you, Jack.”

“It’s great to see you too!” Jack said. “Are you thirsty, hungry? I can bring you something to drink, if you want.”

“That would be… thank you?”

She looked at Claire, but frankly, even if Claire hadn’t decided not to act as if nothing was happening, she wouldn’t have been able to offer her more than an equally baffled stare.

“Great! So, you girls start with your project and I’ll bring you both something to drink!”

He disappeared inside of the kitchen for a second or two. Claire and Kaia stared at each other, in tense silence. Kaia licked her lip, nervously, and she opened her mouth to say something…

“We’ve got juice and we’ve got water!” Jack shouted, popping his head out of the kitchen’s door. “What do you want?”

“I… I don’t know. Water?” Kaia said, turning towards him.

“One glass of fresh water, coming right up! What about you, Claire?”

Claire wasn’t entirely sure what was going on there, but once again, she figured it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Jack running interference for the time being.

“Actually, I’m a little hungry,” she said. “Can you make us some sandwiches? I think there’s still some peanut butter and jelly somewhere.”
“Of course, absolutely. It will be my pleasure.”

“Don’t forget to cut the crust!” Claire shouted while he turned around.

Jack showed her a thumbs up just as the kitchen door closed behind him.

“Umh…” Kaia started saying.

“Let’s go sit on the table. There’s more room for the notebooks,” Claire decided, turning her back on her.

Claire sat where she had left her glass of orange juice and her notebook with ideas on what to write. Kaia hesitated at the doorway for a moment, looking at the chairs one by one, as if this was a hard decision to make. Claire indicated no preference for her sitting anywhere. She really was decided not to indicate anything one way or the other.

Finally, Kaia pulled the chair right in front of her and settled her backpack next to her. She pulled out her notebook and her pencil case, opened it and settled a pen over an empty page. Claire watched every one of her moves closely, by Kaia gave no signs of being unnerved by it at all.

“Okay,” she said, once she was ready. “So how do you want to go about this?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

“Oh, so now you care about what I expect from you?”

Claire hoped that Jack had been there to bear witness to the fact that she hadn’t been the first to throw a passive-aggressive comment.

“No, I care about finishing this project so you can stop talking to me, like you obviously want to do.”

Kaia huffed and glanced up at the ceiling, shaking her head slightly.

“I can’t believe that you’re being so…”

“Glasses of water!” Jack announced, walking in with a platter as if he was a waiter in a restaurant. “I got your glasses of water right here!” He settled them next to each of them and picked up the dirty glass Claire had used for her juice. “Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be back with your sandwiches.”

He left them alone once more, but the bickering that they had started died down with his presence. Kaia sighed deeply and remained silent until Jack was out of the picture. Claire kept looking at her, simply because, as much as she hated to admit it, Kaia’s very presence still acted like a magnet on her. She even looked adorable when she was angry; Claire couldn’t even handle how much…

When Kaia caught her staring, Claire pinched her nose and pretended to be lost in thought.

“Okay.” She sighed. “So how do you start writing?”

Kaia bit the inside of her cheek and swallowed. Claire had to wonder if she was resisting the urge to say something angry again.

“I… usually start with an image of something I find pretty,” she explained. “And then I just… I go from there.”

“So what images come to mind when I say the word ‘December’?”
“I don’t know.” Kaia toyed with her pen. “Snow? Christmas?”

“Very original.”

Claire didn’t mean to sound so sarcastic but it just… came out that way. Kaia rolled her eyes.

“What do you think about when you hear ‘December’?” she challenged her.

“Death.”

“Wow.”

Claire was about to ask her what exactly she meant by that, but Jack reappeared with the same platter as before. He hadn’t just prepared a sandwich, but a whole dozen of them, cut in triangles and without the crust.

“Alright, there you go, sandwiches!” he said, setting the plate right in the middle of the table. “PB and J, truly the best combo. Hey, Claire, remember that time when Uncle Cas made us PB and J sandwiches every day for a whole month so we could take to school? You traded yours with Amber Larson for lip gloss.”

Claire suddenly was second-guessing his decision to keep Jack around for this.

“Hey, Jack, don’t you have more homework to do, something else to study? Like, don’t you need to be working on your own thing for the Inksters?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m actually Skyping with Alexis later today.”

“Really?” Kaia asked. “Nice, tell her I say hi.”

It took every inch of Claire’s will power not to roll her eyes at that comment.

“Will do,” Jack promised, but as soon as those words left his mouth, his smile became a little tenser and he threw a nervous glance in Claire’s direction.

“Yeah. Hi from me too,” she said, trying to sound casual. She wasn’t sure how successful she was at that.

“Okay.” Jack stood up and laughed awkwardly. “I think I’ll just leave you girls to work.”

“Thank you, Jack.”

“If you need anything tell me.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Claire repeated, a little tenser.

This time, Jack took the hint and finally left.

“Isn’t he acting a little… weird?” Kaia asked.

“You mean, weirder than usual?”

It wasn’t her intention to make Kaia laugh and she would have bet anything it wasn’t Kaia’s intention to laugh. But it happened: Kaia let out a soft, brief chuckle and the sound sent a shiver down Claire’s spine. Her lips twitched involuntarily and before she realized, he was smirking at Kaia like she had so many times before.
The moment lasted the three seconds it took them to catch themselves and remember they were supposed to be mad at each other. Claire reached for her glass of water and Kaia lowered her eyes to her notebook and they silently agreed to pretend that hadn’t happened at all.

It was easier than have to deal with what the fact that it did happen. It was easier than to think what that would mean for the two of them.

“So.” Claire cleared her throat. “I think we should like… write.”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s a good idea.”

It wasn’t a good idea. If only because when they were sniping at each other, they had some sort of outlet for the tension building up. Now that they were supposed to be in silence and write, Claire suddenly became hyperaware of every single one of Kaia’s movements: the pen scratching on the paper, the way she chewed the tip of it as she tried to come up with another word, the way she tugged at her own hair. On more than one occasion, she caught herself staring at Kaia’s lips and remembering that day underneath the pouring rain, how soft they’d felt…

“Did you need anything?” Kaia asked, with an eyebrow crooked.

“No.” Claire grabbed her glass of water and downed half of it without stopping to breathe.

She looked down at her blank page and sighed. She couldn’t even begin to think on what to write on it. December was the worst month, not just because it reminded her of her mother’s death, but just… in general. Everything was cold and dead and sterile white. It didn’t matter how many trees and wreaths people hanged around, it simply kept being December and it kept being unbearably horrible.

Maybe she should just write about how much December sucked. It would be a bleak read, but then, Claire’s mood had been bleak for weeks. She placed the pen against the paper, but the words just wouldn’t come. For starters, she wasn’t even sure what she wanted to write. A story? A portrait? An essay on why December was the worst ever?

Perhaps it wasn’t working because all she really wanted to do was stare at Kaia. Unlike her, she didn’t seem to have a problem: her pen slid through the paper with such grace and calm, her letters cursive and pretty, her eyes shining with inspiration. It really wasn’t fair. It really wasn’t fair that Claire could imagine her perfectly sitting in a bench underneath the snow, wrapped in a scarf and a hat, laughing as the snowflakes fell on the tip of her nose.

It wasn’t fair that was what she started writing, because it was the only image that came to her mind. Of course, she wasn’t going to read it out loud. Before she even finished the first sentence, she was of half a mind to rip the paper and burn it on the stove. It was going to be a hassle to clean up the ashes, but it was better than it getting read by anyone other than herself.

She stretched her hand to absentmindedly grab a sandwich…

Her fingers grazed Kaia’s.

She pulled her hand back as if she had been burned. Her heartbeat was racing even before she raised her eyes to meet Kaia’s. They were shining bright, as if she was about to cry.

“I can’t do this,” she muttered. She stood up and strode away from the table, like a breeze.

Claire’s astonishment lasted long enough for her body to react on its own without her permission. By the time her mind caught up, she had already stood up to follow her.
“Kaia…”

“I can’t!” Kaia repeated.

She walked around the living room, like a caged mountain lion. She headed for the door, but then realized she had left her backpack on the living room. But going back for it meant having to walk past Claire, so instead she stood with her back against the door, as if she was ready to run away from the house without her coat or her stuff.

Claire just stood like a tree, not sure what to do or say anymore. It was as if her heart had been frozen since the moment she’d seen that post of Kaia with Alexis, but now that she was seeing her so upset, it was thawing. And all her anger and all her sadness and all the warm, fuzzy feelings she had whenever she was with Kaia came flowing back to her and made her weak at the knees.

But her throat was closed and once more, she found herself staring wordlessly at her.

Goddammit, she had blown it.

“Can’t you just talk to me?” Kaia said, so softly it was almost like an arrow that went straight to Claire’s heart. “Just… talk to me for two seconds. Can you do that?”

Claire wasn’t sure she could do that, but she guessed she owed it to Kaia to try.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing that came to her mind. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I disappointed you. I’m sorry I wasn’t who you thought I was or that I didn’t do what you expected me to, but I don’t know what you want from me now. You’ve clearly moved on.”

She wished she hadn’t said the last part as soon as the words left her lips. Kaia laughed bitterly and ran her fingers through her hair.

“You really think that I would move on that easily? You really think I would just…?”

Her voice trailed off. She took in a shuddering breath and looked away from Claire.

“Look, I know I came on too strong. I know I probably freaked you out. But I just wish that you have talked to me instead of just… ghosting me like that.”

Claire stared at her, baffled.

“I ghosted you?” she repeated. “Kaia, I… I was scared of coming on too strong. I was waiting for you to give me some sort of signal. Shoot me a text, I don’t know. You were the one who went radio silent first!”

Kaia’s eyes shot open wide and her jaw hang slack, the very image of surprise. Claire should have known there that there was some error of communication going on there, but Kaia just raised her hands as if to defend herself form Claire’s accusations.

“So you’re just gonna tell me you never read my letter?”

Claire had to give it to her. It was really hard to stay mad when she was so completely and utterly confused.

“What letter?” she asked.

“Like you don’t know.”
“No, Kaia, I don’t know,” Claire replied, her tone bursting with irritation. “I assure you, I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about right now. So if you would just…”

Kaia blinked several times, in disbelief.

“After our date, I wrote you a letter. I told you just what a great time I had and how much I liked you and… everything I liked about you,” she explained. “How you made me feel safe and cared for and how the way you looked at me just…”

She couldn’t go on. Claire’s body once again had moved out of its own volition and somehow she was standing right in front of Kaia. She wondered if she should back off a little, but the rational part of her brain had stopped working a long time ago.

Before she did anything else, however, she needed Kaia to know the truth.

“I didn’t get any letter.”

“You… you didn’t?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

It came out like the softest breath, but it felt like something broke with it. Like a cord too tense or a glass that kept them apart.

Claire’s heart was beating so hard and fast now that it drowned out everything else, every sound or thought. She planted her hands on the door at each side of Kaia’s head and leaned over towards her.

Her lips were feverishly hot, but also tense and unyielding. Claire allowed herself a second for her mind to catch up before she pulled away. Kaia was staring at her, breathing heavily, her body pressed tightly against the door.

“Kaia?” Claire asked, softly. “If you don’t want to talk to me again, that’s fine. But I’m telling you the truth. I never got that letter.”

Kaia lifted her gaze… and suddenly, there was nothing left to say. Her hands were on Claire’s cheek and she didn’t have any time to prepare for what followed. That was why Kaia’s kiss knocked the air out of her completely, why she barely had time to put her arms around her when Kaia stepped closer to her. Her knees felt weak, but she held Kaia up against her, barely realizing she was lifting her up from the floor. She just wanted to get lost in her, in her breath that tasted like peanut butter, in the sensation of her fingers petting her hair…

Kaia pulled back way too soon for Claire’s liking.

“Wait… but if you didn’t get it… what happened to it?”

“What happened to what…?” Claire asked, dizzily.

“The letter!”

“Oh, yes, the letter.” Claire closed her eyes and forced herself to focus. “I don’t know. Maybe I just missed it. Did you slip it in my locker or something?”

“No. I gave it to your brother. He told me he’d give it you.”
Claire put Kaia down as delicately as she could. It wasn’t an easy feat with the way her hands were suddenly trembling.

“Jack!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “Can you come down here for a second, please?”
There were very few times in Jack Kline’s life when he wished he could be somebody else. In general, he felt very comfortable in his skin and he was more than thankful to have the life he had, with his family and friends and all the other things he loved. Sometimes, of course, when the occasional awkward interaction happened, he experimented that sensation that others described as "wanting the earth to open up and swallow him whole". Though, to him, it felt more like a pull on his stomach, like the desire to have wings and be away from whatever was happening that was making him feel like running away.

And he had never, ever, in his life, felt is viscerally and desperately than he walked down the stairs after Claire called him and briefly met her eyes. They looked like steel daggers sinking into him and Jack didn't need anyone to tell him that his sister was furious. He'd seen her righteous fury plenty of times in his life, but he'd never thought it'd be so terrifying to be on the receiving end of it.

He stopped a few steps before he reached the end of the stairs, with every instinct he possessed screaming at him to run. He still forced himself to remain where he was, swallowing lightly.

Castiel was right. He'd made this mess, and now he had to face the consequences.

"Umh... y-yes?" he asked, still wanting to pretend for a moment that he didn't know what this was about.

"Come here," Claire said, beckoning him to get closer.

"I'm... I'm fine, thanks."

Claire tilted her head at him, her lips twitching as if she was containing the urge to scream. Kaia stood behind her, also staring at Jack, but her expression was more curious and confused than angry.

"So, Kaia was telling me that right before the Thanksgiving break, she gave you a letter for me?" Claire said. Her calm demeanor reminded Jack of the stillness in the air before a thunder roared and a tempest started pouring down.

"Oh." Jack cleared his throat and closed his eyes for a moment. "Umh... y-yeah, she... she did."

"Oh, she did?" Claire repeated. She looked at Kaia over her shoulder, with an arched eyebrow. "Well, that's funny. Did you forget to give it to me?"

Jack opened his mouth and closed it again. His knees were trembling and suddenly, he couldn't look at Claire in the eye anymore. His mixed emotions (the shame of what he'd done, the fear of his sister's anger and Kaia's disappointment) were making him as nauseous as the spiked punch on Ben's party had. He lowered his gaze and bit the inside of his cheek.

This was it. This was the moment of truth. He had to confess and accept the consequences of his actions.

"I... I..." he stammered.

And he couldn't do it. He was a coward. He realized he was a coward and that he was acting as cowardly as it was possible in his current situation.

He still couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth. It was just so bad and he could take Claire being
angry with him. He could take her thinking he was an idiot. But he couldn't take her disappointment if he told her just how selfish and petty he really was.

So he lied. Again.

"I lost it."

"You lost it?!

Jack stepped backwards so quickly he almost stumbled on the steps.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I must... I must have dropped it somewhere! I didn't have it when I came home and then..."

He couldn't keep talking. One, because his own words came jumbled and confused out of his mouth. And second, because Claire had taken a step towards him, her eyes sparkling and her hands curled up into fists.

"And you couldn't tell me that from the beginning?!

And that was the moment that Jack decided to give into his most abject cowardice and fled.

"Jack!" Claire roared behind him. "Why didn't you tell me...? Come back here!"

"I'm sorry!" Jack shouted, even as he ran down the hallway in a futile attempt to save his life. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Claire! Claire, wait!"

Jack sprinted past both him and Claire's bedroom. He wasn't thinking rationally, because if he had, he probably would have hidden himself in the bathroom and waited until Claire had calmed down... which could've taken a couple of days, so maybe that wasn't the soundest plan. Instead, he went directly towards the door of the only person in he house who could save him now.

"Cas!" he called, desperately pounding on his uncle's studio's door. "Uncle Cas, help me!"

"Oh, no, don't you dare getting him involved in this!" Claire said, pointing at him with an accusing finger as she marched towards him. Kaia followed her a few steps behind, her eyes and mouth wide open, as if she was looking for something to say, but couldn't quite figure out what. "You come here and...!"

To Jack's relief, the studio's door open.

"What's all this noise?" Castiel asked. Jack scooted down to walk underneath his arms and, even though he was almost as tall as his uncle, he hid behind him as if that would prevent Claire from seeing where he went. "What's going on?"

What followed was a little confusing, because Jack, Claire and Kaia all started talking at the same time. Jack wasn't even sure what he was saying, just variants of: "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to...!" while Claire tried to get past Castiel while shouting something about how she was going to strangle Jack. He wasn't even sure what Kaia was saying, except for Claire's name over and over.

"Alright, that's enough!" Castiel screamed, immediately shutting all three of them up. He looked at Jack over his shoulder. "Is this about the letter?"

"Oh, my God, you knew about it too?!" Claire threw her hands in the air. "Did everyone but me
"Claire, I know you must be angry, but I'm going to need you to calm down for two seconds," Castiel told her. "You need to hear what your brother has to say."

Claire let out a frustrated huff, but she stepped backwards, crossing her arms over her chest. Her glare was once again fixed on Jack.

Jack swallowed loudly as Castiel looked at him. Castiel knew the truth and Jack couldn't say he had lied (again, to cover up his original lie) without making everything worse. He took a deep breath.

"I... I'm really sorry," he said. His eyes were burning and he knew instinctively he was on the edge of bursting into tears. He forced himself to keep it together. "Claire, I'm sorry. I... made a mistake and... I'm sorry. I just..."

"Don't just apologize to me," Claire said, sharply. She slowly turned towards Kaia, who was looking alternatively at each twin.

"Right." Jack dared to cross the studio's doorway, keeping one eye on Claire, but she didn't unfold her arms to try and reach for him, so that was a good sign. Jack focused on Kaia. "I'm sorry, Kaia. Your letter..."

"No. Hey. It's fine," Kaia interrupted him before he could say another word. She smiled, and though it looked a little forced, it seemed to Jack that she was trying to keep the peace. "It really is. It was... it was a really cheesy letter anyway."

"Nonsense, you're a great writer," Claire intervened. She turned to Jack and pointed a finger at him. "You're taking on all of my chores. You hear me, Jack-Ass? All of them!"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Jack lowered his gaze. "All of them."

"And I get the car exclusively for a month!"

"Yes..."

"Make it two months," Castiel suggested.

"Two months, yes!" Claire agreed. "You can't even look at the car for two months!"

Jack sneaked a glance at Castiel, who simply tilted his head at him. Jack had the terrible impression that Castiel knew, just knew, so he looked away again.

"Yes. Two months."

"Good." Claire finally stepped back, raising her chin. "You better not do anything that could hurt Kaia again."

That disconcerted Jack slightly. He had thought Claire was going to be furious because he had caused her so much angst and trouble. It'd never occurred to him she'd be angry on Kaia's behalf.

Still, he nodded demurely and with one last puff as if to mark her words, Claire finally stopped glaring at him to focus on Kaia.

"I am so sorry about all of this mess," she said, extending her hands towards her.

"It's fine," Kaia assured her. The smile she showed Claire was far more effortless than the one she'd
given Jack. She grabed Claire's hands and moved closer to her. "It doesn't matter anymore."

There were a few seconds of silence until Castiel cleared his throat.

"So, Kaia, are you staying for dinner?"

"Well, I'll have to ask Meg, but I'm sure she'll say it's okay."

"We're just gonna go downstairs now and finish the... things for the club," Claire added.

"Very well." Castiel nodded. "You girls do that."

Claire didn't even turn to look at Jack as she and Kaia walked away. Jack watched them leave and noticed how Claire placed a protective arm around Kaia's shoulder to pull her closer to her.

"Well, Jack," Castiel said, snapping his attention back. "I hope you learned you lesson."

"Yes, sir," Jack muttered.

Castiel gave him a half smirk that Jack wasn't sure he deserved and tousled his hair.

"Don't look so bleak. It could've been much worse."

He closed his studio's door, leaving Jack with the uneasy sensation that despite all evidence of the contrary, this wasn't quite over for him.

But a couple of hours later, when Castiel ordered him to go downstairs and find out if the girls were hungry, Jack found Claire and Kaia on the couch together, tangled in each other's arms. They sat up suddenly when they heard him coming down, their faces flustered and their hairs tangled up and messy. Claire pulled Kaia up on his lap and turned to Jack with a defiant eyebrow arched up.

"You needed anything?" she asked sharply, in a tone that implied she wasn't quite over being mad at him. Jack figured he deserved it.

"Uh... Cas is gonna make dinner. Are you done writing?"

"Oh," Kaia said. She started giggling and hid her face in Claire's neck.

Claire also chuckled. "Oh, shit, right. We were supposed to be doing that."

Jack didn't understand what was so funny about it or what had distracted them enough that they'd forgotten. But he smiled at them, and figured that, for now, he should leave things as they were.

He definitely didn't want to make them worse.

"Thank you very much for dinner, Mr. Novak. It was really good."

Castiel smiled at Kaia. Claire figured it was nice to have someone who complimented his cooking without any ulterior motives, but then again, Kaia had been charming all through dinner: talking about her writing and what books she was reading and wanted to get around reading eventually. Castiel had really connected with that and it had almost made out for the fact Jack had barely even
spoken a word.

Claire was still irritated, and of course she planned on using the leverage she got at every chance while she could. For example, she glared at him briefly and Jack immediately sprung to his feet and started picking up the dishes without another word.

It was hard not to feel bad for him when he looked like a kicked puppy, though. Claire decided she was going to give him the cold shoulder for a couple days more and then start treating him normally again.

"I'm gonna drive Kaia home, is that okay?" she asked Castiel.

"Of course," he said. "But be careful. It's very dark outside. Come back as soon as you drop her off."

She helped Kaia put on her coat and then offered her hand for her to grab. It felt so warm that Claire started wondering what gloves were good for anyway. As long as she had a pretty girl's hand to hold on to, she didn't need them.

Kaia started laughing as soon as they climbed inside of the car.

“What’s so funny?” Claire asked.

“I just… I can’t believe we almost fought over something this stupid,” she answered between chuckles. “We almost… oh, this was really dumb.”

Claire didn’t think it was dumb. Well, it was dumb that she thought Kaia was suddenly mad at her for no reason and it was a little dumb that she hadn’t gathered the courage to ask her point blank what the problem was. She’d just assumed the problem was her, Claire, but then, that was a bit of her issue to deal with.

“It was dumb,” she agreed as she turned on the engine. “God, I still want to kill Jack.”

“No, don’t. He’s your brother and I would hate it if you fought with him because of me.”

Claire eyed her as much the attention the road demanded from her allowed her to.

“What?” Kaia asked, shifting in her seat as if she was uncomfortable.

“You need to stop being this cute. It’s not healthy for me.”

Kaia laughed again and shook her head.

Snowflakes started falling outside of their window, spiraling down and landing on the frosted glass. Claire turned on the wipers and the radio. A cheesy Christmas carol came in, something about being home for Christmas. Claire rolled her eyes and went to change the station but Kaia stopped her. She grabbed Claire’s hand, intertwining their fingers together and squeezing softly.

And frankly, Claire couldn’t argue with that.

“Why do you hate Christmas?” Kaia asked.

“I don’t hate Christmas. It makes me sad.”

“Why?”

“You really want to hear about it?” Claire said, shaking her head. “It’s not a very cheerful story.”
Kaia put her elbow on the dashboard and leaned her chin on her free hand, as if to indicate that Claire had her undivided attention. Claire scoffed and shook her head.

But she told her. She told her because it was easy talking to Kaia.

She told her about her mother’s long sickness, about how she couldn’t even remember a time when Kelly wasn’t vomiting and pale. She couldn’t remember her brunette hair, which looked just like Jack’s in the pictures they had of when she was better, because Kelly had lost all of it by the time she died. She always knew that Mom was a fragile person who had to go to the hospital once a month and then once a week. Castiel came over and dropped her off at the hospital and then took Claire and Jack to the arcade or the park, somewhere they could get distracted from what was going on.

But they could never fool them.

“Do you think mommy is going to die?” Jack asked her one time. “Are we gonna have to go live with daddy if she does?”

They were maybe four years old. Death was a concept they were still learning to grasp and Jack’s eyes looked too wide and too scared.

Claire didn’t want to think about it. She wanted to go back to drawing a knight in a horse because Mom had asked her to and she thought it would cheer her up, but her horse looked more like an oversized dog with long legs and her knight was far too small.

“Of course not. The doctors will make her better.”

Jack hadn’t bought that for a second.

“You’re lying. Like Uncle Cas,” he’d accused her.

Claire had dropped the pencil with frustration. Her knight was a bust and she suddenly wanted to cry, because she couldn’t draw it, because mom was spending another night alone at the hospital, because Jack was asking question she didn’t want to answer.

“Well, I don’t know, Jack!” she’d screamed.

Jack’s eyes had become bright with tears and he’d escaped the room sobbing.

Claire had to take a few seconds to compose herself before she followed him. She found him in his bed, covering her head with his pillow. She climbed next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t know if mom’s going to die,” she’d admitted. Her voice was breaking, but Jack was already crying and if she started too, it was likely they never were going to stop. “I hope she doesn’t. But I don’t know.”

Jack had slowly stopped shaking, but his eyes still looked puffy when he finally raised his head.

“Would you tell me if you knew?”

“Yes,” Claire had said, decidedly. “And you would tell me. We’d never lie to each other. We’re a team.”

Jack had looked at her in that way that sometimes made Claire think he could read her mind and then he’d nodded. He’d extended his pinky and Claire had hooked hers to it, because that was the most sacred way of sealing a pact four-years-old knew.
Downstairs, Castiel had called them to let them know he’d fixed them some PB and J sandwiches.

“The next Christmas I tore down all the decorations at school ‘cause they reminded Jack of mom’s death,” Claire told Kaia. “That’s when my ‘difficult’ behavior started.”

“Wow,” Kaia muttered.

“Yeah.”

They drove in silence through the silent neighborhood. Claire suddenly regretted having soured their reconciliation with such a bummer of a story.

“I wish my parents had died like that,” Kaia said, whispering.

Claire stared at her, surprised. Her mom had been sick for a long time and suffered silently all the way through it, who the hell would wish that?

Kaia must have guessed what she was thinking, because she immediately retracted herself:

“I mean, I… of course I wish they hadn’t died at all. But if they had to, I wish I at least knew they were going to die. I wish I had time to say goodbye to them.” She made a pause. “We had a small grocery store. One day this guy walked in with a gun and started demanding they give him the money from the register…”

“Kaia,” Claire said, because Kaia’s voice was breaking and it really wasn’t necessary for her to go on. Claire could imagine the rest.

“I was there with them,” Kaia said, her voice now a broken whisper. “Mom told me to hide behind the counter. I… I heard her scream when the guy shot my dad. And then her.”

Claire’s hand tightened around the wheel.

“Did they catch him?”

“Yes. He’s serving life.”

So that was a small consolation.

“That’s where the PTSD and the night terrors come from,” Kaia concluded.

Claire was so distracted by the story she almost didn’t realize they were in Miss Masters’ block. She stopped the car and slowly let the engine die. She also turned off the radio, because the Christmas music had been jarring for a while.

“I’m sorry,” she said, because as stupid and useless as it was, it was the only thing she could think of saying at that point.

Kaia shook her head.

“You know, I never told anybody. I mean… obviously Meg knows. And my shrink. All the shrinks I’ve seen over the years, they know. But I’ve never told… like…”

“Yeah.” Claire grabbed her hand again. “I know.”

She brushed a curl from Kaia’s forehead aside.
“Why is it so easy talking to you?” Kaia whispered.

Claire startled. She had been wondering the exact same thing, but truth be told, she didn’t think the answer was all that important. It was just like that. The reasons didn’t really matter. She left a peck on Kaia’s knuckles.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend?”

She was not expecting to just blurting it out like that, but once she did, she found it hard to regret it. Especially because it pulled Kaia from the brink of tears and made her open her eyes with surprise.

“Are you… are you serious?”

“I probably should’ve asked you out on another date first,” Claire reflected. “But I don’t want it to be any more misunderstandings.”

Kaia let out a strange sound, as if she didn’t know it was appropriate to laugh or not. Claire thought maybe it was. She really needed to learn to have better timing, but it wasn’t all that important when Kaia was nodding wordlessly and Claire’s heart pounded so hard against her ribcage she was sure Kaia could hear it.

“Yes?”

“Yes,” Kaia confirmed.

The snowflakes had become an all-out storm. The night was grim and dark and filled with ghosts of heartbreaking memories.

But it didn’t really matter when it was warm inside the car and against Kaia’s lips.
December turned out to be a rather lonely month for Jack.

He always thought time in December moved rather differently than it did during other months. September was always a whirlwind of activity with school starting back again and the summer months were long and fast, the sun shining down on them endlessly.

December also felt endless, but in the way Sunday afternoons felt endless. The nights stretched and stretched and the few hours of daylight they usually got weren’t enough for him to feel revitalized and energetic as he did every other day. The cold and the snow made it hard to leave the cozy, warm nest of blankets every morning, everyone was low on energy, just waiting for the year to end, and Jack was reminded at every turn of his mother.

Claire claimed that the only Christmas she remembered when Kelly was still alive was the one they spent in the hospital with her. It had technically been a Christmas Eve, but they’d exchanged gifts and sung carols all the same. The following morning (though it was still dark outside, so dark it seemed like the light was never coming back), Jack had woken up agitated to see Castiel sitting by his side on the bed, shaking him softly to wake him up. His mouth was tightened and his eyes were red with tears.

He hadn’t needed to say anything.

“It’s mom, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Castiel had confirmed, wrapping his arms around him and holding him very, very tight. “I am sorry, Jack. I’m so sorry.”

Jack never really understood why he’d said that. It wasn’t his fault Kelly had died.

And yes, that was a sad memory. But Jack had another one. He didn’t know how old exactly he was, but it had to be of the previous year, because Kelly was still alive and healthy, with all her hair still intact. He remembered being woken by the sound of a voice singing. He’d walked down the hallway and come down the stairs, following that pristine, happy voice. In the grey morning light, there was their mother, hanging decorations from a big, green pine tree. She’d lifted her head and upon seeing him, she’d smiled at him.

That was the end of it. He didn’t remember if his mom had said anything or if she’d gone to hug them or if they had woken Claire up so she could see the tree. Sometimes he was half-convinced it was a dream, but even if it was, it was too beautiful to just toss it away. Maybe that image of his mom decorating the tree was the reason he didn’t feel any particular animosity towards Christmas and everything it represented. He let Castiel and Claire think so, though, because he knew it made them sad. Their Christmas celebrations were always muted and preceded by a visit to the cemetery that did nothing for their mood.

He wondered perhaps if having something to look forwards to at the end of December would make the month less bleak for him. For now, however, the best thing he could do was keep busy: finish all his homework, clean up his room to find clothes and things he didn’t use anymore that he could donate to charity, find new books or movies to entertain himself.

What else he could do? Castiel was spending so much time in his studio lately that Jack and Claire took turns to go check up on him.
“I am… I am very sorry, children,” he’d say, rubbing his eyes and pulling from the shirt Jack was sure he hadn’t taken off in three days or so. “I… can you make dinner for yourselves tonight? Something healthy, please.”

“Yes, of course,” Jack assured him every time. “How about… tomato soup? I can bring some up for you as well.”

“Thank you,” Castiel sighed. “I just really need to finish this chapter.”

Jack didn’t know if he was burning through chapters rather quickly or if he had been working on the same chapter for weeks on end. Either option seemed plausible at that point.

The only days when they actually knew for sure that Castiel was alive was Thursdays, when he actually made the effort of taking a shower, shaving and getting dressed to go show up for the Inksters. Jack was more convinced than ever that coercing him into participating in the club was the right call, especially because he always seemed to light up whenever he was around Miss Masters.

“Oh, that trench coat looks good on you,” she commented on one occasion.

It was a long, tan trench coat that Claire and Jack had on repeated occasions tried to get rid of by tossing it in the charity boxes, but Castiel consistently rescued it arguing that it was still useful. They had no explanation for his attachment to it and Jack certainly couldn’t understand why Miss Masters considered it looked good.

“This old thing?” Castiel said, approaching her desk with two steaming plastic cups of coffee.

“Yeah, makes you look like a detective in a film noir movie. Out to catch the bad guys and get the dames.”

“Well, if you have any information about the Maltese Falcon, miss…” Castiel said, taking a step closer to her. Miss Masters chuckled. Her fingers lingered on Castiel’s for a second when he handed her the cup.

Jack waited by the classroom’s door, feeling very uncomfortable about eavesdropping on that conversation, but also not quite knowing what else to do. The Inksters’ meeting was supposed to start in two minutes, so waiting outside might have been his best option… but also he was scared that if he made any movement, they would realize he was there and it would make it even more awkward for everybody.

In the end, Miss Masters ended up noticing he was there.

“Hello, Jack,” she said. Castiel startled and looked a little flustered, but Miss Masters acted very normal. “Come on in. I’m sure the others will be here soon.”

Jack straightened his shoulders and managed to smile at them.

“Thank you, Miss Masters. Hi, Uncle Cas.”

So that was a thing that was happening. Castiel and Miss Masters had certainly become very close to one another and it was…

“Why are you saying it like it’s a bad thing?” Claire asked him exasperatedly when he brought it up at lunch the following day. “Weren’t you the one who was desperately trying to get them to hook up?”
The possibility hadn’t even crossed Jack’s mind until she brought it up.

“Do you think they are?” he asked her. “Like… do you think they’re seeing each other and Cas hasn’t told us for… some reason?”

Claire’s mouth twisted in the way it always did when she was getting extremely exasperated.

“First of all, Castiel barely leaves the house, so I don’t exactly see him sneaking around to make out with our English professor,” she said. “And second, if he was doing that, we would know, because he sucks at keeping secrets.”

“That’s not true. There was one time when he…” Jack started saying, because the example he was thinking of (an occasion when Castiel had tried to throw them a surprise birthday party) had ended up with them discovering the secret three days before the actual event. Jack raised a finger to indicate Claire to wait while he tried to think up another occasion. “Well, there was this other time…”

Kaia came to their table before Jack could come up with a secret Castiel had successfully kept from them. As always, Claire’s face lit up with excitement as she moved to make space for Kaia and the two exchanged a quick kiss on the lips.

Ever since they had kissed and made up (quite literally), Kaia always had lunch with them. She also spent a lot of time at their home lately or Claire (using her newly acquired exclusive rights over the car) would go to hers. Claire had made it a point to announced that they were dating “officially” now so that Jack and Castiel wouldn’t “embarrassed her” by inquiring what the situation was at any given moment.

Jack wasn’t sure about the specificities of “official” and “unofficial” dating, but he figured it was best not to ask.

“What are you talking about?” Kaia asked them, as she slid a hand down the table to hold Claire’s, probably.

“Do you think our uncle and Miss Masters are seeing each other in secret?” Jack asked, which immediately prompted Claire to roll her eyes.

“Ignore him, please.” She grabbed Kaia’s milk carton and opened it for her. That was also a thing that Jack didn’t understand: Kaia was perfectly capable of opening her own cartons, but she seemed to smile a little wider when Claire did it.

“Actually, we have an ongoing bet with Ben and Patience about if and when they’re going to get together,” Kaia replied. “It’s kinda fun.”

“Really?” Claire tilted her head. “How much money are we talking about exactly? And how do I get in on that?”

“You can’t just bet on people’s personal life!” Jack said, scandalized. “That’s immoral!”

“And how is it any different from you trying to manipulate Castiel into dating Miss Masters?” Claire pointed out.

“I wasn’t… I’m not trying to manipulate him!” Jack argued. “And even if I was, I’m doing it for altruistic reasons, not monetary gain. So it’s totally different.”

“Uh-huh.”
“Sure, Jack,” Kaia said, though she sounded as skeptic as Claire. “But to answer your question, no, I don’t think they are. I mean… there’s like a vibe there, definitely, but I don’t know if they’d acted upon it.”

“A vibe? Like, a good vibe?”

“Yeah, I mean… they clearly like each other,” Kaia continued with a shrug. “They might be waiting until we all graduate so it won’t be awkward.”

Jack reflected silently upon this consideration. It’d never occurred to him that it would be awkward for them to date while Miss Masters was still their teacher. Of course, there had to be rules in place for teachers dating parents and things like that. Who would know about them? Mr. Winchester, maybe?

“Alright, you keep coming up with those schemes of yours,” Claire said, pushing the last piece of hot dog in her mouth. “Kaia and I are going to go somewhere and do something normal.”

“Oh, where are we going?” Kaia asked, but she still grabbed Claire’s hand and let her pulled her up to her feet. She stumbled a little and ended up clashing against Claire, but neither of them seemed to mind.

“It’s a surprise,” Claire promised her. “You’ll see.”

Kaia waved at Jack as they passed him by, but Claire didn’t even turn to look at him. Jack half-heartedly waved back, but by then they had both left the cafeteria.

That was another thing that happened a lot lately. Claire insisted on walking with Kaia between classes and sometimes she accompanied her to the library instead of having lunch with Jack.

It was fine. It really was. It was great that the two could find each other even after Jack’s colossal betrayal. It was amazing that they were both still talking to him and that he had escaped Claire’s rage with only his ego bruised.

But at the same time… well, Claire had had girlfriends before and Jack had gone through lonesome periods before. It wasn’t anything he could handle.

And besides, he could just hang out with Patience, Ben and Alexis when Claire and Kaia were out together. Well, Patience and Alexis were very worried about their grades, so hanging out with them was more like having a sort of informal homework group for either the Inksters or for actual homework.

Spending time with Ben was another beast entirely. Jack wasn’t sure exactly when he studied, or if he did at all, but Ben still managed to maintain a steady average of A’s and B’s. Also, for how often he got in trouble for making jokes during class, it was amazing that he managed to avoid detention every other day.

“So I said ‘Mr. Walker, you can take away my phone, but you will never take away… my FREEDOM!’.” Ben raised his can of Dr. Pepper over his head, as if expecting a standing ovation or a chuckle from Jack. He managed to offer the second, even though he wasn’t quite sure what the joke was supposed to be. “I mean, I thought it was relevant since we were talking about medieval times and whatnot. But Mr. Walker did not appreciate it. So now I have to turn in a factual report about the life and times of William Wallace. Joke’s on him, though, I already know lots of things about William Wallace.”

Jack nodded attentively while Ben chugged down the rest of his energy drink. It always seemed like
Ben was talking at a hundred words per minute and his cheery attitude kept him warm even as they were sitting outside on the football field’s bleachers in the middle of December. Jack only caught half of Ben’s jests and references, but it was okay. Having a friend who was a boy was different. Jack could ask him some stuff he would feel to embarrass to talk about with his sister or any of the girls.

“Hey, Ben, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot!” Ben told him, as he opened a second Dr. Pepper can and began sipping from it.

“How would you go about approaching a girl you liked?”

Ben choked on his drink. He hit his chest with an open palm for a moment and then assured Jack he was fine three times before he could actually speak.

“You, uh… you’re interested in a girl, bud?” he asked, between coughs. “I mean, are we talking about one particular girl or just… girls in general?”

“I was… thinking more… hypothetically,” Jack said, because he wasn’t about to confess he was thinking about subtly transmitting whatever advice he got from Ben on to Castiel. “Like… dating in abstract.”

“Okay.” Ben cleared his throat one last time. “So what’s the hypothetical situation?”

“Let’s say… two people are friends. And they have a good vibe. And they like each other. But for whatever reason, they just… don’t… uh, take a step further. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Ben licked his lips and remained silent for a while. “Well, there’s lots of reason why they wouldn’t go there. Like, for example… one of them is already seeing or interested in a third person?”

“No, that’s not the case here,” Jack assured him. At least he hoped it wasn’t. He’d never quite discovered what sort of relationship Miss Masters had with Mr. Winchester.

“Well… maybe one person thinks they’re getting a good vibe but the other doesn’t?” Ben suggested next. “Like… getting mixed signals. Or thinking you’re getting signals… but they’re not signals at all, or maybe you think they’re signals, but you’re not quite sure…”

“Ben, these are people, not radio stations.”

That halted Ben’s rant into an abrupt silence. His friend looked at him and then burst into laughter.

“Yeah, okay. But you know what I mean? Miscommunication happens. Maybe one of these people want to take the further step… but they don’t, because they’re not sure if the other person would be… open to that.”

“Huh,” Jack muttered. “That could be the case. So what would be the solution for that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe have them spend more time together until they realize?” Ben frowned. “Is this for a story? ‘Cause Patience was writing a slow burn Finnrey fic the other day and I honestly think she knows better how to handle these things.”

“No, no, it’s just…” Jack stammered, realizing too late he could have taken that answer and save himself a lot of embarrassment. “… just a hypothetical question.”

“Okay.” Ben took a sip from his can pensively. “So are you doing anything this weekend?”

“Yeah, actually. Claire and I are supposed to take some boxes with old clothes and care packages we
made to a homeless shelter. Well, I made the care packages, mostly.”

“Oh.” Ben blinked, as if he didn’t expect that answer, but then he smiled. “Well, I hope you have fun with that.”

“Thanks, Ben. You’re a good friend.”

He didn’t understand why Ben laughed at that.

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Turns out the charity run he was thinking about having wasn’t going to happen the way he envisioned it after all. Claire was up before noon for once (a rare occurrence for a Saturday) but when Jack knocked on her door and reminded her of it, she shook her head.

“Sorry, Jack, I totally forgot. We can go next weekend,” she said as she put on her jacket.

“But you hate going on the weekend before Christmas because there’s always so many people,” he pointed out, confused.

“Yeah, well… this time I’m gonna have to suck it up.” Claire wrapped her scarf around her neck. “I promised Kaia I was taking her to the mall for some last minute Christmas gifts shopping.”

“Oh.” Jack resisted the urge to point out that her promise to go to the shelter with him predated that and cleared his throat. “Is it like… a date?”

“Well, Meg… Miss Masters’ going to be chaperoning us, so no.”

Oh, so she was Meg now.

“Hey.” Claire finished putting on her gloves and slung her backpack over her shoulder. “You can come if you want to.”

“No, that’s fine. I already did all my Christmas shopping with the Black Friday online deals.”

“Of course you did.” Claire sighed. “Well, see you later.”

“Yeah, bye,” Jack muttered. He stayed on top of the stairs, watching as Claire’s blond curls bounced on her shoulders with every step she took and then finally disappeared out of the door.

And the moment she did, something that Ben had said came back to him.

“Come in!” Castiel said when Jack knocked on his studio’s door.

“Umh… hey!” Jack smiled at him and tried to sound very casual as he explained that Claire was going out without him. “So… I’m gonna need someone to drive me to the shelter.”

Castiel must have hit a slump in his writing, because he jumped at the chance of procrastinating.

“Very well. Just give ten minutes to shower,” he said, standing up.

“Alright!” Jack smiled. “Oh, and maybe afterwards we can go to the mall for lunch?”
Chapter 29

As a general rule, Claire didn’t like surprises. She never knew how to react to them, except for freezing up in a way that made the person giving her the surprise think that she hated it. And it was even worse if she actually hated it, because she wasn’t a good enough actress to pretend otherwise. Surprise were, in Claire’s view, incredibly overrated.

She guessed she could have made an exception for Kaia and the surprise she was keeping in her bag, but then, it was kind of fun to watch her squirm as Claire tried to take a peek.

“Come on, I just want to know what you got me!” Claire insisted, trying to look over her shoulder.

“You’re going to have to wait until Christmas!” Kaia chastised her, holding the bag close to her chest. “I mean it, Claire! Stop it!”

“Alright, alright.” Claire sat down on a bench by the fountain in the middle of the mall and put her hands up to show that she wasn’t going to try anything.

Kaia eyed her with suspicion, but she sat down next to Claire and put her bag down between her legs.

“So what did you get?” she asked, pointing at Claire’s bag.

“Oh, well, just, you know…” Claire muttered.

She dived and grabbed Kaia’s bag while she was still distracted. Kaia yelled at her and tried to jump her while Claire held it above both their heads.

“You’re insufferable!” Kaia complained.

“Yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

Kaia stood on the tip of her toes and gently pressed her lips against Claire’s. As always, it felt like the synapses in her brain went haywire and she stopped perceiving anything about the world around them. Everything that wasn’t Kaia, the softness of her skin, the taste of her lips, disappeared and Claire was fine with that. There was nothing for her there anyway.

It took her a moment to realize she had inadvertently lowered her arm and Kaia’s fingers had firmly locked on the bag, gently pulling at it while Claire was too distracted kissing her to put up any meaningful resistance.

“You play dirty,” Claire accused her, but she loosened her fingers and let Kaia take the bag back from her.

“Yeah?” Kaia said, arching an eyebrow. “What are you going to do about it?”

Claire put a hand on her cheek, intending to show her just what she thought of Kaia’s dirty tactics when a tall, lanky guy with a terrible haircut that walked past the corner of her eye caught her attention.

Not because guys generally caught her attention, obviously. It was just because she knew this particular guy with a terrible haircut.

“Jack?” she called out, taking her eyes off Kaia just to make sure.
The guy stopped on his tracks and turned around.

He was, indeed, Jack.

So that was a surprise.

“Oh!” he said, as if he was not expecting to see them there. “Hi, girls!”

To someone who didn’t know him as well as Claire did, there would be nothing strange about his demeanor, the way he smiled or waved at them. Indeed, it looked like Kaia hadn’t noticed anything, because she even smiled back at him:

“Claire said you weren’t coming!”

“Yeah, well…” Jack started.

“Girls?” another voice called behind them.

Claire turned around in time to see Miss Masters… Meg (she had insisted that Claire called her Meg while they weren’t at school) coming at them with two or three bags of her own.

“Are you done with your…? Oh. Hello, Jack.”

“Miss Masters!” Jack exclaimed, his smile growing wider. “What a completely random happenstance!”

“No, it really isn’t…” Claire tried to argue, although she wasn’t sure what exactly it was.

Jack raised a finger as if to indicate her to be quiet as he took his cellphone out of his pocket.

“What are you doing now?” Claire asked, frowning with suspicion.

“I’m telling Uncle Cas where we are!” Jack said, in the same preppy, cheerful tone as before. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to join us. Where were you going now? For lunch?”

“Umh… we were actually going to the bookstore,” Meg said. She obviously was confused at Jack’s sudden appearance, but she was trying to remain polite. Claire wanted to tell her not to bother. Jack was up to something, she could feel it in her bones.

“That’s great! Our uncle, he loves bookstores. And books,” he said clumsily.

“He’s a writer, Jack,” Claire pointed out.

Before she could ask him point blank just what the hell all of this was about, Castiel appeared around a corner and stopped on his tracks, blinking in astonishment at the cluster of people seemingly waiting for him.

And that was when Claire realized. Castiel was wearing his tan trench coat, the one Meg had mentioned she liked according to Jack. He had clearly showered, because his hair was fluffy and messy, but he hadn’t bothered to shave, probably because he thought he would be done with whatever false pretense Jack had lured him out of the house under quickly. He apparently realized he looked only halfway put together, because his eyes widened when they noticed Meg’s presence there and he unconsciously scratched at the stubble covering his cheeks.

“H-Hello,” he muttered.
“Hi,” Meg replied, as taken aback as he was.

“We’re all here now!” Jack said, trying to cover up the all-around awkwardness with cheerfulness.
“Isn’t that great? Hey, uncle Cas, the girls were just telling me they were heading for the bookstore. How about we join them and then we all have lunch together?”

“What? Oh.” Castiel closed his eyes and then opened them again. His voice sounded a little firmer when he spoke again: “That’s a nice idea, Jack, but I’m sure they don’t want us to intrude on their… outing.”

“You wouldn’t be intruding,” Meg said, speaking a little too fast. She cleared her throat. “If you, boys, want to come…” She trailed off and turned towards Kaia and Claire.

“I have no problem with it.” Kaia shrugged.

At this point, Claire really had nothing to protest. She had been the one who invited Jack in the first place and told her what mall they were going. She had been the one who gave him the tools to find them. She hadn’t expected him to turn up with Castiel in tow, but what could she say, exactly?

“Yeah, why not? Should be fun.”

And that settled the issue.

The five of them headed towards the bookstore, but Claire moved slow enough that she could grab Jack by his jacket and pull him to stay a little behind with her.

“What exactly are you playing at?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t try that on me. What is this, are you trying to be cupid again or something?”

“I’m just… you know, I just thought it would be nice to have lunch with you guys. Get Castiel out of the house a little.”

He almost sounded innocent and again, if Claire didn’t know him better, he might have been able to fool her. She continued glaring at him all the way into the bookstore.

“Hey, you said this wasn’t a date!” Jack protested.

“No, I said it was a Christmas gift shopping trip,” Claire said. She waved her arms around to show the bookstore. “Who do you think I’m buying gifts for?”

Jack gazed around and then closed his eyes.

“I’m… I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, just… just go distract him, okay?”

She huffed and walked away from Jack. The bookstore wasn’t too big, so she had no problem finding Kaia next to the poetry section. She had picked up a book and was leafing through it with excitement. Claire took note of the author to get it for Kaia’s birthday. She’d already bought her something for Christmas.

“Excuse me, miss,” Claire said, as she randomly picked a book from one of the stacks. “I was wondering if you could recommend a nice book for me?”
Kaia chuckled and that was always a treat to hear.

“Well, I think we might be able to find you something,” she said. “Let’s look this way.”

And as they locked hands together and moved through the books, Claire was satisfied that she’d managed to handle that surprise without exploding.

Miss Masters and Castiel were behind another shelf, looking around some pocket editions in a corner. Jack stopped a few steps behind them, but they seemed so enthralled on their conversation they paid no mind to him.

“… did you know that was based on a short story?” Castiel asked.

“Really?”

“Yes. It was called *The Greatest Gift* and it was written by a man who was a historian and an editor, not a writer. He said the story came to him in a dream, but he worked on it for several years.” He made a pensive pause, picking up one of the books that Miss Masters had just put down. “It wasn’t a best-seller or anything. He self-published it and gave the booklets away to his family and friends for Christmas. He said he thought the story was meant for people of all religious backgrounds.”

“Well, you know the movie was a flop too, right?” Miss Masters asked. “Critics said it was too sentimental and the studio even took a financial hit for it. The only reason it became a classic was because it became public domain, so lazy TV station decided to air it every year around this time.”

“That is very interesting,” Castiel said, nodding. Jack had the distinctive impression that he already knew everything that Miss Masters was telling him, but he still pretended to be very enthralled by what she was telling him. “It makes you think, doesn’t it? How a little, humble story can transcend the circumstances of its creation and touch the lives of some many people.”

“Oh, God, you sound like him.”

“Like who?”

“Like the angel. From the movie,” she clarified, and raised her chin at him. “Maybe I’m gonna start calling you Clarence.”

Castiel laughed and Jack figured he really didn’t need to be distracted. He thought about going to find Claire and Kaia again when they showed up, holding hands and carrying a new bag with the bookstore’s logo on it.

“Hey, we’re done here,” Claire announced. “Is it okay if we go to the food court and find a table?”

“Of course.”

“We’ll meet you there.”

The two girls left hand in hand while Castiel and Meg immediately turned their attention back to the books.

“So what were you thinking?” Miss Masters asked once they were alone again. “What are you
getting for Jack and Claire?”

“Oh. I actually already bought their gifts. I thought you were looking for something for Kaia.”

“No. I also already got her a gift.”

They went quiet for a few seconds and then chuckled between the two. Jack was about to take a step forwards when something stopped him completely in his tracks.

Castiel had stretched his hand and placed it over Miss Masters as she was about to put down the book she had in her hand. It didn’t seem like he was reaching for the same book. He’d just… wanted to touch her.

“Maybe we can stay here five more minutes,” he muttered.

“Yes. I’d like that.”

And honestly, at that point, it would have been plain rude to interrupt them.

Jack retreated through the bookshelves, eyeing the titles and authors and grabbed one at random. He went through the pages without taking any of the words in and finally put it away again. He couldn’t explain the flustered feeling in his gut or why he was so restless all of the sudden.

This was what he wanted, right? He had dragged Castiel there for that very reason, so he could spend time with Meg.

He just… he hadn’t imagined that would mean he would end up hiding among the books, completely alone and at a loss for what to do next.

He was being ridiculous. It hadn’t even been a very intimate conversation they were having, just talking about old movies and books and stuff like that. Nothing private that couldn’t be interrupted or that he should feel bad for eavesdropping on. He had to march out there and inform them that he was also heading for the food court.

Except that when he poked his head around the shelf again, Castiel and Miss Masters had disappeared.

Claire had to drop off Kaia and Miss Masters at their home, so Jack and Castiel drove alone. Castiel spent the drive smiling and humming along to the Christmas carols on the radio. Jack’s confusion must have showed up in his face, because he cleared his throat as they parked the car in the garage.

“Thank you, Jack, for insisting I came along,” he said. “It was most… invigorating.”

“No problem,” Jack said, though he still wasn’t sure what to make of his uncle’s good mood.

“I’m going to get a head start with dinner before your sister gets here. Would you like to help?”

Normally, Jack would have said yes. He would have stood in the kitchen while Castiel explained the correct way to chop the different vegetables and the time the different meats needed to be ready.

But that day in particular he just… wasn’t feeling it.
“You know what? I think I’m a little tired. I’m gonna go upstairs and take a nap.”

Castiel didn’t notice anything strange with that, because he muttered an absent-minded “very well” and headed for the kitchen still humming to himself a song Jack didn’t recognize.

A part of him almost wanted Castiel to ask him if there was anything wrong. He wasn’t sure what he would have said. Jack’s first instinct, when someone asked him that directly, was to say that everything was fine and that whoever was asking shouldn’t worry about it. He didn’t like the idea of other people worrying about him when they probably had their own issues to deal with. But sometimes, it was nice that they asked. It was nice to know someone cared.

He was being ridiculous again. Of course Claire and Castiel cared about him and they had no reason to think he was feeling a little low. Mostly because Jack had no reason to be feeling low at all. And he knew that.

That still didn’t erase the uneasy feeling in his gut that had followed them from the bookstore to the food court, where Castiel had sit next to Miss Masters and Claire had sit next to Kaia and he’d had to pull a chair close and sit at the head of the table. They had talked about the weather and school and laughed about things that Jack wasn’t sure were funny, because he’d watched the entire conversation happen as if he wasn’t a part of it.

Like he couldn’t really reach out to them. Like he really had nothing to say.

The lunch extended past the point they had all finished their meals and past the point where Jack felt comfortable. In the end, he excused himself saying he had a last minute thing he needed to buy and escaped. Except he didn’t, so he went straight to the parking lot and waited around the car. For another hour. Until his cellphone’s battery died.

But he didn’t come back.

It just… he felt so out of place. Claire had Kaia and now, seemingly, Castiel had Miss Masters. And who did he have?

He shook his head. This wasn’t a competition. Of course Castiel and Claire dated people, they had dated people in the past and that hadn’t ever changed their relationship to him.

He still felt alone and weird.

He plopped down on his bed with a sigh and watched the ceiling, trying and failing to put his thoughts in order. Trying to find something positive about the situation.

They were happy. He should be happy for them.

His cellphone chimed with the sound that indicated he had a new email. It was probably spam. He could check it later. But what if he forgot about it and it sat there unread and undeleted and…?

Claire was half-right when she said he was a neat freak. He just liked things to be orderly, was it that big of a deal?

It wasn’t spam. It was an e-card with *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* blaring and a reindeer with a red nose. Jack looked at it for several seconds, as he tried to take in the address it had come from.

Luc Novak.
He never sent those kind of things. He never called for holidays or birthdays. It was one of the reasons Claire was usually so angry at him, he just… he never did the kind of things a dad was supposed to do. Why was he sending him an e-card? Did he even remember that Kelly’s death anniversary would be soon?

Of course he remembered. He was neglectful, but he wasn’t a monster.

Jack sat down on the bed with his legs crossed, thinking. It was stupid. He’d probably mass sent it to everyone in his contacts and not given it a second thought at all. Jack wondered if Claire had received it as well or if she had blocked Luc’s e-mail years ago.

He should have done the same. Luc wasn’t a good person and they didn’t have much of a relationship to speak of as it was.

But then, it was the end of the year. It was the holidays. Wasn’t it the season to forgive and move on?

Jack wrote a message. Then deleted it. Then wrote it again. He read it three times, changed a word and hesitated with his thumb hovering over the “Send” button for several seconds.

He decided he was overthinking it. They were almost adults. They could have an adult relationship with their father.

He sent the email and read it one more time:

> Hello, dad.

_Merry Christmas!

_How you’ve been?

His heart was pounding fast as he left his phone on the table and left his room to find out if Castiel had something for him to do that would keep him busy.

Luc was probably not even going to answer after all.
Kelly’s grave sat in a corner of the cemetery, underneath an oak tree that Castiel had planted next to it when they’d buried her. Soon after her death, they’d visited the grave often, because Jack wanted to make sure it was still there. Castiel knew that Claire had taken the bus and gone there by herself many times, especially when her goth-punk phase had started. But with time, Castiel had tried to limit the visits to special occasions: birthdays or anniversaries, and only if the kids wanted to go. They invariably went every Christmas morning.

The oak tree’s branches were naked except for the few ice stalagmites that hanged from it and some snowflakes that had landed on its branches. Kelly’s gravestone was a simple one, with her name, the date of her birth and death and the simple words: “Beloved mother”.

It didn’t feel right to include any mentions to her failed marriage there.

The three stood in silence in front of the gravestone, huddling as much as they could in their black coats. Castiel felt like the appropriate thing to do would be to say a prayer or read a passage of the Bible or something. But he had lost his faith a long time ago and Jack and Claire never did show interest for those things. Instead, Castiel took a step forwards and swept the snow with a gloved hand before placing a small white rose next to the stone. Kelly’s favorites.

Claire and Jack silently imitated him.

“You know, I really hate the idea that she’s down there embalmed for all eternity,” Claire commented. “Or until the zombie apocalypse comes.”

“That’s a morbid thought,” Jack said.

“I don’t want to be embalmed,” Claire continued. “Just put me in a hole in the ground and let me rot. There’s this thing called a natural burial where they put you in a wicker coffin or a shroud…”

“Oh, my God, stop,” Jack said. “Castiel!”

“I’m partial to cremation. If you want to scatter my ashes somewhere nice, you can do that, too.” Castiel stopped, realizing too late that Jack probably wanted him to chastise Claire for speaking about those issues in a moment like that. He cleared his throat: “Of course, Kelly wanted you to have a place to come and remember her. I tried to respect her wishes.”

The conversation died with that tidbit of information. The wind blowing was freezing, but they remained where they were another moment.

“I miss her,” Jack whispered.

“Me too,” Claire agreed.

“And me.”

And really, there was not much they could say. Castiel put his hands on the twins’ shoulders and delicately pulled them closer to him.
“It’s cold. Let’s go home.”

They had just turned around to walk back to the car when they saw a man in a thick winter coat passing them by with a huge flower crown.

There were a couple things wrong with that picture. One was the man wasn’t one of the cemetery workers who usually worked on Christmas, who they knew well enough from all the years they’ve been coming on that date. The second was that the flower crown was made of white roses.

Castiel stopped in his tracks, letting go of the twins as he did so, and turned around. The man stopped by Kelly’s grave and gently put the flower crown down. He rubbed his hands together to fight off the cold and strode away as if he couldn’t wait to be out of there.

So he definitely wasn’t one of Kelly’s cousins from two towns over coming to pay his respects.

“Excuse me,” Castiel called him.

The twins, who had kept walking without realizing they were leaving Castiel behind, also halted. The man turned towards Castiel, looking slightly annoyed.

“Yes?”

“Who are you?” Castiel asked, point blank.

The man looked annoyed that he was being interrogated, but he still was kind enough to answer:

“I’m from All in Bloom, sir. We’re a flower shop. We received an order to bring a crown here.”

“An order from whom?”

“I just make the deliveries, sir.” The man shrugged. “You mind? I’d like to be home before dinner.”

“Yes, of course. Uh… Merry Christmas.”

The delivery man half-trotted away from them. Castiel eyed the twins, who looked just as confused as him, and walked back to the grave.

The crown was heart-shaped and looked big and heavy placed against Kelly’s gravestone. It was pretty, but whoever had sent it didn’t know Kelly all that way. She hated that sort of display, preferring instead small, meaningful gestures. That was one of the reasons her marriage with Luc ended so quickly…

Luc.

The card wasn’t signed. It simply said, in elegant handwriting: Never forgotten.

“It’s from him, isn’t it?”

Claire and Jack had come closer without Castiel realizing it. As always, Claire managed to pack a lot of disdain for her biological father without even pronouncing his name.

“It’s… it doesn’t say,” Castiel answered weakly, but they all knew the truth.

“He’s such a hypocrite.” Claire scoffed. “He couldn’t be here while she was dying, but now he sends her flowers?”
“Maybe he thought it was a nice gesture,” Jack said, diplomatic as usual. “People can change, Claire.”

“Not him, though.”

“Alright, that’s enough. We’re not having this conversation here,” Castiel cut them off. He knew the arguments about Luc and what he should and shouldn’t do could turn very heated between the twins and he was not going to have that in front of Kelly’s resting place. “Let’s just go.”

Luckily, they decided not to start again once in the car. Claire simply scooted herself to a corner and looked outside of the window with her arms firmly crossed over her chest, a sure sign that she was not going to answer kindly to anything anyone told her. Jack, on his part, took out his cellphone and stared at it the whole ride home, tapping at the screen to refresh whatever he was looking at several times in a row.

“Is there someone you needed to talk to, Jack?” Castiel asked him after a while.

Jack startled, as if he hadn’t expected Castiel to notice what he was doing.

“Uh… no. I’m just waiting on an email.”

The winter break was just as slow and bleak as the rest of December. Jack felt like he was slowly going out of his mind. He took a page from Amara’s book and tried going jogging in the mornings to keep himself busy, but the temperature dropped to the point where it was a pain just being outside for five minutes and in any case, he was so out of shape the most he could manage was some light trotting before his sides started aching.

He tried to entertain himself with the books that Claire and Castiel had got them from Christmas. One was a YA book about a girl with OCD (he figured Claire thought it was a joke to give it to him, but the story had been rather touching) and one was a fantasy book about a thief trying to steal a magician’s book. He finished them both far too quickly.

He guessed he could also binge-watch series or movies, but it just wasn’t the same without Claire. And it wasn’t that Claire went anywhere, but she just spent most of her days hanging out with Kaia. Every time he went outside of his room, he found them either studying together in the living room or drinking hot cocoa in the couch, giggling to themselves about jokes he was sure he would never understand. She stayed for dinner sometimes and Castiel asked her about books and about Miss Masters.

One time, the girls invited Jack to watch a movie with them and he’d readily accepted. It was a rom-com of some kind, the type of movie that Claire didn’t really enjoy much, but that she watched anyway because Kaia didn’t like horror or action movies.

He’d sat on the carpet while Claire and Kaia curled up on the couch and at one point, he’d turned his head to comment on something that’d just happened… and found that Claire and Kaia were lost in a deep, slow kiss.

He immediately stood up and left for his room. He wasn’t sure the girls even noticed he was gone until Claire went up an hour and a half later.
“Hey, we thought you’d gone to the bathroom,” she said.

“Umh… yeah, no,” Jack muttered from his bed, where he was curled up with a book. “You just… seemed busy. I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

Claire didn’t try to deny it. In fact, she smiled as if she was very satisfied with herself. Jack changed the subject.

“Did Kaia go home?”

“Yeah, I just came back from dropping her off.” Claire dragged his computer chair to the center of the room and sat stride on it. “She got me a Fall Out Boy vinyl box set for Christmas. Vinyl, Jack.”

“Okay.” Jack nodded. He wasn’t a big fan of music, but he knew from Claire’s rambling that vinyl records were supposed to preserve the music quality better. “That was most thoughtful of her…”

“I think I’m in love.”

Jack stared at her, not sure what to say to that.

“Oh. Well, that’s…”

“No, you don’t get it,” she interrupted him. “Like, I think this is Love, with capital L. Like the shit they talk about in songs and stuff. It’s… it’s so surreal. But like, in a good way.”

Jack could tell she wasn’t stressed out about it, because her eyes were shining and she was smiling wide, as if she wanted to burst into laughter but didn’t think anyone else would understand the joke.

He didn’t know what to make of it.

“You’ve… you’ve been with other girls before,” he said, but even as he went through his memories of Claire’s past girlfriends, he still couldn’t pinpoint one that had made her look this positively glowing. In fact, he couldn’t even remember the last time he’d seen her this happy.

“Yeah, but this… this is different,” Claire insisted.

“How so?”

She shook her head.

“I can’t explain it. And even if I could, I don’t expect you to get it. It’s just… different.”

Jack didn’t know why that asseveration bothered him. He wasn’t stupid. People said that love was something one “knew” when they felt it, but he could understand it in theory.

“Why are you telling me if you don’t think I can understand it?”

“Cause I need to tell someone or I’m going to explode.” Claire chuckled, without realizing or without caring about Jack’s annoyance. She ran her fingers through her blonde hair and looked away, a wide grin on her face. “I never thought it could be like this, you know?”

“I think we’ve just established no, I don’t, in fact, know.”

He didn’t expect his tone to come out so wry. Before he had time to apologize, though, Claire nodded as if she understood. In any other occasion, Jack was certain she would have got angry at him, but it was as if nothing could burst the bubble she was currently in.
“Yeah, sorry. You probably think all of this is stupid. I mean, I would think it if I were in your shoes.” She got up, took off her shoes and pushed him to sit on the bed by his side. They used to do that all the time when they were children and though they barely fit in anymore, Jack appreciated it.

“What are you reading? Agatha and Jasper? Again?” she said, grabbing the book from his hand.

“They’re my favorite books, okay?” he said, defensively. “They remind me of simpler times.”

He thought Claire was going to mock that notion, but maybe this “being in love” thing was better for her overall mood than Jack could have ever expect.

“I don’t know about that,” she said simply. “I don’t know if we have a simpler time to romanticize. Our lives have kind of sucked.”

“That’s not true!”

“Yeah, I guess they could’ve sucked a lot more,” Claire said. Jack didn’t have time to protest that wasn’t what he’d meant. “But somehow, I really believe the best is yet to come.”

Jack opened his mouth and closed it again.

He’d definitely hadn’t expected that coming from Claire.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked her.

Claire apparently only then realized what she’d said, because she stared into the distance and then burst into laughter.

“See? That’s how I know it’s love,” she concluded.

She stood up and left the room, leaving Jack with his thoughts. Normally, he would’ve agreed with her that there were always better things to come. But lately, he just… wasn’t so sure anymore.

He couldn’t even explain why he felt that way. It was probably just the winder blues, the end of the year looming closer and with it, the end of their high school years. Endings were supposed to make people a little melancholic, right?

He wished he could have talked about it with Claire, but he didn’t want to be a bummer when she was so happy. Castiel was busy ending his own era as well. Jack was just going to have to… deal with all of this on his own. It couldn’t be that hard.

After a while of trying to go back to his reading without being able to find his focus again, he picked his phone and refreshed the email app.

Luc hadn’t answered to his e-mail yet.

Chapter End Notes

Wednesday 19th: Hey, guys. So the plan for this week was to finish and post chapter 31 on Thursday 20th and then go on hiatus over Christmas Eve, since I will be visiting family out of town this weekend. But sadly, some sudden health issues (nothing serious, but that require some of my time to deal with) have prevented me from doing that.
So... yeah, there won't be another chapter this Thursday or on Monday, but I will definitely be back on Thursday 27th. Thank you all so much for your patience and happy holidays!
Jack knew Claire was never going to agree with him about it, but going back to school after New Year felt like a relief. The looming sensation that something was wrong or going to go wrong very soon was definitely calmer when he had homework and classes to distract himself with. Of course, there was also the Inksters and seeing Alexis, Ben and Patience again after the break was a treat.

“Why didn’t you text? We could’ve hanged out,” Ben said when Jack told him he’d been stuck in the house during the break.

“Oh, I… I guess I didn’t really think about it.”

Ben let out a sound that sounded a lot like a chuckle, but he assured Jack that they could hang out any time he wanted. Jack was thinking about taking him up on that offer, because once again, Claire was spending most of her time walking Kaia to and from her classes. She slung an arm around her shoulder or held her hand and escorted her down the hallways with a smirk in her lips. Kaia sometimes got a little shy about it.

“People are always staring at us;” she complained one time during lunch.

“That’s cause we look so good together, babe.”

Kaia chuckled and blushed at Claire’s answer. Jack sat across the table with them every day and half of the time he wasn’t sure what they were laughing about, but he was glad they were so happy together. He really was.

It was just that… sometimes he felt like a third wheel. He couldn’t really help it.

“Are you sure you don’t want to ride with us?” Claire asked him the second Monday after the break. “I’ll just drop Kaia off real quick and then we can go home.”

“No, really. Don’t worry about it,” Jack insisted. “I need to look something up in the library and then I’ll catch the bus or just walk.”

“It’s freezing outside, Jack.”

“Well, I don’t mind,” Jack said, with a shrug. “The cold helps you with clear thinking, you know?”

Claire glanced at him like she wasn’t sure she believed it, but in the end, she shrugged and told him she would see him at home. She joined Kaia, who waited for her at the end of the hallway, and as usual, they walked away giggling about something Jack was certain he wouldn’t understand even if they explained it to him.

He stayed planted right where he was, while the noises of the school and the students closing their lockers and laughing as they headed outside flooded the air. He supposed he could really go to the library, but unluckily for him, he was already done with most of his homework and he hadn’t bought a book that would entertain him long enough for it to make it believable that he’d really needed to stay behind.

He’d been lying to Claire a lot lately. He didn’t know what that said about him as a person.

He let his feet choose the best route for him, wandering around like a lost soul, deep in thought.
He had no reason to be this dejected. He had a great life, a wonderful family, friends who appreciated him greatly. The melancholy that invaded him were just some winter blues, he told himself. Nothing he really needed to worry about. He’d go home and watch a funny movie and that would cheer him up for sure…

“Jack?”

The voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he stopped with a jolt. Unconsciously, he’d walked up to Mr. Winchester’s office and he’d popped his head out. Jack blinked a couple of times and forced himself to smile.

“Mr. Winchester! How are you? Did you have a good time over the holidays?”

“Yes, thank you.” Mr. Winchester opened the door to his office even wider. “You know, it’s funny. I was just thinking about you.”

“Why?” Jack asked, realizing only too late how defensive that’d come out.

“Just to check in with you, see how you were doing after the last time we spoke.” Mr. Winchester shrugged to take weight off of the situation. “Is this a good time or would you rather come see me at some point during the week?”

“Oh.” Jack shuffled his feet. Well, he didn’t have anything better to do, did he? “No, right now is fine.”

“Alright, well, come on in.”

Mr. Winchester’s desk looked messy, with piles of files he’d obviously been re-reading spread all through it. He quickly gathered them and stored them back into his cabinet. Jack wondered what his file would say before the counselor offered him a drink that Jack rejected.

“So, tell me about your holidays, Jack,” Mr. Winchester asked him as he sat down in front of him. “I understand they must be a hard time for you, with the anniversary of your mother’s death and all.”

“Umh… not really. I mean, it’s sad, but it’s not… you know. I spent it with Claire and my uncle and we… it was fine.”

He didn’t know why he was stuttering. He was telling the truth, after all. He’d really been fine, it was now that the winter blues were hitting him. But he didn’t tell that to the counselor.

“So nothing out of the ordinary happened?”

Jack thought about it for a second and he ended up telling him about the email he’d sent to Luc. He hadn’t mentioned it to Claire and Castiel, mostly because he expected them to tell him that the result he’d obtained was exactly the outcome he should’ve expected.

“I mean, I didn’t expect him to answer it right away, but it’s been weeks.” Jack sighed. “It was foolish to think he’d care.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well… he never really tried to be a part of our lives,” Jack explained. “Not even when we were little. I just think he didn’t want to be a dad, that he wasn’t ready, but now that we’re grown and we don’t… need him as much, I thought perhaps…”
He didn’t finish that sentence. Mr. Winchester discreetly pushed the box of tissues towards him and Jack discovered with surprise that he actually needed one.

“We always need our parents, Jack, no matter how much we grow up,” Mr. Winchester said. “I understand how you feel. My dad was a cop and he worked very long hours, and even when he came home, it felt like he wasn’t really there.”

“But he at least came home.”

The bitterness in his voice shocked even him. He was about to apologize (he didn’t mean to diminish Mr. Winchester’s experience, of course, he was just trying to relate and Jack appreciated that), but the counselor simply nodded as if to indicate that he thought Jack was right.

“In any case, he is your father and it’s natural that you want to have him in your life in some capacity.”

“Claire would say I’m an idiot ant that I need to get over it.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t say that.”

“Probably not,” Jack admitted. “But she always seemed so much more… accepting that we’re never going to have an actual relationship with him.”

“We all process pain and anger at different speeds, Jack. And you’re a very sensitive boy. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Jack swallowed and blew his nose. It actually felt good to cry, to express out loud thoughts that had been plaguing him for a while, knowing that Mr. Winchester wouldn’t judge him or tell anyone. Perhaps he should come and see him more often, though that would take time away from people who actually needed his help a lot more than Jack did.

“So nothing else happened during the winter break?”

Jack looked up, confused. To him, that unanswered email was a small but pretty significant thing that’d happened. He didn’t understand what Mr. Winchester could possibly mean.

“Uh… no, nothing that I can think of.”

Mr. Winchester stared at him silently, as if he was expecting Jack to come up with something. He thought about telling him about Claire and Kaia “officially” dating, but the entire school knew about that and Miss Masters could probably had told him about that…

“Oh, I saw Miss Masters at the mall,” Jack remembered.

“Really?”

“Yeah. We were Christmas’ shopping and… she was there. We had lunch together. It was nice.”

He didn’t add that he’d knew Miss Masters would be at the mall and that he’d dragged his uncle to see her on purpose. He figured that was one of those things nobody really needed to know.

“I see.” Mr. Winchester fidgeted with his pen. “Miss Masters’ your favorite teacher, right?”

“I mean… all teachers are great to me,” Jack said. He was really confused as to where that line of interrogation was leading. “But… yeah, she is pretty amazing. I enjoy her class a lot. And the Inksters, of course. Did I tell you we’re working in pairs now? I’m paired up with Kaia this month,
but I don’t know when we’re going to work on our piece because she’s always hanging out with Claire. I might need to go see her instead.”

“To Miss Masters’ home?”

“Uh… yeah, ‘cause… that’s… that’s where Kaia lives.” Jack frowned. What was with this insistence of talking about Miss Masters? “She, uh… she’s your friend, right? Miss Masters.”

“Yes, we’ve become close since she started working here.”

“Oh.” Did he mean close or like, close? How could he ask that without seeming like he was trying to snoop on Miss Masters’ life? “Uh… well, that’s good. I’m glad she has friends. It could be tough, to make friends when you move to a new place and you don’t really know anybody…”

He was rambling and Mr. Winchester was giving him a very strange look, so Jack stopped talking altogether. That hadn’t been smooth at all and he was sure Claire would’ve laughed at him hard had she been able to hear him.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Mr. Winchester grabbed a piece of paper from one of his drawers and wrote something down.

“Jack, I’m going to need your uncle to come talk to me.”


“No, of course not,” Mr. Winchester assured him. “I just… I feel like you’re struggling a little, with some things, and I would like to discuss ways for him to help you out with that.”

“I’m not struggling,” Jack said, defensively. “I’m doing fine, actually. All my grades…”

“There’s more to life than grades, Jack.”

Claire was always saying the same thing. Jack licked his lips, nervously.

“You’re not… going to tell him that I wrote to my dad, are you?”

“If you don’t want me to tell him that, of course not,” Mr. Winchester said. “But I’d like to talk to him regardless.”

Despite Mr. Winchester’s assurance, Jack still wasn’t too happy while he slipped his note in his backpack. It was the first time in his life that a teacher wanted to talk to Castiel about him. About Claire, sure, but Jack had always behaved well and done what his teachers told him. Why was he the one who…?

“Jack.” Mr. Winchester’s voice cut off his train of thought. “This isn’t a punishment and you’re not in trouble, okay? I just think you’re going through a very… particular process and I’d like to discuss it with him.”

“Well… can you discuss it with me?” Jack asked, cringing.

“Of course. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me, Jack?”

Jack thought about it long and hard, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t come up with anything else to say.
“Man, I’m telling you, I didn’t expect that coming from Patience,” Claire commented that night while they had dinner. “The girl is like an encyclopedia of everything geeky. It’s kind of eerie, actually. She has like, every single Star Wars novel, even the really shitty ones.”

“Did you get to write?”

“Yeah, we’re planning a full on space opera. It was fun.” Claire laughed.

“That’s great.” Castiel nodded. “And what about you, Jack? When are you meeting up with Kaia?”

“Uhm… well, we haven’t discussed it.”

“Of course not. I’m sure you won’t be short of chances, since Kaia is here all the time now,” Castiel added, glancing in Claire’s direction.

“What can I say? The girl is too cute to let her out of my sight.”

Castiel chuckled softly and helped himself to more potatoes. Jack rejected him with a gesture when he offered him more. He had been awfully quiet: usually he chatted away about what a great day he’d had (Jack only ever seem to have great days) and what a great day he was going to have the following day. Castiel was glad that his relentless optimism got him going, but sometimes he worried Jack used that as a way to avoid thinking about the things that made him sad.

“Did anything happen at school?”

“No. No, nothing out of the ordinary. Everything was great,” Jack assured him. He toyed with the peas in his plate and licked his lips. “Oh, Mr. Winchester wants to talk to you.”

That got both Castiel and Claire to stare at him, slightly surprised.

“Why?” Claire asked.

“What did you do?” Castiel asked, turning to his nice.

“What… I did nothing! I’ve been keeping my nose clean since September, you know that!”

“No, it’s got nothing to do with Claire,” Jack explained. “He wants to talk to you about me.”

That was even more confusing and upsetting. When teachers requested to meet with him because of something Claire did, Castiel already knew more or less what to expect. This was completely uncharted waters for him.

“Did he happen to mention why?”

“He said it has something to do with a process I’m going through.” Jack shrugged. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious.”

But even as he sounded as cheerful as usual, Castiel could tell by the way he avoided his eye that he was just as disconcerted as Castiel himself.

So, Castiel took a deep breath.

“Yes. It’s probably it’s nothing to worry about.”
“What did you even do?” Claire asked, with a frown.

“Claire,” Castiel said, warning her.

“I’m just saying. He must have done something.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Jack insisted.

“Claire!” Castiel cut her off. “If your brother says he didn’t do anything, we should have the courtesy of believing him.”

“Thank you.” Jack sighed.

Of course, Castiel had other means to find out if all of that was actually true.

After the twins picked up the table, he announced he was going to be in his studio and carefully locked the door behind him.

Meg picked up her phone after the second tone.

“Hey, you finished the new chapter already? I haven’t even had time to read the last one you sent me.”

“Oh.” Castiel pinched his nose. He had been out doing the groceries and he hadn’t even looked at his computer since the morning. “No. Sorry. This is… this is about Jack.”

After he explained Mr. Winchester’s request, there was a long silence at the other end of the line.

“Is it something bad? Do you think it’s something I need to worry about?”

“I… I honestly don’t know, Cas.” There was another pause: “Actually, I was the one who asked Sam to talk to you about Jack.”

“What?”

That was even more worrying than before. If it had been just Mr. Winchester, Castiel could’ve chalked it up to a misunderstanding or something not really that serious, but Meg… Meg knew Jack well. She knew he was a good boy and she knew Castiel. If there was a problem of some kind, he imagined she would’ve talked to him instead.

“Why would you do that?”

“It’s… it’s complicated, Cas. This isn’t something I can talk about to you as your friend, because it concerns my job as Jack’s teacher.”

“But what, has he done something?”

“He’s… done some things that got me concerned,” Meg explained. “I know it might not be his intention, but they could jeopardize my job.”

“I don’t understand…”

“Sam can explain it way better than I can.” She sighed. “I just… I think we might need to reestablish some boundaries. With the club and now Claire and Kaia dating and… well, you and I…”

Castiel had a vague idea what she meant by that. Yes, they had become friends and she was helping
him with his book in a way that he had never allowed anyone to help him with that process. The only reason he had been able to go as far with the story as he’d had was precisely because of her help. But at the same time, she was still the twins’ teacher. He was thinking now that he might have been a little selfish not to consider that before he…

He left those thoughts unfinished. He had tried to stop his feelings for Meg from growing as strong as they had, but the more time he spent with her, the more he spoke with her, the more the tiny glimmer of hope he kept that what he was experiencing might be mutual grew. But now he realized there might never be an appropriate time to bring it up and even if he did manage to talk to her about it, she was right. There were some boundaries that they shouldn’t have crossed in the first place.

“That’s… I…” He stopped and pinched his nose. “I never meant to do anything that made you uncomfortable and if I had…”

“Cas, no. You’ve been nothing but great. It’s just… well, we might need to have this conversation after you’ve talked to Sam.”

“… very well.”

“And whatever happens, I’m still your friend,” she assured him. “I’ll try to help with this problem in whatever way I can.”

Castiel jolted at the way she phrased that. Was there a problem he wasn’t aware of after all?

He didn’t want to keep interrogating her. Instead, he asked her to give him Mr. Winchester’s email and turned on his computer. After staring at the blank page for several minutes and wishing he’d asked Meg for the counselor’s number instead, he wrote:

>Mr. Winchester, this is Castiel Novak. Jack told me you wanted to speak to me. Is Thursday okay?
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel arrived earlier than usual for the Inksters’ meeting and had to stop a janitor to ask him which way to the counselor’s office. He trusted that it wouldn’t take long, and even if it did, he was certain that Meg could handle the club until he was done.

Mr. Winchester was tall man who wore V-neck sweaters and, just like Claire had said, looked like a bit of a dork. Castiel wondered if that image was careful constructed to counteract the fact he was a six feet giant.

“Please, call me Sam,” he insisted. “Have a seat. Do you want something to drink?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Castiel waited until Sam went around his desk and sat down in front of him before he started speaking: “Mr. Win… Sam. I have to say I’m very confused. Whenever I’ve been called to talk to someone, it has always been with Principal Crowley… and it has always been about Claire.”

“Well, Claire is doing a lot better this year. She hasn’t got into many fights… that we know of,” he added with a sigh and Castiel nodded. If Claire was getting into trouble, she was doing a great job of keeping it hidden, but he honestly believed that she was just too busy with her new girlfriend. Sam went on: “But I have been very concerned about Jack these past few months and I know it’s a concern Meg shares. She doesn’t want to inform the School Administration of this until I have talked to you and you have talked to Jack…”


“It’s a bit serious, but I’m sure once you’ve talked to Jack, we can find a solution. He’s a smart boy. He will understand why his behavior is inappropriate and I’m sure he will stop.”

“What behavior?” Castiel asked, even more confused than before. “What has he done?”

“We… I mean, Meg and I… we have reason to suspect that Jack is trying to… engage in a… personal relationship with Meg.”

Castiel stared at Sam, blinking owlishly as he tried to grasp the meaning of the words that have just been pronounced.

“What do you… what do you mean?” He shook his head. “Jack? In a… he can’t…”

“He is always talking to her and trying to assist her. He was very eager to start the Inksters club…”

“That’s just the kind of person Jack is!” Castiel protested. “He’s attentive, he’s selfless. He likes to make people happy…”

“He also showed up drunk at Meg’s home in October,” Sam added. “And Meg suspects the encounter you had at the mall during the winter break wasn’t all that casual. She thinks Claire might have mentioned where they would be to him and he followed them there.”

Now that he mentioned it, Castiel remembered that even in his post-writing confused haze he’d
noticed that Jack was acting a little strange. He insisted on going to that mall specifically, but he hadn’t talked much during their lunch and then he’d disappeared for a long time until they found him again in the parking lot.

That had also been the day Castiel had a long, warm chat with Meg at the bookstore. What if Jack had seen them and…?

Castiel didn’t even entertain the possibility of finishing that thought. He stood up from his chair and paced around the counselor’s office that suddenly seemed way too small for the distress he was in.

“Jack?” he repeated. “But he’s not… he is…”

“It happens,” Sam said, far too calm. “Especially with the senior kids. They’re on the brink of adulthood, so they get a crush on a teacher and they fixate on them because it makes them feel more mature…”

“But Jack!” Castiel insisted. “He’s never had a girlfriend. He… I don’t think he’s even kissed a girl. He’s too shy and… I don’t know, maybe a bit of a late bloomer. He’s just…”

“Have you considered maybe his lack of interest in girls his age is because of… well, this?”

“No.” Castiel run a hand through his hair. “He’s never…”

“Castiel, Meg has told me that you and her have grown… close,” Sam continued. “And with Claire dating Kaia, the relationship between both your families has become very informal. Now, that’s not a bad thing, necessarily, but it might have been what pushed Jack into acting on his feelings. He might even think that he’s competing with you for Meg’s affection, in a way.”

“He doesn’t…” Castiel started, but he couldn’t continue. The implications of everything Sam was saying have started to dawn on him and he didn’t like them at all.

But even as a part of him still wanted to deny that this was happening, he knew what he had to do. He needed to stop thinking as Meg’s… something, and start looking at it as Jack’s guardian.

He returned to the chair and intertwined his fingers on top of Sam’s desk.

“What… what can we do about this?”

Sam nodded, as if that was the reaction he’d been expecting from him all along.

“Well, the first thing you need to do is talk to him. Explain to him how his behavior is inappropriate and why it made Meg uncomfortable. Be understanding, but firm. If he wants to talk to Meg afterwards, insist on coming with him and being present for that conversation. Encourage him to focus on other things: his writing endeavors, or college, or his friends. We don’t want to make him feel guilty or like we’re punishing him. After all, feelings can’t really be helped.” He stopped and took a deep breath. “But it has to stop. Between you and me, Meg could get into a lot of trouble. She doesn’t look eye to eye with Principal Crowley about a lot of issues and the rumor that she might have an inappropriate relationship with a student could get her fired. Or worse.”

Castiel was surprised by that revelation. Meg often complained about Principal Crowley, but he hadn’t thought she’d really had that much of a strain relationship with him that he would be looking for a reason to fire her.

“I understand, of course.”
“If it doesn’t stop, we might need to take more drastic measures: remove Jack from Meg’s class, from the writing club.” He made another pause. Castiel started wondering if he did that on purpose so his words would have more weight when he spoke next: “You might also need to distance yourself from her so as not to upset Jack.”

Castiel bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t want to hear that, but a part of him knew it was coming anyway.

“Of course,” he muttered as he lowered his gaze.

Sam must have perceived just how much this was affecting him, because he leaned forwards with his kind hazel eyes fixed on Castiel.

“I’m sorry if this is personal, but are you two… involved? Meg says you’re not, but I think she might be too embarrassed to be honest with me about that.”

Castiel decided he hadn’t much to lose by telling the truth.

“We’re not dating, but…” He stopped and shook his head again. “I… well, you know Meg. She is beautiful and smart and I do like her a lot. But I have been holding back on those feelings precisely because she is the twins’ teacher and because her daughter is dating Claire. I was thinking maybe after the kids graduate and move away from home, we could have a chance to…” He left that phrase unfinished, but the sympathetic nod Sam gave him was enough. “But if all of this about Jack turns out to be true… well, it could be hard, but it’s like you said. Feelings can’t be helped.”

Sam nodded again. Castiel didn’t know what it was about that man, but he definitely had a way to make people talk to him about things they wouldn’t normally say out loud.

“You’re very good at your job,” he said.

“Thank you.” Sam opened a drawer and took out a small white card that he slid towards Castiel. “If you think you might need my help in any way while talking to Jack, don’t hesitate to call me, no matter how late it is.”

“Won’t I be bothering you?”

“Not at all. My wife Jess is used to me getting calls from scared parents at odd hours.” A droopy smile appeared in his face. “And besides, we’re not really getting much sleep with her cravings anyway.”

“Oh, how far along is she?”

“We’re expecting a baby girl in March.”

“Well, congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Sam repeated. He stood up and escorted Castiel to his office’s door. “You’ve done a great job with both those kids, Castiel, I can tell. Even with Claire’s impulsiveness and Jack’s… what I’m trying to say is, even though this situation is delicate, you don’t need to take it as a failure on your part as a guardian. I’m sure Jack will come out okay of all this.”

Castiel blinked, astonished. He didn’t know how Sam had guessed that he would be thinking that, but he’d stopped the negative spiral before it had even begun.

“Huh… you really are very good at your job.”
Sam patted him on the back and sent him on his way. Castiel checked his cellphone to see the hour and realized the Inksters’ meeting must have already started.

He walked in right into the middle of Claire and Patience’s “space opera”. He hadn’t realized that Claire had meant that quite literally and that she and Patience had gone the more theatrical route: they had made the others push all the seats backwards and even moved the desk so they would have more room to perform between their public and the chalkboard.

“… Admiral, we might need to maneuver through that dangerous asteroid belt in order to reach Planet Yavari,” Patience said, standing with her shoulders straightened and her eyes looking up ahead, determined. Both she and Claire were wearing Bluetooth headsets and had the script in their hands, but they didn’t seem to really need it as they continued:

“But, your Majesty… if we crash through the asteroids, the Phantoms’ ships will detect our presence!” Claire protested, as Castiel quietly slipped past behind them to stand next to Meg. “We will be attacked and the cargo we’re transporting…”

“You shall take the cargo to Yavari,” Patience instructed. “I will take the escape ship and distract the Phantoms.”

Claire gasped in an exaggerated manner, putting a hand against her chest as if what Patience was suggesting was preposterous.

“You will be hunted, your Majesty!” she protested. “They will follow you and they’ll attack you, and if we lose you…”

“Our nation will go on,” Patience declared, raising her chin up in the air with pride. “I am sure of it. We are strong and we are proud and we will not allow this menace to overtake us. My life is a price I am willing to pay if it means my people will be safe and cared for. Queens lead by example, Admiral.”

“But…!” Claire attempted to protest, but Patience glared at her, so Claire lowered her eyes. “I understand, your Majesty.”

“Make sure the medicines reach the people who need it most.”

“I shall, your Majesty.”

“And above all, good friend, don’t let your hope falter. We shall be reunited soon enough.”

“May the starlight guide you home, your Majesty.” Claire placed a close fist over her heart and then moved away as Patience looked into the distance with a stern face.

Then she bowed and the rest of the Inksters and Meg and Castiel burst into applause. Claire stepped forwards and bowed as well, the both of them smiling and then clapping towards one another as if they were professional actresses just ending a show.

“Well, that was very interesting, girls!” Meg congratulated them. “You did a great job at incorporating the world-building and exposition in your dialogue. And that performance was very entertaining.”

“Thank you,” Claire said, smiling cockily, while Patience giggled and blushed, as if she had not expected it to turn out so well. “It was all Patience, really.”

“It’s a… it’s from a larger story I’m… working on,” Patience stammered.
“Why haven’t you share that with us?”

“I’m a little afraid it might be too, uh… you know. Derivative.”

“All literature is derivative, Patience,” Castiel intervened. “Tolkien had a perfect way of putting it: think about it as if stories come from a great pot that has been put to boil. The bones of that you take out of the pot are the recurring themes and images every writer uses, but the plot and the purpose of a story is what give the soup a unique flavor.”

“So what you’re saying is, it doesn’t matter so much if I’m being original or not. What matters is that I tell a good story and that I make it my own,” Patience said.

“Exactly. And I’m sure you’re talented and dedicated enough that you will be able to do just that.”

Patience’s eyes became wider, as if she hadn’t expected to hear something like that. She shifted and moved around nervously.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

Her friends burst into applause once more. Claire patted her in the shoulder and they silently returned to their seats.

“I gotta say, all that talk about soup made me hungry,” Ben commented. Jack was the only one who laughed slightly at it.

“Well, anybody else wants to share?” Meg asked.

“Alexis and I have a piece, but after that performance, it’s sort of embarrassing to read it,” Ben said. Alexis rolled her eyes as the others laughed once again.

“Come on, we’re going to be even more embarrassed if we wait another week,” she said, standing up as the rest of the group laugh again.

It was a short lighthearted story about a thieving cat that made everyone laugh. After Meg and Castiel gave them some pointers, they ended the meeting and all the kids started putting on their coats.

“I like the idea that the Admiral has family back in Yavari and that’s why the Queen sacrificed herself instead,” Kaia commented.

“I’m sure the Admiral’s wife is going to be relieved when she finally gets back.”

“How do you know the Admiral’s gay?” Ben asked.

“'Cause I wrote her and performed her.” Claire rolled her eyes. “Trust me, she’s super gay.”

“Totally gay,” Patience confirmed.

They laughed and walked out to the hallway. Castiel noticed that Jack lingered at the door a little longer and shot a look at them, but he told himself he was reading too much into that simple action. Someone called Jack outside and he left, leaving Castiel and Meg alone. Meg was picking up the papers from over her desk, the stories that the kids had given them to read and add some commentary to it. Normally they took a few minutes to split the writings between the two, but this time, Castiel stretched his hand and gently took the stack of papers away from Meg.
His fingers grazed her and he tried to ignore the shiver that went down his spine when she lifted her big brown eyes at him.

“Castiel?”

“I’ve… I’ve talked to Sam,” Castiel said in a whisper. He hoped he wouldn’t need to add anything else for her to understand.

“Oh.”

“I will talk to Jack tonight. We will find a way to navigate this situation, I promise.”

“Thank you.” Meg sighed. “I…”

“I really wish you’ve come to me about this, Meg,” he added. “And I wish I had a way to… ease your concerns.”

“Well, I just… I really didn’t know how to tell you, Cas,” she admitted. “It’s not exactly something… at first I just thought it was just the kind of person Jack is, but… I really needed Sam’s second opinion and he agreed we had to bring this problem up to you.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you did before you grew any more uncomfortable. But at the same time…”

He didn’t finish, because what he was going to say next was: “I’m worried about what this means for us”. He reminded himself just in time that there wasn’t an “us” for them. That he had no right to be worried about the “us” he and Meg could have been, not when it concerned Jack and Claire. They were his priority, they had always been.

And even if it hurt like hell to have to walk away from his… friendship with Meg, he would do it for their sake.

He licked his lips and opened his mouth to express that thought out loud when the classroom’s door burst open.

“Hey,” Claire called them. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing!” Castiel and Meg said in unison.

They exchanged a look and, despite the situation, quietly chuckled.

“Alright.” Claire sighed. “It’s fucking cold outside, so I really want to get home.”

“Language!” Castiel chastised her. He hastily put the papers away inside of his trench coat and smiled once more at Meg. He trusted that if they had to say goodbye to each other, they could do it in some other moment. “Alright, we’re going.”

“Thank you!” Claire huffed and left the classroom again. Castiel was going to follow her when Meg called him again.

“Let me know how it goes.”

“I will,” Castiel promised.

He left the classroom with a slight dread in his stomach that he couldn’t help.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry, guys, you're going to have to wait until next year to find out what happens! ;)

Happy 2019!
Chapter 33

“We’re not having this debate again! Pineapple doesn’t belong on pizza!”

“I like it, though. Especially if the pineapple is a little sour…”

“You are a heathen and I cannot believe we’re related!”

Castiel had been listening to the twins argue for the last five minutes of the ride home without saying anything. He was too busy trying to think of a way to breach the topic of Meg to Jack in the least traumatic way possible and he still wasn’t sure the way he’d planned on saying it was the best.

Then again, he wasn’t sure there was a “best” way to handle the situation. He just needed to handle it.

“Okay, maybe I can just order a complete separate pizza,” Jack suggested as they walked into the house and took off their coats and scarves. “That way the pineapple won’t touch your side of the cheese.”

“That’s just a waste of food you won’t eat an entire pizza and you know it…”

They turned towards the stairs, but Castiel called them before they could set a foot on the first step.

“Sit down, please. We need to have a family meeting.”

The twins exchanged an equally confused look, as if to make sure the other didn’t know what this was about either. Claire was the first one to shrug. They dropped their backpacks on the floor and they sat down on the couch side by side while Castiel took the armchair. Jack was closest to him, so that would be good to try and speak calmly to him.

“The reason that I was late for the club’s activities today is that I went to speak to Mr. Winchester,” he began saying. “He told me some worrying things about you, Jack.”

“Oh,” Jack said softly. He shifted on his seat, awkwardly, and cleared his throat. “What… what sort of things?”

Castiel bit the inside of his cheek. He was hyperaware that the twins were both staring at him with identical blue eyes, waiting until he gathered enough courage to say what needed to be said. It wasn’t easy, though.

“You… Jack, you’re a very good boy. You’re smart, you’re polite. Which is why I was surprised at what Mr. Winchester pointed out to me. You’re not in trouble,” Castiel added quickly when Jack opened his mouth. “But what you’re doing isn’t right. I understand it won’t be easy for you to stop, but I’m willing to help you in any way I can. Claire will be too, I’m certain.”

Now that he’d said it out loud, he realized that maybe his phrasing was a little confusing.

“Oh, my God,” Claire said, her wide open with horror. “Is he doing drugs? Is this an intervention? Are you doing drugs?”

“What? Of course I’m not!” Jack defended himself. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t even know where to get drugs!”

“That’s exactly what a drug addict would say!”
“It’s not drugs!” Castiel clarified. He rubbed his temples, took a deep breath and tried again. “I know this might be embarrassing for you, Jack, but it’s natural. Sometimes we… like people that aren’t right for us. It can’t be helped, but… how we act on those feelings sometimes it’s not the correct way to go about it.”

Jack and Claire both tilted their heads in unison and said nothing for several seconds.

“Alright, you lost me,” Claire said.

“I’m not… I’m not sure what you’re talking about either, Uncle Cas.”

Castiel ran his fingers through his hair and decided that it was time to stop trying to be subtle.

“I’m talking about Miss Masters, Jack,” he said, making sure not to call her by her first name to remind them of what exactly their relationship was with her. “She is much older than you and your teacher. This needs to stop.”

Jack frowned. “What?”

“Oh, my God.” Claire covered her mouth with one hand and looked away.

“It’s alright, Jack. You’re a very mature boy and you might not be attracted to girls your age, but pursuing someone who is in Miss Masters’ position could get her in a lot of trouble. I’m sure you care enough about her to not want that.”

Claire’s shoulders started shaking. Was she crying? It was impossible to tell.

“I… I mean… of course I care about her, she’s…” Jack stammered. If his astonishment wasn’t real, it was a very convincing act. “But I don’t understand… what does that…?”

“Jack. We know how you feel, alright? Miss Masters noticed how you were always trying to get her attention and… well she thinks, and Mr. Winchester and I agree with him, that what you’re doing is very inappropriate.”

Jack’s eyes opened wide with realization.

“Wait.” He shook his head. “Wait. You think I’m… I’m trying to… date Miss Masters?!”

Claire shook a little more and then collapsed on the couch, with her face hidden in the pillows. Judging by that reaction and the genuinely horrified look Jack was throwing at him, Castiel had to reconsider his entire approach to this conversation.

“So you… you don’t?”

“Oh, my God, no! Of course not! She’s my teacher!” Jack shouted. “No, no, no! I was trying to get her to date you!”

Claire finally turned around and fell off the couch unto the carpet, making a choking sound that this time Castiel had no problem identifying: she was laughing so hard there were tears streaming down her face and she could barely breathe.

“Oh, fuck! Oh, God!” she gasped, with her face red and more laughter shaking her body with every word. “This is… this is the best… the best day ever!”

At that point, it was truly impossible to keep talking, not with Claire wriggling on the floor like a tortoise on its shell and hugging her sides, still laughing until her cheeks were bright red. Jack hid his
face in his hands, mortified, while Castiel stared at them both, at a complete loss of what to say.

He was sure he’d find the confusion funny someday, but right now, he was just as baffled and embarrassed as Jack himself.

“Jack, what did you—? Claire, could you please stop?”

“No!” Claire screamed between fits of laughter. “You thought Jack…? Jack? Really? Jack Kline, of all people?! Megan Fox could teach his Math class in a bikini and it would take him a month to notice!”

In hindsight, Castiel must have noticed right away what was wrong with that theory, but right now he was too humiliated to concede.

“Alright, that’s enough! Go to your room!”

He couldn’t order her to stop laughing, though, so even as she clung to the catch and staggered to her feet, even as she stumbled towards the stairs, she was still chuckling and bursting into outright laughter. It took five torturous minutes until she reached her room’s door and lock it behind her.

Now Castiel regretted having sent her away. Without someone to see the humor in the situation, all that was left was the awkwardness and puzzlement.

He pinched his nose long and hard before he turned to Jack, who was still not meeting his eye.

“Jack, that is still extremely inappropriate,” was the one only thing Castiel could say.

“I know,” Jack said, lowering his head. “It’s just… you two seemed to get along so well and you were going to be so alone when Claire and I left that I thought…”

“You thought… you needed to find me a girlfriend?” Castiel shook his head. “And that you could, what? Convince Meg to date me just by throwing us together at every chance you had?”

“I mean, when you put it like that…”

“Jack, that’s not how relationships work,” Castiel argued. “You cannot force someone to love another person or to be with them if they don’t want to. And you definitely can’t force two people to be together.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling him since September!”

Castiel glared at the stairs just in time to see Claire standing up and fleeing away. He was sure she’d come back to eavesdrop the rest of their conversation anyway.

“I didn’t mean to force you!” Jack argued. “Just… to give you a little nudge…”

“I’m not sure that’s any better.”

Jack went quiet and Castiel sighed.

“I know your intentions were good,” he promised him. “I know you didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt. But Meg…”

“Oh, no.” Jack paled. “Does she think I’m…? But I’m not!”

“Yes, I know. I know,” Castiel said, calmly. “But you still distressed her and you should apologize
to her.”

Jack groaned and lied back on the couch, staring at the ceiling as if he was calling for a heavenly entity to come down and put him out of his misery.

“Or maybe I could apologize in your place,” Castiel offered.

“Yes!” Jack sat up and put his hands together as if he was praying. “Please, please, uncle Cas! It was all a misunderstanding and I’m so, so embarrassed! Please, tell her I am not going to interfere anymore and I’m so, so sorry, I didn’t mean…”

“Alright, Jack. Calm down. I’m sure she will understand when I explain it to her.”

“You won’t have to,” Claire said from atop the stairs, waving her cellphone. “I already called Kaia and told her all about this.”

“You didn’t!” Jack shouted, indignant. “Claire! Tell me you didn’t!”

Claire ran away, a mocking laughter falling from her lips. Jack shouted out in frustration and got up from the couch to pursue her, telling her over and over that she was evil, how could she do this to her, was this payback? Because it wasn’t funny! Claire disagreed and began laughing even louder than before.

Castiel relaxed against his armchair with a sigh.

Well, now he was facing another problem. He was going to have all of this to Meg and make it sound believable.

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Meg was fifteen minutes late.

Castiel tried to be philosophical about it: she had insisted on him not picking her up in his car, which meant she was moving by bus. It was a cold day near the end of January and it was Saturday. He supposed that meant that buses were irregular or maybe there was a lot of people or…

Or maybe she had simply decided not to see him or talk to him ever again. Which she would be in her right to do, after the stunt that Jack had pulled in his name. Castiel had explained it to her over the phone, and even though Meg had assured him over and over that it was fine, that she was just glad that they were wrong about the reason that Jack had been acting the way he was, that it wasn’t that big of a deal… well, he’d noticed something underneath her voice that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Before he could insist on asking her if everything was alright, she’d said:

“Maybe we should meet somewhere to talk.”

“Of course,” Castiel had replied. “You mean at the school or…?”

“I was thinking less of an informal place?”

She’d proceeded to give him indications on how to get to a coffee shop she liked. Castiel had managed to arrive just fine (or had he? He double-checked. Yes, he was in the right place) after
slipping out of the house undetected by his nephews. It wasn’t that Meg had outright ask him not to tell them where he was going, but he’d thought it was best not to tell them right now. He didn’t want them to get even more involved in his love life that they already were.

Then again, there was not much of a love life to speak of, not to say not at all. He’d had the hope that Meg would… but he was sure she wouldn’t even want to think about it anymore.

The bell above the coffee shop’s door rang and Castiel lifted up his head. His heart immediately felt strangled in his chest and his breath caught in his throat.

Meg was a vision in a blue long coat, with her dark curls cascading free over her shoulders as small silver flakes melted in the heat of the cafeteria. She stopped around some tables and looked around until she spotted him. Too late, Castiel thought that maybe he should have waved at her or called her name. He didn’t want to seem like he didn’t want to be there, sharing a coffee with her. But she was already coming to him and all those thoughts were useless anyway.

“Hi… oh, you don’t have to do that,” she said as Castiel quickly got to his feet and helped her out of her coat.

“Indulge me. I’m an old-fashioned man,” Castiel said. He moved the chair for hair and waited for her to sit.

He wasn’t sure what to make of the little smirk she shot in his direction when they were finally sat together face to face.

“Well… so that was…”

“Meg, let me apologize again in Jack’s name,” he interrupted her. “He had nothing but good intentions, but he’s very naïve and he doesn’t understand that…”

“Cas.” Meg put a hand up to stop his rambling. “It’s fine. Like I said on the phone, I’m just glad we were all wrong.”

“Me too,” Castiel admitted with a sigh. “I can’t believe we thought… Claire is never going to stop laughing about this.”

Meg chuckled softly, as if she too was able to find humor in the situation, even though Castiel most definitely couldn’t just yet.

“I don’t want to talk about Jack, though,” Meg said, surprising him a little. “Or maybe I do. In a way.”

“What does that mean?”

A waiter interrupted their talk to get their order. Meg drank her coffee black, no sugar, nothing sweet to go with it. Castiel didn’t know why he decided to memorize such a trivial thing about her, but lately it seemed like all his attention was split between his daily life (the house chores, the twins, the book) and her. Whenever they were together, he couldn’t keep his eyes off her.

He shut those thoughts away in the back of his mind when Meg turned her attention back to him.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about the book and the latest chapters and the outline you sent me.”

Castiel blinked to adjust to the brusque change of subject.
“What about it?”

“You…” she started, but interrupted herself again as the waiter brought them their mugs of coffee. “Are you sure that’s how you want to go about it?”

Castiel drank a couple of sips from his own latte while he thought about how to answer. It was a fair question, after all.

“It might be a little… controversial, but I think I am being true to Agatha’s character…”

“I don’t mean because of that,” Meg clarified. She made a pause. “Well, I mean, obviously that’s going to be controversial because there’s some people… but no. I meant because of what Jasper does and what you have planned for him.”

“Oh.” Castiel added some sugar to his beverage and stirred pensively. “Well… that’s a little more complicated. Kelliadoth is a place of dreams, of innocence. It’s the twins’ childhood. Agatha is ready to leave it behind even before they go back for this one last adventure, she’s ready to be an adult. But Jasper… he might just need it a little longer. Even as he himself realizes that it’s not how it used to be when they were younger.”

He was speaking with ease, his initial awkwardness and fears about what the recent revelations would do to their relationship completely forgotten. Meg listened to him attentively and nodded slightly.

“Yes, I supposed he might,” she conceded. “Is that how you really see them?”

The question baffled Castiel for a moment. He’d always walked a fine line between his actual nephews and the fictional ones (of course he was in the book; he was reclusive uncle behind whose house laid the woods that constituted the bridge to Kelliadoth). With time, Claire had come to hate the fictional version of herself he’d created (she’d told him as much on one occasion), but Jack had always aspired to be more like Jasper.

“I don’t think he understands that Jasper is supposed to be like him and not the other way around. He’s not a perfect hero and he was never meant to be. He needs to make mistakes, to act selfishly and not do the right thing for once.” Castiel stopped and licked his lips. “And learn that he can still come back from making such mistakes.”

He wasn’t sure if he was talking about Jasper or Jack anymore. Maybe a little bit about the both of them.

Meg tapped her fingers against her arm.

“He’s not going to like it,” she said. “Jack, I mean.”

“I’m sure he will come around to see why things needed to be this way,” Castiel shrugged. “What about you? Have you written?”

He had the satisfaction of seeing Meg flustered and he basked in it. It happened so rarely, because more often than not it was her who was always leaving him speechless.

“It’s not really supposed to be a book. I don’t know why I even told you about it…”

“Because I talk about my book all the time and it’s only fair?” Castiel suggested. “I think it’s a great idea and you should really work on it. I could introduce you to my agent…”
“No,” she cut him off. “If I ever do write it… I think I’ll want to make it happen on my own.”

Castiel nodded, conceding that it was fair.

“Still, a bit of help won’t hurt. And I’m more than willing to…”

She turned towards him and he forgot what he was saying. He hoped it happened often enough that Meg was used to it and thought it was an effect of being absent-minded instead of getting caught up in her eyes each and every time.

“… just… for you to consider…” he finished clumsily.

Meg smiled at him and finished her coffee. They divided the check and Castiel helped her into her coat and held the door for her as they stepped outside to the cold.

“Can I drive you home? I know you didn’t want me to pick you up but…”

Meg stopped on her tracks on solitary corner and lifted her face at him. She said nothing for a moment as their breaths spiraled up in the air in white smoke.

“Meg?” he asked after a few seconds of silence.

Meg sighed softly.

“Alright. I think we can do this.”

“Do what? I don’t know what you…?”

Her hand came to rest on the back of his neck and pulled him closer towards her. Castiel’s heart began pounding so fast that its beating drowned out all other noises: the cars in the street, the conversation from people around them, even his own stuttering right before her lips found his.

She pulled away only a few seconds later, smirking up at him with confidence, while his mind still spun out of control.

“I got tired of waiting for you to make a move,” she explained when he stared at her with eyes wide open.

“Meg.” He closed his eyes, because it was really impossible for him to concentrate on anything when she was looking up at him like that. “It’s not… we can’t… there are so many things we need to…”

She kissed him again, on the edge of the lips this time, so soft and tender that all of Castiel’s protest melted away.

“We can deal with it all as it comes,” she said, shrugging. “I want this, Cas. I want to be with you and… honestly, if you don’t feel the same, just tell me.”

That surprised him even more than the sensation of her mouth on his.

“Why would you think I don’t want you, too?” he asked, frowning.

“I mean… if Jack was so worried that you wouldn’t do anything about us that he took it upon himself to push you…”

She had a point, but that didn’t meant Castiel had to like it. He was perfectly capable of letting his feelings be known without his teenage nephew’s help.
And to prove exactly that, he placed his hands on Meg’s waist and kissed her again.

There was nothing soft about it this time. He tasted her mouth, the breath that passed between the two, the sharpness of her teeth as she nibbled on his lower lip. He closed his eyes and tried to memorize it all: the texture of her coat and her hair in his fingertips, the smell of her perfume…

“Get a room, you two!”

They broke away, faces flushed and Meg giggled like a schoolgirl hiding her face on Castiel’s chest.

And really, there was not much more they could say. Castiel held her hand and together they waited for the light to change.

“We can’t tell this to the kids,” Castiel said after the euphoria remitted enough to let him think clearly again. They were halfway to Meg’s house by then. She turned from staring at the window with a frown.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want Jack to think that his scheming worked.”
February was a very strange month for Jack. On one hand, he was glad that winter was almost over and soon the days would start getting longer and that hope was enough to help him not fake his usual peppiness as he did all through December and January. He couldn’t wait for the snow to melt so that the days when he had to go out of the house bundled up in layers and layers of clothing was over and his socks would be dry all the time. So February was like the last stretch before he felt like the new year had actually began.

On the other hand… well, everything to do with Valentine’s Day.

The first day of the month they walked into the hall to find the school’s walls decked with red and pink wreaths, rose petals spread everywhere and a lot of signs reminded them to buy tickets for the Valentine Dance. Jack stood blinking at it, feeling like he’d been transported to another universe, but not a fun one like Hogwarts or Narnia or Kelliadoth.

Even Claire and Kaia, who were currently on the third month of a very happy relationship, seemed to think that it was all a little bit excessive.

“How are you even supposed to walk around here?” Claire complained, swatting away the rose petals that had become attached to her boots.

Kaia grabbed one of the cards that hanged from the ceiling and wrinkled her nose when she read what it said.

“Listen to this: ‘Roses are red/Violets are blue/The only one that I want/is you!’ ‘You’ in all capital letters with a heart!” she added, showing it to Claire and Jack. “They didn’t even respect the metric!”

“Violets are purple,” Claire said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, you’re being real Grinches about this, aren’t you?” Alexis said. She approached them with pamphlets and placed them in their hands before they even had a chance to protest.

“The Grinch hates Christmas,” Claire reminded her, glancing at the paper. “You’re in the dance committee?”

“Oh,” Jack muttered, looking at the paper and feeling conflicted all of the sudden as Alexis walked away to give flyers to other students. “I… can we buy a ticket and then not go?”

“If you do that, you will be taking away a ticket from someone who actually wants to go, Jack,” Claire pointed out.

She was right. Jack bit the inside of his cheek, looking down at the paper and then up at the Valentine’s decorations and then back down at the paper.

“You can still donate the price of the ticket directly to the homeless shelter,” Claire pointed out.

“Yes!” Jack snapped his fingers. “That’s a great idea!”

“Dancing’s not your thing, Jack?” Kaia asked.
“More like, Valentine Day’s not his thing,” Claire said with a snicker. “Every single year a girl uses the excuse to ask him out and every single year, he humiliates them in some way.”

“I don’t… I never mean to!” Jack argued. “It’s just… you know… I don’t… really know how…”

“How to turn people down?” Kaia suggested.

“More like, he doesn’t know how to tell when someone is asking him out,” Claire replied, with a snicker.

Jack glared at her, but his sister shrugged as she finished putting the books in her backpack.

“Hey, come on. If you didn’t do that, you wouldn’t be Jack,” she argued as they headed down the hallways. “Besides, I’m sure by now everyone knows what they’re exposing themselves to if they ask you out.”

That didn’t make Jack feel much better, but he still mumbled:

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to the Valentine’s Day dance, Ben?” Kaia asked.

Jack turned around to see that, indeed, Ben had approached them. He grabbed the flyer from Jack’s hand with a scoff.

“I don’t believe in Valentine’s Day,” he declared. “It’s made up by Big Chocolate.”

“And who in your opinion runs Big Chocolate? Willy Wonka?” Claire asked him, as Kaia chuckled.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Ben insisted. “If you really love and care for someone, you don’t need a holiday to tell them so. You show it to them every single day.”

“That’s a very nice sentiment, Ben,” Jack said, smiling at him.

Ben looked up at him and swallowed, as if he was very uncomfortable all of the sudden. Or maybe Jack imagined that, because a second later Ben was smiling and talking normally again.

“So listen, if you don’t have plans for Valentine’s Day, I was thinking maybe we could hang out,” he said. “Not like… hang out, but like… you know, we can meet at your house, work on the Inksters’ thing. Maybe catch a movie.”

“Oh, yeah, that sounds great!” Jack said. “I’d really like that.”

Ben laughed and scratch the back of his head.

“Alright, then, it’s a… it’s a hang out! We’re hanging out. That’s great. Really awesome.”

“It is,” Jack agreed, though he wasn’t sure why Ben seemed to be stammering all of the sudden. “I’ll see you then!”

“Yes!” Ben clicked his tongue and pointed at Jack with finger guns and walked backwards down the hall. “It’s going to be…”

He crashed into a group of freshman girls who all gave him weird looks. Ben tried to save some face by standing up very straight, pretending he hadn’t noticed and practically trotting elsewhere.
“Well, if those two yahoos are going to be invading my house, you and I need to find something else to do, babe,” Claire said, turning towards Kaia as the entered Miss Masters’ classroom. “’Cause maybe Willy Wonka invented Valentine’s Day, but we’re still going to celebrate our first ever together.”

Kaia’s dark eyes glimmered at that.

“Sure,” she said laughing. “And we can be out as late as we want, because Meg is going to be out of town that weekend. She has a teacher’s seminar thing that she’s going to.”

“And they put it on Valentine’s Day weekend?” Claire asked, frowning. “Is it a seminar for single teachers only?”

“Maybe they just have really bad timing,” Kaia shrugged. “I don’t think Meg will care, though. She really has no one to spend the day with now that her suitor backed down.”

They both shot a look at Jack with mocking smiles.

“Are you guys ever going to let that go?” Jack asked, frustrated.

“No.”

“Definitely not.”

Jack sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

Though the truth was, he could deal with Claire and Kaia making fun of him for being so clueless that he’d made people believe he was interested in Miss Masters, because Miss Masters herself hadn’t seen too bothered by it.

“Jack, don’t worry about it,” she’d told him the Monday following Castiel’s “intervention”. “It was all a big misunderstanding and I’m sure your uncle already explained to you what you did wrong.”

“Yes, and I will never, ever, ever do anything like that again,” Jack had said, his face burning red. “I am so sorry I made you feel uneasy in any way and I…”

Miss Masters had put a hand up to stop him from speaking.

“It’s all good. Don’t even worry about it.”

And although the next few classes and Inksters’ meetings were a little awkward, they got over it pretty quickly. Miss Masters talked to him and treated him as kindly as always and she even seemed to be in particularly high spirits those days. Claire and Kaia claimed not to have noticed this change, but Jack thought that maybe Miss Masters just wasn’t a winter person and was eagerly waiting for spring to arrive, like he was.

That was how the situation was those days. February was weird, but it wasn’t anything that Jack couldn’t handle. In fact, now that he was looking into colleges again (maybe one in California, so he could be near Claire) and thinking about the future, he felt pretty optimistic about where his life was heading right now.

Which was why when everything changed, it caught him off-guard.

Kaia and Claire were talking and flirting during lunch, as usual, and usual, he was doing his best to ignore the feeling of being left out by the two of them, when his cellphone chimed announcing he
had a new email. Usually, he didn’t take it out, not even during lunch, but this time, he really had nothing better to do. He took it out, fully expecting it to be some sort of spam and…

Reading the name on his screen left him immediately cold, as if all the warmth of the room had been sucked away. His hand trembled violently and he had to hold on tight to his phone to prevent dropping it. His heart raced inside his chest and all these violent emotions must have reflected on his face, because Claire stopped snuggling with Kaia for a second to shoot him a strange look.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Jack didn’t answer immediately. His tongue was glue to his palate, preventing him from saying anything. And even if he could say something, the part of his brain that wasn’t overtaken by his astonishment and confusion warned him that he couldn’t tell Claire about this.

“Y-yeah…” he stuttered. It didn’t sound convincing at all. He took a gulp of water and tried again: “Yeah. I just… felt a little dizzy all of the sudden.”

“You should go see the nurse,” Kaia suggested. “You could be catching a cold or something.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right.” Jack stood up. “I will go do that right now. Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

It wasn’t until he had already fled the diner and was looking for a quiet place where to read the email that he realized just how strange and unnatural that had sounded.

It didn’t matter. He would think about it later.

The boy’s bathroom was almost empty, luckily for him. He found a stall, locked himself in it and only after taking several gulps of breath (the bathroom smelled too much like disinfectant, but he figured that was better than the other option), he fished his cellphone out of his pocket and dared to read it.

> Hello, my boy.

> I’m sorry about this late reply. Several business have held my attention, though I know this is not an excuse that could be easily accepted. Believe me when I tell you that if I’d had the option of replying sooner, I would have.

> I hope you, your sister and your uncle are all well. Aunt Amara told me she saw you all for Thanksgiving, but she let it transpire that her visit was… less than satisfactory for her. I was sorry to hear that. Having no children of her own, she has always been very generous with me and my brothers and I was hoping that generosity would extend to the two of you.

> In any case, I will be back on the States next month and hopefully, I might be staying long enough to assist to your graduation and share your eighteenth birthday. It’s a very important touchstone and I’d love to share it with you.

> Take care of yourself and Claire.

> Dad.

That was probably the longest email his father had written him in… ever. Jack was surprised by that and also by the tone of it. Luc didn’t usually apologize when he did things wrong (like taking over a month to answer an email) because, well… there was always an excuse for what he did, according to him. It was one of the reasons that Claire thought so poorly of him.
He was also surprised that he was coming back. The few times he’d spoken to him, Luc had made it very clear he much rather preferred Europe and that he wouldn’t come back if he didn’t have to. Especially not to their hometown, which he thought was very ill-equipped to provide him with the comforts he was used to.

“Well, don’t come back on our account,” Claire had told him on one occasion, which had then turned into a very intense fight that had ended the visit prematurely.

Now that he thought about it, not many good things had happened whenever Luc had visited them in the past. However, that was no indication that it could happen again. Maybe this time things would be different. Maybe they would turn out alright.

An inner voice that sounded a lot like Claire’s told him that, even for him, that excessively optimistic.

He sighed and rubbed his temples. Should he tell this to Claire and Castiel? If Luc coming to visit was inevitable, it would be fair for them to know...

The bell announcing the start of the class startled him. He hadn’t even realized it was that late!

“Running down the hallways and being late for class, Mr. Kline?” Mr. Walker said, without even lifting his eyes from the board. “I believe that warrants a detention.”

Jack sat down, trying to catch his breath and hoping that not many people were staring at his red, sweaty face. No matter what happened with Luc, he needed to focus on class right now.

“I have something to tell you, kids,” Castiel said, after clearing his throat that night during dinner. “In a couple of weeks, I have to go out of town and meet my agent.”

Claire and Jack looked up from their dinner, a little surprised at that.

“Doesn’t Rachel always come to see you when she needs to talk something with you?” Claire pointed.

“She… usually does, yes. But this time, we agreed that it was better if I went to her. We have a lot to talk about. I’m thinking this time I might be able to go on tour to promote the book, since it’s the final one.”

“Have you finished it?” Jack asked, his face lightning up with excitement.

“Not yet,” Castiel said. “It’s also longer than the usual ones, but I think I’m allowed to indulge in a little longer word count.”

“Of course, absolutely!” Jack replied. “As many words as you need.”

Claire scoffed and shook his head before moving his peas on the dish so as not to eat them. She always did that and hoped that Castiel wouldn’t notice.

“Wait, two weeks from now?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “That’s… that’s Valentine’s Day weekend, right?”

“Umh… yes, I think it would be so,” Castiel said, with a shrug.
Claire watched him close and then nodded and went back to her food.

“Anyway… I was hoping you’re old enough now that I could leave you alone for a couple of nights,” Castiel continued. “You’re going to be alright, aren’t you?”

Jack and Claire looked at each other, surprised. This was a first ever occurrence. Castiel was always so concerned about their well-being, he had never before left them for more than a few hours alone at home.

No, him being locked away in his studio didn’t really count as leaving them alone.

“Yes, of course. It won’t be a problem,” Jack said.

“Can we throw a house party?”

“I would prefer if you didn’t.”

“I’m kidding, I hate parties,” Claire said, with a chuckle. “But yeah, don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine.”

Castiel watched them close, as if he was trying to determine if they were being truthful or not. Then he nodded and kept eating.

In the silence that followed, Jack decided he really needed to say something about the email Luc had sent. He really should. He knew the outcome wouldn’t be pretty, but it was best if he warned them beforehand… though, was it really a warning if they were actually related to the man? And honestly, they shouldn’t be all that hang-up about it, if it was simply…

“You know, this is nice,” Claire said.

“What thing?” Castiel asked.

“Just… this.” She gestured around the table. “Just the three of us, having dinner. No one has any dramas to deal with, we’re not hiding secrets from each other. It’s been a while since it’s been like this. It’s just nice.”

Both Jack and Castiel stared at her in surprise. It was very unlike Claire to say something like that.

“Umh…” Jack started.

“What do you want?” Castiel asked, narrowing his eyes.

“There’s a small indie band playing in the next town over. It’s not on a bar, minors are allowed,” she added quickly. “Can I go with Kaia as a Valentine’s Day date?”

Jack nodded to himself. That did make a lot more sense. Castiel sighed.

“Do you promise you’re going to drive safely and not drink?”

“Scout’s honor!” Claire said, raising three fingers in what Jack was fairly certain was actually the Hunger Games salute.

Castiel sighed and nodded.

“Provided Meg lets Kaia go, I see no problem with it.”
Claire pumped her fist in the air and continued eating her dinner. After a few seconds, Castiel said:

“But you’re right. This is… nice.”

Jack decided he would bring up the e-mail at some other time.
Castiel stood around the door, with his bag around his shoulder, hesitant.

“The money is supposed to last you until Sunday, but if you need anymore, you also have the ATM card and the credit card. Please, use them responsibly.”

“Yes, Uncle Cas.”

“You have Sheriff Mills number to call her in case anything happens,” Castiel added. “And please, please… don’t throw any parties.”

“We won’t,” Jack assured him. “Claire’s going out with Kaia and I’m hanging out with Ben. We don’t need to throw any parties.”

“You didn’t leave us enough time to invite anyone anyway,” Claire said. “Kidding!” she added, raising her hands in the air when Castiel glared at her.

“Don’t hesitate to call me,” Castiel said. “I’m only four hours away and I can drive back as soon as you…”

“Shouldn’t you be leaving?” Claire asked.

“It’s gonna be dark before you get there,” Jack added.

There was no arguing with that. Castiel threw them one last look, as if he wanted to make sure he was seeing them right and then picked up his duffle bag from the floor.

“Please, be responsible.”

“You have nothing to worry about. Responsibility is my second name.”

“No, it’s not.” Jack frowned at his sister.

“It’s… it’s an expression,” Claire sighed.

Castiel stepped forwards and gave Jack a quick hug. When he tried to do the same thing with Claire, she put her hands up to keep him away.

“Pass. But thank you.”

There was nothing much left to say. Castiel climbed down the porch’s steps and headed for his car while Claire and Jack watched him from the doorway.

“I left you dinner in the oven, if you want to heat it up,” he added, already reaching for the handle of the car.

“Thank you, uncle!”

“We’re just gonna go ahead and gorge ourselves on pizza and other super unhealthy foods, but we appreciate the sentiment!”

Castiel looked blinked at them and sighed.
“I’ll see you on Sunday evening.”

“Drive carefully!” Jack shouted as the car was already speeding down the street.

The twins stayed outside, while the weak mid-February snowflakes spiraled down and accumulated on their heads and shoulders. It was a strange feeling, Claire thought. Like… it felt so strange not having Castiel there to remind them to do their homework or their chores. To know that they could go out into the night without him calling to remind them of curfew, because he wouldn’t be there to know that they were out past the curfew.

She breathed in the cold night air one last time before she followed Jack inside the house.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he turned to head for the kitchen.

“I’m going to go heat up the food that Uncle Cas left us,” he explained. “Or maybe you want to have dinner a little later?”

Claire put her hands together against her mouth, as if she was praying for patience.

“Jack, Castiel isn’t here.”

“Yes, I know. Which is why we need to heat up the food he left us…”

Claire took a few steps towards him and grabbed his cheeks in her hands.

“Listen to me: Castiel. Isn’t. Here. We don’t have to eat our veggies and be good kids. We can eat at three in the morning if we want to. We can do whatever we want.”

“But… I like Uncle Cas’ food,” Jack said, frowning. “And why would we eat at three in the morning? That’s late…”

Claire patted both his cheeks to try and get his attention.

“Listen, this is your chance. Is there anything you always wanted to do but Castiel never let you? You can do it right now. I won’t say anything. What do you want to do that you never could?”

Jack stared at her as if the very concept of misbehaving was completely alien to him. He opened his mouth, closed it again. Then, slowly, as if what she was telling him was only hitting him now, his eyes grew wider.

“Do you… do you remember the Guitar Hero videogame we had?”

“Vaguely,” she admitted.

“Castiel never let us play it because it’s too loud and it doesn’t let him concentrate on writing,” Jack reminded her. “Can we play it now?”

Claire nodded to him, a smirk appearing on her lips. If Jack wanted to be thoroughly humiliated by playing Guitar Hero against her, well, then, that was his choice and as his sister, she should support him.

It took them an hour rummaging through the basement and then another one arguing about how the game should be connected, but after a while they actually managed to get the game up and running. They turned the volume up so loud Jack was concerned they would disturb the neighbors, but Claire reminded him once again that *they weren’t the bosses of them*. So they had themselves a little rock concert in their living room, in their socks, screaming and shouting at the scream when they thought...
the score wasn’t correct. After an hour or so, Claire convinced Jack to order pizza (and yes, she even talked him into not ordering pineapple on it) and drink lots of sugary beverages they should definitely not be drinking before going to bed.

It was glorious.

After several songs, she laid exhausted on the carpet, while Jack looked through the game’s catalogue, trying to find a song that was challenging and they hadn’t really tried yet.

“How about this one?”

“Eh. Just pick one,” Claire said, taking another sip from her can. “You’re gonna lose like a little bitch either way.”

“You know, Claire, that’s not very nice of you,” Jack said, but he was smiling, so the remark wasn’t as biting as it could’ve been.

“How many times I have to tell you, brother dear? I’m not very nice.”

Jack shook his head and was going to protest something (probably about how everyone had a little bit of light in themselves or something equally corny) when Claire’s phone rang, interrupting him. She wondered if it was one of the neighbors or if Castiel had forgotten to remind them to lock the door before they went to bed, but they hadn’t been playing for the last fifteen minutes and it was too late for Castiel to be calling them.

She was surprised to see Kaia’s face pop up on her screen.

“Hello?”

“Hey. How are you doing?”

“I’m… fine. Tasting the freedom,” Claire said.

“Yeah? How does it taste like?”

Claire took another sip from her can.

“Like Sprite. What’s up, babe?”

“Nothing!” Kaia said, a little too fast for it to be true. “I’m just… getting ready to go to bed and I…”

“Okay,” Claire interrupted her. “Is this a booty call or a just normal call? Because Jack is here and I might need to go to another room if it’s the first.”

“Tell her I say hi,” Jack said, without taking his eyes off the screen.

“He says hi.”

Kaia chuckled on the other end.

“No, it’s not a booty call,” she clarified. “I just… I wanted to hear your voice.”

That rang some alarm bells in the back of Claire’s head. She sat up straight, as if that would let her concentrate better on what her girlfriend was saying.

“Kaia, is everything okay? You can tell me.”
Kaia remained silent for a few seconds.

“I told Meg I could handle this,” she murmured in the end. She sounded frustrated. “I told her I could be alone in the house for two nights, but now I’m kind of… freaking out and I’m afraid I might have a night terror and there’s no one going to be at home to wake me up and…”

“Say no more. We’re gonna go pick you up right now,” Claire decided.

“What?”

“What?” Jack repeated, turning to her.

“We are, and you’re gonna come here, and you’re going to sleep in the guests’ room,” Claire continued. “So get an overnight bag ready.”

“Are you sure?” Kaia asked. “Is Castiel going to be okay with that?”

“Well, the great news is, we don’t have to ask him, ‘cause he’s out of town too. Also, if you get too nervous, call me again and I’m gonna stay with you on the phone all the way there.”

“Oh… okay,” Kaia said, hesitantly. And then, a little more cheerfully: “Okay. Yeah. That… thank you.”

“I’ll call you when we’re outside,” Claire said. She ended the call and she started looking around for her shoes. “Get up, nerd, you gotta drive me there so Kaia can call me.”

“But… Claire, it’s way past our curfew,” Jack tried to argue.

“Don’t care. My girlfriend needs me to come pick her up, so I will go do that.” She finished tying up her boots and stood up to look for her coat in the hanger by the door. “You either come with me to bring her here or I stay over there.”

“But…” Jack started protesting again, but Claire shut him up with a glare.

“She’s all on her own, she’s scared. What am I supposed to tell her? ‘Good luck with that, see you tomorrow for our date?’”

“No. I guess that would be pretty rude,” Jack admitted.

“Great.” She took Jack’s coat from the hanger and threw it at him. “So we’re going.”

Five minutes later, they were out in the deserted, cold streets, heading for Meg’s house. And if Claire didn’t know any better, she would have said that Jack’s silent was downright broody. Except “brooding” and “Jack” were two concepts that just didn’t mesh together.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Fine,” he insisted. He cleared his throat. “So it’s like… Kaia going to really stay in the guests’ room or is that just an excuse to… uhm… ‘hook up’ with her?” He drew air quotes with one hand while keeping the other one on the wheel.

The question disconcerted Claire more than she was willing to admit. It was just… so unlike Jack to even think about anything of the sort. She chalked it up to Ben’s bad influence.

“You know, I wouldn’t kick her out of bed, but I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”
“It’s just… my room is right next to yours and I don’t really want to hear anything… weird. Like with your sleepovers with Alexis.”

Claire watched him closely for a moment, without saying a word.

“Alright, what is this really about?” she asked.

“W-why do you think this is about something different?” Jack replied, stammering. “I was just planning on sleeping, that’s all.”

“No, you were planning on playing Guitar Hero all night long with me,” Claire corrected him. “How does this throw a wrench in your plans? Kaia can play with us.”

Jack sighed deeply, as if he couldn’t believe Claire wasn’t understanding him.

“Nothing. Doesn’t matter.”

And that was definitely broody.

“Stop the car,” she demanded.

“Weren’t we in a hurry to go pick up Kaia?”

“Stop the car, Jack,” Claire insisted.

Jack threw her a confused look, but he did as he was told. He let the motor die and turned to look at her.

“Why does it bother you that Kaia spends time with us?” she asked, point blank.

She didn’t want to say anything about it, but she had noticed. She had noticed how Jack used every excuse to leave the two alone, that he was always looking away when they kissed and though he treated Kaia with the same courtesy that he extended to everyone, there was an underlying coldness about it that she wouldn’t have been able to explain had someone asked her to. She just knew, because she knew Jack, and because he’d never acted like this with any of her previous girlfriends, no matter how briefly they dated.

And that’s when it clicked in Claire’s head. Kaia was different to him, because she had made it so clear that she was different to her.

“Are you, like… jealous of Kaia or something like that?”

“No,” Jack snapped. He took a deep breath and pinched his nose. “It’s just… whenever you two are together, I just… I feel left out and like I don’t… like I can’t really…”

“So it’s just that you think you’re third-wheeling for us?” Claire tried instead.

“Something like that.”

She had to make her best effort not to laugh. She felt like that would have hurt Jack’s feelings somewhat.

“Okay, listen. Yeah, Kaia is awesome and yeah, I am crazy about her,” she said. “But whatever happens, you and I? We are a team. We’re forever. ‘Cause you’re my brother and nothing is going to change that, okay?”
Jack licked his lips nervously.

“Not even with how bad I screwed up with the letter thing?”

“Not even that,” Claire assured him. “Like, I was really mad with you, but I got over it. Can you get over me being in love with Kaia?”

Jack sulked a moment longer and then he nodded.

“Yeah. Yes, of course. She makes you happy. I want you to be happy.”

That wasn’t quite the same thing that Claire had asked him to, but she’d take it. She sat back down on her seat.

“Alright, then. Let’s get going, she’s waiting for us.”

Jack turned on the radio before doing so. Perhaps he just didn’t want to keep talking about it, but Claire had the idea that this was far from the end of it.

By the time they got to Meg’s house, however, there was another thing that occupied their mind.

“Oh,” Jack muttered. “She was really nervous.”

It was a bit of an understatement. The house was lit up like a Christmas tree, with all the windows illuminated, as if Kaia had gone through each and every room turning on the lights. That was very likely what happened, Claire realized as she picked up her phone.

“Hey, babe. We’re right outside.”

“Oh. Umh… can we… I’m so sorry I made you come all the way here and…”

There was something strange in her voice. Claire decided she was really done with trying to deal with those two dorks emotional breakdowns.

“I’m coming to your door right now,” she informed her. “Wait here, Jack.”

She’d only taken a few steps inside of the garden when the door opened and Kaia stepped outside. She had dressed in her jeans and a turtle neck and the golden glow of her living room lights made her look as adorable as ever.

Claire pushed those thoughts aside and focused instead on Kaia’s troubled expression.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, climbing up the steps to be on Kaia’s level.

Her girlfriend took one of her black curls between her fingers and started twisting it nervously.

“I was just thinking… what if someone notices that Meg’s home is all alone and they… they could come in and steal something and…”

“Well, then I’ll stay here,” Claire offered.

“But you can’t!” Kaia argued, horrified. “You can’t leave Jack alone. And what if someone comes into your home?”

It was disgustingly cute that she thought that in a robbery situation, Claire would be the one to defend Jack and well, she wasn’t about to correct her on that notion. She liked that Kaia thought she
was something that was able to keep the people she loved safe.

What a weird thought.

“Kaia, hey.” She put her hands on Kaia’s cheek and for the second time in the night, she used that gesture to speak sense into someone. “Look, if you lock all the doors and windows, I’m sure it will be fine. And even if something does happen, I’m sure Meg will understand it wasn’t your fault. And Jack and I will honestly rather have you at home with us, where you can ask us to be with you if you feel bad, than all the way here on your own.”

Those words seemed to cut through whatever downwards spiral Kaia’s thoughts were going through. She took in a deep breath and nodded.

“Okay.”

“Okay!” Claire repeated. “I’m gonna get Jack and we’re going to go through every room to make sure all the lights are turned off and all the windows are locked. Is that okay?”

“Yes.” Kaia nodded. “Yeah, that’ll help.”

The spent the next hour doing exactly that and even let Kaia double-check everything to make her feel safer about it. Finally, Kaia did pick up her overnight bag and walked outside with them, sighing.

“Alright. I think I’m ready to go,” she declared.

She turned off the living room lights and locked the door on her way out. Claire grabbed her hand and gently led her away from the house towards the car.

Jack said nothing while all of this was happening. Claire was going to ask him what was that all about, but once they were inside the car, Jack made it a point to look over to the backseat where Kaia was seated and tell her:

“It’s going to be okay, Kaia. We’re going to be with you as long as you need us to.”

Which was awfully nice of him to say. Claire hadn’t realize that Jack wasn’t aware of Kaia’s problems, but he had gone along with the house double-checking anyway. That was pretty big of him, considering how he felt about Kaia hanging around them all the time.

Kaia smiled warmly at him.

“I know. Thank you.”
Kaia was not proficient at Guitar Hero, which frustrated her greatly, which was hilarious and adorable, in Claire’s opinion. Jack tried to teach her how to play, in an attempt that was as futile as it was hilarious.

“You have to try and anticipate the notes coming your way,” he told her over and over. “And you have to push the buttons with a little more force or you won’t get it…”

“But what if I break the console by doing that?”

“Babe, there’s no way you’re going to break the console,” Claire said, chuckling to herself.

“Are you calling me weak?” Kaia asked, narrowing her eyes at her.

“I would never dare.”

She was glad to let Kaia wreck the score advantage she had taken over Jack if that took her mind off of things. She was tempted to make a joke about how three teenagers home alone was the perfect set-up for a serial killer to come and do them in, but she figured that would not actually help Kaia at all.

It was almost four in the morning by the time they finished all the pizza leftovers and were so tired not even Jack and Claire could coordinate their fingers enough to score a single note. When Jack fell asleep sprawled on the couch, Claire figured that it was time to call it a night.

“We should really…” she yawned. “We should really go to bed.”

“Oh. Okay.” Kaia turned off the TV and glanced at the mess they had made in the living room.

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll clean it up in the morning,” Claire assured her. She only half-meant to do that, truth be told, but she was tired enough that she could pretend to be a responsible and clean person if it meant she could go to bed sooner.

Kaia picked up her overnight bag and followed them upstairs after Claire woke Jack up and convinced him his bed was a better spot to slumber. He groggily disappeared inside his bedroom and Claire thought there was a funny thing about irritatingly responsible Jack Kline going to bed without brushing his teeth for once. She just couldn’t come up with a funny way to express that out loud because of how tired she was.

She and Kaia, though, spent a long time in front of the sink doing exactly that. Claire found herself moving her brush automatically, while all the time her eyes were glued to the spot where Kaia’s neck became her shoulder.

She wanted to ask. She wanted to say something about it. But she just… she didn’t know how to bring it up.

In the end, Kaia spat first and asked:

“So, where’s this… guests’ room?”

Yes, maybe that would be better. The guests’ room had a bigger bed.

She definitely needed to get her head out of the gutter. She waited patiently in the doorway while Kaia left her bag on the bed and then turned to her. They stared at each other awkwardly, through
bleary eyes, and then they both giggled. Claire extended her arms at her and Kaia easily slipped into them.

Her kiss tasted like mint and her body was soft and relaxed against Claire’s. She was floating in a sort of sleepy haze, and wishing to get lost even more into her. Her rational mind, the one that would’ve indicated her maybe this wasn’t the best time to bring this up, had jumped ship hours ago. That was why she let her hand slip up Kaia’s shirt, looking for the softness of her skin on her fingertips…

Kaia broke away brusquely, breathing heavily. Her lips were swollen and her voice was hoarse when she stuttered out:

“Good… good night.”

“Good night,” Claire repeated, a little flustered as she watched her girlfriend slip away and close the door behind her.

Well, of course that had not turned out as great as she had hoped, she thought as she changed into her pajamas and got inside her (lonely, cold) bed. In retrospective, perhaps it was much better to bring up the topic when they were both wide awake and conscious of their acts.

Because she definitely, definitely, didn’t want to blow this up by moving too soon.

The following day, something completely unprecedented happened: Claire woke up before Jack did. She knew this, because she walked past his room and caught a glimpse of him lying on his stomach on his bed, completely dressed and with one shoe still hanging from his foot, as if he had fallen asleep in the middle of taking it off.

Claire considered rousing him from his sleep by jumping on him and making fun of him not being able to keep awake enough to change, but at the last minute, she decided she was feeling merciful. She took out a cover from his closet and covered him with it, before wadding downstairs to prepare breakfast. Or more like brunch, she decided after checking the time and finding out it was almost noon.

As she put the coffee to brew and raided the cabinets for something to prepare a mildly decent meal, she realized with a jolt that she didn’t know how Kaia had her breakfast. She knew Kaia liked her coffee with a lot of sugar and some milk, but she didn’t know what she liked other than that. Did she want toasts? Bacon? Pancakes? Claire couldn’t make pancakes. She would need to ask Castiel to teach her once he returned from his weekend away.

But most importantly, she realized that there were still a lot things she really didn’t know about Kaia. They talked a lot about books and poetry, and only occasionally of things that worried them about the present or the future. They studied together whenever they could and laughed together all the time, and of course, Claire didn’t miss any opportunity to kiss her.

She wanted so much more, though. And she wanted…

“Hey.” Kaia’s voice startled her while. “What are you doing?”

Claire realized that she was standing in front of the stove with an egg in her hand, having been
unable to decide whether to crack it or not.

“Breakfast for you, babe,” Claire replied. She smiled and Kaia smiled back, showing her teeth in a grin that was so beautiful and joyful Claire wasn’t sure how she managed to look at it without her heart bursting.

“Don’t you mean brunch?”

“If you want to get technical…” Claire chuckled, but didn’t tell Kaia that she’d had the exact same thought not five minutes ago. That was how in synch they were. That was how much they understood each other.

Or maybe she was taking one silly coincidence and turning it into some sort of soulmate’s argument. God, she really had it bad.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Besides sitting there and looking adorable with the nest you have in your hair? Nothing comes to mind.”

Kaia brushed her fingers through her hair, but all she managed to do was making it look even messier. Claire handed her a mug of coffee, pushed the sugar bowl towards her and kissed her softly on the cheek before she returned to her eggs.

“Scrambled is the only way I really know how to make them,” she said, apologetically. “So I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine. Thank you.”

She said nothing more, but Claire could feel her eyes boring into the back of her neck while she worked. She tried to ignore it, but by the time the eggs were ready, she was more nervous than she’d like to admit. She settled the plate in front of her and sat down, looking into her mug of coffee for a second before she spoke up.

“I…”

“I’m sorry about last night,” Kaia said before Claire could get another word in. “I was tired and you… you took me by surprise.”

Oh, so she hadn’t done anything wrong. That was a relief to hear.

“No worries,” Claire assured her, smiling. “I’m just glad that you’re with us and you’re comfortable… you’re comfortable, right?”

“Yes.” Kaia laughed. “You and Jack are amazing for having me here. Thank you.”

Claire stretched her hand and Kaia gently accepted to hold hers. They smiled at each other over their breakfast. Claire opened her mouth to say something else…

Jack stumbled inside of the kitchen, blinking at the light and groaning softly, still wearing the same creased clothes he’d had when he’d gone to sleep. He plopped down in the chair next to Kaia with a groan.

“What time is it?” he asked, in a hoarse voice that sounded disturbingly like Castiel’s.

“Time for you to look alive, zombie kid,” Claire said. It wasn’t particularly funny, but Kaia laughed
“I’m serious,” Jack said, running a hand through his hair. “Ben’s supposed to be here by four.”

Claire stood up, placed the rest of the scrambled eggs in a dish and set it next to Jack.

“Don’t worry, you have plenty of time to finish rising from the grave,” she told him and then turned to Kaia. “And plenty of time for us to get ready for the concert. Happy Valentine’s Day, babe.”

“Oh.” Kaia closed her eyes, as if she’d completely forgot what day it even was. “Oh, damn, I forgot your gift at home.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Claire said. “The best gift is having you here.”

Jack made another sound that sounded like a strangled moan of either pain or exhaustion.

“Eat your eggs, Jack.”

And even though Claire had absolutely no power or authority over him, he proceeded to do exactly that in complete silence.

Kaia had never heard of Charvelle and in Claire’s opinion that was the biggest travesty of all. They spent the hours previous to the concert listening to their music while sitting together on Claire’s bed, in a sort of crash course through their greatest hits before seeing them live.

“They played in really small venues because they say the acoustics sound better,” she explained, while she showed Kaia a sketchy recording of the duo. “They’re very indie. Like, raise money through the Internet to record their album indie. Their style is sort of like a mix of alternative rock and punk pop and they sound really good…”

“Also, are they like… together?” Kaia asked, narrowing her eyes and holding Claire’s phone closer to her face.

“You know, there’s a lot of speculation online about it,” Claire said. “I think yes.”

Kaia didn’t show the unbridled interest that Claire had expected, but that didn’t discourage her. It was a matter of actually hearing them live. Claire had on a couple of occasions already, and she could confirm that it was a completely different experience. Jo Harvelle was especially great with her guitar and had been the person who’d inspired Claire to take it up in the first place.

“Okay.” Kaei set the phone down. “They’re not usually the kind of music I go for, but I’m willing to give them a chance for you.”

“What is the kind of music you go for?”

“I don’t know. I like less noisy bands,” Kaia said. Claire raised an eyebrow at her qualifying her bands as “noisy”. “Like… Bastille. Or OneRepublic. Or Train.”

“Train?” Claire repeated, unable to contain a chuckle. “Really? That band that had like, one hit single a million years ago?”
Kaia scoffed, offended.

“I happen to like that particular song a lot. And at least people have heard of them!”

“Sure, okay.” Claire laughed a little more. “You’re such a softie.”

“And you’re complete emo trash.”

“But I look cute, though,” Claire said, leaning closer to her girlfriend.

“No one is arguing that.”

Claire stared at her. It wasn’t as if Kaia never let her feelings for her be known, but she wasn’t usually so… direct about them. Claire was the one who was always openly flirting and telling her how gorgeous she was. Kaia usually laughed softly or lowered her eyes as she blushed. She was shy and Claire understood that.

Which is why it was always such a treat when Kaia said things like that about her.

“You’re… I mean, you’re just…” Kaia stammered.

Claire put her hand on Kaia’s cheek and pulled her in for a kiss. Slow and sweet at first, but then Kaia open her mouth a little and their tongues touched, sending a shiver down Claire’s spine. And she wasn’t sure how it happened, but suddenly, Kaia was lying down on her bed, her hair spread on the pillow and Claire was on top of her, kissing her, their legs tangled up and their hands clasped tight together…

Kaia closed her mouth and put a hand on Claire’s shoulder to push her away.

“We should… get ready for the concert.”

“What? Oh. The concert. Right.” Claire shook her head and tried to focus. “Right. But you can’t wear that.”

An hour later, they headed downstairs. At Claire’s insistence, Kaia had added a black leather jacket to her jeans and turtleneck get-up, but since Claire was taller, the sleeves covered all the way down to her hands. She looked adorable, though Claire was starting to suspect there was nothing that wouldn’t make her look adorable.

Ben and Jack were on the couch, supposedly writing, but judging by the amount of Dr. Pepper cans and potato chips bags, they were actually just eating and talking while they lazed around in their socks.

“This is your idea of a fun hang out?” Claire asked, rising an eyebrow.

“Hey, don’t criticize our process,” Ben replied.

“We’re just taking a break,” Jack said. “You’re heading out?”

“Yup.” Claire slung an arm around Kaia’s shoulder. “Don’t wait up for us. We’re going out to actually enjoy our youth.”

“Well, we’re going to be here having safe and healthy fun,” Ben replied, while Claire and Kaia laughed and headed for the door. “So, enjoy your second hand smoke and losing your hearing by the time you’re twenty!”
“You’re just jealous ‘cause we don’t need you boys to have fun,” Kaia shot back and Claire laughed loudly at that.

“Drive safely!” Jack shouted at them.

Claire waved at him before closing the door behind them.

“Are you ready for the best Valentine’s Day ever?” she asked Kaia once they were both inside the car and adjusting their seatbelts.

Kaia took a deep breath and then smiled wide at her.

“Yeah. Let’s do this.”

“Can you believe them?” Ben shook his head. “Fun without us. Well, we can have fun without them, am I right?”

Jack laughed at how offended his friend sounded. It was good hanging with him. He’d had a lot of fun with Claire and Kaia the night before, but he got the feeling that sometimes Ben understood him better. Maybe it was because they were both boys.

“I think we are having fun,” he told him. “Like, we always have fun together, right?”

Ben chuckled and took another sip from his can.

“Yeah… yeah, I guess we do,” he said.

Jack moved from the couch to grab the notebooks they had abandoned on the coffee table several minutes ago.

“We should keep working on this. I think we had a great idea with the duck…”

Ben scooted until he was sat right next to Jack, their legs grazing against each other.

“Actually, I’m not thinking about that right now.”

“Oh?” Jack turned to look at him and was confused to see that Ben’s cheeks were flushed red all of the sudden. “What are you thinking about? Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah. Just… just fine,” Ben said, but it didn’t sound like that. “Uhm… listen, Jack. There’s something I haven’t been telling you and I think we should talk about that.”

He sounded uncharacteristically serious and avoiding Jack’s gaze. Jack felt his stomach tying up in a knot. Had he done something to bother Ben? Claire said he sometimes did things that he didn’t notice people might find irritating. Was that what’d happened there?

“Yeah, of course. Whatever it is, you can tell me. We’re friends.”

“Yeah, that’s… that’s precisely it.” Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t want to be friends.”

“What?” Jack’s eyes grew wider. “Did I…?”
“No!” Ben turned to him and put a hand on Jack’s knee to keep him from moving or freaking out. Which was exactly what Jack needed right then. “You didn’t do anything. I phrased that badly. I mean, I don’t want to be just friends.”

Jack looked at him closely, trying and failing to make sense of his words.

“What do you…? I’m not sure what you…”

Ben leaned forwards and pressed his lips against Jack’s.

It took Jack several seconds to react. His mind was racing with confused thoughts, paralyzed with questions that he couldn’t find the answer to.

Why was Ben doing this? Had Jack said or done something that had made him think…? But he didn’t! Ben was his friend, they had always been friends and he just couldn’t…

He didn’t like this. Ben closeness was overwhelming, the smell of his aftershave made Jack want to sneeze and he was having trouble breathing. He wanted to get up from that couch and run away. He wanted to cry. He wanted this to stop, right now.

He’d put his hands on Ben’s shoulders automatically, but it still took him a second or two to realize he could push him away. When he finally did, it was so brusque and sudden that Ben practically fell down of the couch. He managed to keep his balance and stared at Jack with eyes wide open.

“Jack…?”

“I think you should go,” Jack said. He stood up and walked away, with his back turned to the couch and to Ben.

There was a heavy silence that stretched far too long. Jack was breathing in slowly, trying to keep the knot in his chest and throat from choking him.

“Oh. Oh, shit,” he heard Ben muttered, but his voice was muffled somehow from the blood rushing into Jack’s ears. “Jack, I’m sorry. I thought…”

“Just go!” Jack snapped. He didn’t mean to be so loud and he hated the way his voice broke down. He forced himself to breathe in deeply, but he still didn’t sound firm when he spoke again: “Please.”

There was another long silence.

“Okay,” Ben said in the end.

Jack remained with his back turned, immobile, hugging himself, incapable of finding something else to do or say. He heard Ben moving: the rattled of his pencil case as he threw it his back pack, the stomping of his boots heading for the door, the hissing of his zipper as he adjusted his coat.

“I…” Ben said, but Jack refused to turn around and face him. So he left without another word: the door clicked close in his wake.

Jack was alone.

Again.
The bar wasn’t full when Claire and Kaia arrived, but as the night went on, more and more people arrived in droves: wearing jeans and leather jackets, with strange and colorful hairdos and so much make up they might as well have been wearing masks. Many of them proudly wore some kind of rainbow paraphernalia: wrist bands or key chains or pins on their jackets. They even spotted a boy with a rainbow heart in his shirt and the words: “Love is Love” written across them.

As the crowd started growing, Kaia scooted closer and closer to Claire in their booth.

“You said you didn’t know if Charvelle were together,” she said.

“Yeah, no one really knows,” Claire said, turning to her and trying to figure out the meaning of that question.

“Then why would they act on a place like this?”

Claire threw her head back and laughed.

“Well, one of them, Charlie, she’s out,” she explained.

“Oh, I see.” Kaia still eyed the crowd with suspicion. “And you come here often?”

“No, not often,” Claire shrugged. “But it’s not the first time I’m here.”

That should have been clear for the way they hadn’t carded her at the door and the bouncer had even nodded towards her when they got in. Kaia looked at her with eyes wide open and Claire laughed again and put a hand on her cheek.

“Hey, don’t worry. It’s perfectly safe here.”

“Are you sure?” Kaia asked, nervously eyeing her drink.

“We’re having nothing with alcohol and we’re not accepting any candy from strangers,” Claire told her. “Because we’re smart girls and just because a lot of people do it, doesn’t mean we’re going to.”

That seemed to be exactly what Kaia needed to read, because she sighed deeply and relaxed against the arm that Claire had slung around her shoulders.

“Do you have a fake ID?” she asked.

“What kind of question is that?”

“I just want to know.”

Claire sighed and shook her head.

“Look, minors are allowed here as long as they don’t try to sit at the bar, so we’re not doing anything wrong. You need to stop being so nervous.”

Kaia only stared at her. Her dark eyes looked even darker underneath the bar’s dim lights. Claire held her gaze until she couldn’t stand it anymore and had to look away.

“Yes, I have a fake ID,” she admitted.
“I knew it!” Kaia shook her head, but she didn’t seem upset or angry about that development.
“You’re such a bad girl.”

The note of admiration in her voice made Claire shiver. She wouldn’t have been able to explain why, exactly. Maybe because it was the first time that someone didn’t say that as if it was a bad thing or something that Claire needed to just grow out of. Alexis had been very critical about, well, everything about her, from her temper and her appearance to her aspirations. Other girls had told her she “came on too strong” or “was a lot of fun, but too intense.”

Kaia wasn’t like that. Kaia accepted her the way that she was. And what was more, she seemed to actually like the person that Claire was.

It made Claire’s heart melt inside.

“Well, you know what they say.” Claire grabbed Kaia’s chin and pulled so she would look up at her. “Bad girls get to go everywhere.”

Kaia giggled and leaned close…

A sudden uproar of cheers and applause invaded the bar and the crowd moved as if it was a single entity towards the stage against the wall. Jo Harvelle’s blonde hair and Charlie Bradbury’s bright red one shone bright against the dark wall. They waved at their public and without further ado, they brought up their guitars and went into the first song: a long guitar riff, accompanied by loud drums that invaded Claire’s ears and mind like a flood.

“We gotta get closer!” she shouted to make herself heard over the music.

“What?” Kaia shouted back.

Claire figured there was no point in trying to have a conversation at that point, so she simply grabbed Kaia’s hand and pulled her up from the chair. Kaia followed her without complaining, until they were on the edge of the crowd. At that point, she stopped dead, pulling Claire back to herself.

“Are you sure?” she asked, eyeing with suspicion the amount of people dancing, jumping and shaking their heads with the rhythm of the music.

Claire ran a hand through Kaia’s hair.

“If you don’t feel good, I’ll pull you out. Do you trust me?”

Kaia took a deep, insecure breath, and then nodded.

They dived in and all notion of time disappeared.

This was what Claire had truly been meaning to show Kaia. This sensation of being lost and anonymous as a sea of people pushed and scrambled to their feet, lost completely in the music, the heat, the screams. They held on tight to each other’s hands, because the sea of people wouldn’t let them hold on to anything else, and just let the waves and movements carry them away.

Claire made sure to check Kaia’s face, but after her initial discomfort, she actually began smiling and dancing as well. Some people screamed back the lyrics to the performers on stage, especially when they began playing covers of other bands, and Claire shouted at the top of her lungs on more than one occasion. She was sure her voice would be gone the following day, but she truly couldn’t care less. She was having fun, with the cutest girl in all of earth latched on to her waist and moving along with her…
Someone pushed Kaia as they tried to move closer to the stage. Claire didn’t have time to go after them and punched them in the face, because Kaia was holding on to her shoulder trying to regain her balance. She didn’t seemed bothered, just completely ecstatic, laughing and shaking her long black curls, that were suddenly damped against her skull.

And at that point, Claire realized there were just too many people in that bar for what she really wanted to do.

Charvelle made a pause between the songs.

“Thank you everybody for coming!” Jo told the crowd. “You’re an amazing crowd!”

Everybody answered with enthusiastic cheers, but they stopped jumping long enough for Claire to pull Kaia to the edge of the crowd, half asking for permission to pass, half elbowing and stomping the people who didn’t get out of her way fast enough. Once they were away from the see of people, the air was cooler and the noise was lesser, though the music was still so loud that they needed to scream to hear each other out.

“What is it?” Kaia asked her, frowning. “Do you feel okay? Are you thirsty?”

Claire laughed. In a way, she was, but she thought it would be too crude to explain that to Kaia.

So instead, she showed her.

Kaia’s mouth tasted like the lemonade and sweat. Claire grabbed her by the hips and pulled her close enough that the two could have melted. Kaia threw her arms around Claire’s neck, which only made it easier for Claire to pick her up and push her against the nearest wall.

But this time was different. This time, Claire was so deep into the kiss that she felt dizzy. Everything around her faded away – the music, the people, the changing lights above them – because the only thing that mattered was Kaia, and her tongue, and her skin, and her breath. This time, Claire bent her knee and pressed ever so lightly between Kaia’s legs and the moan that came out of her lips was so soft and so satisfying at the same time that Claire’s entire body shook with it. This time, she dared to leave a trail of kisses down Kaia’s clavicle, down her neck, pressing her so tight there was no room for her to move between Claire and the wall, but if the way Kaia held on to Claire’s shoulders, like she didn’t want to let go, like she wanted to do anything but make her stop…

Claire looked up at her. Charvelle had started playing again and the people were moving, but she didn’t care.

“Let’s get out of here,” she breathed out.

“But… what about the… the…?” Kaia stammered, her eyelids only half-open.

Claire smirked at her.

“There’ll be other concerts.”

Kaia didn’t find it in her to protest.
The house was silent when they arrived. Ben had apparently left hours ago and Jack, because he was Jack, had picked up the mess they’d made in the living room. Claire was a little surprised to see there was no light coming out of his door (it was only one in the morning, she would’ve figured Jack would be reading at that hour or something equally nerdy), but that was really the furthest thing on her mind as she guided Kaia upstairs.

The moan she’d managed to elicit out of Kaia still rang in her ears with more clarity than any of Charvelle’s songs. Claire wanted to hear it again.

“I’m all sweaty,” Kaia laughed. She’d been talking all the way, about the bar, about the music, about what a great time she’d had and how she had no idea that going to a concert could be that much fun… Claire had let her go on and while she drove as fast as she dared. “I should take a shower and get into bed…”

“It’s still early.”

“Yeah, but I really wouldn’t want to…”

Claire pulled her close and shut her up with a kiss. Kaia tensed up, but after a few seconds, she relaxed again and let Claire pull her towards the room’s doorway.

“Come in a while,” Claire said, in a whisper. She hoped she didn’t need to explain what for.

Kaia sucked in a breath. Her eyes looked so big and scared that Claire was certain that she was going to say no. But then she closed them, and when she opened them again, her jaw was clenched with pure determination.

“Okay.”

They sat together in the bed, side by side. Kaia opened her mouth to say something, but Claire kissed her again, squeezing her knee and slowly moving her hand up her thigh. Kaia put a hand on Claire’s cheek, her fingers raking her skin softly and then tangling on Claire’s hair. Claire pushed her down on the bed, and lowered her mouth to the side of her neck again and…

Kaia froze underneath her.

One second, her hands were moving up and down her back, she was kissing her back and rubbing against her. The next she was just completely paralyzed, as if she didn’t dare to move.

Claire broke away to watch her closely.

“What’s wrong?”

Kaia swallowed loudly and showed her a forced smile.

“Nothing’s wrong. We were just… we could just…”

“Babe.” Claire put a hand on her cheek. “You’re shaking.”

Kaia licked her lips and then, slowly, sat up. Claire sat up with her, but inched away a little to give her some space. Kaia’s eyes focused on the carpet for a few seconds before she looked up at Claire.

“I don’t… I don’t know how to do this,” she said. She stopped, shook her head and tried again: “I don’t know if I want to do this.”

Claire had to give it to her. She always found the way to render her speechless.
“You’re…?” She stopped and giggled, because she was sure she had misunderstood, but Kaia remained dead serious, so Claire had to finish her question. “You’re… a virgin?”

“Yeah.” Kaia crossed her arms across her chest. “I just… I told you, I bounced around a lot in the system and I never had a serious girlfriend before.”

“Kaia, you don’t need a serious girlfriend to have sex.”

“You do if it’s your first time.”

Claire wished she had something to argue against that. And the way Kaia was frowning at her now meant she’d said something wrong, so she moved closer to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Well, okay, then. We don’t have to do it right now if you don’t want to.”

That seemed to surprise Kaia, for some reason.

“You’re not… you’re not mad?”

“Of course I’m not mad,” Claire assured her. “Why would I be?”

“I just…” Kaia bit her lip before she went on: “I don’t want you to think I don’t like you. Because I do. A lot. So much sometimes I can’t…” She interrupted herself and shook her head. “You must think I’m an idiot.”

“Hey, no.” Claire put a hand on her chin again and made her look up. “I think you’re amazing. And don’t worry about it, okay? It’s only going to be good if we’re both into it.”

Kaia watched her face closely and then nodded.

“Thank you.”

Claire wanted to kiss her again, but she didn’t want Kaia to believe she wasn’t willing to wait. Because she was. Until the end of time, if it was necessary.

“Do you want to sleep here with me anyway?” she asked, lowering her voice. “We don’t have to do anything. Just cuddle. Is that okay?”

Kaia took a moment to think about it.

“Okay. Just cuddle.”

She insisted she needed to take a shower first. So while she did that in the guests’ bathroom, Claire brushed her teeth and spent a lot of time throwing cold water on her face, chest and armpits. She might not have been getting laid that night, but that didn’t mean she had to smell… well, like she’d just come back from a concert.

On that perspective, maybe it was a good thing that she wasn’t getting laid that night.

By the time Kaia stepped into the bedroom in her pajamas (an adorable oversized shirt with a panda in it and shorts), Claire had already changed into her sweatshirt and had scooted to the right side of the bed to make place for her.

Kaia hesitated a second, but finally she slid underneath the sheets and moved closer to Claire. Claire turned off the lights and carefully placed an arm around Kaia’s waist. Shea tensed for a moment, but
just as Claire was about to move away, she relaxed and rested her head against the pillow.

“Good night,” she muttered.

“Good night.”

And they proceeded to not fall asleep for the next five minutes.

It was sort of ridiculous, but they were both too agitated to really fall asleep and the conversation they’d had, as well as it’d turned out for the two of them, had exposed a raw nerve.

In the end, Kaia sighed and turned around. She smelled so clean, like soap and shampoo and even in the dark, Claire could make up her features, the seriousness in her face.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, of course. Anything.”

“How many girls have you… been with?”

The question caught Claire so off-guard that she didn’t know what to say. Kaia scooted away.

“You don’t have to answer. It was a stupid question.”

“No, it’s just… I wasn’t expecting…” Claire said. She sighed and decided there was no point in stalling: “Three.”

“Only?”

“Were you expecting a higher number?” Claire didn’t know whether to be insulted or amused. “Despite what you might have heard around the school, I don’t sleep with every girl that makes out with me because she doesn’t think it’s that big a deal.”

Kaia reflected upon that for a moment.

“Who were the big deals, then?”

Claire sighed. She supposed that if she’d been honest thus far, she might as well be honest about this too.

“Well, first there was Eve. I was a sophomore, she was a senior. We promised to stay together even after she went to college.” She snickered. “She broke up with me via Skype exactly two weeks before prom night.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. Still, I don’t regret it. She was kind to me and she could’ve had any girl she wanted, really.” She made a pause, reflecting. “After that, it was Magda. We hooked up on that same prom after Jack proved to be a horrible date and I wanted to get back at Eve. We were sort of together for that summer until her family moved away. We had to sneak up a lot. Her parents were… the religious type, if you get me.”

“Yikes,” Kaia repeated.

“Yeah. And then, there was Alex, of course.”
“Oh. Of course.”

The tone in which she said it made Claire want to laugh. She had been so worried that Alex was going to snatch Kaia away from her. She should’ve known that Alex was going to be too busy with all her extracurricular activities to actually put that plan on motion.

It was hilarious now that Kaia sounded like she was jealous. Claire passed an arm under Kaia’s head and ran her fingers through her hair. It was always so soft…

“And you.”

“Me? But we haven’t…”

“You asked about the big deals,” Claire reminded her. “You’re a big deal to me.”

Kaia giggled and hid her face on Claire’s neck.

“Flatterer,” she accused her.

“It’s true, though. You don’t have to be someone’s first to be important.”

“I really hope not,” Kaia said. “But then, what does that mean for you?”

“It means you’re going to break my heart sooner or later. But that’s fine with me.”

“I’ll try not to,” Kaia mumbled sleepily. “You’re a big deal to me, too.”

Claire kissed her on the edge of the lips. She didn’t tell her that Kaia was her first in another sense. She was the first girl Claire was completely, absolutely, irrevocably certain that she was in love with.

And when Kaia broke her heart, it was going to hurt like hell.
After a long time of tossing and turning, Jack woke up feeling like he’d taken a beating. Or like he was about to go down with the flu. Or just like everything was terrible and he didn’t see the point of getting out of bed that day.

He debated actually staying there for the rest of the day (he was sure that if he told Claire to leave him alone, she would) but the only thing he was going to accomplish with that was to obsess over every detail of every conversation that he’d had with Ben and try to figure out where he’d gone wrong.

The thing that hurt the most was that he’d really thought Ben was his friend. Talking to Claire these last few months, he’d come to the realization that a lot of people he thought were his friends were actually looking something else from him, something he hadn’t been able to give to them. He believed that Ben was different.

But he’d been wrong.

And it hurt to know that. It really hurt so badly.

And that wasn’t even taking into account the fact that he’d probably embarrassed and infuriated Ben the way he’d done with so many girls before, like Magda or Tracy. Jack knew exactly what was going to happen next: Ben wouldn’t talk to him again. He’d avoid him in the hallways and pretend not to see him or make a quick excuse if Jack ever gathered the nerve to try and talk to him first.

Not that he would. It was simply… too mortifying to even think about.

Jack pulled the covers over his head and closed his eyes, willing himself to fall asleep again so he wouldn’t have to keep thinking about all of this.

His cellphone rang before he could manage.

Sighing deeply, he rolled over the bed and picked up the call.

“Jack?” Castiel asked on the other end of the line.

Jack took a second to readjust and then spoke as cheerfully as he could manage.

“Uncle Cas! Good morning!”

“It’s almost twelve, Jack.”

“Oh.” Jack cleared his throat nervously. “Sorry. I must have overslept.”

“That’s unlike you. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes!” Jack said, a little forcefully. He cleared his throat and forced himself to be a little quieter. “Yes. Of course, I’m fine.”

There was a long pause at the other end of the line.

“If you say so,” Castiel conceded in the end. “Is Claire around?”

“Umh…” Jack pushed the covers aside and stood up, shaking a little in the winter morning air. “Let
me check.” He placed the phone against his chest before he called: “Claire? Hey, are you awake…?”

He didn’t need to ask anymore. Claire’s door was wide open, her bed a mess and the sweatshirt she slept in abandoned on the floor. For the second time in as many days, Claire had beaten him to the punch and got up before him.

Jack must have suspected that was a sign that there was something really wrong. Specifically, with him.

But just as with many other things, he’d rather not think about it right now.

Following a hunch, he cracked open the guests’ room’s door, but the bed there was perfectly made, as if no one had slept there at all. She also didn’t answer when she walked downstairs.

She wasn’t home at all and Jack wasn’t too sure what to make of it.

“Umh… I think she’s in the bathroom,” he ended up lying to Castiel, cringing as he did so.

“That’s fine,” Castiel said. “I just wanted to let you kids know that I’m heading back after lunch and I’ll be there for dinner.”

“Great! Did you have a good meeting?”

“I’m sorry?”

“With your agent?”

“Oh,” Castiel mumbled, as if he’d completely forgotten about it. “Yes, it was very… productive.”

“I’m really glad to hear that.” Jack sat down in the bottom step of the stairs and leaned his head against the wall. “I could really use a new Agatha and Jasper book right now.”

Castiel didn’t immediately answer to that, so Jack really should’ve suspected what was going to come next.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Yes!” Jack assured him again, because Castiel was at least four hours away and probably still had things to do. What would be the point of making him upset? “Just fine. Don’t worry about a thing. We’ll be here waiting for you with some chicken and potatoes…”

“Wasn’t that the food I left you on Friday?”

Jack heard the motor of his and Claire’s car in the driveway and decided it was time to end that conversation.

“Have a safe trip, Uncle Cas. We’ll see you when you get here.”

“Jack…” Castiel began to protest, but Jack ended the call before he could get another word in.

Claire walked inside the house just a second later, a wide smile on her lips, humming a tune as she took off her coat. Jack watched her, and suddenly, all the things he’d been keeping inside – their father’s email, his jealousy of Kaia, his fight with Ben – came boiling up to the surface. Before he could stop, he heard himself shout:

“Where were you?!”
Claire looked at him astonished. It was as if she’d just noticed or remembered that he was there too.

“Chill. I just went to drop Kaia off at home.”

“Of course you did,” Jack muttered, rolling his eyes.

Claire tilted her head at him.

“What’s up with you? I thought we’d talked about this.”

Jack took a deep breath. He needed to control himself.

“Yes. Yes, sorry. I’ll just…”

He stood up and walked back upstairs, heading to his room and ignoring Claire calling his name. He needed to control himself. It wasn’t anybody’s fault but his that he was having a bad day. He closed his door behind him, intending to… do something. Pick up fresh clothes from the closet. Head to the bathroom and get a shower and get dressed. Go downstairs, make something resembling a breakfast. He was sure that once he’d changed and eaten, he would feel at least marginally better.

But he couldn’t do any of those things. Instead, he stopped in the middle of his room, thinking about just how great it would be to go back to bed, where it was warm and quiet and he didn’t have to answer to anybody asking him whether he was okay or not…

Claire barged into his room without knocking.

“What is your problem?” she demanded to know.

“Nothing!” Jack replied, taking a step back. “Get out, I need to change.”

“No.” Claire planted herself between him and the door and folded her arms. “I won’t leave until you tell me what’s wrong!”

“Nothing’s wrong!”

“Liar!” Claire snapped.

If she’d slapped Jack across the face, the effect wouldn’t have been greater. He stared at her as his eyes burnt with tears that he didn’t dare to shed. But, dammit, it was all too much and he’d been holding on for far too long and he just… he couldn’t…

“Jack,” Claire called again. Her posture relaxed as she took a step closer to him. “What is it?”

Jack found himself unable to speak. His knees were trembling, his hands had balled into fists without his permission. He let himself fall unto de bed and hid his face in his palms, finally losing the battle. And even as he cried, he told himself over and over that he needed to stop. Claire was watching him. He had to calm down, tell her that it was nothing, that he was stressed from having slept too little or…

The mattress sank by his side and Claire’s hand came to rest against his back, moving up and down in slow, circular motions. Jack recognized the gesture. It was something Castiel used to do when they were little and crying for whatever reason. His sister said nothing, only continued to rub his back until he let it all out, until all the emotions that he’d been trying to contain finally finished spilling out.

Only when Jack was breathing in shakily, but no longer crying, Claire asked again;
“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong now?”

It took Jack a while, between the hiccups and some leftover crying, but he managed to explain it to her. Not everything, not all the things that were plaguing him lately, just the most recent one: the entire debacle with Ben.

Predictably, Claire clenched her jaw with fury when he was finished.

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Please, don’t.”

“But look how he made you feel!”

“He didn’t know!” Jack protested. “He didn’t know that I am… that I’m not… I don’t know. I don’t even know what’s wrong with me. I just… I don’t need you getting into a fight right now, Claire.”

He fell backwards on the bed with a sigh, letting the weight of it all press him down again like an anvil on his chest. Claire pinched the bridge of her nose, in an attempt to contain her rage.

“Okay,” she said. “What do you need then?”

Jack truly wasn’t sure. He had to think about it for a moment.

“I need someone to tell me how to stop hurting people.” He pressed his hands against his eyes, in a futile attempt to stop himself from crying again. “Why do I keep hurting people? Why can’t I be normal? Do you think I’m broken?”

Claire laid down by his side, not saying anything for a long, long while.

“You’re not broken,” she concluded. “I think you’re just not wired that way, same way I’m not wired to like guys. It doesn’t mean you’re broken.”

It was nice to hear her say that. Jack wished that he could believe it.

“It doesn’t feel good, Claire,” he started, struggling to find the words to explain it. “Everyone talks about how good it feels to fall in love with someone, to want to be with someone, how you just know. But I don’t know. I never know. And when Ben kissed me, I didn’t feel anything. Just really awkward and like I wanted it to end.”

“Well, yeah,” Claire said, as if what Jack was expressing was the most obvious thing in the world. “That’s ‘cause you’re asexual.”

The word resonated with something inside of Jack’s mind, as if she’d rang a crystal bell and the sound it’d made was familiar and new at the same time.

“I’m a what?”

“Asexual,” Claire repeated, with a shrug. “You’ve always been.”

Jack stared at her, blinking in confusion.

“What…?”

“It means you just don’t… like anyone that way,” Claire explained. She turned to face him with an eyebrow arched. “I thought you knew it.”
“How could I have possibly know that?” Jack asked, frowning. “How do you know it?”

“Well, when I realized I didn’t like boys, I did a lot of reading about these things. Like, human sexuality and gender and stuff.”

“I thought you’d said you always knew you were a lesbian.”

“I mean, yes. In a way, I’ve always known I was different. But I didn’t have the words to describe how different I was until I read about it.” She made a pause. “I guess you just… never really cared for that stuff, because you were always too busy being yourself to stop and question what exactly you were.”

Jack frowned at her.

“What does that mean?”

Claire looked up at the ceiling again, as if doing that was going to give her the answer.

“Growing up, you were always so sure about what we were supposed to do, you know?” she started. “Do our homework, do as Castiel and the teachers said, be nice to people and all that shit. It was like you had it all figured out.” She paused, pensive. “I couldn’t do it. I was questioning things all the time. I guess that’s why I was the difficult one.”

Jack reflected upon that. She was right. He’d always trusted the adults to know what was best for him, even when he didn’t understand their reasons. He’d always expected that they’d be caring for him, that’d they would give him the answers when he was confused or lost.

“I wish I had been more like you, then,” he muttered.

Claire looked at him, with eyes wide with surprise.

“Because now you’re the one who has it all figured it out and you learnt to do it on your own,” Jack explained. “And I have no idea what to do and I’m just now coming to grips with the fact no one will tell me anymore.”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t have it all figured it out.”

“Far more than me, in any case.”

Claire blinked a couple of times and then grimaced.

“Oh, no. No!” She covered her eyes with her hands, as if she was the one who was going to break into tears now. “Are you telling me I’m the mature twin now?”

“I guess so.”

“Nooooo!” she whined. “That is too much responsibility!”

Her tone made Jack giggled. Claire continued to groan and complain, but soon she was laughing as well. They stayed in silence, staring at the ceiling for another while.

“Do you feel better?” Claire asked.

Jack thought about it. All the things that had overwhelmed him were still there. But at least for the time being, they didn’t seem as terrible as before.
“Yeah. A bit.”

“Great.” Claire jumped to her feet and stretched her hands over her head. “Do you want to eat Fruit Loops directly from the box without any milk before Castiel gets here?”

That was something they hadn’t done in ages. Jack smiled.

“Sounds perfect.” He stood up as well. “Hey, Claire?”

Claire had taken two steps to the door, but she stopped and turned towards him.

“Could you… maybe show me where you read all that stuff about being asexual?” he requested.

“Sure. I’ll send you the links.”

“Thank you. Hey, Claire?”

Claire huffed and turned to look at him again. “What?”

Jack walked up to her and threw his arms around her. He knew Claire wasn’t too keen on that sort of thing and indeed, after a few seconds, she tapped him on the forearm (“Alright, that’s enough”) for him to let go.

But he still felt like he needed to show her how much he appreciated her taking the time to talk him through his meltdown like she’d done. Because even if the world seemed very confusing right now, he knew he could always count on her watching his back.

Castiel half-expected to find the house had burned down on his absence, but he was pleased to see that not only was it still standing, but that Jack and Claire had actually cleaned the living room and the kitchen. Why they’d needed to clean it in the first place, he preferred not to think about it as they sat down on the table after he’d taken a shower and changed his road trip clothes… to eat the chicken and potatoes that he left them on Friday.

“We put them in the fridge. They’re fine,” Claire insisted.

Castiel dreaded to ask what they’d eaten instead, so he didn’t.

“How was your weekend?” he asked instead, fully expecting them to lie through their teeth.

“It was okay.”

“Yes. Nothing out of the ordinary,” Jack said. “Just… a perfectly normal weekend.”

Claire softly shook her head to indicate he was overselling it, so Jack quickly changed the topic.

“And how was yours?”

Since they hadn’t been inclined to tell him the truth, Castiel also decided to give them a rather short answer.

“It was fine. Thank you.”
“Did you have fun?” Claire asked.

“It… it was a business meeting, mostly,” Castiel said, frowning. Why did she suddenly seem so interested?

“Well, you know what they say. When you’re in good company, even business is pleasure.”

Jack tilted his head. “I’ve never heard that saying. Who says that?”

“Oh, you know. People.”

Claire was watching Castiel intently and he had to resist the urge to swallow loudly. He had done nothing wrong and there was no reason for him to be ashamed. But he still believed that this wasn’t something he could share with the kids just yet.

“I suppose,” he said, cautiously. “Both Rachel and her husband Raphael are very good people to be around. And I had a lot of time to write, so it was a pleasurable trip.”

Jack nodded, satisfied with that answer, but Claire stared at him for several more seconds without blinking. Finally, she shrugged and went back to her food.

“Well, I’m glad everybody had such a nice time,” Castiel concluded.

“Yeah, it was good.”

“Really nice,” Jack said. They ate in silence for several seconds and then, in the most cheerful tone ever, he added: “Oh, and by the way, Dad’s visiting next month!”

Castiel choked on his water.
“I don’t know what you expect me to do about it, Claire. He’s a free agent, he will do what he wants.”

“You could tell him to fuck off.”

“Do you really think that’s going to make any difference to him?”

“It can’t hurt to try!”

Jack scoffed his head while he parked the car in front of the school. Claire had been angry all morning and no matter what Jack tried to tell him, she wasn’t calming down any time soon. This was expected of course. Any time Luc was so much as mentioned, Claire’s mood became immediately foul.

“And in any case, I don’t know what the hell he’s coming here for!”

“I told you. He said he wanted to be at our graduation!”

“Please.” Claire groaned. “When has he cared about any of those things before?”

She exited the car and slammed the door close without waiting for an answer. Jack sighed deeply and counted to ten. He usually was very slow to anger, but Claire was really trying his patience that day.

Castiel had got over the initial shock of finding out about Luc’s upcoming visit rather quickly. After he was done choking on water and asked Jack how he knew about it, his face had got very serious, in a way that indicated that he wasn’t glad to hear the news. This was expected, but Castiel still surprised Castiel by saying:

“Well, if he must. I won’t be the one to tell him no.”

Claire seemed to have interpreted that as a sign that she was supposed to take that job upon herself, because she’d spent the next hour and all the ride to the school that morning trying to convince Jack to send another email to Luc, telling him that he wasn’t wanted around that town. Jack had declined on the basis of that being ridiculous and immature.

“Well, maybe he cares now!” he argued, following Claire in their lockers’ direction. “People can change, Claire! We were just talking about this yesterday.”

“People can change. He can’t,” Claire shot back. It felt like they’d had that conversation a thousand times before, and neither of them was willing to change their position. “Honestly, Jack, how many times are you going to fall for it?”

“Fall for what?”

“This!” Claire gestured vaguely in his direction. “Every single time he makes a promise, you believe him, and every single time, he breaks it and then I’m the one who has to deal with your mopey ass.”

Jack scoffed at her.

“Nobody asks you to!”
“Fine. Because this time, I’m not going to do anything.” She opened her locker and randomly started tossing books into her backpack. “I’m not going to talk to him, hell, I’m not even going to look at him. You can deal with him if you want to and then you can deal with him letting you down again on your own!”

“Fine!” Jack repeated. “You know, your life is going to be very sad if you refuse to give people second chances!”

“This isn’t a second chance he’s asking for,” she replied, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. “This is like the hundredth one. Why the fuck do you insist on giving it to him?”

“Because he’s our father!”

“Maybe. But he sure as hell isn’t our dad, and you know it!”

“Umh… is… this a bad time?”

Jack and Claire eyes each other, breathing heavily. Suddenly, Jack realized they’d been practically shouting at each other in the middle of the school hall and there were several people staring at them. When Claire glared back at them one by one, though, everyone scattered like scared doves. The only one who remained standing near them was the last person Jack had expected to come talk to him.

“What do you want?” Claire asked him, narrowing her eyes at him as if she could murder him just by doing that.

Ben shoulders were slumped and he held unto his bag’s strap as if that would protect him from Claire’s righteous fury.

“I just… I wanted to talk to Jack.”

“What for?” Claire asked again, stepping between him and Jack.

Jack suddenly felt guilty for having screamed at her. Even though she was really angry with him, she was still willing to stick out her neck for him. He should tell he really appreciated that when they were both a little calmer.

However, right now that wasn’t the most important thing. He put a hand on her shoulder and softly pulled her back before she decided to break Ben’s nose.

“Claire, it’s okay,” he assured her. “It’s fine.”

Claire still remained where she was, fuming, but she finally took a step back, leaving Jack to face Ben.

And for some reason, it was as if that was even worse for Ben. He looked up at him and swallowed, fidgeting with his strap once again.

“Hi.”

“What do you need, Ben?” Jack asked him. He hadn’t meant to sound so cold, but there it was. Ben swallowed again.

“I just wanted… no, I had to apologize to you,” he said. He took a deep breath and stuck his chin up in the air. “I fucked up. I made you uncomfortable and I… I know you didn’t react the way you did because of my… but…” He stammered, sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “I should’ve
written this down.”

Claire and Jack exchanged a look. Jack really wasn’t expecting Ben to apologize and although he thought it was big of him, he wasn’t sure what to do with it. Claire, on the other hand, looked skeptical. She turned her attention back to Ben.

“Get to the point, Braeden.”

“I’m sorry!” Ben cringed. “I should’ve have done… what I did. And if you don’t want to talk to me again, that’s fine. I deserve that, because I was a jerk. But I just needed you to know I’m sorry. There. That was the point.”

He placed his hands in his hips and breathed out, as if he’d been carrying a very heavy weight and finally been allowed to release it.

Jack licked his lips, still unsure, so Claire swooped in to spare them the uncomfortable silence.

“I didn’t know you were gay.”

“I’m not gay,” Ben replied. “I’m bi.”

“Ah, okay.”

Well, it was a valiant effort. Jack supposed it was his turn to speak.

“You… I mean, you did make me feel very uncomfortable,” he admitted. “But most of all, you hurt my feelings, Ben. I thought we were friends.”

“We are!” Ben exclaimed. He closed his eyes and grimaced. “I mean, we… were. I think. If you want to be again…?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said, point blank. “I thought you were hanging with me because you liked me, not because you wanted something else from me.”

“No, no, look. I do like you and I do appreciate our friendship. I didn’t mean to get a crush on you, it just happened!” Ben groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. “I messed it all up, didn’t I?”

Jack licked his lips, at loss about what to say. He didn’t like being mad at people and Ben looked truly remorseful about what he’d done.

“I… I accept your apology, Ben,” he said, because that was the most neutral thing he could say.

“Really?” Ben blinked, surprised, as if he truly hadn’t expected that. “Well, okay then. Thank you. I…”

“You want a piece of advice, Braeden?” Claire interrupted him. “Try asking the next time.”

“Right, of course. You’re absolutely right.” Ben took a deep breath and smiled wearily at Jack. “Do you want to go out with me?”

Claire hit her forehead with an open palm.

“Dude, I didn’t mean right now!”

Jack scratched his arm.
“No. To tell you the truth, I don’t want to date anyone.” He glanced at Claire again, who nodded at him, encouragingly. “I’m… I think I’m… no, I am. I’m asexual.”

It felt strange saying it out loud. Strange, but not wrong. Claire had been right: once he had the words to explain it, it was as if all sort of pieces that had been scattered before finally clicked together inside his head, about what he was, about why he was the way he was.

He thought he would have to explain if further, but Ben simply sighed.

“Of course you are. Story of my life.” He raised his eyes, once again looking extremely remorseful. “Okay, but… can we still be friends?”

“You know… I think it’d better if we didn’t hang out as much for a while.”

Ben clicked his tongue.

“Fair enough,” he accepted. “I’m sorry again and…”

But he either ran out of things to say or couldn’t come up with anything else, because he turned around without finishing that sentence. Jack’s stomach became a knot watching him leave. Despite what he’d done, Ben really had been a good friend to him.

“Wow. ‘Maybe we shouldn’t hang out’. That’s positively harsh, coming from you.”

Claire’s sarcastic tone suddenly reminded him they were in the middle of an argument. She seemed eager to get into it again, but Jack wasn’t. he was just tired of the entire business, if he was being honest with himself.

“Look, Claire… you can do whatever you want when our dad gets here. That’s what you always do, anyway.”

“Oh, I will.” Claire slammed her locker shut. “I’m not going to let him hurt me again, but if you’re stupid enough not to do the same… well, I don’t know what to tell you, Jack. You’re on your own.”

And with that, she turned her back on him and walked away briskly.

To look for Kaia again, for sure.

The bell rang, calling people to class. Jack had done all his homework and took notes during every lesson, but everything that had happened that morning was still running though his mind.

The saddest thing was, he realized, he didn’t have anyone to talk to about this stuff. Castiel hadn’t reacted as badly as Claire, but it was obvious he wasn’t happy about the situation at all. Kaia would take Claire’s side, he didn’t even have to guess. And though he considered Patience and Alexis his friends, he hadn’t grown as close to them as he had with Ben.

He had been the closest thing Jack had ever had to a best friend outside of Claire. The whole situation sucked.

There was only one person that he felt like he could talk to about everything that worried him. And even though he had been wrong about him before, Jack knew he’d had good intentions and he’d given him good advice in the past.

“Come on in,” Mr. Winchester said when Jack knocked on his office’s door.

Jack took a deep breath and did exactly that. The counselor looked at him with raised eyebrows.
“Jack! I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“No, I guess not. Usually you call me to come in here and I have no idea what it is about and then…” Jack realized he was mumbling and willed himself to stop. “Umh… can I come in?”

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Winchester closed the file he’d been writing on, put it aside and beckoned Jack towards the chair in front of his desk. “I was meaning to talk to you anyway.”

“Really? What about?”

“I wanted to apologize. I was wrong about you and why you were doing certain things…”

“Oh.” Jack chuckled when he realized that he was talking about Miss Masters and his uncle. It was odd that two people had apologized to him on the same day about what was essentially the same thing: him being a clueless asexual. “It’s alright, Mr. Winchester.”

“No, it’s not. I shouldn’t have assumed without asking you directly. I guess it goes to show that everyone can make mistakes.”

Jack appreciated him saying that. Mistakes were exactly what he wanted to talk to him about.

He gave him a quick update on the Luc front: his email, his announcement that he’d be dropping by soon (his email hadn’t specified a date and Jack was glad he hadn’t mentioned that to Claire, because she probably would’ve assumed that was a sign Luc was lying) and how everyone at home had reacted.

Mr. Winchester heard him with silent solemnity and when he stopped talking, he asked:

“And what seems to be the problem, Jack?”

Jack blinked several times. He thought he had been very clear about that.

“Well, Claire is mad and Castiel… I don’t know, it’s like he won’t even talk to us about that,” he said. “That’s the problem.”

“Yes, and I can see how that’d be an awkward situation,” Mr. Winchester agreed. “But you can’t control or change how other people feel, Jack. Sometimes it’s even hard to control how we feel ourselves.”

That definitely wasn’t the answer that Jack was looking for.

“But what should I do?” he insisted.

“I don’t think there’s much you can do,” Mr. Winchester said, which was the opposite of what Jack wanted to hear. “Your dad will visit and Claire and Castiel might not react well to his presence. You can’t do anything about that. What you can control is your own actions and behavior while he is here.”

Jack shuffled in his seat, deeply reflecting about that.

“But…”

“How do you feel about him visiting, Jack?” Mr. Winchester asked. “You were very upset last month when he didn’t reply to your email. So you must be excited, despite how your sister is taking it.”
Jack opened his mouth and closed it again. It was so strange. He hadn’t even thought about it, only about what Claire and Castiel would say. He’d put their feelings before his own, because that was what family did. But maybe the reason he’d come to Mr. Winchester was because this might have been the only place he had where he could freely talk about himself.

And now that the chance was there, he wasn’t really sure what to say.

“I should be excited, shouldn’t I?” he muttered. “I mean, it should be exciting. I remember when we were little and we knew he was coming to pick us up, we used to wait by the door with our backpacks ready. We ran to the window every time we heard a car approaching…” He made a pause. “We were never really sure if he was going to come or not. It was sort of like playing roulette, but… not fun, because if we lost, we’d be sad or angry for a couple of days.”

“Are you playing roulette right now? Do you think there’s a chance he might not show up after all?”

“I think, knowing him, that’s always a possibility,” Jack admitted. He wouldn’t have done so if Claire was there, of course, but he knew Mr. Winchester would keep his secret. “And it would be sad if he didn’t even after he promised… but the way Claire and Uncle Cas are acting, it’s also going to be uncomfortable if he does show up.”

“Damn if he does, damn he doesn’t.”

“Exactly.” Jack sighed and looked at the ceiling for a moment. “I feel very confused. And I’m not even sure what I want to happen anymore.”

Mr. Winchester fidgeted with his pen.

“I don’t know if I have an advice to give you here, Jack,” he said. “All I can tell is that I don’t think your sister is reacting this way because of your dad. He has disappointed the both of you in the past and it’s understandable that she would be mad… but it sounds to me that she’s more worried that you’re going to be let down once again.”

Jack reflected on that and then shook his head.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t, but…” He stopped, as if he was thinking of the best way to put it. “I told you, our dad wasn’t always present as well. My brother, Dean, he believed in him anyway, no matter how many times our dad failed to show up. And I came to resent him, because of the way Dean was always hurt when he was let down. So I understand how Claire is feeling. But I also understand why you won’t give up hope on your dad. It hurts to think that he doesn’t care enough to try to be there for you.”

Jack gritted his teeth, because suddenly there was a lump in his throat. Mr. Winchester, once again, had hit the nail in the head.

“I want to think the best of him. Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? Just… believe the best of people and hope they’ll somehow pull through for us?”

Mr. Winchester said nothing to that for several seconds.

“Maybe I am naïve,” Jack admitted in the end. “But I don’t want to just give up on him like Claire has.”

“That’s very noble on your part, Jack,” Mr. Winchester told him. “You have to be careful, though.
There’s people who would try to take advantage of that.”

“He’s our dad.” Jack shook his head. “What would he win in trying to take advantage of us? We have literally nothing. I’m not even sure how we’re going to pay for our colleges yet.”

“Speaking of, have you thought about what colleges you’ll be applying to? Several have deadlines coming up within the next few months…”

Jack was saved the embarrassment of having to answer to that by the bell.
...Agatha straddled the wall and stretched out her hands.

“Jas!” she called out to her brother as he sat on the branch of the tree. “We have to go!”

The steps of the guards approached, like the drops of a furious rain drumming against a window glass. Jasper stared at the hand his sister was offering and his own hand trembled. The distance was short and he could’ve saved it in a second... but he stayed where he was.

“No,” he said, raising his eyes at her. “You’re wrong. This is wrong. Daralis is the Queen of Kelliadoth.”

“Jasper!” Agatha insisted, panic rising to her voice and her eyes. “The magic is disappearing because she’s not! Can’t you see that?”

“The magic is disappearing because someone else is taking it!” Jasper argued. “And we have to help her find out who that is. That’s what we were called here to do!”

“Agatha!” Raven’s voice called from the other side of the wall.

“They’re thieves and bounty hunters! How can you believe them? How can you believe any of the things they’ve told you? That Daralis would kill her own husband, her own step-daughter?” Jack asked. The hurt in his voice was undeniable and Agatha’s heart strangled in her chest. “No! I won’t do this!”

Agatha eyed the gate that they had barricaded. The palace’s guards were banging against it, trying to get it open. It wouldn’t resist much longer and she had a decision to make.

She took in a shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry, Jasper.”

She stood atop of the wall. The wild wind and storm blew her hair around her head like a halo. With one last sad look at her brother, she did the hardest thing she’d ever done: she turned around and jumped down the wall.

Jasper’s scream, her name in his voice, rang in her ears long after they’d fled...

Castiel stared at the fragment he’d just scribbled out with mountain desperation. This was supposed to be the highest point of conflict between the Legendary Adventures, the moment where their conflicting personalities and different beliefs marked a fork on the road for them. In previous books, they’d always disagreed about things that ended up being unimportant, but this time, the conflict should’ve been monumental, it should’ve felt like there really wasn’t a possibility of them coming together ever again.

It should be an upsetting moment. Yet, when he read it, he only found it flat and full of too much exposition. He was going to have to rework the entire chapter.

He put the pages aside and looked at the other passage he wanted to work through.

“I’m sorry about…”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Agatha interrupted Bandit brusquely and pushed her horse further.
She didn’t like this beast. It was nothing like the talking Horses that she and Jasper had mounted thousands of times whenever they came to Kelliadoth, nothing like Silver Hooves, who had bravely carried them across the Dark Woods. This horse was stupid and slow, not heeding her orders when she gave them. He tried to stop to eat at the edge of the road, and he was constantly falling behind. Whenever he stopped and stubbornly refused to keep going, Agatha had to dismount and pull from the reins so he would get moving again.

“Come on, you idiot beast,” Agatha muttered to him. The horse just stared at her with big stupid eyes and tried to go back to eating the grass, no matter how much Agatha insisted and pleaded.

Raven must have noticed she was struggling, because she stopped her own horse and walked up to Agatha’s. Placing a hand over his muzzle, she muttered something to him. Agatha didn’t understand it in its entirety (her Elvish was rusty after several years of not encountering one), but the horse immediately raised his head with attention and stomped his hooves on the ground, as if he was ready to break into a run.

“There we go,” Raven said, patting him, satisfied. “He just needed a bit of coaxing.”

Agatha stared at the back of her head before climbing back. She managed to get her horse on par with the elf’s.

“I thought you said magic was disappearing,” she said. “But you can still talk to the animals.”

“Communication isn’t magic,” Raven chuckled. “Well, not entirely, I suppose. They can still understand some words of Elvish, but they can’t answer anymore and they’ve lost all knowledge of the Common Language unless they’ve been trained. They’ve just grown…”

“Stupid.”

Raven let out another chuckle, which made Amber and Bandit looked at them over their shoulders. They didn’t seem angry just perplexed that someone had time to laugh when they were quite literally fleeing for their lives.

Though they had stopped running miles ago, after taking several shortcuts that Bandit assured them would confuse the guards that came after them. Agatha didn’t want to tell them that perhaps the guards would be confused, but she knew exactly where they were: heading West, towards the High Mountains. And if she knew that with a simple glance, she was certain that Jasper would track them down in a heartbeat. He had always been more familiar with Kelliadoth’s geography than her.

She shook her head. She still didn’t want to think about her brother.

“I probably shouldn’t laugh at that…” Raven muttered after her companions turned on their chair and focused on the road again.

“We might as well laugh. The other option is lying down on the ground and crying our eyes out.”

Raven didn’t chuckle this time. Just stared at her with raised eyebrows.

“You’re not what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. I thought you’d speak like people in the Old Tales. That you’d be dry and brave and very much not… this. I thought you’d be more like Jasper actually is, I guess.”
And there it was. Agatha sighed and watched the trees overhead for a long time.

“Jasper’s always been better cut out for this than I am. The legendary adventuring and being a hero and whatnot.”

“Yet, you were the one who saw through Daralis’ scheme.”

“Yeah, well. She was overselling it a bit. I also don’t like people who just execute others without a trial.”

“Thank you for that, by the way.”

“You’re welcome.” Agatha discovered with surprise that she actually felt better talking to Raven. She made it easy to express the things that worried her, and there were many things worrying her right now. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going now? I rescued you, I trusted you and I left my brother behind for you. So I think I deserve to get the whole picture now.”

Bandit and Amber looked over their shoulders again. Raven seemed skeptical, but she began talking anyway:

“Lady Pearl will explain everything better. She was the princess’ governess before the King died and she knows some magic. She organized the resistance against Daralis. People didn’t believe her at first, but then when the magic began disappearing…”

“Do you think it was her who called us over?”

“No.” Raven shook her head. “Only the true Queen or King of Kelliadoth can call unto the Legendary Adventurers for help.”

“But you said Princess Primrose had been killed, like her dad.”

Raven stared at her in silence, doubtful.

“I don’t know. Lady Pearl doesn’t tell us everything. We’re just bounty hunters and fugitives. Jasper was right about that.”

Agatha supposed that her elven hearing had allowed her to hear the conversation they’d had atop of the wall. She didn’t hold it against her. She would’ve eavesdropped in a moment like that as well.

“You know, Queen Marigold had a saying,” Agatha told the elf. “She used to say ‘In Kelliadoth, there’s always more than meets the eye’. I think that applies to you. You are bounty hunters, but you’re also rebels. You’re fighting against a tyrant. I think that’s very brave.”

It was hard to tell, because she turned away almost immediately, but Agatha almost believed that Raven had blushed.

That was definitely a lot better. Castiel bit down on his pen and then crossed out a word here and there, adding notes to the margin, but he left the scene mostly unchanged. The scene where Daralis convinced Jasper it was necessary for him to go “rescue” Agatha was pretty good as well. Why was it easier for him to write scenes of the twins separately than it was for him to write them together? Perhaps because those days, Jack and Claire weren’t exactly on speaking terms.

It had been a while since they’d been this angry with each other over something. Even after the lost letter debacle, they’d remained in speaking terms… though mostly Claire made sarcastic remarks and Jack just sighed and conceded whatever point she was making.
This was different. This time, Jack said something and Claire pretended she hadn’t heard him at all or simply stood up and walked out of the room. Or Claire came out of her room, sat down on the living room and glared at Jack until he was uncomfortable enough to pick up his things and leave. The silence in the house was only broken by the sound of Claire’s incredibly loud music, and that was only when she was home, because lately it seemed like she found any sort of excuse to be out: either she went out with Kaia or just “to prepare her portfolio” with her pencils and paint somewhere. It was as if the fact that Luc was coming to visit had made her decision to go to art school even more prominent than it had been before.

Jack, on the other hand, seemed jumpy and nervous every time his phone rang, as if he was waiting for a call or a message or just… something. He had come to Castiel’s studio on one occasion and asked if he had Luc’s phone number.

“You probably don’t,” he said, lowering his eyes and blushing, as if he was asking for something very shameful. “I know he changes his number a lot, but I was wondering maybe you could talk to him.”

“Why do you need me to talk to him?”

Castiel hadn’t meant for it to come out so hostile, but the mere idea of having to talk to his brother on the phone, let alone having to talk to him, made his skin crawl. No one in the family had the highest opinion of him, but to Castiel especially he was a conman, a deadbeat and a complete and utter jerk who had never brought joy or helped anyone but himself.

He had been very careful not to express that opinion around the kids, but he had told as much and worse to Luc himself.

“She was your wife!” he’d told them the month after Kelly had died. “You didn’t even have the decency to show up for the funeral.”

“I’m sorry, things got complicated over here. You know I have a very stressful job,” Luc had replied, even though they were both aware that his “job” consisted mostly on spending the family fortune on expensive trips around the globe while he pretended to work. “I don’t know what you expected me to do, Castiel. Yes, I was sorry to hear about Kelly, but she was the one who decided to divorce me. It’s not that I stopped caring about her, but she made it pretty clear she didn’t want me anywhere close to her.”

Castiel hadn’t said, but he should have, that this was precisely the reason that Kelly had divorced him in the first place.

“The least you could do is come here and assure them that they aren’t completely abandoned by everyone who is supposed to care for them!” he’d said instead. “They are your responsibility now. They are your children!”

Luc had sighed at the other end of the phone.

“I was never meant to be a father,” he’d said, mournfully.

“I know. But you need to step up now. Luc, please. They’re scared and they’re sad and they need you. There are also a lot of legal matters to settle…”

“Alright!” Luc had sounded more exasperated than anything. “Fine! They’re staying with you, aren’t they?”

“For the time being.”
“I will go as soon as I can.”

He’d hanged up before Castiel could press him on how long that would be exactly. Castiel had turned around to see a very tiny Claire hiding right past the kitchen door, clutching her stuffed bear and staring at him with big watery eyes.

“How long have you been standing there?”

Instead of answering, Claire had taken a couple of insecure steps towards him. Her lower lip had trembled as she spoke:

“Daddy doesn’t want us, does he?”

“Of course he does,” Castiel had said. “He’s just very busy right now. He’ll come as soon as he can. You should be in bed now, Claire.”

Claire had stretched her hands up at him and he’d picked her up to take her back to the room she still shared with Jack back then.

“Why can’t you be our daddy instead?” she’d asked, with her face hidden in his neck.

Castiel had struggled for a moment to speak. It was hard with the lump in his throat and with the feeling of his heart breaking inside of his chest.

“Because… that’s not how these things work, Claire,” he’d said as he laid her down in bed. In the bed next to her, Jack slept soundly. “But don’t worry. I promise I will always be here for whatever you need.”

Claire had watched his face intently, as if she was trying to determine whether he was lying to her or not. Then she’d nodded and let him tuck her into bed.

Maybe it was a cruel thing to think, but Castiel suspected that Claire had known, even at that very young age, the kind of man that Luc was. Despite what Luc might think, he had never spoken ill of him in front of the children and he had never tried to predispose them against him. Claire had come to the conclusion that she didn’t want her father in her life all on her own and she’d stood firm on it the same way she’d stood firm on being out at school despite the ire that it might attract and in her desire to go to art school. That was just the kind of person she was.

Just as it was in Jack’s nature to try to make peace even when things seemed complicated.

For example, when Castiel answered the way he did about Luc’s number, Jack had shrunk visibly and taken a step back.

“I just… well, I sent him an email asking if he could be more specific about the date when he’d be visiting and if he wanted us to pick him up at the airport… well, if he wanted me to pick him at the airport, ‘cause it’s okay if you and Claire don’t want to come and… anyway, he didn’t answer and I was wondering maybe if I tried calling him… but you’re probably right, maybe I’m being too insistent about this. Maybe I should just wait for an answer. Yes, I’ll go do that…”

It still broke Castiel’s heart. It broke his heart that Jack was such a good boy and Claire was such a strong headed girl, and they were both wonderful, and Luc just couldn’t see that, that he hadn’t been around to see them become what they were. It broke his heart that despite acting like she didn’t, it still had hurt Claire to cut Luc out of her life and that Jack still wanted him to be in it regardless and Luc just couldn’t be bothered to make an effort for the son that still believed in him.
It was terrible and it was terrible that there was next to nothing he could do about it. He’d given up in trying to convince his brother to do right by his children years ago.

“Wait, hold on,” Castiel called him before Jack turned towards the door. “I think I still have an old number of his. You could try that.”

Jack’s face lit up with a smile.

“Yes! Thank you, Uncle Cas.”

Castiel gave him the number and then sat behind his computer to begin the draft for the next chapter.

There was an evil entity, he decided. One last big enemy that the twins needed to overcome, a Shadow incarnated that promised them with lies to give them everything they wanted just like it had promised Daralis.

Maybe it was a little cliché. He would ask Meg about it later.

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“We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number and try calling again…”

Jack sighed and put the phone down. It was the third time he’d tried calling to the number Castiel had given him, and this time he was sure he had entered all the numbers correctly. Luc was simply not answering or the phone number had simply changed since the last time Castiel had talked to him. that was disconcerting all on itself. Didn’t Castiel keep their father updated on what was going with them…?

Claire jumped on the couch next to him with and extended a nougat towards him, without looking at him or saying a word. Jack frowned, confused, but accepted the nougat.

“Are you talking to me again?” he asked.

“I had a long chat with Kaia and she thinks being mad with you is bad for my health,” she explained. “She read me a full poem about it.”

“Oh.” Jack frowned. He wasn’t sure what to make of that. After the things he’d told Claire about Kaia, he was so sure that she would…

“And besides, I refuse to let him drive a wedge between us,” Claire continued. “That would mean he has some sort of power over me.”

Jack appreciated that. He didn’t appreciate that she was doing it out of spite, but most of what Claire did was motivated by that, so what could he do? He unwrapped the nougat and extended a piece of it towards her.

“Thank you.”

Claire took a bite out of the nougat. “Any news about when he might be arriving?”

Jack stared at his phone again and with a sigh, he put it aside.
“No, but I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Do you wanna watch TV?”

“Sure.”
Luc Novak was sort of like a summer storm or like a hurricane. He arrived when you were least expecting it, ferocious and strong, with winds and thunder, and left untold devastation in his wake. Even if it wasn’t physical. Even if it couldn’t be seen.

Claire was having a relatively normal Thursday. March had started and with it, the spring rain that would wash away whatever was left of the snow that had covered the town during those months. She read a description of the rain, a sort of gothic story that started being seemingly about a princess in a tower but it slowly revealed to be about a girl in a mental institution, watching the rain falling down beyond her window. She was very proud of it, and even more so when both Castiel and Meg said it was very good. She was getting better at this. It was sort of like drawing: the more she did it, the easier it became.

“I could write a graphic novel. I could be like Alan Moore, but without all the crazy magical stuff,” she said while the Inksters headed for the door. Well, everyone except Meg and Cas, who, as always, had stayed behind to talk in the classroom.

“I thought you said the crazy magical stuff was what made Alan Moore brilliant,” Alexis commented.

“Well, yeah, but I don’t want to be brilliant and crazy,” Claire said, with a shrug. “I’ll settle for being mediocre, sane and only mildly famous.”

“I wouldn’t mind being thought of as brilliant and crazy,” Kaia commented. “Just as long as I was rich and famous enough that I could leave enormous tips to my waiters.”

“If I was rich and famous, I would buy myself a little cottage somewhere nice and isolated and stay there in the peace and quiet while I wrote my novels,” Patience said.

“Geez, and they say I’m anti-social,” Claire muttered.

“If I had tons of money right now, I would pay for college in advance,” Alexis said. “And then I would open my own hospital. Oh, and I would buy my mom a bigger house and a better car.”

“If I had tons of money…” Jack caressed his chin, pensively. “I think I would buy a big house. Like, a really big one and then I’d go to the nearest shelter and I’d take in all the old dogs who are at risk of being killed and I’d rescue them.”

“Jack, you’re allergic to dogs.”

“What’s your point?” Jack asked, tilting his head, which ‘cause everyone to laugh a little. “What would you do, Ben?”

Ben startled, as if he hadn’t expected Jack to address him directly. Lately, he always hanged in the back of the group and he wasn’t as prone as clowning around as he’d been in the past. Claire suspected that Jack’s rejection had been a hit to his ego.

“Umh… I think I’d do what Alexis said. Buy my mom nice stuff,” he muttered. “And also maybe travel. Like, a long road trip across all fifty states, hitting all the tourist traps, like Sam and Dean used to do.”

It was so weird that Mr. Winchester was “Sam” to him because his mom was dating Mr.
Winchester’s brother. Claire supposed no more weird that “Miss Masters” being Meg to her because she was dating Kaia.

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” Jack commented.

Ben fidgeted with the strap of his backpack and chuckled softly.

“It’s dumb.”

“No, I don’t think it is.”

Claire cleared her throat. They were approaching the parking lot and she didn’t want the conversation to end with such an awkward note.

“Well, if I had tons of money, I…” she began, but then her eyes fell on a car parked right in front of Castiel’s.

It was a black shiny Mercedes, expensive, brand new and entirely out of place in the school’s parking lot. It didn’t belong to any parent or student and no teacher could afford something like that. It was the kind of car somebody would drive to show off how much money and status they had and as she watched it closely, she noticed that it had a sticker from the rental two towns over.

Her stomach was sinking as if she’d swallowed a rock even before the door open and the person driving the car strolled out.

He’d changed very little since the last time she’d seen him… two, three years before? She’d lost count. In any case, his dirty blonde hair had grown out, with locks pointing in every direction as if he’d driven with the window rolled down. He was pretentious enough that she couldn’t discard that he’d run his hand through his hair in order to make it seem that way, though. Another mark of pretentiousness: he was wearing a black suit with a white shirt and wearing sunglasses even though the day was cloudy.

Every inch of Claire’s consciousness was telling her that she should get out of there, run away and hide as if she’d seen a ghost.

But it was too late. He’d already spotted them.

“Jack!” he called, waving his hand in their direction and strolling towards them as if he owned the place. “Claire!”

Claire glanced at Jack. He’d also frozen in his spot. The edges of his mouth tingled, as if he wasn’t sure whether to smile or not. He recovered fast, though, and smiled as well.

“Dad!” he exclaimed, walking up towards Luc.

“Dad?” Kaia repeated, turning to Claire with surprise. “That’s your dad?”

Claire realized with a jolt that, as much as she’d told Kaia about… well, pretty much everything, she’d failed to mention that her dad was a deadbeat scumbag. That was how little she tried to factor Luc Novak into her life.

But of course, he always had to go ahead and do whatever he wanted. The complete ass.

Luc threw his hands around Jack and hugged him for a few seconds.

“Boy, you’re almost as tall as me!” he commented, and it was true. If Jack grew another inch, he
would even surpass him. Luc patted him on the cheek and smiled with satisfaction. “You look very
good.”

“Thanks, dad,” Jack said. “What are… why are you here? We thought… well, we didn’t know…”

“I told you I was coming to see you.”

“Yeah, but you… you didn’t say when,” Jack pointed out. Claire knew him well enough to know
that, even though he was smiling, he was little nervous: he pulled from the helm of his jacket and
shuffled his eight from one feet to the other. “You should have. We could’ve had picked you up at
the airport…”

“Oh, I rented a car and drove myself here. I didn’t want to trouble you,” Luc said, as if he’d been
anything but trouble for everyone around him during his entire life. “There was no one at your
house, so I figured you’d be here doing some sort of extracurricular thing… Claire, aren’t you going
to come say hi?”

Claire realized that she’d been standing in the same spot for the past two minutes. She took a deep
breath, let go of Kaia’s hand and walked up to him. She ignored the way he opened his arms to hug
her and instead raised her chin at him, defiantly.

“Hello, Luc.”

She was pleased to see that this annoyed him. His smile stayed on but he removed his nostrils flared
a little. He took off his glasses to glare at her with his cold, grey eyes.

“Now, is that any way to say hello to your father?” he asked and then lowered his voice to mutter
through his teeth: “Claire, don’t be difficult in front of your friends.”

Claire opened his mouth to tell him (in very polite terms) to fuck off, but then Castiel called their
names from behind. He ran up to them, his face turned into stone and his shoulders rigid.

“Luc,” he muttered.

“Hello, little brother,” Luc greeted him, but his attention turned from him immediately. “And hello to
you. Who might you be?”

Meg had come out running behind Castiel. Jack, because he was Jack and of course he couldn’t help
but being polite, immediately took it upon himself to introduce her.

“Uh, dad, this is our English teacher, Miss Masters.”

“Enchanté,” Luc said, grabbing Meg’s hand and leaving a quick kiss over her knuckles. “I bet all the
boys pay extra attention to you in class.”

“I bet you tell that to every one of your kids’ teachers,” Meg said, pulling her hand back delicately
and showing a grin that was pure teeth.

Claire wanted to high five her. She must have known that Luc had never in his life been to a parent-
teacher conference concerning them and that this was perhaps the first time he met any of their
teachers. And even if she didn’t know it, it was still a pretty sick burn.

“We didn’t know you were arriving today,” Castiel said, speaking in a very neutral tone. “We
would’ve waited for you.”
“Well, you know me. I like to surprise people.” Luc shrugged. “What surprises me is that you’re here as well.”

Which meant he had been hoping to intercept Jack and Claire by themselves. She didn’t precisely like that.

“Yes.” Castiel pulled from the sleeve of his coat. “It’s a long story.”

“And you can tell me all about it during dinner!” Luc exclaimed, smiling at them again. “Come on, I’m taking you to a wonderful place in the town. All on me, of course…”

“I’d rather starve, thanks.”

Everyone turned to stare at Claire, but she couldn’t find it in herself to care. Luc never invited them anywhere, not unless he had some sort of agenda behind it and she wasn’t eager to find out what it was this time. She didn’t give a damn if she sounded “difficult” or “rude”. She wasn’t willing to spend one second more than it was strictly necessary around Luc.

“Uhm… what Claire meant to say is that… we already had plans, didn’t we?” Kaia said, moving to stand next to her.

Claire suffered a moment of strange panic. Had she ever come out to Luc? She’d been out to pretty much everyone she cared about for the last couple of years, but she couldn’t remember if she’d ever mentioned it to him that she was a lesbian. Was he going to make a scene in front of everyone, in front of Kaia, if he found out right now?

Luckily for her, the topic didn’t come out right then, because Alexis moved forwards:

“Yes, all sorts of plans.”

“Very important plans,” Patience added. “Unpostponable, really.”

Claire grabbed Jack’s arm and pulled him closer to her as Ben also joined the group.

“Sorry, Mr. Novak,” he said, in what had to be the cheekiest display until then.

“Guys, but we didn’t…” Jack started saying, but Claire stomped on his foot to shut him up.

“So, yeah, maybe we can have dinner some other day,” she said. “It’s not like you’re leaving town soon, is it?”

To someone who didn’t know him, it would’ve been impossible to tell. But she could sense the way he got rigid, the way his eyelids narrowed just a little, how his hands became tense balls. He was furious, not only that they were defying him, but that all those friends were supporting them instead of trying to convince them to go with their father.

He changed tactics.

“Kids, I haven’t seen you in a while, and I was really hoping we could…”

“Well, that’s what you get for showing up unannounced,” Castiel interrupted him. He placed himself between Luc and the Inksters, as if he was trying to protect them from him. “Jack and Claire had planned this outing for weeks and they have my permission to go. It would be extremely disappointing for them if they couldn’t go now.”

Luc’s eyes became so cold they might as well have been ice knives as they settled on Castiel.
“But I am their father,” he argued.

“Precisely. They will have all weekend to catch up with you,” Castiel insisted. “These… plans they made with their friends, on the other hand… they’ll only be young once, Luc. And I can come have dinner with you, if you wish.”

It was clear that Luc wanted to argue. He wasn’t the kind of person who took not getting away with his lightly and this was definitely an open challenge to his authority over Claire and Jack. In Claire’s opinion, he had no authority whatsoever, but she figured it wasn’t the moment to bring that up.

In the end, he seemed to understand that throwing a tantrum right then would only weaken his position. He took a deep breath and smiled again.

“Well, of course. I can’t say I’m not a little hurt that they would choose their friends over their own family, but I guess there’s nothing to be done. Only when we grow old we come to appreciate the people who truly care for us, don’t we?”

Claire had to resist the impulse to roll her eyes. He was so transparently manipulative, she couldn’t even believe he thought that would somehow work on them…

“I’ll go.”

Jack moved away before she had the chance to catch him. He stood in front of Luc, a little shrunk with his usual shyness, but with determination in his eyes.

“I’d love to have dinner with you, dad,” he said. “I mean, we haven’t seen you in such a long time…”

A long, tense silence followed that declaration, because Jack clearly didn’t know how to go on with that sentence without sounding like he was reproaching him. Claire was frantically looking for another excuse, any reason for why Jack shouldn’t go to have dinner with Luc, but she couldn’t come up with anything.

“Alright,” Luc said in the end. “We’ll make it a boys’ night out.”

Claire bit the inside of her cheek to prevent herself from screaming out in frustration. But there was really not much else she could do.

Ben, Alexis and Patience walked away a little to quietly ask permission from their parents to come, while Meg advised Kaia to come home early. Castiel would drive Meg home and then join Jack and Luc at home to go to the restaurant with them, which Claire disliked even more. She didn’t want Jack to be alone with Luc, lest their father would put an evil mind spell on him or something.

In any case, she had done everything she could. That didn’t make the coffee she had at Patience’s grandma’s coffee shop taste any less bitter.

“I thought you said he was in Europe with no intentions of coming back,” Alexis said. Of course, she was aware of the kind of person Luc was, since Claire had told her enough about him that she could draw her own conclusions.

“He was,” Claire groaned. “But I guess he decided ‘Hey, I’m gonna go screw up the last school trimester for them, that will be fun’!’. Jackass.”

“I mean, I get that you didn’t want to see him, but… he just didn’t seem so bad to me?” Kaia commented.
Claire had to remind herself that she loved her and that this was her fault for not telling her sooner about Luc.

“That’s how he gets you,” she explained. “He pretends that he’s all charming and nice and then he just…” She gestured wildly, unable to even explain the depths of Luc’s terribleness.

“So he’s… he’s Darth Vader, is that what you’re saying?” Patience said.

“Yes, he’s exactly like Darth Vader!” Claire agreed. “Only even Darth Vader wasn’t this much of an unredeemable imbecile.”

Kaia, Patience and Alexis stared at her in surprise, as if they hadn’t expected her to express herself so strongly about it. Of course, they wouldn’t get it. Kaia and Alexis both had lost their father or had never met him in the first place, while Patience apparently held her dad’s opinion of her in high regards. Amazingly, the only one who seemed to be completely on Claire’s side on this was Ben.

“I haven’t seen my actual dad since I was… maybe five years old?” he said. “But if he was constantly coming and going, I’d be pissed too. What’s the point of that? Either stay and actually put on some effort into raising me or just leave the guy who’s doing that job continue to do what he’s already doing.”

“Yes!” Claire exclaimed. “Thank you!”

The others stared at each other, as if they were unsure of what to say. Kaia cleared her throat.

“So… this is actually about your uncle.”

Claire opened her mouth, closed it again and looked at the ceiling. Amazingly, she was regretting not going to the dinner after all.

Who knew what kind of poison Luc was spewing all over Jack and Castiel?
“… that was the best champagne I have ever tasted,” Luc said, while weighing the glass in his hand. “You should try that, Castiel, if you ever have the chance.”

Castiel looked at him and wondered if his brother was just joking or if he really, actually, believed that the reason he hadn’t been drinking champagne in a small town in Southern France was because he just “hadn’t had the chance”. That was really the difference between Luc being oblivious and being outright malicious.

“I will keep that in mind if ever find myself there,” Castiel replied.

He looked around, but their waiter was nowhere to be seen. Which meant their food wasn’t ready, which meant this dinner was going to last far more than he would’ve liked. Luc had really drove for an hour to take them to this Italian restaurant with prices that made Castiel’s eye twitch a little and in which he felt terribly underdressed in his cheap suit and trench coat. Jack was even more inadequately dressed in his jeans and shirt combo, but he seemed to fascinated by what Luc was telling them to be self-conscious.

“That sounds like a really beautiful place,” he commented. “I’d like to visit it someday, if it’s possible.”

Castiel drank his water to gulp down the sudden heave coming up his throat.

“Well, of course!” Luc said, smiling wide. “Maybe when you graduate, I could take you and Claire there. I’m sure she will enjoy it, with all the art and stuff that she likes so much.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it!” Jack said, enthusiastically.

Castiel was sure that the prospect of spending twelve hours aboard a plane, not to mention any number of days in Europe, with Luc would be enough to make Claire fly into an uncontrollable rage. He decided not to mention that for the time being.

Luc filled his glass again and pushed it towards Jack.

“Do you want to try?”

“Can I?”

“No, you can’t!” Castiel said, yanking the glass away as delicately as he could. “It’s illegal, Jack.”

Jack lowered his eyes in shame, but Luc huffed and rolled his eyes as if Castiel was being unreasonable.

“Why not? He’s going to be eighteen in a couple of months. In Europe, he’d be able to drink…”

“Well, we’re not in Europe, Luc,” Castiel said, firmly. “So, please, refrain from offering alcohol to the kids.”

Luc stared at him for a long time, his grey eyes cold as ice, but he didn’t argue that he was actually the kids’ parents and could let them drink alcohol if he wanted. Instead, he threw his hands in the air with a sigh.

“You were always such a wet blanket, little brother.”
Jack let out a cough that sounded a lot like a laugh. Castiel tried not to get his feelings hurt over that.

The waiter finally showed up with their plates, overflowing with pasta and sauce, and left immediately. Jack tried a little and hummed with pleasure.

“Oh, this is delicious!”

Castiel took a bite, brooding over the fact it really wasn’t that good and he could’ve made better food at home. Luc, on his part, was delighted with Jack’s reaction.

“Isn’t it? Your mother and I used to love coming to this place. I think we actually had our first date, here, if I remember correctly.”

“Really?” Jack’s eyes shone.

“Luc,” Castiel interrupted them. He didn’t really mean to. He knew Jack would be all over any information about Kelly and it was far from his intention to stop Luc when he was actually on a sharing mood, but he just had to know… “Why are you here?”

Luc huffed again, but he didn’t do Castiel the disservice to pretend he didn’t know what that question meant.

“Well, Aunt Amara called me and told me all about her Thanksgiving visit,” he explained. “It sounded like it didn’t go well for a number of reasons. So… I’ve decided to help.”

“Help?”

“Help change her mind,” Luc said, simply. He took another sip from his champagne. “Amara is strict, but she’s not unreasonable and she does care for our family. It’s what she cares about the most, in fact. So I’m sure that if we prove to her that Jack and Claire are more than the negative opinion she formed of them, she’ll turn around and help pay for their colleges.”

Castiel stared at his brother with astonishment. It sounded so reasonable, it sounded like something any father would do. Hell, it sounded like he wanted to do, because the other option was that Jack and Claire put themselves in horrible debt to achieve their dreams.

He was certain there was a catch. There was always a catch with Luc. There had to be, he just couldn’t figure out exactly what it was…

“Oh, don’t look so shocked. I might get offended,” Luc sighed. “Is it so hard to believe that I want what’s best for my children?”

If Claire had been there, she would have told him to his face that this would be the first time Luc did something seemingly out of the goodness of his heart for them. But Castiel didn’t dare to go that far.

“That is… I mean, it’s very…”

“Why don’t you help pay for our colleges?” Jack asked, frowning. “I mean, you’ve been to Europe and to all these wonderful places. You must have money.” He stopped, blushing and lowered his eyes. “I… I didn’t mean to sound so rude, I’m sorry…”

“No, of course. Don’t worry about it, boy,” Luc told him. He sounded so calm and magnanimous it was hard for Castiel to believe that those words were coming out of his mouth. “You’re absolutely right. As your father, I think it’s my duty to help in any way I can… the thing is, I don’t have as many ways to help as you imagine. Yes, I have some personal fortune, but the reason I am able to
travel and have a certain lifestyle is because of my job at the family’s firm. I deal with partners and clients overseas. It's a lot more business than it is pleasure.”

Castiel raised an eyebrow at him, skeptical, but Jack nodded, as if that explanation made a lot of sense to him.

“Of course, I will help to cover some of the expenses,” Luc continued. “But Aunt Amara is in the unique position of giving you a full ride and I think that we should try and convince her to help as well.”

“Well… I don’t know,” Jack said, nervously moving the food around his plate. “I don’t want to look like we’re asking for handouts. Claire and I have managed to get the things we’ve wanted before and it’s not that we wouldn’t appreciate the help, but…”

“Jack.” Luc stretched a hand to put it over Jack’s forearm. “It’s not about asking for handouts at all. Aunt Amara made you an offer, then she rescinded that offer. Now it’s a matter to get her to make the offer again.”

“You think you can do that?”

“Of course I can. It’s what I do.”

Luc’s grin was so oily that Castiel had to push his plate away. He wasn’t sure that he could keep eating. He still was certain that there was some sort of trap that he wasn’t seeing or a scheme that he couldn’t quite figure out…

“Castiel, I can tell what you’re thinking,” Luc said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Castiel replied, sitting very rigidly in his chair.

Luc sighed and laid down his fork and knife to the side.

“See, I know what you believe about me,” he said, turning to Jack again. “I know what Claire believes… and I can’t say I blame any of you for thinking it. I haven’t been the most attentive parent in the past, I have failed you more times than I have been there for you and I have no real good excuse to not have been a part of your lives all this time.”

“I mean… I didn’t…” Jack started, but Luc put a hand up to stop him from speaking.

“But you’re almost adults now,” he continued. “And it hit me… I have missed out on practically your entire childhoods. I don’t want to miss out on the rest of your lives. I want you to see that it’s possible for people to see the error of their ways and to strive to be better.” He made a pause and then slowly raised his eyes. They weren’t as cold as before, but Castiel still couldn’t help but to wonder if the warmth in them was genuine. “People can change.”

And Castiel knew, with his guts, with his bones, that it didn’t matter what he said or did from that point onwards. Jack was already willing to give him another chance.

Claire was on the couch with her guitar and her mint green headphones when the guys arrived. She looked up, saw that Luc had invited himself into the house and decided that retreating inside of her
“The room was the right move for her.

“Claire…” Luc called her as she stood up, but she ignored him. There was simply nothing he could say to her.

Five minutes after she’d close the door behind him, Jack came in without even knocking.

“That was really rude. He just wanted to say good night to you!”

Claire glared at him, but after taking a deep breath, she figured there was no point in trying to fight him on this.

“Doesn’t matter. He’s going to be out of town tomorrow, back to his grand European life and…”

“He’s staying,” Jack informed her. “He’s inviting Aunt Amara for our birthday.”

Claire let out a strangled groan. Their birthday wasn’t until the end of April.

“You have to be joking. He’s staying two months in town?” She shook her head. “That’s more than he’s ever stayed… anywhere!”

“I think he might be staying until we graduate,” Jack said. He smiled as if that was a good thing and that was more than Claire could handle.

She briskly walked past him and headed directly towards Castiel’s studio. He took way to long for her liking to come to the door and when he did, she had to wonder if he was the ally she needed for this. He looked very tired and haggard, as if just eating on the same table as Luc had drained him from his vital energy. It wasn’t a completely out there theory.

“Is Luc staying until our birthday?” she asked him anyway, because she couldn’t trust Jack relentless optimism on this one.

Castiel sighed. “He says he is.”

“And he will!” Jack insisted. “Yes, he hasn’t been too reliable in the past…”

“To put it mildly.”

“… but this time it will be different,” he continued, ignoring the remark. “I know it will.”

“How?” Claire asked. She was on the brink of losing her patience completely. She stopped to pinch the bridge of his nose and forced herself to speak calmly: “I don’t want him here for our birthday. It’s the big eighteen, Jack, and he’s going to ruin it somehow.”

“No, he won’t. Claire, why won’t you give him another chance?”

“Because he doesn’t deserve it!”

“Who are you to say that?” Jack asked, shaking his head. “You’re being very unfair…”

“I’m being as fair as I can be! You’re the one being too easy on that piece of…!”

“Children!” Castiel shouted.

Claire felt slightly guilty from having to involve him in all of this, but she needed someone to back her up on this.
“You know it’s true!” she said, turning to him. “He dumped us on you because he didn’t want to be our father. He never did.”

“And that was a mistake, but…”

“If you’re going to suggest I should forgive him, Jack, I swear to God…”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Castiel said, stepping between the two and stretching his arms as if he thought they were going to jump at each other’s throats at any moment. Claire wasn’t too far away from them. “It doesn’t matter what you think right now. Luc is here and he has expressed his intentions to stay here. Whatever that means, remains to be seen, so I suggest that you keep your opinions about it until then.”

“You’re asking me to forgive him?” Claire asked, scandalized.

“I’m asking you to give him the benefit of the doubt,” Castiel replied. “If he is sincere about his intentions, that could be an opportunity for the two of you that you would otherwise not have. I’m not going to let you throw it away just because we jumped to conclusions too early.”

“So you’re not agreeing to this because he’s your brother and said he wanted to change?” Jack asked. He sounded disappointed.

“Of course not. I know him all too well.” Castiel shrugged.

Jack stared at him, his lower lip trembling as if he wanted to cry. He turned on his heel and marched down the hallway, locking himself in his room before they had the chance to add anything else. Claire also wasn’t happy about Castiel’s reply, but she remained where she was, because she wanted to understand.

“What the hell is Luc planning now?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Castiel admitted. He turned to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Claire, listen to me. Whether your father is being honest or not about his intentions, it’s irrelevant. Jack will not doubt his words, even if he has reasons to. So I need you to watch your brother’s back and you can’t do that if you’re constantly bickering with him.”

Claire gritted her teeth. Fine, he had a point there.

“I just don’t want him to get hurt,” she muttered.

“Nobody wants that,” Castiel agreed.

And really, what else could Claire do at that point?

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Jack didn’t know where that pit in his stomach sensation came from, but he knew he didn’t like it at all. He didn’t like it that Castiel was supposedly doing this for them instead of giving Luc another chance and he didn’t like that Claire had been so adamant about not wanting him around. Why were they being so harsh on him? Yes, he had made mistakes in the past but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be forgiven.

Because if he couldn’t be forgiven, that meant Jack, in a way, couldn’t either. Just because he hadn’t
meant to hurt people, it didn’t mean he hadn’t really hurt them with his words or his actions. And he was certain that, as many mistakes as Luc had made, he also hadn’t meant to hurt people in the way that he had.

He paced around his room for several minutes, breathing in deeply as he did. It didn’t help to clear his head at all. In the end, he sat down and grabbed his cellphone. He toyed with it for a moment, but then opened the message function and typed out:

>Did you get to your apartment alright?

He had given Jack his current phone number when he asked for it. Jack didn’t count on him answering, however. He never answered and when he did, it was usually hours later when he’d already forgotten to…

The cellphone chimed.

>Yes, thank you. How is everything there?

Jack stared at the screen, unsure how to react to this development.

Maybe this was a good sign. Even after he’d said it out loud so many times, he hadn’t really dared to hope that things would be different. But maybe…

>They’re fine, thanks.

Luc didn’t buy that for a second.

>How mad was your sister?

Despite how shaken the fight had left him, Jack chuckled at that.

>She was very angry. I don’t understand why. I tried telling her that you really want to change, but she wouldn’t believe it.

He made a pause and then quickly typed another message:

>You do want to change, right? You want to be there for us? Castiel doesn’t believe it either.

Luc’s reply took a little to come:

>Like I said, I can’t blame them if they don’t believe it. I guess I’ll have to show it through actions rather than words. It’s only fair that they reserve their judgment.

Jack figured that was true. He knew Claire could be very inflexible when it came to those things, but maybe it was just a matter of giving her time to come around and…

Luc sent another message:

>I don’t want to speak ill of your uncle. I know you care for him a lot.

That disconcerted Jack a little.

>What do you mean?

>Nothing. Please, disregard that.
No, I want to know what you mean.

There was a long silence before Luc finale sent his answer:

I don’t want to believe that he’s predisposed your sister against me somehow, but sometimes I can’t help but to wonder if that is the case. I don’t think I have ever done anything to grant me her ire in this way. I know I have failed you before, but you’ve found it in yourself to forgive me. Why can’t she?

Jack licked his lips nervously as he wrote back:

Claire and I are very different.

Perhaps it’s just that. Like I said, please disregard what I said.

Jack lied down on his bed and tried to do exactly that. He wanted to say that of course Castiel would never do something like that and Claire was just stubborn and rancorous.

But the little voice in the back of his head, a voice that sounded a lot like Luc’s, kept humming his doubts back at him.
Chapter 43

Claire upped her resolution not let Luc live in her head rent free and acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary for the following days. She kept talking normally to Jack and pretending she didn’t hear a word when someone tried to speak to her about their father. He just wasn’t worth getting worked up over, especially when there were so many things to keep her occupied until graduation.

She had been eagerly awaiting for that day to come ever since she set a foot on the building for the first time and decided she hated everyone and everything about it. But now that it was here, it was kind of surreal to think that she’d never have to walk those halls again, never again had to put up with people snickering and whispering in her wake when she held her girlfriend’s hand.

She couldn’t wait.

“I know you’re not a very visual kind of person but maybe you should take a look at my portfolio and tell me what you think,” she suggested to Kaia.

“You just want to show off your talents to me.” Kaia chuckled.

“Well, yeah. What’s the point of being talented if I can’t earn the admiration of a pretty girl?”

Kaia laughed again and scooted closer to her. She was about to say something when Alex came running up behind them and planted herself in front of the two, stopping them in their tracks.

“You could show off your talent to everybody,” she said, not even trying to pretend she hadn’t been eavesdropping on their conversation. “The prompt committee needs someone to design the posters for the event and we… I thought of you.”

Claire wondered how many committees and clubs existed in the school and if Alex was somehow in all of them.

“Pass,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Please, Claire,” Alexis pleaded. “I don’t want the school to end up with a badly photoshopped poster like every year. You’ve seen them. They’re embarrassing.”

She had a point, but that still wasn’t enough to convince Claire to help.

“Look, you know I really don’t care for prompt…”

“You’ve gone every single year,” Alexis pointed out.

“Well, yeah. Because someone has to make sure that Jack doesn’t get into trouble when his date inevitably goes awry.”

“And you can swoop in and make out with said date,” Alexis added, putting a hand on her hip like a mother scolding her child.

“That was one time!” Claire protested. “And in any case, I wouldn’t have to be begging for my brother’s scraps if they let me just take a girl with me.”

Kaia tensed by her side and moved away to look at her with a frown.

“Hang on, what?”
“Oh, yeah. Same-sex couples aren’t allowed to go to school dances together.” Alexis rolled her eyes. “It’s incredibly homophobic and unfair.”

“Yeah, no kidding!” Kaia opened her eyes wide, scandalized. “It’s like it’s not even the twenty-first century.”

“Right?”

“It’s not a problem, though.” Claire shrugged. “We’ll just pretend we’re going with other people like every year and then switch. The chaperones don’t even notice after a while.”

She expected Alexis and Kaia to laugh at that (Claire and Alex had done exactly that the past year, after all, with Alex pretending to be Jack’s date and Claire showing up alone because no one was going to question it), but neither did.

“No, that’s not right,” Kaia protested, shaking her head. “We should be allowed to go together, like everybody else.”

“Absolutely!” Alexis agreed. “That’s why the prompt committee this year is putting up a petition to have that rule overturned.”

Claire chuckled. She couldn’t help it. She just imagined Principal Crowley receiving that complaint and then promptly dismissing it and giving them detention for wasting his time.

Judging by the way Kaia’s frown deepened and Alexis glared at her, that wasn’t the correct thing to do.

“Oh, come on!” Claire said. “Guys, I agree that the rule it’s stupid and all, but I don’t see them changing it any time soon.”

“Well, no, if we keep quiet about it, they won’t.”

“What are you going to do? A demonstration or something?” Claire scoffed. “Look, it’s just high school. We’re here for three more months. Afterwards, we leave and it won’t bother us anymore.”

“But it will bother the people that comes after us!” Alexis argued.

“Yeah, but…” Claire stopped halfway through that sentence when she realized Kaia had suddenly let go of her hand.

There was something undefinable in her expression. It wasn’t sadness exactly, though her dark eyes had never looked darker and it wasn’t anger, though her mouth was shut in a single tight line.

“Just high school?”

Claire didn’t have time to answer to that. The bell rang and Kaia turned her back on her and walked away in her classrooms direction. She didn’t even look back when Claire called her name.

“What did I say?” Claire asked, baffled.

Instead of offering an answer, Alexis shook her head and walked away as well.

So that didn’t end well.

Claire barely paid attention to class afterwards, even though Art History was basically the only subject that was going to help her in her future career path. She was calculating. Usually, Kaia had
US History and Civics during this period. They regrouped at the cafeteria for lunch and ate together with Jack. Sometimes Patience, Ben, or Alexis would join them, but given that Ben and Jack were still not talking and Alexis was also irritated with her (though God knew why), Claire doubted they would this time.

So if she needed to talk to Kaia alone, she was going to have to be very blunt about with Jack. The boy had never got a hint in his entire life. She would find out what she’d done wrong, she’d apologized for whatever it was and then they could back to hold hands and talk about prompt. Well, maybe not about that.

Things started going downhill with that plan at the end of the class, when Mr. Fitzgerald called her right as she was about walk out the door.

“It’ll just take a minute,” he promised.

Claire hesitated, but she ended up backing down into the classroom. Mr. Fitzgerald was kind of a goofy, chill guy who came very close to being her favorite teacher, with Meg being a close second. What could she say? Mr. Fitzgerald was never mad that she doodled on the edge of the pages of her notebook if she got bored.

“What is it?”

Mr. Fitzgerald pulled something from his desk and Claire realized right then she’d forgotten she’d asked him to check her portfolio. He was basically the only person she knew that could give her an informed opinion on the subject.

“I thought you might want this back,” he said, with a smile, as he handed it back to her.

“Thank you,” Claire said, mesmerized. She hadn’t expected him to have an answer so soon. “So, what did you think? Is it good enough for CalArts?”

Mr. Fitzgerald made a sound that sounded a bit like a laugh and walked around his desk to sit on it.

“I think it’s good enough for any art school you want to go to, Claire,” he said. “Any one of them would be lucky to have you as their student. You’re very talented.”

Claire wasn’t sure what that tingle inside of her gut came from. Sure, people complimented her on her drawings and paintings all the time and sometimes, it felt like she hadn’t really earned it. Oh, sure, the finished product looked great, but she had to spend hours on it to actually make it work. She struggled and wanted to throw her hands in the air in pure frustration more times than she was willing to admit. Sometimes she couldn’t help thinking that real artists didn’t have that problem, and that she wasn’t one. Not just yet.

But Mr. Fitzgerald's words were encouraging.

“You really think so?”

“I’m sure you’ll go far,” he said, nodding. “And I was glad to hear that you didn’t get in as much trouble as in previous years.”

Claire laughed that off, nervously. Teachers kept telling her how glad they were that she had learnt some self-control and she was keeping her nose clean. What they didn’t know was that, just as with drawing, it had been a concerted effort on her part. Kaia didn’t like it when she lost her temper.

That made her think about her girlfriend again and how she needed to fix things. Right now, in fact.
Before they went even sourer.

“Thank you, Mr. F. I really appreciate that,” she said, hoping that would end the conversation.

“All right, go get your lunch,” Mr. Fitzgerald told her, with a friendly gesture to dismissed her.

Claire made a quick stop at her locker to put her portfolio away and then practically ran to the cafeteria.

Kaia wasn’t there. No matter how much she looked around, she couldn’t catch a glimpse of her dark, curly hair anywhere. She did catch a glimpse of Jack, though.

“Hey, you’re late…”

“Have you seen Kaia?” Claire asked him before he could get another word in.

“Umh… I think I saw her going outside?” Jack frowned, as if he only now realized that was kind of strange behavior. “Is everything alright?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Claire said, turning on her heels.

It took her a moment to figure out where she was. The weather was finally nice enough to have lunch outside again and there were people hanging out in the field and the bleachers. The trees on the edge of it were showing the first new leaves of the year and the ground wasn’t frozen solid. Kaia was sitting underneath one of them, her journal open over her lap as she scribbled furiously on the pages.

Claire took a moment to wonder if it was the same one where they’d talked, really talked, for the first time ever, before she strode towards it and leaned on the trunk next to her.

“Hey.”

Kaia didn’t look up. So, Claire had definitely fucked up really bad.

“Are you going to tell me what I did wrong or am I gonna have to guess?”

That came out a lot more passive-aggressive that she’d intended, but it was too late to take it back. Kaia sighed and slammed her journal shut.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to fight about it. Let’s go have lunch.”

She stood up, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. Claire grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

“I don’t want to fight either, but I obviously did something that bothered you,” she said. “Can you please tell me what it is?”

Kaia avoided her gaze, looking down at her shoes and fidgeting with the helm of her shirt. In the end, she took a deep breath, but shook her head.

“It’s really stupid.”

“Tell me anyway,” Claire insisted.

Kaia bit her lips before turning the full effect of her gaze on Claire. It was disconcerting and more than a little upsetting to see exactly how mad she really was and how much she was holding back. She was always so calm and so sweet… Claire had never thought she’d see something this dark in
her eyes.

“Did you really mean that?” Kaia asked. “It’s high school, so it doesn’t matter?”

“Well… yeah,” Claire said, still confused as to why that was such a big deal.

Kaia turned her back on her and tried to walk away again.

“Kaia!” Claire called her, running up behind her. “Look, I agree with you and Alexis, but it’s not worth getting worked up over it. There are so many other things we could be spending our time on, like sending college applications letters and…”

“That’s exactly the problem!” Kaia exploded and stopped to confront Claire. “You’re already moving on from… all of this.” She gestured around to point at the school, and the field, and the people lounging and having lunch around. “It’s like you’re in such a rush to get out of here and…”

She stopped and closed her mouth shut. She was always better at writing her feelings than explaining them out loud, so Claire waited. However, after several seconds of tense silence, it was clear that Kaia wasn’t going to keep going, so Claire sighed.

“Can you blame me? This place kind of sucks.”

“Does it? All of it?”

“Yes!” Claire couldn’t believe that Kaia was really asking that. Had she not noticed the stares and the sneers and the whispers? Had she not noticed how Claire had to put on a tough front to keep everyone who would harm them or Jack away? “And the only way I can actually think of surviving it is by telling myself that all of this is temporary.”

“All of it?” Kaia repeated. “Are we temporary too?”

And with that, the conversation took on a whole new meaning. Claire closed her eyes for a moment, taking in the weight of everything Kaia was implying with that question.

“No,” she said, taking a step closer. “Of course we’re not.”

“You haven’t even asked me what I’m planning to do after graduation,” Kaia pointed out, coldly. “You’re always talking about CalArts and what you’re going to do once you get there and graduate and… it’s like… there’s no place for me in that plan.”

It was like having a blast from the past. Alexis had been standing there in front of her, asking the same questions and making the same assumptions that Claire just hadn’t cared enough about her, that she hadn’t taken their relationship as seriously. And Claire had felt the same sensation on her chest, that she was suddenly getting corralled, that they were asking her questions she had no answer to.

“Kaia, it’s not like that,” she tried to say. “Look, we’re young, we’re…”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re seventeen,” Kaia interrupted her. “But we’re not going to be seventeen forever, Claire. Graduation is approaching and we need to talk about these things. If we’re going to stay together, we need to make plans. And if we’re not… well, I need to know.”

Claire stared at her, baffled for a moment. She wasn’t sure how to respond to the notion that they wouldn’t be together in the future. She just knew the very idea made something deep inside her chest ached, and she didn’t like it. So like every time that something scared her, she got angry.
“If this bothered you so much, why didn’t you bring it up before?”

“I thought about it! Millions of times! But then your dad came around and you were upset and after that, you were preparing your portfolio and I didn’t want…” Kaia stopped to take a deep breath. “But I’m bringing it up now. I want to know what’s going to happen to us after school is over, after the summer, after you go to California. Do you want us to go on?”

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose. Those were too many questions and her mind was still racing from the entire situation.

“I think… we can’t talk about this here, Kaia.”

“Why not?”

“Because lunch time is almost over,” Claire pointed out.

It wasn’t just a convenient excuse to end the conversation. The people that having lunch on the field had picked up their stuff and headed back for the school’s building. Except for a few stragglers, they were practically alone by the tree line now. And though any other day Claire would have blown off classes to spend more time with Kaia without a second thought, right now she had the feeling it would be for the worse. She needed to calm down. She needed to think.

And she couldn’t do that with Kaia’s eyes boring into her like that. It was hard to even hold her gaze, but Claire managed until her girlfriend finally sighed, conceding her point.

“Fine. But we are gonna have to talk about this.”

“I never said we wouldn’t!”

She realized too late it had come out snappy and loud. Kaia stepped back, her eyes opening wide. Claire bit the inside of her cheek and wish that somebody would kick her.

Kaia recovered first.

“Okay. We’re gonna be late for class.”

She picked up her backpack and walked away at a brisk pace. Claire stayed behind, watching her dark curls bounce off her back intently.

She wished she could have something reassuring to say to her. Or positive. Or apologetic. Or anything.

But as the ache in her chest grew, she found that she had no idea what she was supposed to say.
The rest of the day was weird and tense.

Jack noticed right away that something was wrong with Claire.

“What is it? Is everything okay? Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m fine!” Claire snapped, which of course, only solidified the notion that she wasn’t fine, at all.

And since apparently they had this new policy of not letting up when something was bothering the other until they felt better, Jack wouldn’t stop asking as they crossed the parking lot after their last class.

“Did Mr. Fitzgerald say something bad about your portfolio?”

It was incredible. That had happened only a few hours ago and Claire had been so proud of herself for the glowing praise. It had lasted exactly the time it took for her to walk out of his classroom to go find Kaia outside.

And when she saw Kaia was hanging with Patience near their car, she figured she was about to get even more bad news. Usually, Kaia put her bike in the trunk of Claire and Jack’s car and let them drive her home. This time, she kept her hands firmly on the handlebar.

“Hey,” Kaia said when they approached her. “Uh… I’m riding home with Patience.”

Patience gave them a wave from where she was waiting and of course, Jack waved back smiling.

“Oh,” Claire muttered

What else could she say to that? Kaia and Patience had been friends since before they’d started dating and Claire definitely didn’t want to seem like she was a petty and jealous girlfriend. Even though the thing she wanted the most right then was to get Kaia on the car like every other day and pretend the fight they’d had during lunch hadn’t really happened, because they couldn’t talk about it while Jack was there acting as a buffer. She swallowed those feelings and said out loud:

“Alright. Text me when you get there.”

“Sure.”

Kaia hopped on her bike and Claire felt like this was the last chance she was going to get to say something to fix her mess.

“Maybe we can go out for a coffee tomorrow or… something. So we can… talk,” she ended, clumsily.

The way that Kaia looked at her made her think for a moment that maybe she had changed her mind as well about this whole “talking” business. But after a moment, she nodded.

“Okay. We’ll see.”

She rode away to join Patience and though Claire stayed where she was, she didn’t see Kaia look over her shoulder.
And just her luck, the one time she would’ve been fine with Jack being his usual, oblivious self, he decided to be observant.

“Did you guys fight?” he asked, with a frown.

“No.” Claire reached for the car’s handle. “Not exactly.”

“What happened, then?” Jack asked once they were inside.

The problem was, Claire realized, that Kaia was absolutely right. Graduation was looming closer each day (they were near the end of March already, and then it would be Claire and Jack’s birthday on April and then…) and it was absolutely fair that Kaia wanted to know what they were going to do when they left school.

But she hated to think about it. The image she had of the future was a blurry picture and she couldn’t make it come into focus. What were they going to do?

She looked at Jack while biting the inside of her cheek and then decided that since he wasn’t going to stop asking, she might as well tell him everything.

“I really don’t even know what our options are!” she said, with her hands tense over the wheel. “Like… does she expect us to keep a long distance relationship? Because, shit, Eve said we were going to do that and Magda also said that she was going to write and they both sort of failed to follow up on that, so I’m not entirely sure that’s the best method to keep the passion alive.”

“Maybe she wants you to go to California together.”

Claire hadn’t wanted to think about that option. She knew Kaia was looking into English BA programs and such and of course there were universities in California for that. Claire realized that she wasn’t sure Kaia had applied to any there and even if she did, would they be her first option?

“Would you… I mean, would you like that?” Jack asked.

His voice had dropped an octave, as if the question scared him every bit as much as it scared Claire. She kept her eyes on the road, not sure what to respond to that until they pulled up on their driveway.

“I… I don’t know,” Claire said.

“But you said you loved her.”

“Yeah. And I’m pretty sure it’s true.” She crossed her arms and stared at the ceiling, sighing. “But it’s… it’s different, Jack. We’re so young and I feel like we have no idea what’s going to happen, so making a compromise like that only for it to turn out badly, I…” She pinched the bridge of her nose. The very idea had made her eyes itch and her throat become close, but she tried to hold all of that back. “I don’t know if I could handle that.”

“How do you know it’s going to turn out badly?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Look at Castiel and our mom. She ended up marrying his brother and then dying.”

“No, that’s different. They were friends.”

Claire couldn’t argue with that. Castiel had always given them the version that he and Kelly had been very good friends and nothing more, and of course Jack believed it without question. She
couldn’t help suspecting, however, that that wasn’t the whole story. She couldn’t imagine being such “good friends” with anyone as to take up on the duty of raising their children if something happened to them and their spouse was a colossal prick. And also related to her.

Maybe theirs was too specific a case. But in any case…

“Yeah, doesn’t matter. I still have no idea what I’m going to tell Kaia.”

Jack remained silent for a very long time.

“I… I know this isn’t going to sound great coming from me,” he said, hesitant. “But if you don’t want to live with her in California or… maybe… you should tell her that.”

Claire glanced at him, and that was all it took to know that he knew exactly what that would bring upon. Telling Kaia she wasn’t sure their relationship would survive long distance or that she’d outright preferred it that they didn’t go to the same place together… it would mean the end for them.

And that was the ache in the chest that Claire couldn’t quite get rid of. The idea that she would lose Kaia because she wasn’t mature enough or sure of herself enough or just… she would never forgive herself.

Both alternatives terrified her equally. She grabbed unto the wheel and hit her head against it, because at that point she had no idea what she was going to do or say.

She must have looked miserable during dinner (true, she’d barely touched it and only answered with monosyllables whenever someone asked her anything), because as she was walking upstairs, Castiel came up to her to ask her what was wrong with her.

Well, actually he was much gentler than that. He asked her to come into his studio, take a seat on the couch where he sometimes slept on when he didn’t have the energy to drag himself to his room, and tell him if there was something bothering her.

“Did everything go fine with Mr. Fitzgerald and your portfolio?”

Claire almost wanted to laugh. Castiel and Jack were so alike sometimes it was hilarious. It was a little less hilarious that their minds have both gone to her portfolio, because that was related to CalArts and oh, God, Kaia was right. That was all she ever talked about.

But then, Castiel was older. He might have a different perspective on the whole issue. She was desperate and would lose absolutely nothing from letting him into the situation.

Castiel listened to her attentively while she explained, nodding along as if it was all very logical and expected. In the end, he opened one of his drawer and offered her half a bar of chocolate that he had lying around there for some reason. Claire took it, because she needed something to sweeten the bitterness inside.

“I don’t know what I’m going to tell her,” she said again. “What do you think I should tell her?”

“I think… we all have blind spots, Claire.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“You’ve known what you were going to do with your life for a while now,” Castiel explained to her. “Kaia appeared in your blind spot. You couldn’t have known she’d become so important to you.”

That disarmed her. That was exactly what’d happened. She couldn’t have known she’d fall like a rock for her, that the idea of letting go of her would end this badly.

“But what should I do?” she insisted, because that wasn’t the answer she was looking for.

And then Castiel hit her with exactly what she feared the most:

“I can’t tell you that.”

Of course. That was the disadvantage of being oh, so mature and responsible. People expected her to just figure out things for herself.

“What I can tell you is that you have two options,” Castiel continued. “You either go on the way you had already planned… or you make a little adjustment to fit Kaia in as well. Which is what she’s asking you to do.”

“You don’t think I’m too young to make a decision like that?”

“If you’re old enough to make a decision about your future professional life, you’re likely old enough to decide on your love life as well.”

Claire watched him closely.

“You ended up throwing away the career you chose at eighteen and doing something completely different.”

“Yes,” Castiel affirmed. “Isn’t it funny how things turn out sometimes?”

‘Funny’ wasn’t the word Claire would’ve chosen.

“You know, that’s not actually too reassuring.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Castiel offered her an apologetic smile and more chocolate. “You’re going to have to make this decision yourself.”

Claire already knew that, but she was simply too exhausted to sass Castiel over telling it to her. She simply grabbed the rest of the chocolate and headed for her room. She flopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling before turning to sink her face in her pillow.

The smell of Kaia’s hair had remained there for days after the night she slept there and Claire had been hesitant when changing the pillowcases because she didn’t want to lose it. She’d done so in the end, but she still could conjure up the scent if she closed her eyes and concentrated. It had been something flowery and sweet, the type of perfume that Claire would’ve found cloying, but that she’d adored to smell when she’d woken up that morning to Kaia’s peaceful sleepy face…

Her cellphone ringing interrupted her memory. Groaning, she rolled over and caught her cellphone. The number on the screen was unknown. She let it go to voice mail, because why the hell was someone she didn’t know calling her?

She had just sat up to take another bite of chocolate when her phone began ringing again, with the same number flashing. Claire huffed and figure to tell the caller to fuck off real quick.

“Who is this?” she asked before the other person could say a word.
“Hello, Claire,” Luc said on the other end.

Claire ended the call. She opened the display menu to block the number, but she didn’t quite get to do it before he called again. The anger flared up in her stomach and before she knew it, she had picked up again.

“Don’t hang up!” Luc warned her.

“How did you get my number?” Claire demanded to know.

“I need to talk to you about something,” Luc said, avoiding the question. “Would you listen to me for five minutes?”

Claire wasn’t interested in what he had to say, not even a little bit, but she decided to treat this as the marketing call she thought it was in the beginning: she’d listened to what the seller had to say and then she’d politely decline their offer. She didn’t want to give him any reason to complain about her to Aunt Amara.

“You have three minutes.”

“Very well,” Luc accepted. “I think you should break up with your girlfriend.”

The astonishment that invaded Claire froze her fury, at least for a few seconds.

“What?”

“You should never go to college with a relationship, Claire. You’re starting a new stage of your life and you need to be free to do as you please. You cannot do that if you’re holding on to your high school sweetheart. I know it might seem like the end of the world if you end things with her, but you’re young. You need to be free to meet new people.”

The only reason Claire let it go on for so long was because she was too stunned to say anything at first and then too livid.

“That’s what you think, huh?”

“I’m just pointing out what your options are…”

Claire ended the call and blocked the number before Luc had the chance to call her again. Her face was burning and she was certain that if she opened her mouth right then, she was going to start screaming. So instead she forced herself to breathe deeply for a while before she stood up and walked down the hallway to knock on Jack’s door.

“Did you need anything?” Jack asked.

Claire watched his face very closely. He seemed only mildly surprised that she’d gone to talk to him, not avoiding her gaze or cowering in fear. So he either thought he’d done nothing wrong or he just didn’t remember. So Claire spoke as calmly as she could:

“If you tell Luc anything about my life again, I will strangle you.”

That got a little bit of an effect. Jack shrunk and stepped back.

“Claire, I didn’t mean to… I was just chatting with him and I mentioned you were very upset about Kaia…”
“Don’t… don’t ever talk to him about me again,” Claire said. She was only half-aware that she had her lips peeled back in a snarl. “Am I clear, Jack?”

Jack lowered his eyes and swallowed.

“Yes. Very clear.”

“Good.”

She had nothing left to tell him. She didn’t want to be angry with Jack right now, but she was shaking. So she turned her back on him and ignored him when she called her again.

But strangely, this made things a little clearer for her: if Luc thought she should break up with Kaia, then she needed to do the exact opposite of that.

They decided to meet up in Patience’s grandma’s coffee shop. Kaia had insisted that they should go there separately, which didn’t seem like a great sign for Claire, because it meant that Kaia was preparing for the eventuality that she would have to leave on her own. But Claire tried to remain optimistic. It couldn’t be so bad, could it? They were still talking. As long as they could talk about these issues, Claire was certain they would find a solution.

Her certainty wavered as she waited silently in the table. Kaia was late. Would she come at all? Of course she would. This relationship was as important to her as it was to Claire and she wouldn’t pass up the chance to fix what was wrong between them.

By the time Kaia did show up, however, Claire was more than a bit nervous, practically jumping for Kaia to see her. Kaia smiled at her, tight-lipped and seemingly more than a bit nervous, but she allowed her to give her a kiss and move the chair for her.

“Sorry about the delay. The bus was running late.”

“No worries,” Claire assured her. “It’s fine.”

They made a pause to order their drinks and then looked at each other in silence. Kaia lowered her gaze and licked her lips, as if she was trying to think of something to say. Claire decided it was time to grab the bull by the horns.

“I wanted to tell you…”

“I think we should…” Kaia started at the same time. She smiled and shook her head. She was so cute when she did that Claire sometimes found it hard to breathe. How the hell did she ever think she’d be able to let go of her. “You go first.”

“Alright.” Claire took a deep breath. “I don’t want to end things with you, Kaia. You’re more important to me than I ever thought you’d be.”

That seemed like a good start. Claire didn’t want to say the words, not right now when there was so much hanging in the balance, because she didn’t want it to sound like she was hoping her feelings would be a good enough reason for Kaia to stay. That wouldn’t be fair.

“I don’t want to end things either,” Kaia said, softly. “So, what are we going to do?”
Claire knew this was the part that Kaia wasn’t going to like, but she couldn’t lie to her. That wouldn’t have been fair either.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be thinking about those things right now. We’re still months away and I don’t think perhaps if we left good enough alone…”

She couldn’t go on, because the expression on Kaia’s face was enough to make her realize she was saying precisely the wrong thing.

The waiter came back, placed their mugs in front of them and left a pregnant pause behind him.

“So what you’re saying is, you don’t know what you want to do,” Kaia muttered in the end.

“Yes, exactly!” Claire said, relieved that she was getting it. “I need more time to figure everything out, Kaia. But right now, what we have right now…” She stretched her hand and placed it on top of Kaia’s. “Well, we’ll just have to see. Isn’t it enough?”

Kaia looked up very slowly. She pulled her hand away. Her eyes had never been so dimmed.

“No. It isn’t enough.”

The words were like ice shards directly to Claire’s heart.

“You are… wonderful,” Kaia continued. “And talented and strong in a way that I wish I could be. I always feel safe when I’m with you. And these past few months… I never thought I could have that. I never thought I could have a girlfriend that held my hand and went on dates with me and was just… so normal.”

Because her life had been so convoluted and marked by trauma. Because she’d never stayed long enough anywhere to meet someone and date them. Claire had never considered just how much it’d meant to Kaia things that she’d taken for granted about a relationship. She opened her mouth, but Kaia lifted up a finger to indicate she wasn’t done talking.

“And that’s exactly why this ‘we’ll see’ answer you’re giving me isn’t enough. Because I want what comes after too. I don’t want to just ‘see’. I’m sure now and if you’re not…”

Her voice trailed off. Claire realized she was waiting for an answer, but she couldn’t give her one.

She wasn’t sure she could say anything without bursting into tears.
Chapter 45

There suddenly seemed to be a gloomy, dark cloud hanging around in the house and Jack wasn’t sure what to do about it. In fact, every single thing he tried to do seem to backfire somehow.

Claire barely left her room. She roamed around the school halls and back to the house in complete silence and no matter how much Jack to try to get her to talk about it or how much he tried to cheer her up, it simply didn’t seem to be working.

He’d found about her fight with Kaia through Kaia herself, when he’d casually asked her if she’d be having lunch with them that day and she’d slowly shook her head.

“I don’t think Claire wants to see me right now,” she’d said, with a sad expression upon her face.

“Why not? What happened?”

Kaia bit her lips. “I think you should ask her that.”

It was easier said than done. Claire was talking to him normally, informing him of the chores they needed to do or asking him to pass him the salt, things like that. Whenever Jack tried to have a serious conversation with her, however, or ask her about Kaia, Claire would just… refuse to do that.

“Claire, please, please, won’t you talk to me?”

Claire simply glared at him and proceeded to walk past him without saying a word to him. If they were at home, she would close her room’s door behind her and she had the presence of mind to lock it so Jack couldn’t barge into her like she had done to him before. He tried talking to her during their car rides to and from the school, but she’d simply turn the music up way too loud for them to actually have a conversation.

“I’m sorry, okay? I promise I won’t tell anything to our dad. Please, I just want to know how I can help,” Jack insisted.

“You can’t,” she said darkly, right before she slammed the door in his face once again.

He didn’t know anything about the details of the fight, though Patience provided him with some over the days.

“Look, Kaia is my best friend and I don’t know if it’s right that I’m telling you any of this,” she said before she disclosed anything.

“Why not?”

“It’s the rules of a break up,” Patience explained. “Like, you and I can still be friends, but if it comes to that, you’re taking Claire’s side and I’m taking Kaia’s.”

“Who came up with those rules?” Jack asked, frowning.

Patience shrugged, once again leaving Jack feeling like the rest of the world had received some sort of manual about interpersonal relationships that he’d failed to read.

“Is that going to apply to everybody?” Jack asked, as Patience opened the door to Miss Masters’ classroom.
They were the first ones to arrive to the Inksters’ club. Despite everything that had happened with Ben, Jack still felt like nothing had changed inside of that club, like they were all still friends talking and reading their work and having fun. Except that he was supposed to be working on a piece with Claire that month and they hadn’t. And now he also had to think about the possibility of everyone taking sides if Kaia and Claire broke up.

Patience must have read the concern in his face, because she smiled at him and patted him in the shoulder.

“Not necessarily. I mean, they had a fight and they aren’t talking right now. It doesn’t mean it’s really over. Well, at least Kaia doesn’t think it is.”

“She doesn’t?”

“She’s waiting for Claire to get her head out of her ass,” Patience said. She then closed her eyes and tightened her lips, as if she’d said something she shouldn’t have. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

Jack wondered if there was some kind of ethical problem if he let Claire know what Patience had told him. He usually would ask Ben about it, but they despite them being in talking terms, they still weren’t… talking. Not like before, in any case.

He also wondered if he could talk to Mr. Winchester about it, but in the end he desisted because he didn’t want to bother him with something that seemed so trivial. Mr. Winchester was always ready to help him figure out big issues about his life, like his relationship with Luc and his college choice… and it was really, really easier to try to get Claire to talk to him than to come to Mr. Winchester and confess he wasn’t dealing with the things he should be dealing with.

So in the end, despite not really wanting to, he found himself knocking on Castiel’s door.

It felt like the last time he’d really seen him had been days before when he’d found Castiel’s phone inside of the fridge and he’d gone to give it back to him.

“Did you forget it in there? What happened?”

Castiel had looked at the phone with a defeated expression, as if he’d hoped never to see the thing again.

“Rachel keeps calling. I told her it was almost done and now she wants to know when it’ll be done-done.”

Sometimes it was hard to believe that man worked with words for a living, but that wasn’t what Jack had registered from that conversation.

“It’s almost done?” he’d asked, his eyes growing wide. “Well, how long does it have left? Do you think it will be ready before our birthday…?”

“Yes. No.” Castiel had pinched the bridge of his nose. “I really don’t know. I’ll try to have it ready by then, but I can’t be sure.”

“Okay!” Jack almost jumped. “What do you need me to do? How can I help you get it ready?”

“I just… I just need some peace and quiet,” Castiel had said. “Just that. If your dad or Aunt Amara or Rachel calls… just take the call for me.”

“Of course!” Jack had said, nodding vigorously. “I’ll make sure that no one bothers you! You just
have to focus on writing and editing and I’ll take care of everything!”

He’d turned around to go back to his room when Castiel had called him back again.

“Change my mind,” he’d said, taking the phone away from Jack. “I’ll hold on to that.”

Since then, Jack had tiptoed around the house, making sure to solve all the chores, doing the groceries and cooking dinner… which he had to do by himself, because Claire’s flunk meant she wasn’t in the mood to help him. If it was up to Jack, he wouldn’t have gone to Castiel. He really, really wanted him to finish the book. He had the feeling that as soon as the book was done, his own bad mood about everything would just vanish in thin air. He needed that last adventure of Agatha and Jasper to realize that it was the end of an era for him, and that meant not interrupting Castiel in any way whatsoever.

But he really had no idea what else to do. Claire just seemed too sad and she was refusing to talk to him because he had made the terrible mistake of telling Luc about her. He needed Castiel’s advice right away.

He knocked on the door and waited several seconds. If Claire had been there with him, she would’ve made a joke about Castiel dying on top of his desk and… what if she was right? What if Jack should have checked on him sooner? Should he have…?

He forced himself to take a deep breath and knocked again. This time he was rewarded with a groaning “Coming, coming…” He still had to wait a while until the door swung open.

Castiel stepped outside, blinking into the light as if he’d just been rudely awakened from a nap. He was wearing a shirt with coffee stains and his beard was thicker than Jack probably ever seen it, as if he hadn’t shaved himself since the last time Jack had seen him on Thursday.

“Jack?” he asked. He rubbed his face and shook his head like a dog. “What time… what day is it?” His blue eyes, surrounded by deep, violet circles, opened wide. “It’s not Wednesday, is it?”

“No.” Jack chuckled but he stopped when he realized Castiel was asking that seriously. “No, it’s… Saturday.”

“Oh. That’s good, then.” Castiel yawned. “I haven’t really… slept. Uh… is there anything you needed?”

Jack opened his mouth, took another look at Castiel’s exhausted expression and… decided to lie through his teeth.

“No. Everything’s… everything’s fine. Just wanted to check up on you. Do you want a coffee or something?”

“Oh, yes. Coffee. That’d be grand.” Castiel scratched his eye. “If you’d be so kind to also get me something to eat? Nothing fancy. Scrambled eggs or a sandwich…”

“It’s… it’s almost three o’clock in the afternoon,” Jack pointed out.

“Right. Have you and Claire eaten?”

“Yes, we have. Don’t worry about us.”

He was only half-lying this time. He had eaten, but he wasn’t sure what Claire had done. He wasn’t sure if she’d even come out of her room that particular day.
“Very well. And I’m… I’m really sorry about…” He gestured at himself.

“Oh, no! You don’t have to apologize. You’re doing something important. We understand.”

Castiel sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I certainly hope it’s important.”

“Why would you say that?” Jack asked. “Of course it is. Thousands of kids have grown up with these books, they look up to Agatha and Jasper. That’s very important.”

Castiel stared at him for a second before giving him a weary smile and ruffling his hair like he did when Jack was a kid.

“Thank you, Jack. You’re a good boy. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Jack avoided his gaze. And to think he had been there to bother him about how he didn’t know how to deal with Claire.

“Well, luckily, you’ll never have to find out!” Jack told him, trying to sound cheerful. “I’ll go make you that coffee now.”

“Thank you.”

Jack had never really got the hang of the coffee maker. He didn’t use it all that often and he preferred instant coffee with a lot of milk and cream. So it took him a while staring at the buttons to make sure he was pressing the right ones.

Luckily for him, the sound of someone using the coffee maker incompetently was enough to draw Claire out of her room. She was still wearing her pajamas, she’d tied her long blonde hair in a bun behind her head and she wasn’t wearing an ounce of make-up, which made her seem strangely pale and haggard.

“What are you doing?” she asked, eyeing him as she went straight to rummage the fridge.

“Castiel asked me to get him coffee. Do you want some?”

“No. Your coffee sucks.”

She took out the gallon of orange juice and drank directly from the lid. Jack sighed deeply and resisted the urge to repeatedly bang his head against the kitchen’s deck out of frustration.

“Claire, please, just talk to me!” he begged. “I know you’re not feeling well because of this entire business with Kaia and I want to help. I really do.”

“Do we have cookies?” Claire asked, already starting to ransack the cupboards.

“Claire…”

Claire stopped searching and sighed, resigning to the fact that Jack wasn’t going to give up on this issue.

“You can’t help, because nobody can,” she told him, point blank. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and… Kaia is right. I should know by now if I want this keep going past our graduation. And she deserves someone who is sure she wants to be with her.” She sighed. “I hate that I’m not that person, but what can I really do?”
That was the longest sentence Jack had heard her utter in several days and on one hand, it was a relief. On the other, he didn’t really like hearing that he was unable to help at all.

“You could… maybe become that person?” he suggested.

Claire let out snicker and finally found the unopened package of cookies she had been searching for.

“People don’t change, Jack.”

Jack supposed he shouldn't be surprised by the fact that Claire's inflexible beliefs applied to herself as well.

“Of course they do!” he insisted. “If they really want to.”

Claire ripped the package open and picked a cookie. She offered it to him with a sad smile.

“You keep that optimism and let me know how far you go.”

Jack took the cookie and watched as she headed for the stairs once again.

“Claire,” he called. “Maybe when you’re feeling a little better we can… maybe work on the thing for the Inksters?”

Claire blinked at him as if she had no clue what he was talking about.

“Oh, shit,” she muttered in the end. “Was that this month?”

“Umh… yeah. That was this month. And since the month ends next week…”

Claire groaned and clutched the cookies closer to her.

“Maybe we can ask Meg and Cas to give us an extension?”

Jack wanted to tell her that maybe being in her room binge-eating cookies and being sad wasn’t the best thing. He wanted to insist on trying to get her to open up and talk, he wanted to be as forceful as she had been with him when he’d refused to talk about those issues. But he didn’t know how to go about that without completely pushing her away, so he simply smiled and said:

“Yes. I’m sure they’ll have no problem with that.”

“Right. Good talk,” she added, before turning her back on him and heading back upstairs.

Jack stood around in the kitchen, waiting for the coffee to be ready. He really was at lost for what to do anymore.

His cellphone chimed with a new text message.

It was Luc. Maybe he wanted to keep his promise that he was going to stick around and be more communicative, he texted him almost every day, telling him about the work he was doing from the hotel and how he was talking to Aunt Amara (she still hadn’t agreed to come for their birthday, alleging she didn’t know if she was going to be free around that time, but Luc was trying to convince her anyway). He hadn’t come and see them again, because, as he put it, he didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.

But he was talking to Jack. Probably more than he’d had in years.
>How is everything?

Jack thought about it very carefully before answering. Claire had been really upset when he’d told Luc about Kaia and he didn’t want to make the same mistake twice. So, instead of telling her about Claire, he did something he rarely did with anyone other than, perhaps, Mr. Winchesters. He told him the truth about how he was feeling.

>I’m a little bit lonely. Uncle Cas and Claire are occupied.

>Well, we need to solve that then, Luc answered. I’m taking you out for dinner.

>You don’t have to do that.

>I want to do that. It’s no trouble.

Jack looked at the message for a very long time and in the end, he figured he really had nothing to lose.

>Okay. Let me ask Uncle Cas.

>Why? I’m your dad and I’m telling you we’re going out for dinner. Besides, it’s not a school night.

That wasn’t an invalid point.

>Alright. Then I’ll just tell him that I’m going out with you.

>No, don’t disturb him if he’s too busy. I’ll tell him myself when I pick you up. I’m sure he won’t be opposed to that.

Jack wasn’t too sure Castiel would appreciate being ambushed like that. He’d warn him about Luc coming, he decided, and then let the two sort things out.

>Ok. Should I tell Claire?

>Do you really think she’ll want to come along?

Also a very valid point.

Luc told him he’d picking him out at seven, so that gave Jack plenty of time to take a bath and get dressed.

He poured the coffee in Castiel’s favorite mug and headed for his studio. He didn’t have to knock on the door this time, because it was ajar, which was odd.

“Uncle Cas?” he called, stepping inside.

The only answer he got was a loud, deep snore. Castiel had fallen asleep in his couch, with a pencil in one hand and some pages sprawled all over his chest and the floor. He looked positively exhausted, so as tempted as Jack was to pick up the pages and give them a quick read, he resisted the urge in order not to wake up Castiel. He gently placed the mug on the desk next to the computer and tiptoed outside.

Well… maybe he shouldn’t even tell Castiel that Luc was coming. Like their father had said, if Castiel was so busy, perhaps it was better not to disturb him.
Chapter 46

Claire ran out of cookies and excuses not to come out of her room around seven thirty. She’d been trying to work a riff on her guitar over and over, but she just couldn’t get it quite right. She’d also carpeted her floor with discarded drawings that she’d started only to tear out in frustration. She’d started writing a story and then crossed out all the words, over and over until that page in her notebook was nothing but a big blob of spilled ink.

She simply couldn’t focus on anything.

Usually putting on loud music and signing at the top of her lungs would help, but she couldn’t do that either. All the Charvelle songs reminded her of their Valentine’s Day date how bright Kaia’s eyes had seemed under the light reflectors and how soft her skin had been underneath Claire’s fingertips. And she couldn’t listen to any other song because they all reminded her of another Charvelle song and well, it was just a vicious circle.

She half-suspected the songs had nothing to do with it. She was just too agitated and sad to get Kaia out of her head.

And it wasn’t fair. Was she the only one who was going out of her mind? She hated school, but she’d rather be there right now, because at least she could catch a glimpse of Kaia walking down the hallway or imagine her in the library reading all her favorite books. There, at home, all she could do was climb the walls and obsessively refresh all of Kaia’s social media sites.

She hadn’t posted anything since the day they’d “talked” at the coffee shop. So perhaps she was just as restless as Claire, but she couldn’t imagine how so. Kaia was probably relieved that she’d got rid of such an indecisive, temperamental, selfish girlfriend…

Someone rang the bell downstairs.

Claire popped her head up. Who could it be? Well, it didn’t matter. She turned around on the bed and prepared to brood for another while before looking out to see what was for dinner… and the doorbell rang again. Was nobody going to get that?

Huffing, Claire opened her door and looked outside. Castiel’s studio was closed and she could hear the faint running of the shower coming from the bathroom, which meant Jack was in no condition to open the door either. She figured the person at the other side would be alarmed to see her in her flip flops and dressing gown, but that was what they were going to get.

“We don’t want any cookies and we don’t really care for the Lord…” she started saying as she pulled the door open, but the words got stuck in her throat when she saw who was on the other side.

“Hello, Claire,” Luc greeted her with a smile.

Claire slammed the door in his face and ignored the subsequent rings.

“Who is it?” Castiel asked, appearing in his studio door.

“A snake oil salesman. Ignore it and he’ll go away.”

Of course he didn’t do that. Despite the fact that he was wearing sweatpants, a stained shirt and no shoes, he walked down and opened the door as well. His appearance was a sharp contrast with Luc’s suit and tie, as if he was there to talk to one of his clients or give a work presentation.
Luc raised an eyebrow and stared at the sorry duo the two made.

“Well, you don’t seem very preoccupied,” he commented.

“Luc.” Castiel’s tone of voice was icy. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to pick up Jack. We’re going out for dinner.”

Claire let out a sneer. She couldn’t really help it. He was dressed like that to take his own son out for dinner? And since when was he all about taking his offspring for dinner in the first place?

Luc turned to her with a sharp smile.

“We would have invited you, Claire, if we thought you’d agree.”

“Yeah, no. Hard pass.”

“Which is why we didn’t invite you.” Luc shrugged.

Claire had to give him this: he had turned being a passive-aggressive little shit down into an art. She also didn’t like the way he said “we” as if this hadn’t been his idea, but something he’d shared with Jack, which was terrible and disturbing to even think about.

“Jack didn’t mention anything about you taking him out for dinner,” Castiel protested.

“No? It must have slipped his mind.” Luc stepped into the house uninvited and looked around. “Where is he, anyway?”

He didn’t wait for Castiel to give him an answer: he simply strutted inside and climbed the stairs as if he owned the place.

“Hey!” Claire shouted, indignant. “Are you just going to let him wander in here like that?”

Castiel blinked and finally reacted enough to go after his brother.

“Luc, please. Won’t you rather wait downstairs?” he said. “I’ll get Jack.”

That also wasn’t ideal, because that meant that Claire had to stick around and make sure Luc didn’t steal anything from the living room. Also, why the hell had Jack agreed to go out for dinner with him? Worse still, had it been Jack’s idea?

Luc stood around, his hands in his jacket pocket, looking every bit like the successful businessman he liked to think he was. The fucker.

“How are you feeling, Claire?” he asked.

“What’s it to you?” Claire replied, crossing her arms over chest. She would’ve turned around and sat down on the couch and pointedly turn on the TV to show Luc just how little she cared about his presence there, but that would’ve meant turning his back on him for a handful of seconds.

“You’re my daughter,” Luc pointed out.

“Funny. I don’t seem to remember you ever doing anything father-like.”

“Well, as I remembered it, you requested to take our family’s last name during the custody hearings.”
In retrospect, that had been a mistake. Claire would’ve been better off sticking with their mother’s surname. Being a nuance to the illustrious Novaks hadn’t really been worth it.

“Well, it’s not too late to change my mind,” Claire replied. “Maybe when I get a wife I’ll take her name instead.”

Instead of acting scandalized like Amara had, Luc simply smiled at her.

“That’s your prerogative, of course.”

Claire wished she could come up with something hurtful to say. But then again, she wasn’t sure Luc cared enough about her that anything she said would be hurtful for him. So instead she bit the inside of her cheek and refused to look at him for the few second sit took to Castiel and Jack to come down.

“Hello, dad!” Jack greeted him, with the same niceness as usual.

“Are you ready to go, boy?”

Claire stared at Castiel, waiting for him to say something, anything, to protest over the fact that Jack was walking out the door with Luc.

“Bye, guys!” Jack said, waving at them.

“Don’t wait up for us,” Luc added and closed the door behind them before anyone could protest.

Claire ran towards the window and moved the curtain aside to peek as Jack got into Luc’s luxurious rented car.

“Are you crazy?” she asked, turning to Castiel. “Why did you let him go?”

“What exactly did you intend me to do, Claire?” Castiel asked.

He sounded tired and Claire got it, she really did: he’d been working non-stop to get the final draft ready and whatnot, but she couldn’t believe that his exhaustion was so great he wouldn’t see how Jack spending time with Luc was a terrible idea. Everything regarding Luc was a terrible idea.

“I don’t know! You could have told him he was grounded! You could have told him he didn’t have your permission to go!”

“And what good would that be?” Castiel shot back. “He is your father.”

He said with such terrible defeat in his voice that Claire suddenly understood that he wasn’t simply tired from working on the manuscript. No, this was much worse, she realized as she watched him walk upstairs with his shoulders slumped and his head bowed down.

She had been so busy throwing herself a pity party she hadn’t stopped to consider for a second how all this business with Luc would be affecting Castiel. He’d taken Kelly away and now he was trying to take Jack and Castiel must have felt like there was nothing he could do. How could anyone fight against a summer storm?

After a few seconds of debating with herself, Claire ran upstairs.

“Hey, Cas!” she called just as he was about to disappear inside his studio again.

He stopped to look at her and Claire took a deep breath as she approach him.
“Okay, I’m only going to say this once, so like… pay attention,” she warned him. “Luc never hunged my drawings on the fridge, even the ugly ones. He wasn’t here when we were sick or when we needed a ride somewhere. He didn’t get the numbers from all our friend’s moms or went to all the PT meetings, which I imagine are very lame. He didn’t hug me and told me he loved me no matter what when I came out. He literally showed up once every year or so to take us out for ice cream and ignored us the rest of the time.”

She made a pause to take in a breath. Castiel was staring at her with eyes wide open, and she really needed to finish this before it became even cornier than it already was.

“So maybe this whole ‘I want to be better’ shtick is genuine, but it doesn’t really make a difference this late in the game. He wasn’t there when it mattered. You were.” She took a step towards him, because it was of upmost importance that he learned this. “That makes you a thousand times the father he ever was. I know that. Jack knows that. And he’ll remember it in the end.”

Castiel licked his lips. His blue eyes were shiny with unshed tears.

“Thank you,” he muttered. “Can I…?”

Claire sighed deeply. Why was everybody always so hanged up on hugs and stuff like that?

“Fine.” She opened her arms. “You have one minute.”

Castiel held her tight and made the most of it. Claire was happy that at least he couldn’t see her face as she pulled herself together again.

Luc drove in a careless way that reminded Jack of whenever Claire was angry and chose to disregard all sort of safety rules, like he couldn’t wait an extra second for the light to change from yellow to green or he stubbornly refused to put on his seat belt no matter how much the light in his dashboard indicated him to do so. Except Luc didn’t seem angry at all. In fact, he was very calm and almost happy, humming to himself as the air coming in through the window messed up his hair.

“Are you enjoying this, boy?” he asked after a while.

Jack smiled, nervously, because while it was nice to be out on the road, it was nice to be out of the house after Claire and Cas had been so indifferent towards him… he still wasn’t sure how he felt about being alone with Luc like this.

“Where are we going, exactly?” he asked him. “The same restaurant as before, where you and mom had your first date?”

“What?” Luc asked, as if he couldn’t remember what Jack was talking about, and then laughed. “Oh, no. No, no. We’re going somewhere different.”

“Where?” Jack asked as he eyed a sign telling him they were going into the highway. “We’re going to the city?”

“Of course. The best restaurants are there.”

“But…” Jack swallowed. “I don’t think Cas would like us being out here this late.”
Luc’s hands tensed around the wheel.

“Well, he let you come, didn’t he?” he pointed out. “And besides, you’re with me. Don’t you trust me?”

That was a loaded question that Jack decided not to answer for the sake of politeness. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Luc, exactly… he just wasn’t sure how this night was going to end for him. It could go very well or it could go very badly and he literally had no way of knowing which.

“So… what do you want to eat?” he asked instead.

“Well…” Luc started, but then he stopped and shook his head. “No. You decide.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Anywhere you want. My treat.”

Jack smiled and thought about it for a second.

“Can we go have burgers?”

Luc glanced at him for a second, as if that was the last thing he’d expected him to say.

“Burgers,” he repeated in the end. “I… I don’t see why not. Take out your cellphone and see if there’s somewhere nice nearby.”

“Okay!”

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up to a mom and pops restaurant that was technically still inside the boundaries of the town, so it’d be much easier to turn back once they were done eating. Jack didn’t really like big burger chains and this was a place he’d never been to. The only problem was that Luc seemed completely out of place with his sharp business suit and more than a little uncomfortable in the small booth they got to the side.

“Well, this is…” he started saying when the waiter approached them.

“Welcome to Dean and Benny’s Double Burger, can I…? Oh.”

Jack looked up at him, blinking in surprise.

“Ben?”

Ben stared back, his pen suspended over his notepad as if he had forgotten what he was doing with it.

“H-hi, Jack,” he muttered, awkwardly. “Uhm…”

“I didn’t know you worked here!”

“Yeah, it’s my step-dad’s place. Him and his partner, they’re… I’m sorry.” He stopped and shook his head. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

Luc cleared his throat and Jack suddenly remember he wasn’t the only one in the table.

“Ben, you remember my dad?”
He remembered too late the circumstances under which Ben had met Luc had been less than ideal, with Claire outright refusing in front of everyone to go out to dinner with him. Which had been rude and more than a little uncomfortable.

Ben handled this second encounter with grace, however.

“Right. Nice seeing you again, Mr. Novak.”

“Back at you,” Luc said, grabbing the menu. “So, what’s good here?”

Ben recommended they had a double cheeseburger with extra bacon, so they each ordered one of those. Luc followed Ben with his eyes as he headed to the back.

“Friend of yours?” he asked Jack.

“Y-yeah,” Jack stammered, because the truth was a little more complicated to explain. “I, uh… I think so.”

“You think so?” Luc arched up an eyebrow. Jack swallowed, as if he had done something wrong, but Luc simply sighed. “Well, maybe you should keep it that way. I have nothing against your sister, but… it just seemed to be very complicated for her, from what you’ve told me.”

It took Jack a second to realize what Luc was asking him.

“Oh, no. No, it’s not like that. I’m asexual.”

He thought nothing of saying it out loud. He’d done so plenty of times that since Claire had lent him the articles about it and he’d discovered that most of them make sense for him. But Luc frowned at him as if he’d just pronounced a word in a strange language.

“What?”

“It means I don’t experience sexual attraction,” Jack explained. “I might also be aromantic. I don’t really know yet.”

Luc continued staring at him until Ben came back with their burgers and promptly left reminding them to call him if they needed anything else.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll grow out of it eventually,” Luc said and with a gesture of his hand, he changed the topic before Jack could explain that wasn’t exactly how asexuality worked. “Can I ask you something, though? We could have gone to the city, had sushi or Indian food or the finest cuisine in the state if you wanted. Why burgers?”

Jack looked at the double monstrosity in front of him and wondered how to explain it best.

“Umh… well, sometimes Uncle Cas is too busy to cook or we want to just have a lazy night in front of the TV, and we always order pizza because we can each choose what toppings to put on ours. Well, except Claire won’t let me order pineapple on mine anymore. She feels very strongly about that.” He stopped, tilting his head at the burger. “And pizza is awesome. I like pizza. Sometimes I want burgers, though, but I don’t want to say it because we always have pizza and Claire and Cas like it very much and I don’t know how they’d feel about having burgers instead just because I want them.” He stopped, realizing he was rambling. “Does that make sense?”

Luc nodded slowly.
“It makes perfect sense,” he assured Jack. “See, Jack, our father… and when he died, our older brother, Michael, they were very controlling of everyone in the family. They wanted things done a certain way, wanted us to follow a certain path, and we couldn’t deviate from that lest we’d be ostracize from the family. Maybe that is why I was in such a rush to marry your mother. I knew they disapproved of her.”

“They didn’t like our mom?” Jack frowned, with the burger halfway to his mouth. Castiel had never mentioned anything of the sort. “Why not?”

“Well, they expected me… all of us, really, to marry someone of certain standing. Kelly was a small town girl, an artist, a dreamer, really. Don’t get me wrong, I was very lucky she chose me over Castiel…”

“What?”

“Oh.” Luc took a sip from his glass of soda. “I… that’s probably not for me to tell. Castiel and Kelly… well, they were very good friends, but I always wondered if part of the reason Castiel decided to keep me away from you two was because I took Kelly away from him, in a sense.”

Jack slowly lowered his burger. Suddenly, his stomach had become a knot and he wasn’t sure that he could keep eating anymore.

“Uncle Cas would never do something like that,” he said, frowning.

“Of course. I didn’t mean to say that,” Luc replied, shaking his head. “Just… let’s not talk about the past, alright? Let’s talk about the future. What are you planning to do about it?”

“Oh.” Jack scratched his arms, because that conversation wasn’t really any less awkward for him. “I… I don’t know. I applied to the University of California…”

“So you can be near Claire.”

“Yes, exactly. And it has some very interesting programs. I’ve been reading about them online…”

“But what are you planning to study?”

Jack licked his lips.

“Well, I…”

“And do you plan to apply somewhere more… prestigious?” Luc continued asking. “Like an Ivy League college, perhaps? You’re a very smart boy and I’m sure your Aunt Amara would be very proud of you if you were accepted to a place like Harvard or Dartmouth.”

“I’ve… thought of applying to Stanford,” Jack said, nervously. “That’s… that’s where Mr. Winchester studied.”

“Mr. Winchester?”

“The school counselor.” Jack took a bite of his burger and chewed very slowly. “I think I’d like to be a school counselor, too. I’d get to help a lot of people.”

It was an idea that had been wandering in his head for a while now, but he hadn’t dared to say it out loud until now. He wasn’t sure how people would react to it and sure enough, Luc’s following comment wasn’t all that encouraging.
“So you’d go to Stanford only to waste away as the school counselor in a small town in the middle of nowhere?” He snorted. “I’m sorry, Jack. I don’t mean to disparage what you want to do, but I truly believe you’re meant for bigger things.”

“Bigger things like what?”

“You have time to figure that out,” Luc said, taking another sip from his glass.

“Uh… no, not really. Not that much time.”

Luc laughed, as if Jack had told a very funny joke.

“Anything you want to do, my boy,” he added, patting Jack on the back.

Jack was once again going to tell him that perhaps being a school counselor was what he really wanted to do (he wasn’t sure, but it sounded better to him than being an architect?) when Luc once again changed the topic of the conversation fast enough to give Jack whiplash.

“Mull it over and see what comes to mind. How is your burger?”

Jack took another pensive bite of it.

“It’s very tasty. Thanks. You haven’t touched yours.”

“I don’t care much for junk food,” Luc replied. Jack barely had time to feel guilty for dragging him to eat something he didn’t like before Luc was once again on another issue: “So. I know we haven’t had a lot of… bonding time in the past. I’d like to remedy that. Tell me about yourself, Jack.”

“Uh… well, there’s not much to tell.” Jack felt his cheeks burning. He hated to be put on the spot like that, but this wasn’t like he was in class or anything. He was talking to Luc. It shouldn’t feel this embarrassing. “I… go to school, I go to the writing club with Claire…”

“Yeah, him and Miss Masters. They get along really well,” Jack said. “Claire and Kaia get along too, of course.”

“That’s the girl she’s been having troubles with, isn’t it? I wouldn’t say that they get along so well, do they?”

Jack stared at his half-eaten burger for a while.

“I shouldn’t talk about it,” he concluded. “Claire will get mad.”

“Jack.” Luc leaned forwards to talk closer to him. “If you’re not comfortable with anything your sister does or tells you…”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just… I’ve already meddled so much in their relationship…”

And he didn’t know how, he ended up telling Luc about Kaia’s letter that he’d failed to deliver. Perhaps it had been weighing on his conscience for a very long time. He’d lied to both Castiel and Claire that he’d lost the letter so his guilt would seem lesser, but he told Luc the truth: he still had it, hidden away in his desk.

“I can’t give it to Claire without her getting even angrier at me. And especially now that they’re fighting. But I hate that I did this. It’s not… not something I’d usually do.”
Luc nodded, as if everything Jack was saying made perfect sense instead of being an emotional jumbled mess.

“You care about your sister a lot. That’s commendable, boy.”

“But what I did…”

“You made a mistake,” Luc interrupted him. “Trust me. From someone who has made plenty of mistakes in his life, this isn’t the worst thing you could have done. Claire ended up dating this girl anyway and if they broke up, that wasn’t because of anything you did or didn’t do.”

Jack wanted to believe that, he really that. It just wasn’t that easy.

“Well, let’s talk about something lighter,” Luc proposed and for once, Jack was glad that he changed topics so easily. “Besides the club, what do you like to do?”

“Umh… read, I guess,” Jack said. “I’ve been rereading all of the Agatha and Jaspers books waiting for Uncle Cas to finish the last one.”

“Oh,” Luc muttered. “I never read them.”

“You haven’t?!”

“Cas only sent me the first one. I think I must still have it somewhere…”

“Well, I have all nine of them in hardcover,” Jack said, smiling proudly. “I can lend them to you, if you want.”

Luc sighed deeply and looked at his plate. Hesitantly, he picked up the burger and held it in front of his face.

“I don’t see why not,” he said in the end. “I’m trying to be a new person. I should be trying out new things, right?”

He bit into the burger and Jack smiled. Perhaps he hadn’t been wrong about him after all.
April arrived all too soon and not soon enough in Claire’s mind. She remembered being excited for her and Jack’s birthday when they were little… well, she remembered Jack being excited about cake and balloons and presents and getting to have all their friends home. Claire was just excited that he was excited, because after a while, she really wanted all those kids she only vaguely knew because they were in school with her and all those chattering moms to just… go away.

Since they’d turned thirteen, Claire took up the occasion to get Castiel to take them somewhere nice. One year, when they turned fifteen, they all went to the arcade together and it was the most fun birthday she’d had, cakes and balloons notwithstanding. This year, she’d been thinking to ask Castiel to let them have a road trip to the nearest national park, just her and Jack, because it was the big eighteen and they should share it together, just the two of them.

But now that the date was actually only a couple weeks away, she found herself exhausted. Between final exams, Kaia still not talking to her and the idea that Aunt Amara was looming closer once more, she simply didn’t have the energy to plan anything.

She still didn’t want their eighteenth birthday to go unmarked, so she armed herself with every ounce of energy her post break-up depression left her and dragged herself to Jack’s room the following Sunday morning.

She was not pleased to see what she saw.

“What is he doing here?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

Luc was standing in the middle of Jack’s room, right in front of an open drawer in the desk. He closed it with a quick, sharp gesture and turned to Claire, smiling.

“Good morning. Jack thought we shouldn’t be bother you. He’s under the impression you’re not a morning person. But look, it’s nearly ten and you’re up and moving!”

Claire glared at him. She didn’t trust him. She didn’t trust his friendly grin or his cheerful demeanor or the fact that he was apparently now visiting Jack without her or Castiel knowing it. She liked absolutely nothing about this situation, but before she could let those feelings be known, Jack intervened:

“Hey, Claire, have you seen my copy of *The Furthest Wood*?”

“No,” Claire said, automatically. She frowned. “Which one was that one?”

“The seventh one,” Jack said, turning around and pulling every book from his shelves to see if it wasn’t behind any of them. “You know, Jasper and Agatha hear about this enchantress that might have a cure for the prince’s sickness so they have to travel to the Dark Woods to find her?”

That must have been one of the books Castiel wrote after Claire decided she had outgrown Jasper and Agatha’s antics. He kept giving her the drafts, but she only really read over them and retained no details from any of them, unlike Jack, who practically memorized them. She shrugged.

“No idea, dude.”

“Perhaps you should give these books another chance, Claire,” Luc suggested. “Jack seems to enjoy them very much and your uncle put a lot of effort into them.”
“Yes, our uncle,” Claire mumbled. “Where is he, again?”

“Said he was going out to have brunch with his spell-checker,” Jack said, at the same time as he leaned to look underneath his bed.

Claire had some questions: who was this supposed spell-checker? And why did they need to meet on a Sunday morning somewhere outside the house? Why couldn’t this person come to help Castiel there? Who the hell had brunch?

She wasn’t going to ask any of them out loud, of course.

“Well, good luck finding that book,” Claire said, rolling her eyes. “Let me know when the house is free from the stench of pure evil walking around it.”

She turned her back and headed for the stairs before either Luc or Jack had time to answer to her insult.

She was just done, officially and completely done with Luc being around and trying to be a nice guy around them. He was up to something and it frustrated to no end that she was in such an emotional funk over the debacle with Kaia that she couldn’t even begin to try and figure out what it was.

She opened the fridge and stared at the inside of it for several seconds. She’d completely forgotten what she was looking for in the first place. She needed five minutes to think, to really think without anyone interrupting her. Or maybe she just needed to get out of the house and drive for hours on the highway. Either way, being there and feeling like Luc was around all of the sudden…

“Claire.”

Claire did her best to remain immobile, suppressing the startle that was to hear Luc’s voice behind her. She grabbed the carton of orange juice (even though she was pretty certain that wasn’t what she wanted) and closed the door.

“You need anything?” she asked Luc, as she rummaged through the cabinets to get a glass. “We’re out of dead babies, but maybe if you go to the neighbors they can give you a puppy to munch on.”

“I’m not the Devil, Claire.”

“Sure you’re not,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “That’s why you’re over there trying to convince my brother to sell his soul to you.”

Luc sighed deeply and moved to lean on the counter. Claire poured herself some juice, pointedly ignoring him.

“I’m not making Jack do anything he doesn’t want to. I’m not forcing him to spend time with me. He’s doing that because he wants to.”

Claire bit her tongue, very hard. She hated that he was right and she hated that there wasn’t anything that she could say about it. So she simply glared at him.

“Whatever,” she said. “Jack’s gonna see soon enough that you never stopped being the same serpent that you’ve always been.”

She attempted to make a dramatic exit after that declaration, but Luc was ridiculously fast and had ridiculously long legs.
“You judge me too harshly, Claire,” he said, lowering his voice an octave: “And perhaps you judge your brother too lightly.”

Claire hesitated on whether she should just push past him or throw her orange juice to his face (would that be considered an unprompted attack if he was getting all up in her personal space?) but before she could, he reached for something inside of his pocket and pulled out… an envelope.

“What’s that?” Claire asked, frowning.

“You tell me.”

Luc placed the envelope over the counter and, despite the fact that Claire didn’t trust him enough to take his eyes off him, she glanced down.

The envelope had her name on it. She recognized the handwriting immediately.

Her guts froze. The fingers around the glass were suddenly very rigid and she found herself unable to speak for several seconds.

Then, a panicky voice in her head began shouting at her that she couldn’t let Luc see that this affected her in a way. She swallowed and adopted what she hoped was completely neutral.

“Where did you get that?” she asked, lowering her voice.

“Where do you think?”

Claire offered no answer to this. She simply forced herself to lift her chin and stare up at her father’s icy blue eyes, so cold they almost seemed grey.

“You think that Jack is looking out for you the same way you look out for him.”

Claire said nothing. She had nothing to say to that, so she remained stubbornly quiet.

"But perhaps you should consider the possibility that... maybe he isn't," Luc continued. He wasn't smiling or gloating. He was serious, as if he was merely stating a series of fact that Claire wasn't aware of. "Maybe he is a little bit more than how you think I am than you'd believe."

Claire still stayed quiet. She didn't want to say anything. She didn't want to show what he was saying affected her in any way whatsoever. She couldn't. Whatever he was playing at, she couldn't let him win.

"Maybe you're making a mountain out of a molehill," she replied. "Maybe I gave that to him for safekeeping."

"Claire, dear. Both you and me know that isn't true."

"And how would you know that?" she snapped.

"Because Jack told me he kept that from you himself."

Claire tightened her lips. She wanted to scream, she wanted to push him out of the house.

But she knew if she did that, she'd lose. She knew he was expecting that reaction from her. That was exactly what he wanted her to do. He could then play the victim, say that she was crazy and flew into a rage for no good reason. Or he could keep trying to convince her that Jack was a liar and that she needed to listen to Luc, whatever it was that he was planning to do next.
Neither of those options sounded good, so even though Claire's heart was beating hard and she was certain her face had gone red, she remained unmoved.

"Dad? I found it!" Jack's voice came from behind them.

Luc turned around and Claire saw the chance to do what she'd been planning to do from the beginning: with her free hand, she quickly snatched the envelope and hid behind her back just as Jack walked into the kitchen, waving the book and smiling with his innocent boyish charm as usual.

"I found it! It was underneath my desk for some reason. No idea how it got there."

"It must have fallen," Luc suggested, with a shrug. He took the book from his hand and smiled. "Well, I think that's all of them, right?"

"Yes! You should start them right away. The first couple ones are a little more childish, because, well... we were very little when he started writing them, but you'll see how the others just get better and better..."

"That's great," Luc said, placing a hand on Jack's hand as he gently pushed him out of the kitchen. "I think I should perhaps go back to my hotel and do that right now."

Despite her wanting for the earth to open up and swallow her so she wouldn't have to confront what came next, Claire followed them.

"You're leaving already?" Jack asked. He sounded far too disappointed for Claire's taste. "But... you said we could go out for lunch..."

"Yes. Maybe some other time," Luc replied, with an awkward grin. "I don't want to... overstay my welcome in this house."

"Oh." Jack glanced at Claire, but immediately turned his attention back to Luc. "Alright. Let me get a backpack so you can take all the books."

"You go do that," Luc encouraged him as Jack ran up the stairs again. He turned to Claire once more. "Think about it, Claire. You have my number. You just have to... unblock it and we could talk about anything you need to talk about with me."

Claire resisted the urge to tell him he was the last person in the world that she wanted to talk to right then. She headed up, passing Jack on his way down with the backpack full of books and closed the door of her room behind her.

Only then she allowed herself to breathe in shakily, to let her weak knees give in as she landed on the bed. She placed the glass of juice on the floor, and held the envelope in front of her.

There was the letter. The letter that had caused her and Kaia so many troubles. Jack had said he lost it, but there it was. She knew it wasn't a trick or a fake, because Kaia had let her read some of her poems and stories. Claire was as familiar with the curve of her "c", the dots on her "i" and the way she wrote the "e" as if it was separate from the rest of the word as she was with Kaia's features.

That meant Luc had told the truth, for once. And Jack had lied. He'd been lying to her for months about what'd happened to the damn letter.

Should she open it? It was hers, after all. Kaia had written it for her. But that had been months ago, when things weren't so confusing and before she'd realized how much she'd...
And besides, if she read it, she didn't know if she could hold the rage she was feeling anymore. Because she was angry, she was furious, in fact. But if she fought with Jack, that could mean he would lean into Luc even more and that couldn't be good. It couldn't be good at all.

But if she told Jack that Luc had given her the letter, he'd be breaking his heart all over again. Or Luc could deny it, he could accuse Claire of going through Jack's things and the saddest thing was, Claire wasn't certain anymore who would Jack believe.

There was a knock on the door. Claire quickly slid the letter underneath her pillow.

"What?" she called out.

Jack opened the door and popped his head in.

"Hey, so... if you don't have to study or finish anything... I was thinking maybe we could work on our piece for the Inksters?" he suggested, calmly. "Because we liked... postponed that for the entirety of last month?"

"Right." Claire closed her eyes, pinched her nose and shook her head. "That. Yeah, sure. I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay!"

Jack closed the door and Claire gave herself another moment to breathe in and out very slowly. She had to keep it together. This was all part of Luc's ploy. She couldn't fall for it no matter what.
Chapter 48

The monotonous whirring of the printer almost managed to put Castiel to sleep. The last couple of days had been terrible, to the point where he'd skipped last Thursday's Inksters meeting.

Meg had been very understanding of it, even though she couldn't resist to tease him a little about it too.

"Jack and Claire wanted to read their piece with you there. We all missed out because of you."

"Well, the more suspense there is to it the better, right?" he joked.

Meg laughed, but he had the feeling she didn't as much she had in the past.

"Cas, when are we going to tell them?" she'd asked, point blank. "Listen, I'm not gonna say it's not fun sneaking around like we're teenagers trying to avoid our parents but..."

Castiel had sighed and leaned on his chair.

"I know. I'm sorry about all of this," he'd said, because lately he felt like she had to apologize to Meg for putting up with him a lot. The twins were used to him disappearing into his studio for long periods of time, especially when the book was in its last stages of development, but Meg...

Castiel hadn't stopped to consider all the things that made him a terrible boyfriend. His absentmindedness, his tendency to delegate or postpone things that weren't important because they didn't pertain to the task right in front of him (Claire had called that "tunnel vision"), even things that had to do with his self-care or the care of the people he was in charge of... it was a miracle Meg hadn't grown tired of him two months into their relationship.

"There's so much going on right now."

"I know. Jack and Claire's birthday dinner with your brother and your aunt is probably not the best time to break it to them," Meg agreed and he was so relieved that she at least gave him that. "But after that..."

"After that. I promise you." Castiel sighed and leaned on his chair. "And then we can go out and have all of the proper dates we've been avoiding."

"That sounds nice," Meg said. "You know what sounds nicer? If we could go back to that little hotel in Keystone for another weekend..."

A shiver went down Castiel's spine at the memory.

"We never did get around seeing Mount Rushmore."

"Oh, I don't know. I think the views we did get to see were very impressive."

Castiel wasn't sure what was about her that made him melt when she spoke like that. He couldn't wait to be with her out in the open, to kiss her without caring about who could see them.

He was dreaming about it when the printer stopped with an abrupt silence. Castiel lifted his eyes to see if it had run out of paper, but no. It had merely finished doing its job.

As if on cue, Jack burst into his studio.
"Is it ready? Can I read it?" he asked, his eyes lightening up.

Castiel picked up the last pages, placed it together with the rest of the manuscript and with a smile, presented it to Jack. He let out a squeal of excitement and ran out of the studio, holding it close to his chest as if it was the most incredible treasure ever. Castiel counted on not seeing him for the rest of the day until he had finished reading it.

He hoped Jack wouldn't be disappointed. After all, he was, without exaggeration, the books' biggest fan.

This time, Castiel also had very harsh critic that he wanted to please. He picked up the second copy of the book and walked up to Claire's room.

He had to knock three times before she deigned to open for him.

"What?"

She looked slightly tired and irritated, but that was her default look those days. Castiel had tried asking her about how things were with Kaia and she'd almost chewed his head off, so he'd decided not to mention the issue in front of her anymore. If she wanted to talk about it, she could come to talk about it when she was ready.

He raised the stack of paper towards her.

"It's finished."

Claire lowered her eyes at it and then pointed to the side.

"Jack's room's that way."

"He already has his copy," Castiel replied. "I want you to read this one."

Claire sighed deeply.

"You know, I'm..."

"Too old for these books, I know," Castiel interrupted her. "Please, Claire? It's the last one ever. It's special. Just... give it a chance. Read the first couple of chapters. If you don't care to read the rest of it, that's fine. But at least give it a chance."

Claire bit the inside of her cheek. For a moment, Castiel was certain that she was going to refuse, but in the end, with a sigh, she stretched her hands and grabbed the papers from him.

"Fine. But only because I have nothing better to do today. If I still had a girlfriend, I'd be out hanging with her."

She closed the door in Castiel's face. Despite her curtness, Castiel still smiled to himself.

"Sorry about your lack of girlfriend!"

"Shut up!"

Castiel chuckled and headed for his own room to do something he hadn't done in weeks: sleep soundly with the knowledge that he hadn't fallen behind his projected word count.
Claire settled the "book" (was it really a book if it was only a stack of papers?) in front of her in the bed. She placed her headphones around her head and turned the volume up loud enough that she was sure to go deaf by age twenty-five.

She didn't hate the Agatha and Jaspers books, not really. Castiel's writing was simple, but effective, and he always managed to make Kelliadoth seem like a full, colorful world, even though there were some logistic questions to it. Like, if all the animals talked, were all the people vegetarian? Or why did they even have to put up with the bad kings and queens just because they were "legitimate" until Agatha and Jasper came around to scare them into behaving?

She supposed she was putting too much thought into a book that was written to entertain children. Specifically, it had been written to entertain Jack and her, but she couldn't understand what he still found entertaining when they were turning eighteen in like, two weeks.

Still, this seemed important to Castiel, so she wasn't even gonna half-ass it and only pretend that she'd read the entire book. She was actually going to make the effort to go through it, no matter how dull it got.

She grabbed the first page. The book had been appropriately named: "The Last Adventure".

It started a bit like all the other books: Agatha and Jasper were dicking around their uncle's backyard, which was a large wood extension and suddenly, they went a little further than they'd meant or crossed a stream that wasn't there before and boom! They were in a completely different world.

She'd always wondered why the backyard was such a reliable portal. And what would happen to it now that Agatha and Jasper were never coming back to Kelliadoth ever again?

But this time it was different. The woods were eerily silent and there wasn't a party sent by the current sovereign of Kelliadoth to receive them. Instead, they found themselves on the receiving end of a lot of aggression and sass doled out by three bounty hunters that had somehow broken into their cache and taken Agatha and Jasper’s magical weapons.

And they haven’t been called back to Kelliadoth in a hundred years.

So that was new. Claire sat up, starting to pay more attention now despite herself. The bounty hunters fought the twins and the only way they managed to win was through cheating, of course. They captured them and took them to the palace and on the way there, they could see a lot had changed since the last time they were there: the people of Kelliadoth, who had always been so open and welcoming towards them, now glanced them sideways, ignoring their claims of being Agatha and Jaspers. In fact, the only ones who seemed interested in their claim where the palace’s guards.

“This is not what you promised!” Bandit protested when the guard gave him only a handful of coins. “These are prisoners claiming to be the Legendary Adventurers, they're worth more than this!”

The guard unsheathed his blade and placed the tip underneath the bounty hunter's chin.

“Or we could leave with just this, it’s fine.”

“Bandit, you’re such a coward!” Amber protested.

“Reward!” Agatha said, rolling her eyes. “We are the Legendary Adventurers! They should be throwing you in the dungeons and having your head for the way you’ve treated us.”
“What?” Jasper asked. Agatha stealthily elbowed him in the ribs, so immediately he straightened his back. “My sister is right. This is an indignity that won’t stand! Untie us and take us to your sovereign immediately!”

“You have to admit it. They are more convincing than the average ones,” the other guard muttered in her companion’s ear.

“That’s because we are the real deal,” Agatha insisted.

“Nonsense!” The guard moved his sword away from Bandit’s throat (to his relief), and turned to the twins. “The Legendary Adventurers never would’ve let themselves be captured in the first place?”

“Then why are you offering a reward for us?” Agatha asked.

“We’re not offering a reward for you, just people claiming to be you,” the other guard explained.

“So you recognize we’re the Legendary Adventurers?”

“Yes. No. What?” the guards said, turning to each other in confusion.

 Someone laughed softly behind them. Agatha turned to see Raven covering her mouth and looking down at her shoes to hide her amusement.

 It was a shame. If she hadn’t stolen her bow and tied her up with elven rope, Agatha thought they could have been friends.

 Claire raised her eyebrow at that. Was Agatha…? No. It couldn’t possibly be. It literally said “friends”, as in, Raven, Amber and Bandit could have been their companions if this was a normal Agatha and Jasper book. She was probably reading too much into it.

 An argument broke out between the bounty hunters and the guards that ended up with all five of them thrown in the dungeons. Agatha and Jasper started looking for ways to break out of them and learned a bit more about the state of Kelliadoth: King Alder and his daughter, Primrose, had both died and currently his second wife, Daralis, was sitting in the throne. There was upheaval in the kingdom, because she was not the legitimate queen, though others thought that she governed just fine.

 Amber and Bandit were very careful not to show what side of the debate they were on. Raven was angry because she had expelled several elven tribes from their woods. Claire took note: they were going to turn out to be some sort of rebellious or resistance force against the evil queen.

 The next developments, however, she didn’t expect: once the Chancellor got Agatha and Jasper out of the dungeons and they proved they could wield the Legendary Adventurer’s weapons, once Daralis gave them their welcome banquet, she asked them to recognize her as the queen in front of everyone in Kelliadoth.

 “I need people to stop calling my claim to the throne into question,” she said, looking sadly into her chalice. “It’s the only way we can start reconstructing.”

 This woman was so obviously evil it was almost hilarious. But Jasper was falling for it. He was willing to help her, because he wanted to believe the best in people. He didn’t even call it into question when Daralis declared the bounty hunters were criminals and they ought to be publicly executed.

 Claire was quite literally at the edge of their seat: was Castiel going to actually kill someone? That had never happened before!
Obviously not. Agatha executed a daring rescue at the last second and escaped the palace with the rebels… leaving Jasper behind with Daralis.

“Come with me and we can figure this out!”

“No, you have to stay, Agatha! We have to talk to her!”

The scene was actually kind of heartbreaking. Or maybe Claire felt it so because it hit too close to home. She actually had to put the pages down and pace around her room for several seconds.

Goddammit, Castiel had improved a lot since that first book.

In any case, the book was now split in two perspective: one with Agatha and the rebels (they did turn out to be rebels, shocking) going out to meet Lady Pearl, the princess’ ex-governess and the leader of the resistance… who was also hiding a very much alive Primrose. It turned she survived Daralis’ assassination attempt, because of course.

“I am Princess…” She stopped, as if she’d caught herself about to make a mistake. The grief shadowed her dark eyes. “I am Queen Primrose. I called you and your brother for help, Agatha.”

Agatha looked at this girl, who couldn’t be older than her. She had dark skin and long black hair and she was dressed in rags. No one could have guessed there was a princess in her humble appearance, but there was something undeniably regal in the way she stood, and something undeniably honest in her eyes.

Still, Agatha didn’t bend the knee right away. She’d been fooled once already.

“Well, you could have called us a lot earlier, before things got this bad.”

“I know. I just… I was desperate and you were a last resource.”

“Last resource?” Agatha shook her head in disbelief. “Your Majesty, no offense, but your forefathers have called us for matters far less important.”

Primrose frowned for a moment, but then her eyes opened slowly, as a realization dawned on her.

“You… you don’t know? Has no one told you?”

“What? What is it that I should know?”

Marigold had left nine stones for the future sovereigns of Kelliadoth to call on Agatha and Jasper in times of need. The first couple of them had called the Adventurers thinking the others would have plenty of chances of they needed them, but that was why the adventures had been getting far more perilous with each installment and far more years had passed between each of them, leading to the last hundred years without anyone calling upon them. Like Primrose had said, they were quite literally a last resource.

So that was a nice in-world way of explaining why there wouldn’t be more books after this one.

Claire made a pause after that revelation to get herself some coffee. She had no idea when it had got so late and how she’d spent so much time reading without realizing.

So what followed was quite interesting: Jasper was tasked with finding Agatha (“to talk to her”, sure, Daralis) and Agatha had to keep Primrose hidden from both him and the Queen. That was new. The twins had always complimented each other’s abilities; having to see them use them against one
another made for a very intense reading.

Also, Agatha and Raven spent several pages bonding, with Raven asking a lot of questions about Jasper and Agatha’s home.

“There are no stories about the kind of world you come from,” Raven told her. “You come here, you save everyone and then you disappear… but we don’t know where to.”

“You wouldn’t like the world I come from. There’s no magic there.”

“I don’t know. If it created someone like you, I daresay it’s magical enough.”

Was Raven coming onto Agatha or was Claire going mad?!

Eventually Jasper and Agatha met face to face again, Agatha revealed another unforeseen consequence of having the illegitimate queen on the throne and that slowly killing all the magic in Kelliadoth: they wouldn’t be able to return home afterwards.

“We’d have to stay here forever! We’d always just be the Legendary Adventurers!”

“And what would be so bad about that?!”

Jasper’s screaming surprised Agatha enough that she stopped moving.

“You don’t mean that,” she said, looking closely at her brother’s face. “Jasper, our lives are back there. We have to go back, we have to grow up and become the people we were always meant to be.”

“Maybe this is who we were meant to be!” Jasper argued. “We’re heroes here. And who are we back there?”

That lasted until Daralis got impatient and threw a spell at Agatha, which forced her to flee.

Claire was kind of conflicted. On the one hand, she was with Agatha on that she didn’t want to be left behind in a world that had no Netflix. Or dentist, spells to reduce the pain notwithstanding. On the other hand, Kelliadoth had some really good things, like magic and apparently pretty elf girls that were very into Agatha.

“What would be so bad about you staying here?” Raven asked. She scooted closer to Agatha. “You could protect us all. You could be here to fight Daralis…”

“And my brother? For ages and ages?” Agatha shook her head. “I wouldn’t want that. Nobody would. And besides, if we let Daralis just keep the throne, this would become just another world without magic. It wouldn’t be Kelliadoth at all.”

Raven’s hand came to rest over Agatha’s. Hesitantly at first, but then Agatha turned her attention to her and slowly turn her hand to intertwine her fingers with the elf’s.

“I know all of that,” Raven whispered. “But… is it selfish I want you to stay anyway?”

Agatha suddenly realized how close to one another they were sitting. The sun was slowly rising in the horizon and its rays bounced off Raven’s dark eyes, making them shine like late stars in the dawn.

“Maybe… maybe we can be selfish just for a little while,” Agatha said, leaning closer to her.
Claire grabbed a pillow, buried her face into it and squealed until her lungs gave up.

The rest of the book was great too. They had an epic final battle in which they discovered that Daralis was drawing her powers from the Chancellor, who was actually a sort of shadow creature that had been feeding off the royal family for ages. When he attacked Agatha, Jasper came through (because of course) and saved her. Daralis, knowing she was defeated, fled, but Raven and the elves she had expelled from their homes captured her and took her away. Knowing the elves, it was like she was to suffer a very poetic fate, like they were going to imprison her inside a tree bark for a couple of centuries or so. Claire sometimes thought death was a better destiny than whatever punishment the elves could dole out.

And that was it. Primrose took her place as the rightful queen, named the faithful Lady Pearl as her Chancellor, gave Bandit, Amber and Raven the title of Heroes of Kelliadoth, and it was time for Agatha and Jasper to go home. There were a lot of tears, but in the book and in Claire’s face.

“Wait, hold on!” Agatha said. Jasper watched quizzically as she ran back to the line of friends waiting to say goodbye to them.

Agatha ignored all their looks of confusion as she put her hands on Raven’s cheeks.

“Come with us.”

“What?”

“Come with us,” Agatha repeated. “To our world. You asked so many questions about it. Don’t you want to see it?”

“But…” Raven’s eyes travelled to the eleven tribe surrounded her, all staring at them with unreadable expressions. “I could never come back.”

“But you’d be with me,” Agatha said. However, her shoulders slumped. “I… I’m asking too much, I’m sorry. Of course you wouldn’t…”

“No!” Raven interrupted her. “I want to. I just…”

“Go, child,” said the Eldest, with a smile in his wrinkled face. “Your heart would be broken if you stayed.”

Raven took a deep, shaky breath. She wiped the tears from her eyes and gave her tribe a respectful, deep bow, which they returned in solemn silence. She turned to Amber and Bandit, who both stepped forwards to embrace her tight, several breaths passing between the three friends.

“We had a good run, didn’t we?” Bandit said. Both Amber and Raven chuckled softly through their tears.

Finally, with a wide beam, Raven turned to Agatha and grabbed her hand, nodding. Agatha couldn’t help it. She wrapped her arms around Raven and pulled her in for a soft, tender kiss.

They walked together to the portal, where Jasper waited, shaking his head. He lifted his head and looked at his friends one last time.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice breaking. “For everything.”

Queen Primrose smiled at them and lifted her hand in farewell.
Then, without another world, the Legendary Adventurers stepped into the portal and left Kelliadoth for the last time.

It was two o’clock in the morning. Claire had had to get up to turn the lights on hours ago and her playlist had shifted so many times she wasn’t sure what she was listening to anymore. She was hungry, her neck hurt and her eyes felt irritated and swollen.

It took her a moment to realize that was because of how much she was crying.
Morning crept into the kitchen, a warm spring sunrise like they haven’t had in months. Castiel sat in front of his coffee, thinking that maybe he should start making breakfast soon. After a long day of resting, he felt like himself again and not like a maddened creature who could do nothing but write and edit and was partially only made of words.

Things weren’t great right now. Lucifer was around, Aunt Amara was coming for the kids’ birthday and he still had to think of a way to break it to them that he was dating their favorite teacher.

But he’d finished the book and he was glad with the results. He hoped Jack and Claire would be, too. Their opinion was the most important one for him.

Sooner than he’d expected, he heard footsteps coming into the kitchen. He raised his eyes and was surprised to see Claire walking in instead of Jack.

“Good morning,” he greeted her. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. Yeah, actually,” she said, but contradicted herself immediately by yawning wide. “Well, a book kept me up until late.”

Castiel straightened his back, suddenly very interested.

“So you read it?”

“I did, yeah.” Her voice expressed no emotion as she poured herself some coffee and moved to sit next to him with her own steaming cup. But when Castiel watched her closely, he noticed she was smiling.

“Well?” he asked, trying not to sound as nervous as he felt. “What did you think?”

Claire took her time to answer. She lifted the mug to her lips and sipped silently, tasting the dark liquid as if the answers were there.

“You gave Agatha a girlfriend,” she said in the end.

“I did, yes,” Castiel said. He wasn’t surprised that was what Claire had got hanged up on.

“I can’t imagine all the schools that have your books and all the religious parents associations are going to be too happy about that.” Claire chuckled, as if bringing up the ire of ridiculously bigoted people was a delightful thought for her. “What were you thinking?”

Castiel was prepared for that question. He’d meditated on it for a very long time.

“Well, I was thinking of you, to be honest,” he told her. “You and all the little girls who are like you and look up to Agatha. How important it’d be for them to know that their hero is like them, too, and has the bravery to just… be who she is.”

He couldn’t keep speaking, because Claire had moved her chair closer then him and placed her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. It was rare that she would hug him, that she’d be so open with him, so Castiel moved slowly, as if she was a little animal that could get scared if he made a movement too brusque, and placed an arm around her shoulders.

“Did you like it?” he asked again.
Claire’s laughter was muffled by the tears.

“Honestly? It could have been gayer.”

“Well… guess it’s a good thing I can count with your input then.”

Claire laughed again and moved away. Castiel pretended not to notice how she used a napkin to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

Castiel was about to ask what else she’d liked about the book when Jack made his entry. Claire looked like she’d slept very little, but Jack seemed like he hadn’t slept at all. His eyes were puffy and his nose was red as if he’d been crying for a very long time. His hair was in disarray and his cheeks looked pale.

“Jack?” Castiel inquired softly as he sat down in the chair to his other side. His movements were silent and mechanic, as if he was barely paying attention to what he did. “Are you okay?”

Jack snapped out of it slightly and looked at him with big, scared eyes, as if Castiel had startled him. A second later, that expression melted away and he smiled.

“Yes. Yes, I’m okay. Thank you for asking.”

He looked at the table, realized he hadn’t grabbed anything to have breakfast and forcibly chuckled to himself before getting up to look for a mug and some milk inside the fridge. So, he was definitely not okay. Castiel looked at Claire, but she shrugged, apparently as lost as Castiel himself was.

“Hey, nerd, did you read the book?” she asked.

“What? Oh, the book.” Jack poured himself the milk and added some coffee. He started looking for the sugar bowl inside of the cabinets, all with mechanic, absent movements, as if he was barely paying attention to what he was doing. “Yes. The book. I read that. It was great. They’re always great.”

“Jack…” Castiel started.

Jack dropped a glass. He maneuvered to try to catch in the air but at the last second, it slipped through his fingers and landed on the floor with a loud crash.

“Oh, my God!” Jack exclaimed, grabbing his head with both his hands. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I’m so clumsy! I’ll sweep that right away!”

“Jack. Jack, stop!” Castiel said, standing up to grab him by the shoulders before he could go anywhere. Claire had stood up too, looking rather concerned. “What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

“The glass is broken. I have to… Claire’s always walking barefoot, she could get hurt…”

“Jack, look at me. Don’t worry about the glass right now,” Castiel insisted. “Look at me, Jack.”

Jack finally stopped squirming enough to do as Castiel said. But when he did, it was as if getting stabbed right through the chest. The pain in his eyes, the tear… as if Castiel had done something unthinkable and Jack wasn’t sure he could forgive him.

“Why did Jasper do that?” Jack asked, in a broken whisper.

Castiel was astonished beyond words. He never thought that Jack would take it so personally. Meg had warned him, of course, but he hadn’t really thought…
“Jack…”

“They spent half of the book away from each other, fighting!” Jack said, his voice rising and his face becoming increasingly red. “He pushes her away and he trusts all those evil people. He would never… he couldn’t… and then they have to leave Kelliadoth? Forever? Why…? I…”

He burst into tears, his sobbing drowning out the rest of his words. Castiel held him close to him and slowly guided him to sit down on the closest chair. He petted Jack’s hair as if he was a child again, at a lost for what to say.

But luckily he didn’t have to. A second later, Claire moved a chair back and sat to Jack’s left, a glass of water in her hand that she gently pushed towards him. Jack looked at her through tears, while Claire remained serene.

“They had to leave forever because Kelliadoth is where they went to grow up,” she said. “And they’re not children anymore.”

Jack hiccupped. He grabbed the glass with trembling hands and managed to take a big gulp of it.

“Jasper was acting like… like…” he stammered.

“Like an absolute ass,” Claire completed for him, with a shrug. “I mean, yeah. He wanted to stay in Kelliadoth. Who wouldn’t? There’s magic there, it’s awesome. But the Chancellor’s magic… it wasn’t real. Not the way Marigold’s magic was. It was an illusion. And it worked on Jasper because he already wanted to have a chance to stay there forever.” She made a pause. “I might be missing some things. I didn’t expect to have to write a report on the book I finished last night at this hour of the morning. I haven’t even finished my coffee, dude.”

Jack chuckled. There were still tears coming out of his eyes, but at least he seemed calmer. He took another sip of the book.

“Sometimes people fuck up, Jack. Like, Agatha is always fucking up in the other books,” Claire pointed out.

“She isn’t…” Castiel tried to protest.

“I mean, it’s only fair Jasper fucks up this one time,” Claire continued, flat out ignoring him. “But it doesn’t matter, because he realizes his mistake and he fixes it. At the end of the day, it’s not… it’s not that big a deal. It really isn’t.” She breathed out softly, as if she was putting down a heavy load she’d been carrying. “There’s bigger problems to deal with.”

Castiel wondered if she was still talking about the book.

Jack wiped off the tears from his eyes.

“Not that big a deal?” he croaked. “Claire, he… he endangered everyone.”

“But then he saved everyone.” Claire shrugged. “You know, I like this Jasper better. He’s not always a hero. He doesn’t have his shit together. But he tries.”

Jack still looked unconvinced, but as he’d calmed down, Castiel figured it was the right time for him to interject something.

“Jack… if you really hated something, you can tell me,” he said. “There’s still time to change it.”
“But…” Jack muttered.

“I wrote these books for you. For the both of you. It’s important to me that you understand that. You were always meant to be their first readers and the people whose opinion matter the most to me.”

He wasn’t expecting to get all choked up. He supposed this was turning into a very emotional morning for everyone around them anyway.

Jack wiped his face again, because the tears just seemed to keep on coming no matter how many times he fought them.

“Who’s going to be there for them?” he asked. “The people of Kelliadoth. They need… they’re still going to need heroes. Who’s going to help them now?”

“I reckon someone might,” Castiel said, softly. He hadn’t considered that possibility. “But it’s not Agatha and Jasper’s mission anymore. They have their lives to live. That’s the next adventure for them. Do you understand that, Jack? They need to let go of that place. We… we all need to let go of it.”

Jack stared at him in silence, shaking as if he was holding back even more tears. But in the end, he broke down again crying and Castiel had to hug him against himself for a while, waiting for him to calm down. He fully expected Claire to leave them, but she surprised him: she stayed right where she was, rubbing Jack’s back soothingly and assuring him again and again that it was okay.

It was a very exhausting process, but in the end, Castiel was thankful for it. There were some things he hadn’t seen as clearly before. He encouraged Jack and Claire to bring their copies of the book down made specific notes on things he could improve. Meanwhile, Castiel cleaned up the shattered glass and made pancakes for the two of them. It was going to be a long morning.

But while Claire had a lot to say (especially when it came to Raven and Agatha), Jack only pointed one or two things that just sounded a little obscure to him and could be easily solved with some added exposition. He mostly ate his pancakes in silence and didn’t even fight Claire over how much syrup she was using in hers.

Castiel still had an uneasy feeling as they went through the pages together.

“Jack… did you like the book?” he asked point blank at one point. “Be honest with me.”

Jack looked down at the pages he had been scribbling over, pensive.

“I… I really don’t know,” he confessed in the end. “Maybe I just… I need to give it some time. It’s… I’m a feeling a lot of things.”

“We got that from the all the crying an hour ago,” Claire commented, while she mercilessly crossed out an entire paragraph with a red ink pen.

Jack huffed and ignored her.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Cas,” he said, lowering his eyes. “I wanted to like it. I really did. I know how hard you worked on it, but I just don’t know…”

“Jack, it’s fine. I’m glad you could tell me that,” Castiel interrupted him. He shrugged and smiled to show that it wasn’t, as Claire had said, that big a deal. “I guess you can’t win them all.”

Jack smile back, wearily, and then yawned.
“Is it okay if I go lay down? I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

“Of course. We can keep talking about this later.”

Jack left them in the kitchen with a bunch of papers spread over the table. It was a strange feeling for Castiel to know that his last book had failed to impress the person who, up until that point, had been most supportive of them.

“Well, I liked it,” Claire declared, while scribbling out a bunch of notes in the margin pointing out exactly what she thought Castiel needed to correct.

“Is that right?” Castiel asked, a little surprised at that affirmation. He was still waiting for Claire to tell him that it had been too childish for her taste or something of the sorts.

“Yeah.” Claire’s smile was full of mischievousness. “And not just because of all the gay either, but that helped.”

Castiel chuckled softly at that affirmation. But despite Jack’s reaction, he was satisfied for how it’d turned out. Not every day one managed to finish a series of books that had been twelve years in the making. Jack was right that it was sad they wouldn’t get to go to Kelliadoth ever again…

An idea lit up in his head.

“Where are you going?” Claire asked as he stood up and headed out.

“I need to write an epilogue,” Castiel said. “I know you didn’t like the one in that book about the wizards…”

“Uh… Harry Potter?” Claire said, as if he was supposed to keep up with the trends and remember all those names.

“Yes.” Castiel nodded. “But this one will be different.”

Claire stared at him, a little confused by his sudden jolt of energy, but she shrugged in the end.

“Alright, you do that. But I’m not answering questions from your agent when she calls!”
Despite everything going on in Claire’s head, she was overcome by a strange sense of optimism in the week leading up to their birthday.

“We should do something,” she told Jack three days before while they drove to school. “Like, gather all our friends together and do… I don’t know, something.”

Jack barely looked up from his phone as he spoke:

“We have the dinner with our dad and Aunt Amara.”

Claire did her best not to roll her eyes all the way back to her head.

“Our birthday is on Saturday. That dinner is going to be Friday because ‘business prevent her from staying any longer’.”

She thought her imitation of Amara’s tone of voice was perfect, but Jack didn’t laugh. It was as if he wasn’t even listening to her.

“Who are you texting?” Claire asked, frowning at him.

Jack avoided her question with a sigh that, in any other human being, might have been an indication that he was irritated with her.

“All right, what do you have in mind exactly?” he asked. “For the birthday thing?”

Claire decided not to point out he could at least feigned some enthusiasm. He had been acting snappy and more than a little curt since what Claire had come to denominate “the book incident”. She thought she was the expert at getting people to leave her alone by insisting she was fine when she clearly wasn’t, but Jack was definitely giving her a run for her money. It was starting to get on her nerves.

“I don’t know, dude. You’re the expert at this whole socializing thing,” she said. Continued looking at her with an eyebrow arched, so Claire figured he wasn’t going to offer an insight on this after all. “We could… gather all of our friends and just… hang out?”

“Friends?” Jack repeated.

“Yeah. The Inksters.”

Jack stared at her in silence for several seconds.

“Okay,” he said in the end and went back to his texting.

“What?” Claire snapped.

“What about what…?”

“You’re saying ‘okay’ like ‘okay’,” she explained, trying to imitate his dismissive tone. “Like you don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Jack finally put the phone down with another sigh.
“Well… I’m not exactly talking to Ben and you’re not exactly talking to Kaia,” he pointed out. “It could be a little awkward.”

Claire entered the school parking lot and searched around for a free spot. Maneuvering to park the car gave her enough time to think of an answer to that assertion.

“I can’t believe I’m the one saying this, but… maybe we should get over ourselves?” Claire suggested. “A few months from now, we’re all gonna be going to different places and… I don’t want to leave with unfinished business.”

“Well, maybe you should talk to Kaia, then. I don’t have any unfinished business.”

“Dude,” Claire said, exasperated. She didn’t want to explain to him that it just wasn’t that simple, but… maybe, for once, Jack was right about something. And it was that simple. And she should take her own advice and get over herself. “Okay, yeah. But I still think we should have a meeting of some sorts.”

“Okay,” Jack said, and this time he managed not to sound as dismissive as before. Though it was hardly the enthusiasm that he would’ve shown had he been acting like his normal self. “I’ll tell Patience. She’s helping me study for my SATs during lunch.”

“You’re… taking the SATs?” Claire asked, confused.

“Yes, in June.” Jack reached for his backpack in the backseat. “I need it if I want to make the late deadlines for Harvard applications.”

“You’re applying for Harvard?!” Claire repeated. “Since when?”

“I’m applying for a lot of places.” Jack shrugged. He opened the door and walked away as if that was all the answer he needed to give.

Claire grabbed her own backpack and ran down the parking lot to catch up with him.

“I thought you were coming to California with me?” she asked, frowning.

It had never been a concrete plan of theirs, but she’d just sort of… assumed that was how it was going to go. It just seemed much easier to share an apartment between the two than live in the campus or whatever.

“I don’t know, Claire. I just feel like I need to keep my options open.”

This time, when he surpassed her, Claire let him do it. She was too astonished to do or say anything else.

Well, of course, Jack was brilliant, nothing but straight A’s since middle school. He could go to whatever college he wanted and of course, with how indecisive he had been about what to study, perhaps it was better that he applied to a broad variety of them. He could get into Harvard if he wanted to. He should go into Harvard and use that smart brain of his to do something great and important.

But it was just… so strange to think he wouldn’t be coming with her. She’d figured he would. Even if she had no girlfriend or no other friends, she was counting on Jack coming with her. Was it selfish of her to not want him to go to Harvard? It probably was.

But why the hell did he even want to go there in the first place?
“Hey.”

She’d been so lost in thought that Alexis showing up next to her locker startled her.

“Oh, hey, Alex.”

“Did you think about the poster thing I asked you to do?” Alexis asked her. “I’ve had some ideas and I’m sure you can turn some of them into something really spectacular…”

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I have not thought about it. Sorry.”

She expected Alexis to get mad at her because of her brusqueness, but strangely, she didn’t. She just tilted her head and followed her down the hall while still talking.

“Well, I’ll email my ideas to you and you can tell me which one you like… are you feeling okay, Claire?”

Claire wanted to lie to her and tell her everything was fine, but she felt incredibly tired about… everything to do that.

“Well, my girlfriend dumped me and I’m pretty sure my brother has been pod-peopled,” she said. “Other than that, I’m peachy, thanks.”

Maybe it was because Alexis wanted something from her, but she didn’t tell Claire she was overreacting. Instead, Alexis put a hand on her shoulder and smiled kindly at her.

“Hey, final exams season is looming closer. Tensions are high. I’m sure Jack will start acting like himself again in no time.”

Claire appreciated she had the delicacy not to mention Kaia.

“Yeah, I suppose it could be that,” she muttered. She didn’t want to think it was due to some other factor. A factor named ‘Luc’, for example. She shook her head and exiled that rat from her thoughts.

“Hey, we were planning on maybe doing something on Saturday, if you’re free…”

Alexis frowned and then opened her mouth, as if she was just realizing something.

“Oh, your birthday!” She bit her lip nervously before speaking: “I’m sorry, Claire. We… I… already made plans.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Claire asked, frowning at her. “What plans?”

Alexis glanced at her shoes, as if she was considering telling her about this or not, but in the end she raised her eyes.

“We’re… sort of having a sleepover at Kaia’s place,” she confessed.

Claire took in a deep breath, because suddenly it felt like all the oxygen had escaped from her lungs.

“Oh.”

“No, it’s not like that!” Alexis explained, hurriedly. “Patience is going to be there too. We’re doing things for the prom committee and writing a strongly worded letter to Principal Crowley about the same-sex couple ban…”
“Alex,” Claire interrupted her. “It’s fine. It’s okay. I mean… I really have no right to say anything. I’m the one who fucked things up with Kaia.”

The day, that had started weird and badly, had somehow managed to become worse. She turned around and tried to keep walking, but Alexis just wasn’t going to let this up.

“Claire, it’s really not like that,” she insisted. “Like… yeah, I had a crush on Kaia when we first met, but… she made her choice. And I get why.”

That got Claire’s attention enough for her to stop walking.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re stubbornly single-minded and have an abrasive personality.”

“Thanks?” Claire frowned.

“But you’re also honest. And protective. And sweet, in your own way,” Alexis continued. “And maybe things with Kaia aren’t as over and done with as you think they are.”

Claire stared at Alexis, at a loss for what to say for several seconds.

“Wh-what… did she tell you something? Alex…”

The bell calling people to class interrupted her. Alexis sighed and smiled condescendingly at her, as if Claire really had no idea about anything.

“You need to figure that out. Anyway, I’m sending you the email tonight.”

“Y-yeah,” Claire stammered as Alexis passed her by. “Well, who’s being single-minded now?”

But Alexis was already too far away to hear that comeback and in any case, Claire was late for class.

Not that she could focus on any of them. Her thoughts shifted irremediably back to Kaia and what Alexis had said. What did she know? What had Kaia said?

During lunch, she stalked the library until she caught Patience coming out of there with Jack, both of them carrying more books than it seemed possible.

“Hey!” she said, putting a hand on Patience’s shoulder and startling her. Her pile of books crashed on the floor with a loud din. Patience glared at her. “Sorry,” Claire muttered, leaning down to help her pick them up.

“What do you need, Claire?” Jack said, as he put his books to the side and leaned to help as well. “I told you I’d be studying with Patience.”

“Yeah, I know. I actually need to talk to her.”

“With me?” Patience asked, confused as she stood with the books once again safely nested against her chest. “What for?”

“You’re Kaia’s best friend, right?” Claire asked her. “You would know if there’s any chance that she’d take me back.”

Patience stared at her incredulously, as if she couldn’t believe that Claire would ask her that when she was in the middle of a very important studying session for a very important exam that could
decide their future. Claire supposed she could have found another moment to ask her this, but it was kind of an urgent matter.

“Well, I mean… maybe?” Patience said, when she realized Claire wasn’t going to move until she got an answer. “She was sad about all of it and she still is, but…”

“So there’s a chance?” Claire insisted.

Patience stared at her with her lips tightened, as if she thought Claire was trying her on purpose.

“Look, that’s something you need to talk about with her,” she concluded. “I can’t be passing messages between the two of you as if we’re twelve. Come on, Jack.”

Jack stared at Claire for a moment longer. He opened his mouth, maybe to say something, but in the end he simply followed Patience to wherever it was they were studying without another word.

Well, that was just fantastic. Claire had even less of an idea what to do now than before she talked to Patience.

“Alright, does anyone want to share something you’ve written?”

The classroom remained silent. The three last Inksters meetings had been slow, in the sense that neither of the six seemed to be writing that much with the exams around the corner. Kaia had some poems, Patience had some short stories, but mostly what they’d done was sit around and talk about they’ve been reading and what they wanted to write, what they were doing for prom…

And the conversation always seemed to decay and die out quickly, because Claire wasn’t talking to Kaia, Ben wasn’t talking to Jack and Jack wasn’t talking, period. Alexis and Patience tried, because they were little overachievers like that, but it didn’t always work out. The last couple of times, Castiel and Meg had cut out the meeting half an hour sooner than they usually did. Claire didn’t particularly mind this, what with all the awkwardness, but still. It was a bit depressing, compared to how vital and heated the conversations used to get not two months prior.

Castiel and Meg exchanged a look.

“Well, if you haven’t written anything lately… how about we share how the club has helped you this year?”

“Isn’t that the kind of thing one does when something’s about to finish?” Ben asked.

“Yes, Ben. School’s out in a couple of months and some of you won’t be returning next year,” Meg pointed out calmly.

“Oh,” Ben muttered, as if he had forgotten about that little detail.

“So maybe it’s a good time for us to get a little… introspective. Who wants to start?”

To no one’s surprise, Patience hand raised in the air.
“Well, umh… actually, I’m thankful for what the club has done for me,” she said. “I was terrified of sharing my writing before. To anyone. But talking to you and seeing how well you all received it… it’s done a lot for my confidence. So, thank you, everyone, for that.”

“Aww,” Alexis said, smiling at her. “Actually you’ve helped me too. I was never a very creative person… or at least I don’t think I was. This… helped me find something to do that’s fun and inspiring and… you know, I don’t necessarily plan to be a writer like Patience or Kaia, but I do enjoy doing it. I never would’ve found that out if I hadn’t come here.”

“Yeah. You know, ditto,” Ben replied, with a shrug. “I really only joined because I wanted to make friends and… I got to do just that, and that’s cool.”

Claire shifted in her chair. All those displays of sincerity and whatnot were a bit heavy-handed for her. What she really wanted to do was to get Kaia alone so she could talk to her. Or maybe not. What if Alexis had been wrong in her assessment that it wasn’t too late? Kaia wasn’t even looking at her right now…

“I made friends too. Those friends turned out not to be who I thought they were.”

The affirmation threw everyone for a loop. Not only because of how passive-aggressive it was, but because it came from the person Claire (and she guessed, everyone in the room) least expected to say something like that.

“Jack?” Castiel asked, frowning at him. He sounded unsure on whether he should reprimand him for that or take him outside to ask him if he was feeling okay.

Jack was staring down at the open notebook in front of him, his expression unreadable. When he spoke again, even his tone seemed devoid of all emotion:

“Friends are supposed to support you no matter what and not ignore you the minute things turn out wrong for some reason. But… sometimes some things get in the way and it seems… well, just that they don’t care about you as much as… for other relationships. I mean, even my own sister…” He stopped himself and looked up, as if he’d just realized he’d been saying all of that out loud. He cleared his throat, a sound that came out loud in the embarrassed silence that had fallen over the classroom. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well…” Meg began.

“That… is such bullshit!” Claire exploded.

She couldn’t stop herself. Because she knew exactly where all of this was coming from or, at least, she had a very firm suspicion of it.

“Claire…” Castiel started, with a warning tone, but Claire’s temperament had risen far beyond any reasoning. She stood up, facing Jack’s seat so he couldn’t escape her.

“No, come on! Say it!” she dared him. “Say to my face you think I’d ever chose any girl in the world over you!”

“Well, not any girl in the world!” Jack said, standing up. His cheeks were reddened and his fists were clenched, showing a rage that Claire had rarely, if ever, seen in him. “But it certainly seems to keep happening. The moment I tell you maybe I’m not going to California with you after all, you…”

“We’re not attached by the hip, Jack! If you don’t want to go to California, that’s fine by me! And one thing has nothing to do with the other!” Claire shook her head. “Where the hell is all this even
coming from? I thought we were way past this discussion!”

“No, we’re not past this discussion because you keep just…!”

Castiel stepped forwards and without another word, he grabbed each of them by one arm and
dragged them outside of the classroom.

“What is wrong with you two?” he asked, frowning.

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” Jack declared, his voice rising. “She’s the one who keeps pushing
me away, pushing everyone who cares about us away!”

“I’m the one doing that?!” Claire shouted, indignant and not caring anymore that anyone was
listening in. “Come the fuck on, Jack! You’re the one who’s been running around with Luc and
praising him to high heavens as if he was…”

“Exactly! Why can’t you believe that maybe he does care about…?”

“He gave me the letter!”

That declaration was enough to get Jack to pause for a second. The terror that grew in his eyes
would’ve satisfied her if this was any other circumstances, if she didn’t hate it that this was how it’d
come up. She was planning on waiting for the right time to tell Jack just how slimy Luc actually was,
trying to find the best way to tell him without breaking his heart.

But now…

“What do you mean?”

“The letter Kaia wrote me. I know you didn’t lose it. I know you kept it hidden,” Claire said. “And I
know, because Luc told me! And because he gave it to me!”

“No.” Jack shook his head. He was growing paler by the second. “I-I… I told him… he wouldn’t…”

“Well, he did. And you know why I didn’t tell you? Because I knew he did it so you and I would
fight. And I don’t want to fight with you. Not again. So this whole ‘Woe is me, my sister doesn’t love
me enough’ shit you’ve got going? It needs to stop because I’m the one who’s on your side, Jack.
The only one who’s ever been and will ever be, no matter what!”

She crossed her arms over chest and puffed. Because otherwise, she was going to start crying and
that was going to ruin the whole thing. Well, even more than it already was.

She shouldn’t have looked away, though. Because the first thing she saw when she did, was Kaia’s
face staring at her, her eyes wide open, looking every bit like a deer in the headlights.

Later on, she’d be barely aware that Castiel had grabbed each of them by an arm again (“Alright,
that’s enough. We’re going home!”) and that the drive back was awkward and quiet. She’d be barely
aware of the way Jack slammed his door behind him and how Castiel tried to convince him to come
out for dinner, to no avail.

Because the look in Kaia’s eyes haunted Claire for the rest of the night.
Castiel was only half-sure that Claire and Jack would come down the following morning, after the sorry spectacle they had given outside of the meeting. He understood that the situation was volatile and that this had been a long time coming, but he still wished it could’ve been avoided.

It certainly hadn’t helped that they each had locked themselves away in their rooms (Jack before dinner, Claire after having some bites and declaring she was no longer hungry) and refused to come out even when he’d asked them to.

He made pancakes, listening in to the familiar sounds of the morning: Jack’s alarm of birds and nature sounds, Claire’s alarm of loud rock music. He waited for the steps heading for the bathroom and the fight over who got to shower first, but it never came.

In a way, that silence was more unnerving than anything.

He placed the pancakes in the middle of the table and sat down with his mug of coffee to wait.

Jack came down first, followed closely by Claire who, for once, seemed to be on schedule. They sat together side by side and if they felt any excitement about the prospect of having pancakes for breakfast, they didn’t show it.

After several minutes of them eating without even acknowledging each other’s presence, Castiel cleared his throat.

“So… are you going to talk about it?”

“No,” Claire said.

“I don’t think so, no,” Jack said at the same time.

“You’re going to have to, eventually. Your Aunt Amara is coming later today, to stay for the weekend,” he reminded them. “We’re having dinner with her and your father. It’s going to be a tense occasion for everybody as is, so perhaps you’ll want to get past this by then.”

Neither of them looked at him. Claire was better versed at keeping her emotions closed to her chest, so he could read nothing in her expression as she finished the last bit of pancake.

“I’m taking the bus,” she declared, setting the keys to their car on the table. “I’ll see you tonight for
this dinner thing.”

Jack lowered his eyes. The shame and anger he was holding back was plain to see.

“Jack,” Castiel started.

“Was he always like this?” Jack asked, suddenly. It took a second for Castiel to realize that perhaps he hadn’t even noticed the fact that his sister had left. Or maybe he had, but he’d rather not recognize it. “Our dad, I mean. When he was younger, when he was with mom…”

Castiel wasn’t sure what he meant by “like this”, but he knew exactly what to tell him.

“Luc has always been someone who is… very cunning. And very good at noticing people’s weaknesses. And exploiting them,” he admitted. “I don’t know if it’s something he does consciously, but he likes to control others. He likes to be the center of their universe, the only one they can come to when they’re in distress. That’s ultimately what drove a wedge between him and Kelly. She refused to be under his control.”

“B-but… that’s… the old him,” Jack stammered. “He changed. He told me he’d changed.”

He sounded like he was about to cry. Like a child protesting something he just didn’t want to see happening. Castiel tapped on his mug, pensively. He didn’t want to cause Jack any more distraught than he was already feeling, and yet, he couldn’t not be honest about this.

“Well, the way he acted with your sister and the secrets you confided in him doesn’t consist with the behavior of someone who has changed his ways,” he said. “I’m sorry, Jack. This… I believe this is something you need to talk about with him.”

Jack licked his lips, nervously.

“Okay,” he said. He grabbed the keys and stood. “I’m going to be late.”

The school drive was twenty minutes and he still had a good half hour to get there. But Castiel preferred not to point that out. As depressing as the situation might have been, he had to trust they could figure it out by themselves.

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Claire wasn’t a stalker. Alright, maybe sometimes she stalked the social media of girls she liked, but digital stalking was as far as she allowed herself to go. So if she went looking for Kaia on the halls that day, it wasn’t because she was stalking her. It was because she wanted to confront her about what she’d heard in person. Because she wasn’t a stalker and she also wasn’t a coward.

It was hard for her to define what she was though when she found Kaia by the drinking fountain and froze on her spot, considering she still had time to run away and pretend she hadn’t seen her.

She repressed that reaction successfully and strode towards Kaia, even though her knees were trembling slightly.

“H-Hey,” she muttered. It didn’t come out as confidently as usual, but Kaia was startled, jumping back a little.

“Hey,” she replied. Again she was staring, her dark eyes opened and her lips parted, as if she was
going to say something, but just… couldn’t bring herself to.

Claire tried to stop thinking about what she could do with those lips and focused on what she was there to do.

“I… I’m sorry about yesterday. You… I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

“Oh. No, don’t worry about it. It’s… high stress times. With… exams and everything.”

It was the same argument Alexis had used. Claire bit the inside of her cheek and forced herself to focus on the here and now instead of letting her mind wonder down paths she probably couldn’t come back from.

“I just… I wanted to say…” she started, though she wasn’t quite sure what she wanted to say.

Luckily for her, Kaia had her own reasons to be worried.

“Is it true? That Jack hid the letter and… that you have it now?”

Claire sighed, mildly relieved. At the very least that was a question she could answer honestly.

“Yes. I just found last week and I didn’t want to…” She let her voice trail off. She wasn’t sure why she’d come to talk to Kaia in the first place and now she was more than messing everything up. “I… I haven’t read it,” she ended confessing.

“Oh.” Kaia looked down at her shoes and Claire could have almost sworn she was blushing. “Why not?”

“I… I don’t know,” Claire admitted. “You wrote it when we were just starting to know each other, before I let you down and… well, it just doesn’t seem fair to do that to myself.”

Kaia toyed with the strap of her backpack, avoiding Claire’s eye.

“Maybe that’s for the best. I don’t really even remember what I wrote.”

Claire frowned at her.

“Do you want me to read it?”

“I… Claire, I don’t know!” Kaia exclaimed. She sounded very frustrated all of the sudden. She walked a few steps away and leaned against the opposite wall. Claire remained where she was, waiting for her to speak again. Kaia took a few deep breaths before she did: “It’s just… I fell so hard and so fast for you, I didn’t expect it to end like this. With this… fizzling out, this… going our own ways in silent resignation.”

“It’s not what I wanted either.”

“What did you want, Claire?”

It was a fair question. Kaia had been asking it for weeks and Claire’s inability to answer had been what drove them apart. But as she looked at her now, as she remembered the softness of her curls in her fingertips and the taste of her mouth and the ways her eyes lit up when she smiled…

“You,” she said without thinking.

Kaia huffed and looked away.
“Now who’s the one who’s not being fair?”

“I’m sorry.” Claire took a step forwards, but she stayed far away enough that she wouldn’t be tempted to reach out for her. “Kaia, I really need you to know that I never meant to cause you pain. I just… we’re so young, you know? We don’t know if…”

“If it’s going to last?” Kaia let out a bitter chuckle. “Well, of course not. If we’re not willing to make it last. And even then, do you really think the heartbreak will be worse because we spent more time together? Because we tried to build something real?”

“I know it will,” Claire murmured.

Kaia looked at her intently but before Claire could say something else, she sighed.

“All these weeks I’ve been waiting for you to… come and throw pebbles at my window again or… make some kind of grand romantic gesture. Something.” She sighed. “I guess people only do that in the movies and stuff.”

“Kaia…” Claire started, but before she could go on, Kaia took step forwards and stepped on the tip of her toes. Claire closed her eyes instinctively before she kissed her.

Her lips were still just as soft. And they were still capable of setting Claire’s heart racing.

It lasted maybe a few seconds before Kaia broke away.

“You were worth the heartbreak,” she whispered.

She didn’t give Claire time to react. She spun on her heels and walked away down the empty hallway. It took Claire a moment to realize that everyone around them was rushing towards the classrooms. She hadn’t even heard the bell ringing.

“What the hell?” she whispered to herself.

Had that been a goodbye kiss? Or would Kaia still be open to discuss things? If they made up, would they still go together or would it be temporary? No, Kaia would probably not want that. But what would she want? What did Claire want?

Well, at least she knew she was even more of a mess than she’d been before. As if she didn’t have enough things going through her mind!

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Jack stood outside of Mr. Winchester’s office, with his hand up in the air but unable to bring himself to knock. The day had dragged on and now it was almost time to go and really, did he want to bother Mr. Winchester with this? He could talk about it with Castiel… except that Castiel had already told him what he thought and it wasn’t something that he was eager to hear again. He needed a second opinion. He needed someone to help get his head in order and Mr. Winchester had always been able to do just that.

But at the same time… did he deserve to be there? There were probably other students that needed Mr. Winchester’s help more than he did. And even if they weren’t, Mr. Winchester probably wanted to go home instead of listening to him whining once again about his father and Claire and how he
couldn’t make up his mind about anything…

The door opened up and Jack jumped backwards, startled. Mr. Winchester smiled kindly at him.

“Hello, Jack. Did you want to talk?”

“I…” Jack started. “I’m not sure“

“Well, why don’t you come in and we figure it out together?” the counselor offered.

Well, since he was already there, he guess he could do that. Mr. Winchester closed the door behind him and gestured for him to sit.

“How you’ve been, Jack? You haven’t been back to talk to me in a while.”

“No. I guess… things have been good.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Oh, and it’s your birthday tomorrow, right? That’s a very special occasion for you and your sister.”

“Yes. Very special.” Jack tried to smile, but he wasn’t sure he managed more than just a very uncomfortable grimace. At the very least, it made Mr. Winchester ask:

“What’s bothering you, Jack?”

Jack looked up at him… and well, he just couldn’t hold everything back anymore. Mr. Winchester listened to him attentively, nodding now and then and encouraging him to go on when Jack felt like he couldn’t quite continue. But he told him everything: how he’d been sure that Luc had changed, what Claire had revealed, how he was dreading to see Luc that night for dinner with Aunt Amara.

“I just don’t know what I’m going to tell him,” he concluded. “I don’t know how he could do that and why. Do you think Claire is right, that he was trying to get us to fight?”

“I don’t know your father, Jack. What do you think?”

Jack stood up from the chair and paced around. Mr. Winchester’s office suddenly felt far too small for how anxious and unrestful he was.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I really don’t know what to think anymore. He was so nice to me these past weeks, I really thought…”

He couldn’t go on. There was a lump in his throat, choking out his words without mercy.

“Have you… considered the possibility that maybe you were wrong about him?”

Jack leaned on the wall, refusing to look at Mr. Winchester.

“Everybody keeps telling me that. Everybody has been saying that to me from the beginning. Was I so wrong for giving him a chance?”

“I don’t think you were wrong…”

“Because if I was wrong, that means I’m an idiot!” Jack exclaimed. “It means that anyone can just come in and take me for a ride and I’m not going to know better. And Claire is right, and I’m going to always need her watching my back.”
“Jack…”

Jack refused to stop his pacing around.

“But I can’t count on her doing that, because she has her own life and her own career and we’re not attached by the hip!”

“Are you mad at your sister?”

“No! Of course not, how could I be? She’s the only one who has always been honest with me.”

“Then are you mad at your father?”

“No!” Jack repeated, shaking his head. “I don’t know!”

“Then who are you angry with, Jack?”

“I’m mad at myself!” Jack shouted.

His voice broke down and suddenly everything about him became blurry. It took him a moment to realize it was because his eyes were overflowing with tears. His knees were shaking and the knot in his stomach had become a horrible, iron-like weight. He staggered back to the chair in front of Mr. Winchester’s desk and wiped his eyes with the back of his hands.

“I’m mad at myself,” he repeated, slowly. “For believing him. For pushing Claire away. For… pushing everyone away.”

Mr. Winchester gently placed the box of tissues closer to him. Jack did everything to hold back the tears, but it seemed like something, some sort of dam had broken and he just couldn’t stop it anymore.

“Jack. Jack, listen to me,” Mr. Winchester said. “Why do you think you’ve pushed everyone away?”

“Because that’s what I do.” Jack made a pause to blow his nose and try to calm himself so he could speak more clearly. “I try so hard for people to like me, to stay close to me. But I end up alienating them because I’m… I can’t even keep my family together!”

Mr. Winchester watched him silently for several seconds. Then, slowly, as if he was explaining a very difficult topic that he needed Jack to understand, he asked:

“Why is it your job to keep your family together?”

Jack opened his mouth, found he couldn’t say a word, and closed it again.

“You focus too much on giving other people what you think they need,” Mr. Winchester continued. “You want them to like you and you want them to stay close to you. That’s a very human impulse and there’s no reason to be ashamed. But in doing so with every one of your relationships, you might end making judgment calls that could hurt others or even yourself. You might convince yourself that what you’re doing is the right thing, but perhaps you’d fail to stop and examine the reasons you’re acting that way.”

Jack thought about the letter he’d hidden from Claire. He’d told himself he was protecting her, that she was moving too fast with Kaia and he was trying to protect her. He’d also thought about Castiel and Miss Masters and the problems that had brought for everybody. Those hadn’t been his calls to make and it had been selfish to think they were.
He also thought about Luc and how he’d given him another chance to have a relationship with him because… well, he seemed like he really wanted to get to know him. And he thought Claire was the selfish one for not doing the same, but perhaps she had been in the right to try and protect herself.

“Maybe…” he muttered, but he couldn’t go on because another sob climbed up his throat. That gave time to Mr. Winchester to continue:

“You have to give yourself permission to ask for what you need.” He made a pause, as if he wanted to make sure that Jack was taking in his words. “So, what do you need, Jack?”

Jack looked up at him slowly. Suddenly, maybe because he’d cried so hard, his mind felt a lot clearer than it had been when he’d been hesitating at the door. He knew exactly what he needed.

“The truth.”

Chapter End Notes

Thursday, March 7th: Hey, guys! Sorry to leave you all in a bit of a cliff-hanger, but I'm gonna have to take the next couple of weeks off due to Big, Important College Stuff.

This fic is coming to an end soon, though I still have some plot threads to figure out and I don't want to rush through them while I have other things to keep my mind occupied. I appreciate every single one of you who have with me through this, leaving comments and kudos. You're all awesome. I'll see you soon!
Claire was waiting for him outside in the parking lot when school was over, leaning against the car with her backpack at her feet. She looked down at her cellphone, apparently immersed on whatever it was she was reading there. Jack stopped on his tracks. Despite stopping by the bathroom after his chat with Mr. Winchester, he was vaguely aware that his eyes might still look puffy and his face might still be very pale. She was going to want to know what’d happened and…

Why was he hesitating? There was no shame in needing to talk to someone. He straightened his shoulders and stalked towards her.

“Heads up, Castiel says Amara is already at home,” she said, without even looking up.

“Oh.” Jack blinked to assimilate that information. “Right. That’s tonight.”

Claire finally raised his eyes and frowned.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Jack leaned against the car next to her. That was a loaded question and he wasn’t exactly sure how to answer to it, so he moved on to what he really wanted to talk about with Claire.

“I… I’ve been doing some thinking,” he started, slowly. “And I… I have to apologize to you.”

Claire frowned.

“Okay?”

Jack took a deep breath to gather up his courage.

“I shouldn’t have kept Kaia’s letter from you. It was wrong, it hurt you and I’m sorry. And then I lied to you about why I hadn’t given it to you, and that was wrong too. So…”

“Jack,” Claire interrupted him with a huff. “I’m not mad at you about the stupid letter. I mean, maybe I should be. But I’m just… I’m not.” She stopped and tilted her head, pensively. “I guess I understand why you did it. It’s… it’s scary to think that maybe we’re not always going to be as close as we are now.”

Jack swallowed. It was hard to hear exactly what he’d been thinking coming from her mouth.

“Well, I’m sorry anyway.”

“Yeah, you should be. It was incredibly stupid,” Claire declared. “But I’m really not mad about it. So… apology accepted, or whatever.”

Jack breathed out in relief. Despite knowing that he should have said this a long time ago, it was still a relief to hear her saying this.

“Do you think I should apologize to Kaia as well?”

“Honestly, maybe not. Things are very weird right now between me and her.”

“But this isn’t about you and her. She trusted me to do something and I didn’t do it.”
Claire let out a strange sounded. Jack was almost sure it sounded like a chuckle.

“You know why I am mad at you, though?” she said, changing the topic so abruptly it almost gave Jack whiplash. “That you felt like you could tell Luc of all people before you told me, that I had to find out through him. If your conscious was eating you up like that, why didn’t you come to tell me?”

“I… I thought you’d be just as furious as you were the last time,” Jack confessed. He pulled from the helm of his shirt, nervously. “Especially after the two of you had your falling out. I thought it might look like I was meddling again.”

“You’re an idiot,” Claire said, but there was no real meanness in her tone. “If two people want to be together or don’t want to be together, they’re going to do just that and no amount of meddling from someone else is going to change that.”

“Yes. I know that now.” Jack fidgeted with the helm of his shirt, distractedly. “I guess that means that mom really wanted to be with our dad.”

Claire stared at him quizzically.

“Okay. I’m not entirely sure where that came from, but I sure hope she did. The implication otherwise is kind of disturbing.”

“It’s just…” Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I want so bad to believe there’s something good in him, Claire. There has to be. She saw something, right? That’s why she married him.”

Claire stayed in silence for a very long time. This wasn’t the nicest conversation for them to be having, but she probably didn’t want to go home right then and have to face Amara once again.

“I think some people might look like they have something nice in them, but it isn’t always the truth.”

“I can’t believe that,” Jack said. “I don’t want to believe that.”

“And that’s what makes you a better person than I am,” Claire replied. “I don’t think you should lose that, Jack, but at the same time, you need to say enough is enough when someone tries to take advantage of you. I’ll watch your back as much as I can, but I can’t always be there.”

Jack nodded. He couldn’t talk, so instead, he enveloped Claire in his arms and held her tight against him. To his surprise, instead of pushing him away or struggling to get away, she simply sighed and patted his arm until he was ready to let her go.

“Better?” she asked him. Jack nodded, because if he started talking, he was going to begin crying all over again. “Okay, are you ready to face the Queen of Darkness?”

“Amara’s not the Queen of Darkness, Claire.”

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that,” she replied with a chuckle.

And just like that, everything was okay between them once again.
“They’re late,” Amara muttered, shaking her wrist to check her small golden watch.

Castiel took a sip of his coffee, trying to prevent his awkwardness from showing. He had been to many, many, many awkward family reunions and this was nowhere near the worst one, but it was up there. Amara had been acting cold and mighty since her arrival, Luc had been sucking up to her nonstop (mentioning how good she looked, how much he admired the deals he had closed, how thankful he was that he could be there to share a dinner with them and the twins on this very especial occasion) and been mostly just… ignored by the two of them.

Not that he was complaining. They could be passive-aggressively criticizing him and every single one of his life decisions and the decisions he’d made for the twins. That seemed to be a favorite topic for them and it was strange that it didn’t come up on the way from the airport, nor when they arrived at the house and Castiel offered to make coffee for everyone. In fact, it was as if the both of them were trying to be pleasant, or what passed for pleasant for people like them.

Well, that was until school was out and the twins were a no show.

“Being punctual is a sign of good manners,” Amara pointed out, coldly. “I am aghast that they’re not respecting that.”

“Well, they just came out of school,” Castiel said, trying to sound calm. “Maybe they’re talking with their friends or…”

“They knew Amara was coming to have dinner with us tonight for their birthday,” Luc added. “So, this is very unlike them.”

“More coffee?” Castiel offered quickly.

He took the moment alone in the kitchen to breathe in deeply, remind himself that these people were technically his family and text Claire to beg her to please, for the love of God, hurry up and come home.

“I have to apologize for them, of course,” Luc said. “I’m sure they don’t mean to be disrespectful of you.”

Castiel had to wonder what Luc’s agenda in all of this was, being so nice to their aunt. Even Amara was narrowing her eyes at him, as if she was certain all of this goodwill had some sort of hidden intentions behind them.

He was just serving the second cup of coffee when finally (finally!) Claire and Jack made their entry. He swallowed the impulse to demand to know where they were and why did they leave him alone with Amara and Luc of all people.

“Hello, children,” he said, instead.

“Hi, Uncle Cas. Hi, Aunt Amara.” Maybe it was Castiel’s imagination, but he thought Jack’s tone became a little colder when he dad: “Hi, dad.”

“Hello, children.” Luc sounded slightly reproachful. “I hope you didn’t forget about the dinner tonight. We organized it all in your honor, after all.”

Castiel had to wonder who these “we” were, because when he’d offered Luc to help, he’d said he had it all under control and that Castiel had terrible taste in restaurants anyway.

“We didn’t forget,” Claire said. Her face revealed nothing she was feeling or thinking. “We got a
It was clear that such cordiality coming from her caught both Amara and Luc by surprise. They both stared at Claire as if she had been replaced by an robot that was programmed to spout pleasantries and apologies.

“Well… it’s no matter,” Luc said. “Go on put on your best clothes. We’re going to a very fancy place and we don’t want to lose our reservation.”

Jack and Claire headed upstairs without any further comment.

“Claire certainly seems to be a lot… calmer,” Amara commented. “At least, she didn’t see as… antagonizing as before.”

Castiel didn’t want to tell her it was perfectly possible Claire was maybe saving the antagonizing for later in the night. Luc, on the other hand, jumped at the opportunity to outright lie about what he’d been doing all those weeks.

“I guess it must be my own influence, if I’m allowed to say so. Castiel is a little… liberal as to what he allows the children to do…”

“They’re practically adults,” Castiel argued. He could have just as easily argued that Claire had putting all her effort into spending as little time as possible with Luc, but he fully expected him to deny that.

“Practically adults doesn’t mean they’re adults,” Luc argued. “They still need of our guidance to decide what’s best for themselves, just like Aunt Amara and Michael were always giving us such good advice.”

Castiel knew he was definitely up to something now, because Luc hated when Michael told him what to do, especially when he argued “Dad would have wanted this” or “Dad would have wanted that”. But he still couldn’t figure out exactly what he was looking for here.

Amara, on her part, was delighted.

“You’re absolutely right! They need to listen to those who know best. If you had done that, Castiel, perhaps you wouldn’t have made as many mistakes in their upbringing.”

“I think I should change as well,” Castiel decided, standing up. “Excuse me.”

He took his time choosing a tie to go along with his suit. He ended up choosing a blue one, since Meg had said once that the color brought his eyes. Not that he needed to particularly impress anyone at that dinner, but just carrying the memory of something nice Meg had said already made him feel much better.

In fact, now that he thought about it, perhaps listening to her voice right now was exactly what he needed.

The phone rang twice before she picked it up.

“Cas? I thought you were having dinner with your aunt and the kids. Is something wrong?”

Castiel smiled. Just hearing to her speak already brightened what had, up until that point, been an all-around depressing afternoon.
“Nothing’s wrong. We’re about to leave, in fact.”

“Why are you calling me, then?”

“Moral support?”

Castiel sat on his bed and stared at himself in the mirror. A forty-something older man with a five o’clock shade on his cheek that he wouldn’t bother to shave looked back at him. He looked extremely tired and more than a little defeated. He couldn’t believe that it was him.

“Darling, don’t tell me you’re scared of one lousy dinner.”

“Scared is not the word I’d use. It’s just… dealing with my family is overwhelming.” He stopped and looked for the words to most precisely express what he was thinking. “It’s not easy to hear them questioning every single choice I have made. It makes me feel like I’m eighteen again and them telling me I’m not really ready to take the reins of my own life.” He stopped. “Perhaps that’s why I allow Jack and Claire so much liberty. But at the same time, a part of me has to wonder if I had maybe followed their advice, I’d have more to show for my life than I do now. Maybe I would’ve accomplished something.”

“Maybe. Or maybe you’re just rambling because you don’t really want to go.”

“That’s not an invalid assumption,” he admitted.

Meg chuckled on the other end of the line.

“Listen, you’re having a mid-life crisis, but there’s no reason for you to feel diminished. You raised two wonderful, strong kids. You wrote book after book that brightened up the childhoods of so many. You helped a group of insecure teenagers find the joy in their creativity. I’d say you’ve accomplished quite a lot.”

Of course, when she said it, it was easy to believe it. He would’ve believed anything she said in that smoky voice of hers.

“You’re amazing.”

“We’re not talking about me,” Meg said.

Castiel insisted anyway.

“You’re amazing and kind and strong and I don’t want to keep you a secret anymore.” He made a pause and then added in a soft breath: “I love you.”

A stunned silence followed that declaration. Castiel wondered if maybe it had been too soon for him to say that. After all, they’d only been together for three months. But he felt like he’d been falling for her since the first moment he’d laid eyes on her.

“That’s…” Meg made a pause, as if she needed a moment to process. “That’s the first time you’ve said that.”

“Yes. And I mean it. I love you,” he repeated. “You don’t have to say it back, but I thought you needed to know…”

“I love you too.”

He had no idea it was possible for his heart to feel this big inside his chest or that his face could hurt
from smiling so much.

“Okay, good.”

“Yeah.” Meg laughed. “Yeah, I think we need to talk about that a little more.”

“I’d love to.”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be right now, though?”

Suddenly, the perspective of dinner with Amara and Luc looked insignificant. He couldn’t remember what he’d been so nervous about.

Claire and Jack were both in the bathroom, apparently fighting for the vital space in front of the mirror.

“You don’t have to put on make-up, so move it!” Claire protested.

“I don’t know why you have to put all of that on your face, anyway.”

“Because it looks like yours and I can’t stand the thought of it.”

“We’re fraternal twins. We look nothing alike.”

Castiel chuckled at their conversation, which apparently made them aware of his presence, because they both stepped out at the same time, almost stumbling unto each other at the door. Now he understood why Jack had needed the mirror: he’d been trying to adjust the bowtie he was wearing along with his dress shirt. It was still a little crooked, but he looked neat and elegant nonetheless. Claire, however…

“You’re wearing a dress,” Castiel pointed out, surprised. He didn’t think Claire had worn a dress since she was eight years old and had threatened to stop breathing forever if he tried to put one on her.

Claire pulled from it, her cheeks turning slightly pink. As everything else she wore, it was black, but unlike everything else she owned, it didn’t have a single patch, hole or band logo on sight, making it seem elegant in its simplicity.

“Yeah, well. Thought it’d be fancier and Amara wouldn’t have as much to protest.”

Castiel smiled at them and took a step forward, grabbing each of them in one of his arms and pulling them closer for a hug.

“I am so… incredibly proud of the both of you,” he said.

He could sense their confusion even before he let them go and saw it upon their faces.

“Uh… thank you?” Jack muttered, because that was the polite thing to say.

“What did you smoke?” Claire asked, tilting her head. “And can we have some?”

Castiel laughed and tried to fix Jack’s bowtie. The result wasn’t any less lopsided.

“I’m just happy we get to share tonight. Even if it’s not in the most, uh… ideal company.”

“Understatement of the century,” Claire said. She grabbed the small bag that she’d hanged from the
doorknob. “Alright. Let’s get a move on before they come looking for us.”

Jack walked fast to catch up to his sister.

“If I wore make up, would you let me stay in the bathroom longer?”

“Please. You couldn’t even pull off a smoky eye.”

“I could if I knew how to…”

Castiel stared at the back of their heads and smiled to himself. They looked so tall and grown-up even as they still argued like children. He allowed himself a moment to believe maybe tonight’s dinner wouldn’t be complete disaster after all.
Chapter 53

Jack was not good at awkward silences. To him, a pause in the conversation meant the other person was not enjoying themselves in his company, so he always did his best to fill them up with one topic or the other. Claire had told him more than once that his constant chatter gave her a headache, but most people seemed relieved that he’d want to continue talking to them even as they were seemingly running out of topics.

Tonight, however, he didn’t feel like talking. As soon as they got inside of the car (Castiel sat in the middle of the backseat with them, perhaps to prevent them from fighting over who got to sit next to the window), Jack leaned his forehead against the cool glass and watched the streetlights passing them by. Despite his conversations with Mr. Winchester and Claire (or perhaps, precisely, because of them), he had a lot of things running through his mind and he needed time to organize them. He had so much to talk about with his dad, so many things he wanted to ask him.

He tried picturing how that conversation would go. Maybe it couldn’t be tonight, because this was something they needed to talk about alone, but the following day, maybe Luc would drop by to congratulate them on their actual birthday. Jack would ask him why he gave Claire the letter after he’d specifically told him that he was embarrassed and scared to tell her about it, and Luc would say…

What would he say? If Jack was in his place, he’d apologize. He couldn’t imagine a reason why he’d do that to Claire to begin with. Perhaps Luc just wanted to show her that she could trust him after all or perhaps he thought Claire deserved to know the truth no matter what. Those were good reasons and Jack could imagine himself forgiving Luc, telling him he understood, but that the way he went about it (behind Jack’s back, stealing the letter from his desk) was very much shady and that was the reason Claire didn’t trust him. He could ask him for more transparency in the future and perhaps that’d be the end of it.

Or he could deny that had happened and accuse Claire of lying. Jack was absolutely certain that Claire hadn’t lied, because she’d never lie about anything regarding Kaia. So what then? Perhaps Jack would tell him he knew that wasn’t the truth and give Luc a chance to rectify his story. That seemed like it was only fair. But what if he insisted?

What if he turned out Jack had been wrong and Luc was every bit the bad man that Claire thought he was? What then?

He was so lost into his thoughts that it took him a while to notice the awkward silence inside of the car. Castiel fidgeted with his fingers and the sleeves of his shirt, while Claire had her head leaned backwards and stared right at the car’s ceiling. Amara, on the passenger seat, tapped into her cellphone screen nonstop, probably sending very important business emails and instructions.

Jack was sitting right behind Luc, who drove with surgical precision, passing by cars and stopping several seconds before the yellow light even changed to red. It was a far cry from how he’d driven the night he’d taken Jack out for dinner. Perhaps he was being more careful in Amara’s deference, because Jack was certain she wasn’t the kind of person who didn’t approve of reckless driving. She wasn’t the kind of person who approve of any kind of recklessness.

He thought about saying something, but at the last second, he realized that there was nothing he could say. What he had to say to Luc had to be said in private, he barely knew Aunt Amara and Castiel and Claire, well, they didn’t seem to be uncomfortable around him. Just at the entire situation in general. He had no power over that.
So, for once, Jack decided to suffer the awkward silence like the rest of them.

After a few minutes, however, Luc moved to turn on the radio. A pop, animated song came on. Jack recognized it as one of the songs that Claire used to blast, arguing that Pink was the only pop singer hardcore enough for her taste.

*Party crasher,*

*Panty snatcher,*

*Call me up if you a gangsta…*

Claire moved her head, suddenly paying attention to it.

“Luc, turn that dirty song off!” Amara demanded.

Luc leaned forward to do that just before the chorus came in. Claire huffed, offended, and the awkward silence returned, multiplied.

Except this time Jack knew how to break it.

“*So, raise your… glass?*” he sang, not sure if that was the correct lyrics and pretty certain his voice was quite out of tune. Claire turned to stare at him, so Jack continued, encouraged: “*If you are wrong, in all the right ways…*”

“All my underdogs,” Claire joined in with a smile upon her face. “*Won’t you come on and come on and raise your glass*?”

“*Just come on and come and raise your glass!***

“Children!” Amara scolded them. They immediately stopped singing, but Claire covered her mouth to drown out her laughter. “See, this is what is wrong with the youth of today,” Amara kept complaining as she shook her head, disapprovingly. “All those songs about sex and drinking…”

“I don’t know, Aunt Amara,” Castiel said. He was smiling as well. “I think there are worse things in life than having sex and maybe a drink with someone. Not necessarily in that order.”

Claire hit him in the biceps and let out a scandalized guffaw. Jack laughed as well, though he wasn’t quite sure he was getting the full scope of the joke.

“We’re here,” Luc announced. He sounded strangely calm.

“Thank God, I’m starving.” Claire opened the door and walked outside without waiting for anyone else.

Castiel stopped long enough to open Amara’s door for her and then followed Claire. Jack was about to join them, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him in his place. Luc handed the keys to the valet with his free hand (that was impressive; Jack had never been to a restaurant with a valet service) before turning to him.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked. “I expected that unruly behavior from your sister, but you?”

Jack’s cheeks felt like they were burning. But at the same time, why should he feel embarrassed? Despite what Amara might think, the song wasn’t about drinking.

“We were just having a bit of fun,” Jack said. “That’s all.”
“Well, make sure your ‘bit of fun’ doesn’t upset Aunt Amara. There are too many things hanging in the balance, Jack.”

And with that, he headed inside as well.

Jack was starting to think that Claire was right and Luc was maybe a bit too invested into this dinner turning out well. Or perhaps Jack thought that because he wasn’t precisely happy with Luc right then. Of course, it was far from his intention to make Aunt Amara uncomfortable, so he decided to behave himself for the rest of the evening.

The restaurant was just as elegant as Luc had announced. There were two different sets of tall glasses and several sets of silverware next to them. Jack wasn’t sure how they were supposed to use them, so he kept eyeing Amara and just doing what she did.

“Champagne, please,” Luc ordered. “We’re celebrating a very special occasion after all.”

“Isn’t it funny how you guys can drink in our honor but if we even suggest we do it, Aunt Amara will have a stroke?” Claire said. The silence that followed that comment was brief, but intensely awkward. Castiel shook his head to indicate that this wasn’t the best time and Claire forced out a smile. “Just kidding, of course.”

The conversation after that was curt and sparse. Jack ordered a beef that came with a mushroom gravy he’d never tried and that he wasn’t sure he liked and Claire had a fish that was far too spicy. He knew because after taking one bite, she gulped down two glasses of water without breathing. They looked at each other and silently exchanged their plates. Claire had always liked mushrooms more anyway.

“Of course, I’m very proud of Jack,” Luc was saying. “He’s graduating top of his class, he’s been getting straight A’s in all of his exams and I expect colleges will be fighting over him.”

Claire rolled her eyes, but no one except Jack noticed it.

“You were very uncertain about what you wanted to study the last time I was here,” Amara pointed out. She took a sip of her glass of champagne. “Has that changed?”

It took Jack a moment to realize that she was talking to him.

“Yes, actually. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and I’ve decided I want to major in psychology with a minor in education.”

The words flowed out of his mouth so easily that even he was surprised by them. They sounded almost as confident as when Claire said she wanted to be an artist, and he guessed that was why everyone was suddenly staring at him.

“You do?” Castiel asked, frowning.

“Since when?” Claire tilted her head.

“Well… talking to dad help me figure that out,” Jack admitted. “And of course, all the vocational tests that Mr. Winchester had me take helped as well. I want to help people, especially kids. So I thought becoming a counselor was the best way to do that.”

Another stunned silence followed that declaration. Jack started to feel like his face was burning and wondered if it was because of the mortification or the fish’s spice…
“Okay,” Claire said and turned her attention back to her food.

“That is a very noble goal, Jack,” Castiel added. “I’m glad you were able to make up your mind.”

Jack looked down. He didn’t know why, but a warm, pleasant feeling at Castiel’s approval climbed up from his stomach and nested in his chest. It was weird. He hadn’t felt like that when he’d told Luc about the same thing. Perhaps because Luc hadn’t sounded so sincerely happy for him and even now, he looked like he’d just swallow a lemon.

“Yes, well,” he muttered. “There are many things a counselor can do. You can have your own practice, have patients.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Jack agreed. “Kaia told me that there are a lot of children in the foster care system that require therapy and assistance and I could help them as well.”

“I’m sorry, who is Kaia?” Aunt Amara asked.

Jack opened his mouth, closed it again and eyed Claire. She was looking straight at Aunt Amara, defiantly.

“My girlfriend,” she answered simply.

“Oh.”

Jack figured it wasn’t the best time to ask if Claire and Kaia were indeed still girlfriends. The conversation decayed after that for a while.

“And do you still think you’re going to that… art school of yours?”

“I don’t think so, Aunt Amara. I am going,” Claire replied. Her voice was incredibly calmed, but Jack noticed she was clenching the table cloth underneath the table. “I already sent my portfolio to them and I should have an answer by next month.”

“Claire is very talented, so I’m sure she’ll be accepted,” Castiel intervened. “I was even thinking…”

“Right, and if she is accepted, that will be a lot of… expenditure.”

Jack was certain that Claire was two seconds away from jumping over the table and try to stab Luc on the neck with one of the knives they hadn’t used yet. He put a hand over her forearm to prevent her from doing so. There were too many witnesses.

“Yes, I reckon it will be.” Claire’s tone was tense. “I’m willing to work to pay for it. I’m not afraid.”

“Let me just say, Claire, your… tenacity is admirable.”

Claire was so astonished by that she was rendered speechless. Jack couldn’t blame her. He wasn’t expecting Luc to pay her a compliment like that. Was it a compliment? Claire glanced at Jack and he knew she was thinking it had to be some kind of trap.

“Uh… thank you?”

“Art is a very competitive field, though, and only the best get to break in it,” Luc continued, either not picking up or outright ignoring his children’s confusion. “But I’m sure the name Novak will open up a lot of doors for you.”

“I don’t…” Claire started saying.
“We would very much like to support your career,” Luc said. “Both your careers. And I’m certain that taking the stress of the monetary cost of your education off your backs would help you focus on them and become the best in your fields.”

“Y-yes,” Jack stammered. He looked at Castiel, but his uncle seemed as taken aback as them. They all knew that dinner was a bit about trying to convince Aunt Amara to help them afford college, but no one had expected Luc to just come out and say it. “Of course. That’d be…”

“But you have to understand that your Aunt Amara has reservations,” Luc went on, turning to look at her. “It’s understandable. As generous as it would be for her to aid you financially, she’ll want to make sure that money is being used for its rightful purpose.”

Amara stared at Luc, the glass of champagne idle in her hand. She seemed to have been put on the spot as much as any of them, but she was either better at hiding it or she was curious to see how long was Luc going to beat around the bush, because she said nothing.

“So, I have a proposal for you,” Luc said, even though no one asked him where he was going with all of this. “Let me handle all of that.”

It took a second for Jack to process what he was saying. And even then, he wasn’t sure he’d understood it correctly.

Castiel was the first one to speak and his question wasn’t the most eloquent one:

“What?”

“If Aunt Amara agrees to set up a trust fund for you, kids, I volunteer to be its administrator and executor,” Luc declared. He was trying to make it sound like it was the greatest idea in the world, but Jack felt sick to his stomach all of the sudden. And it wasn’t because of the spicy fish. “I will make sure every semester is paid and all you’ll have to worry about is graduating on time.”

“Wait, wait,” Claire said. Her eyes were wide open and she had a strange grimace on her mouth, as if she wasn’t sure whether she should smile or not. “You want Amara to give you the money so you’ll handle it? And we’re supposed to trust that you just… will do what you’re saying?”

Luc huffed, as if he just couldn’t believe Claire was questioning his good intentions.

“I am your father, Claire. Why wouldn’t you trust me?”

“I can think of a couple of reasons…” Claire started, but before she could get another word in, loud chorus came from somewhere to their backs.

Jack was so busy readjusting his focus of the entire situation that he didn’t realize that it was the waiters, singing “Happy birthday!” to them as they approached their table with a round cake and several candles on top. His face burned as the entire restaurant turned to set their eyes on them. Some of the patrons even joined in on the singing, but he just couldn’t register…

Claire grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. Castiel had taken out his phone and was taking pictures of their reaction. However, he could see the concern in their eyes, as if they’d expected this blow from Luc, but they were worried about him more than anything.

So Jack forced himself to smile. Even as the tears form a lump in his throat, even as he had to hold to Claire’s hand not to start screaming, he smiled.

“… happy birthday to you!” the waiters finished and everyone at the restaurant applauded
enthusiastically.

Claire and Jack leaned over and blew the candles out. While the people around them cheered them on and clapped loudly, Claire mouthed “Are you okay?” at him.

Jack nodded. Not because he was okay, but because he’d finally found the answers to the questions that had been plaguing him. They weren’t the answers he would’ve wanted. But it was better to have them than not.
The conversation became stilted and uncomfortable again as they shared the cake as dessert and they were all more than relieved when Aunt Amara said that it was getting late.

“I’ll take a taxi back to my hotel, Luc, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“Aunt Amara, you know I don’t mind driving you,” Luc protested, but Amara shot him a look so cold it was a miracle he didn’t freeze on his spot.

“It’s no trouble.” Her tone was perfectly courteous, but there was something bubbling just underneath the surface that made Jack suspect that wasn’t what she meant. “Besides, I believe you have a lot to talk about with your children.”

And with those words, she turned around and walked away, leaving them all standing outside the restaurant while they waited for the valet to bring their car. Jack was aware of the glances both Claire and Castiel were casting in his direction, but he decided to ignore them. He wished he wasn’t the one who had to say anything, but he’d insisted in giving Luc another chance. Now he had to deal with the consequences of that decision.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems like I’ve said something wrong?” Luc commented lightly once they were all already in the car.

Jack had been looking outside of the window, once again thinking about a conversation with him he didn’t want to have. But it was important that he did.

“Children, please,” Luc huffed. Somehow he made it sound like he was including Castiel in that category, even though he was only a few years older than him. “I know what you must be thinking of me, but I’m only suggesting this for your own good. You know Aunt Amara doesn’t have a high opinion of you, especially Claire, and especially not after the way you treated her at Thanksgiving. I’m only trying to help.”

“You’re trying to help yourself, Luc,” Castiel said. “As always.”

No one was expecting Luc’s reaction to those words: he let out an uproarious laughter, as if he’d just heard the funniest joke ever.

“You have no right to say that about me,” he said, his tone becoming serious and dark all of the sudden. He turned to look at his brother. “Not after taking my children away from me…”

“Oh, quit it. He didn’t take us away!” Claire jumped. “You never wanted us to begin with!”

“I cannot believe you’ll think that of me, Claire!” Luc said, his tone offended and hurt. “Of course I wanted you…”

“You had a funny way of showing it.”

Jack kept surprising himself that night. He hadn’t planned on saying that out loud. He hadn’t planned on letting all the quiet anger he’d been harboring since the dinner come out like that. But it was getting increasingly harder to hold it back.

And Luc seemed shocked too. He huffed a couple more times.
“Jack…” he protested, but maybe he perceived that he was going to get nowhere, so he went quiet for the rest of the ride.

Claire was the first one to open the door and step outside, but she stopped after taking a few steps towards the front door and turned to wait for them. Castiel did the same.

Jack stepped out and stood against the car for several seconds until Luc understood he was waiting for him.

“Jack, you can’t possibly believe…!”

“Shut up!”

He hadn’t planned on screaming either, but dammit, it felt good. The pure shock in Luc’s face was also satisfying enough that it gave him the strength to continue:

“I believe it because they’re right. You came here saying you’d changed, that you wanted to be part of our lives and I believed you because that’s what I’ve always wanted from you. But you just… you lied. You just wanted to turn us into another one of your little money-making schemes…”

“You think I’d steal from my own children?”

“You left mom when she was sick!” Jack exploded. “I’m not even sure what you’re capable of or not!”

“I didn’t know she was sick when I left!” Luc argued. “She was the one who kicked me out!”

Jack didn’t know if that was true or not. In any case, he wasn’t precisely inclined to believe him at that point.

“Then why didn’t you come back to take care of us when she couldn’t anymore?” he pointed out. “Claire is right, you couldn’t have cared less what happened to us!”

“Alright, that’s enough, boy!” Luc surrounded the car and advanced towards Jack, his grey eyes flashing with fury. “You have no right to talk to me like this…”

“You have no right to pretend to be my father!” Jack shot back, refusing to back down even as Luc stopped right in front of his face. “You’re not my family. They are!” he added, pointed at where Castiel and Claire were standing, each of them with one foot pointing towards them, as if they were ready to jump in at any second.

Jack didn’t know what he expected Luc to say. Even then, even as hurt as he was, if Luc apologized to him, if he admitted what he did was wrong, if he realized how deeply this was affecting Jack…

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Luc rolled his eyes out. “You could have such a great future if you stuck with me and helped me convince Amara… Jack! Don’t walk away!”

But Jack didn’t stop and he didn’t turn around, not even to glance at Luc over his shoulder. He was done. He couldn’t hear any more. His heart was pounding fast as he walked inside the house, with Claire following him close behind.

“Jack!” Luc called again.

“Luc, not now,” Castiel said. “Don’t do this now. Just go.”

Jack was certain that Luc was going to insist in trying to speak to him, but a second later, Castiel
closed the door behind them. They waited in silence, standing in their living room nervously, until the roar of the engine indicated them that, finally, Luc had driven away. Castiel still checked outside before closing the curtains and turning to them.

“Jack, that was…” he started, but Claire interrupted him:

“That was awesome! Oh, my God, did you see his face?” She laughed and raised her hand at Jack, expecting a high-five. “You were great! I loved it!”

Jack didn’t feel like what he’d done was real cause for celebration. He half-heartedly crashed his palm against Claire’s and stepped back.

“Yeah, I… I’m sorry about that.”

“What? Dude, don’t be!” Claire said. “He had it coming.”

“You have every right to be angry, Jack,” Castiel added, putting a hand on his shoulder. “What he said…”

“I don’t… I don’t want to talk about it,” Jack muttered. “I think I… I’m gonna go to my room now.”

“Oh… okay,” Claire said, moving aside so he could head for the stairs.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Castiel asked him.

Jack stopped with his foot on the third step and turned to him. He wanted to say that he needed Luc there so he could scream at him some more. He wanted Castiel to assure him that everything would turn out alright in the end and that he wasn’t a horrible person for not wanting to see his father ever again. He wanted to say that he needed many things, but he wasn’t certain exactly what they were.

Instead, he smiled at him.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Claire said, immediately.

“I’m not,” Jack admitted, with a sigh. “But, uh… I will be.”

Despite how alone he felt right then, he was glad neither of them came after him. He wasn’t sure he could have managed to say another word without breaking down completely.

Claire hesitated outside of Jack’s door. That was strange. They usually barged on each other’s room unannounced to annoy each other. Well, Claire did it to annoy Jack. She was almost completely certain that Jack did it to follow her lead, because that was what siblings did, right? They got on each other’s nerves all the damn time, but then, when things got hard…

She was beginning to sound like Jack. Damn.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered to herself. She knew that Jack had said he wanted to be alone, but that had been hours ago. He was probably done marinating in his own emo thoughts and she knew he wasn’t asleep, because she could see the light glimmering underneath the door.
She ended up rapping softly at the door. Perhaps he still wasn’t ready to talk, but this was important.

“Yes?” Jack called on the other side, which Claire immediately interpreted as an invitation to come in.

“Hey,” she said, popping in.

Jack was wearing his ugliest grey T-shirt and pajama pants and sat on his bed on what looked like a nest of covers and printed pages. She walked inside and pulled up his computer chair near to grab one.

“You’re reading the book again?” she asked, surprised. “I thought you’d hated it.”

“I didn’t… I didn’t hate it,” Jack said. He almost sounded offended that she insinuated he could ever hate an Agatha and Jasper book. “I just didn’t like it as much as the others.”

Claire raised an eyebrow, a gesture she’d learned from Meg was more than effective to express skepticism. Jack huffed.

“In any case, I think my initial assessment was wrong,” he admitted. “So I’m giving it another chance.”

“So mature of you.” Claire snickered. Jack rolled his eyes, but there wasn’t any malice in their gestures.

“It’s late. What did you want?”

Claire pulled out her cellphone and stared at the screen. When Jack opened his mouth to ask a question, she raised a finger to silence him. The hour in her phone changed and a soft guitar melody started playing.

“It’s midnight,” she informed him. “Which means it’s finally our actual birthday.” She pulled out the present she had hidden under her shirt. The paper had chafed a little and the bow was lopsided, but she didn’t think Jack would care. “So, happy birthday.”

A grin split through Jack’s face. He stood up, opened his closet and from the highest shelf, the one Claire couldn’t reach without climbing on something, he extracted a perfectly wrapped gift with a big bow.

“Happy birthday,” he repeated back at her.

They exchanged the gifts at the same time. Jack carefully introduced his nail underneath one of the folds and pulled from the scotch tape carefully.

“Thank you!” he exclaimed, when the latest Neil Gaiman book fell on his lap. “I’ve been meaning to buy this!”

“Of course you were, you insufferable bookworm.” Claire ripped the wrapping from her gift and dropped the ribbons on Jack’s carpet carelessly. “Oh, that’s cool,” she had to admit. Jack had got her a sketchbook with a skull on the cover and pretty nice pages inside.

“Thought you might like it,” Jack said. “When you go to college, you can show it around and people will know you’re the toughest person there.”

Claire chuckled a little and moved to sit on the bed next to Jack. She squashed some of the pages in
the process, but honestly, that was Jack’s own fault. And besides, she didn’t give him any time to protest when she wrapped her arms around him.

“Thank you.”

Jack squeezed her tight and for what felt like several seconds, the twins stayed there, without saying a word.

“So…” Claire cleared her throat as she let go of him. “How are you feeling?”

She didn’t need to clarify what she meant. Jack scratched his arm nervously.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I think… I’m disappointed and I’m angry, but…”

“Not all that surprised?”

Jack sighed, maybe relieved she could understand it without her having to explain it any further.

“At least now I know,” he concluded. “I know for certain why he came to see us and… well, it’s always better to know the truth.”

“Yeah. I guess. And dude, I know you hate being confrontational, but I honestly think you were great.”

“Thanks.” Jack chuckled. “To be honest, it felt great. Now I know why you do it.”

Claire hit him in the bicep and Jack laughed at her.

“So what happens now?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he answered, with a slight shrug. “If he wants to be part of our lives, part of our family, for real… I wouldn’t oppose it. But I’m not going to trust in him again so easily.”

“I’m not going to trust him ever, period.”

“You still think that people can’t change?”

“I mean… Exhibit A?” she said, looking at him with confusion. She’d come here to talk about how much Luc sucked, what was he trying to say now?

“I don’t know. Maybe he hasn’t changed, but you have. A lot.”

“No, I haven’t.” Claire moved away as if Jack had just pointed out she had a spider on her shoulder. “What are you even talking about?”

“Remember back in September when you fought Tracy because she was saying horrible things about me?”

“The bitch had it coming and I will stand by that decision forever,” Claire protested. Jack chuckled and shook his head, as if that wasn’t what he’d meant.

“You didn’t even stop to hear what I had to say about that. But just now, you saw how sad Luc was making me and you didn’t step up to punch him in the nose.”

“Not because I didn’t want to, believe me,” Claire said, still not sure where he was going with this. “It just looked like you had that handled from where I was standing.”
“Exactly. Because you let me handle it,” Jack pointed out. “Even though you had your reasons to confront Luc as well, you decided to step aside. And then you came here to ask me how I was.”

“Okay.” Claire tilted her head. “What exactly are you saying right now? Are you telling me I’ve grown soft?”

“Kinda, yeah.” Jack nodded and ignored Claire’s offended huff. “And I think you started growing soft since you began dating Kaia.”

It was strange. Despite how much Claire kept telling herself that she was over it, that she needed to get over it and let go for her own sake, hearing her name still made something deep inside her chest ache.

“I know you don’t want to talk about her.”

“Great. Let’s not!” she suggested, but Jack continued, relentless:

“But I think it was her who made you realize that caring for others doesn’t always mean fighting their battles for them. Sometimes it means being there while they fight them. Like you were for her.”

“Yeah. And look how that ended.”

“I don’t think it has ended.” Jack tilted his head. “I think you’ve grown enough that you could have like an actual, adult relationship with her, which is what she was asking from you.”

“Okay, stop that,” Claire interrupted him, irritated. “You’re not a counselor yet.”

At least that had the advantage to make Jack laugh and gave her the chance to change the topic.

“Did you really mean that, by the way? That you were going to do a major in that and a minor in this and whatnot?”

“Yeah.” Jack stopped, lifted up his chin and repeated, more confidently. “Yes. That’s what I want to do. I want to help people. Or help them help themselves.”

“Well, that makes an incredible amount of sense,” Claire told him. She wasn’t even being sarcastic. “I think you’ll be awesome at that.”

“Thank you.”

There was not much more to say after that. Claire let Jack give her another hug, they said goodnight to each other and then she headed for her room.

She would have liked to just lie down, close her eyes and let sleep overtake her, but it seem like that wasn’t in the cards for her that night. She tossed and turned restlessly, as Jack’s words ran through her head over and over. He was wrong, of course. She hadn’t changed at all, and even if she had, it wasn’t a change significant enough to mean that she could be what Kaia needed her to be. That wasn’t how things worked. Jack knew nothing about relationships to begin with, so why was she even listening to him?

He did know her, though. Better than anyone in the world.

Claire clicked her tongue and kicked the covers aside. She turned on the lamp over her desk and opened her drawer. Her heart leapt to her throat when she didn’t immediately found what she was looking for, but it turned out that she had only put a couple of drawings over it.
She sat down on her bed with her legs crossed and stared at Kaia’s handwriting. How was it possible for a piece of paper to feel so heavy in her hand?

Should she? If Jack was right about her becoming a different person over the course of her relationship with Kaia, that meant that this letter had been written for a very different Claire. And who even was that person anymore, Claire wasn’t entirely sure. But if she had become better (at controlling her anger, at being aware of what others needed from her) that meant that Claire from a few months ago was worse. And Kaia had still chosen to date her. She’d still chosen to write this letter for her.

She stuck her nail underneath the envelope’s paper and pulled, slowly, making sure not to break it. Her hands were trembling slightly as she pulled out the letter inside. Kaia had chosen to use a lavender-tinted paper and of course, her calligraphy was stylized and careful, as if she’d stopped to consider every word before writing it down.

Dearest,

I have read so much poetry, listened to so many songs, seen so many movies and I never once believed in what they called “love at first sight”. I still don’t believe it.

But that morning when we sat together underneath the tree at the edge of the field and we talked for the first time, something moved deep inside of my chest. It wasn’t violent or uncontrollable, like a fire or a hurricane. It wasn’t anything intense or unstoppable. I simply looked at your face and I listened to your laughter and it dawned on me that I already knew you. That I had been waiting for you. My soul recognized you, even if my mind and my heart took a little longer to catch up.

Maybe lifetimes ago, you and I already met. In realities that we can’t even imagine, in worlds outside of our reach, through ages too far away for us to grasp. When I kissed you tonight, the rain stopped around us because you were warm and safe and I felt like I was coming home after a very long time.

I don’t believe in love at first sight. But I do believe this isn’t the first time I have fallen in love with you. I have chosen you before and I’m so lucky I got to find you once more.

So… do you want to go again?

K.
Castiel stared at the table. He moved the vase with flowers to the left. He realized it wasn’t centered enough, so he pushed it to the right again. He stepped away, analyzed the table again, and with a sigh, decided that it was perfect.

Although, maybe if he added another flower to the…

He didn’t have time to keep second-guessing himself. Jack and Claire’s voices came floating from the living room:

“I’m telling you, Jack, it’s driving me crazy. I really need to know what you think about this!”

“I can’t tell you what I think about it, because this is something you have to decide on your own.”

“Okay, but you’re like a future counselor, right? Can’t you counsel me right now?”

“I’m starting to regret telling you that…”

Whatever their conversation was about, it stopped abruptly when they both stepped into the kitchen. They stared at the table, their eyes growing wide at the sight of it. Castiel took a deep breath and grinned at them.

“Happy birthday, kids.”

“Woah!” Claire exclaimed.

“You did all of this?” Jack asked, beaming. “For us?”

Castiel shrugged and tried to pretend like it had been nothing, really. Between Amara’s arrival and the blowout last night, he’d barely had time to go to the market and get everything, but it had been worth it in the end: he’d got up early to cook the pancakes and the muffins, chop the strawberries and blueberries, make sure the coffee was at the exact temperature that Claire liked…

Jack came over him and embraced him in his arms, holding him so tight Castiel felt his ribs collapsing.

“Thank you! It’s amazing!”

“You deserve it,” Castiel assured him, patting him in the back.

“You shouldn’t have.” Claire’s hug was shorter and less constricting, but Castiel appreciated nonetheless. “But FYI, since you did, I’m totally gonna eat everything.”

>Please!” Castiel gestured for them to sit. He moved his own chair and waited until they had helped themselves to the food (Jack went for the salad fruit first while Claire poured herself some coffee) before he cleared his throat. “I’m actually glad we have this time to share, just the three of us. There is something that I have been meaning to tell you.”

Claire continued eating as if she hadn’t heard a single word, but Jack had the courtesy of looking up at him.

“What is it, Uncle Cas?”
“Well…” He took a moment to stare into his mug. He’d prepared his speech and practiced it a little, so he had no reason to be nervous about it. He took a deep breath and look up. “You know how sometimes people can come into your life unexpectedly and become so much more important than you’ve thought…”

“Oh, like Claire and Kaia!” Jack pointed out.

Claire looked up while chewing on her pancake. And suddenly Castiel realized that what he was about to reveal could have some unexpected consequences. How would she feel about him dating her ex-girlfriend’s foster mother?

But then again, it was unfair to Meg to keep all of this a secret and he had promised he wasn’t going to do it anymore. So he cleared out his throat.

“Yes, exactly like that. Well, it turns out that I…”

“Hey, speaking of Kaia, maybe you can give me some advice,” Claire interrupted him. “Jack here is being useless. Even more so than usual.”

“I told you, I don’t want to meddle anymore!”

“Well, I’m giving you permission to meddle! Just tell me what you think I should do!”

“Children,” Castiel said, hoping his tone didn’t come off as too exasperated.

“Okay, you can tell us your thing afterwards,” Claire promised. “But listen: I’m thinking I should ask Kaia to prom. Because last time we talked, it sounded like she was saying goodbye to me, and I was totally willing to let her go. But then I read this letter she wrote me and it made me realize I will regret everything if I don’t try one more time to make it work between us. But is that pushing her boundaries? What if she gets mad at me for even doing something like that?”

“She’s been like this all morning,” Jack whined.

Castiel realized that they were not going to stir the conversation away from this topic until Claire had actually obtained an answer that’d calm her down.

“I think maybe you need to have a lengthy conversation with Kaia about all of that,” he said. “Now…”

Before he could say another word, the doorbell rang, interrupting him. Castiel counted to ten while the twins exchanged confused glances.

“Are we expecting someone?”

“I don’t think so.”

Castiel was tempted to pretend there was no one home and just keep going what he was trying to tell them, but at the last second, his ingrained hospitality won out. He stood out and walked to the door, telling himself that he’d definitely have a chat with the twins as soon as this had been dealt with.

He was not expecting to see the person he found on the other side.

“Aunt Amara?”

“Oh, good, you’re awake!” Amara said and sauntered inside of the house as if she owned the place. Then again, that was just how Amara walked in everywhere. “I was hoping you’d be. Are the
“We were just... having breakfast...” Castiel mumbled, too stunned to form a full sentence.

Jack and Claire popped their heads from the kitchen. Claire attempted to retreat inside as soon as she realized who it was, but Jack grabbed her by the arm and forced her to come out.

“Aunt Amara! So nice to see you. We thought you were leaving early this morning.”

“I thought so too, darling.” Amara set her handbag over the coffee table and plopped down on their couch, crossing her legs and eyeing the twins, who were, of course, both still in their pajamas. “But then, last night, a strange thing happened. Your father called me up, apologized for your behavior throughout the dinner and insisted that I should think over the idea of naming him the executor of your college trust fund.”

Castiel’s eyes immediately darted towards Jack. He squared his shoulders and clenched his jaw, but other than that, he gave away no signs of being affected by this revelation.

“He did that?” he asked, softly.

“Oh, yes. We had a long conversation about this topic.”

Castiel didn’t know how to process this information, so he said nothing. He turned towards the twins, but they seem just as shocked by that development as them.

“Wouldn’t you want to know what I told him?” Amara prompted them.

“Not really,” Claire admitted.

“I said to him that I could smell his desperation from miles away,” Amara declared, ignoring the interjection. “I’m sorry to tell you this, children, but I really suspect Luc would misuse the money if I were to trust him with it.”

“Uh…” Jack looked at Clare, who shrugged. “How... how awful of him.”

“So, instead, I have decided that I will put Castiel in charge of it until the both of you turn twenty-one.”

There was a split second following that sentence when Castiel had to wonder if he was sleeping. But no, apparently, not only was he wide awake, he was also completely sane and had nothing wrong with his ears. He knew all of this because both Claire and Jack looked as bewildered as he felt, staring at Amara with eyes wide open and slack jaws.

“You... you’re giving us the money,” Jack said.

“I am.”

“And you’re... making Castiel the administrator,” Claire repeated.

“Did I not make myself clear enough about that?”

“No. You were clear, Aunt Amara, it’s just...” Castiel looked at the children, but he realized quiet soon that he was not going to get any help from them. “What made you change your mind?”

Amara shifted slightly on the couch. She obviously didn’t like being questioned like that and she wasn’t used to giving explanations for her whims. It was almost as if she’d expected them to accept
this generous (and it was generous, no one would say otherwise) gift without wondering if there would be any strings attached to it.

“Well… to be quite honest with you, you did.” She turned towards the twins and smiled at them. “You were much more confident in yourself than the last time I saw you and that shows how much you have grown in just a few months. That is commendable.”

“Thank you, Aunt Amara,” Jack said. He blushed and lowered his eyes at the compliment, but his little smile revealed how pleased he felt.

“And Claire…”

“Here we go,” Claire sighed, rolling her eyes.

“It’s quite admirable that you remain adamant in your goal, even if I do believe that an Art degree is a waste of your time and my money.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Then again, it wouldn’t be the first time that I am proven wrong,” Amara admitted. “So, provided you keep up with your classes and graduate on time, I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“You…” Claire let out a strange sound, something between a chuckle and cough. She looked at Jack and Castiel realized she was doing the same thing as him: looking for confirmation that all of this was really happening. “Are you serious?”

“I am always serious,” Amara said.

Claire opened her mouth, closed it again and shook her head, completely speechless.

“Thank you, Aunt Amara!” Jack was the first one to recover from the shock. He moved towards the couch and stretched his arms, then he put them back down. He obviously wasn’t sure if hugging Amara was the right thing to do. Amara saved him from the awkwardness by standing up and patting him on the cheek.

“You’re welcome, sweetie. Consider this your birthday present.” She made a pause. “But this is to pay for your education only. You’re still going to have to work if you want to live off campus and have any luxuries like computers or…”

“Wait,” Claire interrupted her, her eyes growing with sudden realization. “You’re doing this just to spite Luc, aren’t you?”

“Claire!” Castiel exclaimed. Now that she said it, it made total sense that was the reason Amara had made this decision, but he feared that getting called out on it would make her change her mind again.

“Of course not. I would hate to be the instigator of any family feud among us,” Amara replied, sticking her chin up in the air with dignity. “Then again, it is possible that during my long conversation with Luc last night I let him know that I don’t appreciate trying to be manipulated in such a manner.”

“That…” Castiel started and then stopped. “I have to be honest, I would’ve paid money to see his face.”

“Oh, my God,” Claire said. She laughed openly. “Aunt Amara, this might be the first time in my life
I legit respect you.”

Luckily, Amara chose to take that as a compliment.

“Thank you, darling.” She tilted her head at Jack and smiled at him. “And don’t you look so blue
about this. Your father might be a scoundrel, but it doesn’t mean that you have to be like him.”

Castiel knew that wasn’t the reason Jack had gone quiet all of the sudden, but it didn’t matter. He
smiled at Amara anyway.

“Yes. Thank you so much, Aunt Amara.”

Amara squeezed his shoulder lightly.

“Now, what are the plans for this very special day?” she asked.

“The plans?” It took a second for Castiel’s brain to catch up to it all. “Oh, yes. Well, we were just
going to head to the mall and I was going to let the children pick their own presents with my credit
card.”

“It’s sort of a family tradition,” Claire said.

And then Jack (sweet Jack, wonderful Jack, the most polite boy in the entire world, whom Castiel
loved as if he was his own son) said exactly what Castiel was dreading he would say:

“Would you like to come with us, Aunt Amara?”

And then Amara said the worst possible thing she could say in such circumstances:

“I don’t see why not. I’ve already rescheduled my flight for tomorrow morning anyway.”

So… the disclosure of Castiel’s relationship with Meg was going to have to wait a little longer.

The outing with Aunt Amara wasn’t as painful as Castiel imagined it would be. They managed to
lose her in a store of very expensive perfumes, which gave them plenty of time to hit the stores that
the twins really wanted to visit. Claire bought herself a lot of (black) new clothes and Jack chose
some more books even though Castiel was certain that Claire had given him one already for his
birthday. They reconvened with Amara in the food courtyard and he wasn’t exactly sure how, but it
became a sort of race to convince her to eat some sort of greasy, junk food she wouldn’t have
touched with a ten foot pole otherwise.

“How many calories are in this thing?” she asked, holding a burger and wrinkling her nose at it as if
it had crickets on it.

“Enough to make you happier than you’ve ever been in your entire life, trust me,” Claire told her.

“I’m not sure my personal trainer would be happy to know I ate something like this…”

“We’re lucky they’re not here then, aren’t we?”

“Come on, Aunt Amara,” Jack encouraged her. “Have one bite, and if you don’t like it, I’ll get you a
This was apparently what Amara needed to hear. She gave the burger the tiniest bite she could bring herself to give and chewed on it for several seconds in pensive silence.

“Well?”

“That is…” Amara made a pause and took another bite, bigger this time, as if she wanted to confirm that her first impression had been right. “It’s no gourmet dish, but it is unexpectedly tasty.”

“You should try the burgers from this place called Dean and Benny’s,” Jack said, happily. “It belongs to one of our classmate’s dads…”

His voice trailed off and Claire picked up the conversation for him before anyone could ask if there was anything wrong with him:

“It’s the sauce. That’s what makes it really good.”

“Indeed!” Amara exclaimed and for the first time in what felt like years, Castiel saw her smiled with the utmost sincerity. “I guess there’s nothing wrong with me having a cheat day. I didn’t have any of the cake last night at the restaurant.”

By the end of the day, Castiel had to admit that it had all been surprisingly pleasant. They dropped Amara off at her hotel and for once, it didn’t feel like she was being passive aggressive when she kissed each of them in the cheek and wished them to have a good day.

“Who would’ve thought? She’s actually not that unbearable when she manages to remove the stick out of her ass,” Claire commented.

“That’s really rude, Clare,” Jack chastised her. Castiel would’ve done the same thing, but he was laughing far too loudly for it to have any real effect.

“Well, that was a pleasant day,” he said once they were inside. “We ate a lot, but if any of you would like us to have some dinner…”

Claire and Jack put their bags down and stared at him once they were inside of the living room. Castiel felt strangely self-conscious all of the sudden.

“Is there something wrong, children?”

“No, nothing wrong,” Jack promised him.

“It’s just that you were going to tell us something this morning and then you didn’t?” Clare clarified. “We’ve been wondering all day what that was about.”

“Oh.” Castiel was surprised that they’d even remembered that. Between Claire’s drama with Kaia and Amara announcing she’d be paying for their colleges, it seemed like they’d had a lot of other things in their mind that day. “Well… why don’t you sit down so I can tell you?”

“Why do you need us to sit down?” Claire asked, frowning. “Is it something bad?”

“No, it’s not something bad,” he clarified quickly. “See, I didn’t tell you this before because I wanted to wait and see if it would turn out to be something serious. And it has, so it’s only fair that you know. Children, for some months now, I have been…”

The doorbell rang, interrupting him once again. Castiel closed his eyes and bit the inside of his
“Okay, we can ignore that,” Claire said.

“Finish what you were saying,” Jack added.

“Very well,” Castiel sighed. “I have been…”

The doorbell rang once more, so whoever it was on the other side wasn’t going away. Castiel sighed and raised a finger at them.

“Hold that thought,” he said, standing up.

That day seem to be full of surprises. First Amara and now Ben, staring up at him with eyes wide open, and stepping back, as if he had been two seconds away from running away.

“Umh… good evening, Mr. Novak,” Ben said, forcing out a smile. “Are Jack and Claire home?”
Jack and Claire had a split-second to decide what to do once they heard Ben’s voice. Claire jerked her head towards the stairs, pointing to him that they could hide away and pretend that they weren’t home at all. Jack considered it, but then shook his head. No. Whatever it was that Ben had come there to see, he wanted to hear it.

In part out of curiosity, but for another part… well, these past few weeks where he’d been fighting with Claire, he’d realized the reason that Luc had been able to manipulate him so easily was because he was really lonely. He’d never had trouble making friends, but he seemed unable to retain them and that made his heart ache in ways he didn’t think it was possible.

And whatever else had gone on between the two of them, Ben had been his friend.

Castiel moved away when he heard them approaching.

“Oh… hi!” Ben said. He smiled nervously and fumbled with the presents he was carrying. He extended the one in his left hand towards Jack and the one in the right to Claire, then realized that wasn’t right and crossed his arms. “Umh… happy birthday, guys.”

“We’re not doing a thing,” Claire said.

“I know. Alexis told me you weren’t doing a thing. But I’d already bought you the presents, so…”

Jack took his because the position Ben was holding couldn’t be too comfortable. Claire took hers as well. The reluctance and anger in her eyes would have been enough to send anyone running for the hills, but Ben stayed where he was, though he had to swallow a couple of times before he could speak up:

“Can… can we talk, Jack? Like… alone?”

“Umh…” Jack looked at Claire. She raised her eyebrows. He knew that she was ready to chase away Ben if he asked her to, but in truth… he needed to do this. It had been a long time coming. He handed her his gift for safe-keeping and smiled at Ben. “Yeah. Yeah, of course. Let’s step outside.”

Claire pointed at her eyes with two fingers, then towards Ben and closed the door behind them as Jack move to sit on the porch’s steps. After a few seconds, Ben came to join him.

“Hi,” he started, awkwardly.

It occurred to Jack, too late, that he should’ve offered him something to drink. It was a nice detail on his part to show up for their birthday, bearing presents. He was still a little apprehensive, though.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“You know, I just… I wanted to check on you,” Ben said. “That fight you had during the last meeting of the Inksters with Claire seemed… heavy.”

Jack nodded. God, had it really been two days? It felt like so many things had happened since then…

“Yeah. Yeah, it was. But, uh… we figured it out. We always do.”

“That’s great. I’m glad. I wish I had a brother or a sister. It seems super rad that you always have someone to share your birthday with, even if a lot of people are busy…”
He was rambling, trying to fill out the silence between the two. Jack couldn’t blame him.

“Ben,” he interrupted him. “Umh… I appreciate what you’re trying to do…”

“Right. But you don’t ever want to see my face again,” Ben sighed. He fidgeted with his fingers, but then turned to face Jack with his usual smile. “Alright, lay it out on me. I’ll take it like a man, I promise.”

Jack couldn’t hold back a smile. Ben could make anything sound lighthearted and funny and after all the “heaviness” he’d experienced in the last forty-eight hours, that was exactly what Jack needed.

“It’s not that I never want to see you again. It’s not that. I don’t hate you or anything like that.”

“But you haven’t talked to me in months,” Ben pointed out. “Not since I…”

“I was mad at you,” Jack admitted. “But it wasn’t because of you kissing me. It was because… we were friends. And I liked being your friend. And to know that you wanted something different, something else… I felt a little betrayed, to be honest with you.”

“Oh,” Ben muttered. “Oh, shit. Jack, I never… I never meant for you to feel like that. That was the furthest thing from my intention.”

“I also felt like… if being friends just wasn’t enough for you maybe that was because I made a really crappy friend.”

“God, no!” Ben exclaimed, shaking his head. “No, not at all. You’re a really cool dude and I enjoy hanging with you. Which is… why I ended up developing a crush on you in the first place, I guess.”

“I get that.” Jack stopped to reflect on that and corrected himself: “Actually I don’t. I don’t really get that. I don’t think I’ll ever get that. I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. You are who you are, Jack, and that’s fine.”

“Is it, though?” Jack asked, softly. “Would you be happy just being my friend again? Would that be enough for you?”

Ben made a pause. Not a very long one, so when he spoke again, he sounded sincere:

“Yeah. Yeah, that be more than enough. ‘Cause… just being friends with you is awesome.” He stretched his hand and placed it around Jack’s shoulders. “I’ve missed you, dude.”

Jack breathed out really slowly. He hadn’t realized he’d been so tense up until that very moment.

“Thank you,” he muttered, smiling. “I’ve missed you too.”

“Can you believe that?” Claire whispered. She and Castiel were standing next to the window, shamelessly spying Jack and Ben. “He came all the way here! With presents!” she added, pointing at the boxes she’d carelessly tossed over the couch on her rush to see what her brother and his friend were saying.

“Well… it is customary to show up with presents for someone’s birthday,” Castiel pointed out.
“Yeah, but after they were fighting for months?” Claire asked. “He either bought them like way in advance or…”

“Wait a second, they were fighting?” Castiel asked, frowning as if this was brand new information for him.

“Yes, because Ben kissed Jack but Jack’s as asexual as a sea sponge.”

“Ben kissed Jack?” Castiel repeated, stunned. “And Jack is a what?”

Claire shook her head, huffing. She didn’t have time to deal with Castiel catching up to things she’d known for ages.

“He showed up here knowing there was a chance I’d kick his ass or that Jack would tell him to go away,” she continued reflecting. “He showed up some spine. Like, he actually did that.”

“Yes, very well. What is this about Jack and Ben kissing?”

“He confronted this!” Claire continued, as a hot, angry feeling started crawling up her stomach. “Oh, my God, and I’ve been hesitating all day like an idiot! All week!”

She turned heels and headed directly from the stairs. She was halfway into climbing it before Castiel caught up.

“Claire! What is going on?”

“I am not going to be out-brave by fucking Ben Braeden!” she declared.

She wasn’t going to stop to explain all the nuances of her decision to Castiel. She didn’t have time. She dove inside her bedroom, fished her acoustic guitar from underneath her bed and stopped to wonder where the car keys were before remembering she kept them in the pocket of the last pair of jeans she’d worn.

“Claire, what are you doing?” Castiel asked.

Claire walked past him without answering his question. She opened the door and marched outside, ignoring the way that Jack and Ben startled when she almost stepped on them on her way to the car.

“Where are you going?” Castiel insisted from the doorway. “Claire, answer me right this instant!”

Claire put her guitar in the trunk and closed it with a slam before he turned towards him.

“I’m going to serenade my girlfriend and convince her to take my dumb lesbian ass back,” she declared. “And before you say anything, this is really important to me, so if you try to stop me from going, I’m just gonna sneak out of the window and go do it anyway.”

Castiel blinked at her and then sighed.

“Very well. I’ll warn Meg you’re coming so she won’t call the cops.”

And he retreated inside.

Claire looked at Ben and Jack, who were staring at her as if she was crazy. And maybe she was, but then again, she wasn’t about to admit that.

“You guys want to come?”
“Uh…” Jack muttered. He exchanged a look with Ben, who ultimately turned to Claire and shrugged.

“Sure. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

Claire made it very clear that they needed to be quiet all the way there, as she blasted the same song over and over in order to make sure she learned the lyrics correctly.

“Are you sure this is going to…?” Jack started to ask when she parked on the alley next to Miss Masters’ house.

“No,” Claire admitted. Her heart was pounding fast in her chest, as if she’d just run a marathon of some kind. “But I have to try.”

“Just FYI, I’m gonna film everything and put it on YouTube,” Ben said. Claire glared at him, but he simply smiled as well. “What, lesbians being cute and reconciling over a corny song? It’s going to go viral like that.” He snapped his fingers.

Claire tried to ignore him and the knot on his stomach as she pulled her guitar out of the trunk. Had the fence always been this tall? She hadn’t even noticed that the last time she was there. Would she be able to jump it with her guitar if she took impulse and…?

Jack leaned down and placed his hands together so she’d have a sort of step for her to reach the wall. She stared at him, surprised.

“Come on,” he encouraged her with a smile. “I’m sure Kaia will be wooed.”

Claire didn’t waste any time pointing out that nobody said “wooed”. She stepped on his hands and held on to the side of the fence, sitting on it and then jumping down to the grass below. She hoped she didn’t make too much noise. At least she didn’t fall flat on her face and groaned in pain like Ben did. Jack, of course, managed to jump the fence with no problem because it was only a few inches taller than he was.

Kaia’s window was illuminated. Alexis had said they were having a sleepover and doing prom-related stuff. Oh, God, that meant there was a chance that she and Patience were going to be there to see this too.

It had seemed like such a great idea when she was driving there, but now her hands were trembling slightly as she hanged her guitar around her neck. It didn’t help that Ben took out his cellphone out of his pocket and pointed it at her while Jack raised two thumbs to cheer her on.

Claire’s mouth was dry all of the sudden. Her singing voice wasn’t the best one and she was suddenly painfully aware of that.

She took a deep breath. Here went nothing.

Her fingers found the right cords with ease. It was really an easy song to play, just the same notes over and over again as she sang:

*Your lipstick stains*

*On the front lobe of my left-side brain*

*I knew I wouldn’t forget you*
And so I went and let you blow my mind…

There was some movement on the window. Jack gestured for her to raise her voice, so Claire took a deep breath and did just that:

Your sweet moonbeam

The smell of you in every single dream I dream

I knew when we collided

You're the one I have decided who's one of my kind

The curtain moved aside just as she went into the chorus. Patience and Alexis looked down at them, their mouths hanging open as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. They disappeared inside again the next second. Claire continued singing out loud, hoping that Kaia was around to hear her:

Hey, soul sister

Ain't that Mr. Mister on the radio, stereo

The way you move ain't fair, you know

Hey, soul sister

I don't wanna miss a single thing you do

Tonight…

The curtains moved again. Kaia stumbled forwards, as if someone had pushed her towards the window. Her eyes widened with surprise and Claire’s heart began pounding faster. She looked as cute as ever.

Just in time, I'm so glad

You have a one track mind like me

You gave my life direction

A game show love connection

We can't deny

Kaia covered her mouth with her hands. Claire smiled, unable to hold herself back. The nervousness she’d felt a moment before was all worth it just to see Kaia’s face right then.

I'm so obsessed

My heart is bound to beat

Right out my untrimmed chest

I believe in you

Like a virgin, you're Madonna
And I'm always gonna wanna blow your mind

This time, when she went into the chorus, Jack and Ben joined in. Their voices were even worse than hers, but it was the thought that counted. She was practically shouting at the top of her lungs during the third verse:

The way you can cut a rug

Watching you's the only drug I need

You're so gangsta, I'm so thug

You're the only one I'm dreaming of, you see?

I can be myself now finally

In fact, there's nothing I can't be

I want the world to see you be… with me

Claire realized she was no longer nervous. She’d forgotten about nervousness several verses ago.

Hey, soul sister…

Kaia’s eyes were wide as the moon.

… I don’t wanna miss a single thing you do…

Her smile brightened up the night.

… tonight.

The last notes of the song vanished in the air.

And Claire had never loved her more.

Well, that lasted for about five seconds until Kaia retreated inside without a word. That was when all of Claire’s doubts and fears returned in full force.

Jack and Ben, who had been cheering until a second before, went quiet all of the sudden.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked. “Do you think she liked it?”

“Maybe you need to do an encore,” Ben suggested. “I’ll get another angle.”

Claire wanted to tell the both of them were morons, but there was a sudden lump in her throat that would’ve made that difficult. She put her guitar down…

The back door opened, casting a rectangle of light on them. For a second, Claire was certain that it was Miss Masters coming to tell them that they were disturbing the peace and quiet of the neighborhood and that they needed to leave, but then Kaia came out running towards them, her black curls bouncing against her back with every step she took.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she shouted as she jumped directly towards Claire. The only thing she had time to do was stretch her arms and hold her as Kaia’s arms wrapped around her neck. “I can’t believe you actually did that!”
Claire closed her eyes and enjoyed that moment. She felt lightheaded and it was so surreal to have her between her arms again.

Kaia moved away, grinning. She was wearing a tank top and what seemed to be pajama tops. She’d been changing, Claire understood, that was why Patience and Alexis had had to bring her to the window. They were now observing them, both of them smiling and leaning against the doorway. Claire barely paid attention to them. It was hard to pay attention to anything when Kaia was right in front of her.

“Well, it was hard. That song is so cheesy I felt like I was gonna die.”

Kaia punched her in the bicep, but she laughed and didn’t let go of when Claire grabbed her hand.

“Kaia,” she started.

Kaia’s smile faltered a little, but she kept looking at her face.

“Yes?”

“I know we said a lot of stuff in the past few days and that things are kinda weird right now, but…”

“Yes?”

“… CalArts has a creative writing program.”

Kaia blinked at her, slowly, as if she was trying to process those words.

“What?”

“I looked it up last night. You still have time to make the late deadline if you apply next month,” Claire continued. She wasn’t sure she was saying the right thing, but the words kept coming out of her mouth like a torrent she couldn’t stop. “There’s also a great slam poetry scene that you could do great in…”

“Wait. Stop.” Kaia shook her head. “What are you saying?”

“Oh, my God!” Kaia stepped back and covered her mouth with her hands again. “I thought you were just asking me to go to prom with you!”

“Oh,” Claire muttered. With everything else going on, she’d forgotten that prom was actually a thing. “Uh… well, sure, if you want to, we can do that as well…”

Kaia shook her head, chuckling softly as she approached Claire again. Claire wanted to put her hands on her waist and pull her close, but she waited patiently until Kaia pulled her in first.

Her mouth tasted like toothpaste, and sweetness, and triumph.

“Yes,” she said when they broke away.

“Yes to California or yes to prom?” Claire asked, frowning.

“Yes to everything.”
And maybe this time when they kissed, there were fireworks going off in Claire’s mind. Or it might have been all their friends clapping and cheering them on.
“You never did anything like that when we were dating!” Alexis complained.

“That’s because your mom’s the sheriff and she has guns.”

“And you think Meg doesn’t?” Kaia asked.

Claire made a face that must have been funny, because everybody started laughing at her at the same time. Meg appeared on the door to check on them.

“You’re not making too much noise, are you?”

They barely managed to contain their laughter enough to answer to her.

“No, Meg.”

“No, Miss Masters.”

Meg threw them a warning glance and then retreated inside, letting them hang out on the porch and the front yard. As long as they weren’t bothering the neighbors, there was nothing wrong with them.

And Claire was thankful for it. She hadn’t realized how much the group had been fragmented until that night. She’d been so busy missing Kaia she’d barely even had time to miss the rest of her friends. But it was amazing when Kaia came back from the house with a pack of soda that they passed around, opened them up and improvised a toast.

“To Jack and Claire!” she said, holding the can above her head. “Happy birthday, guys!”

“Happy birthday!” Ben, Alexis and Patience said. Jack was blushing and laughing, because he wasn’t used to be the center of attention, but Claire had way more important things in her mind. She’d taken off her jacket and draped it around Kaia’s shoulders and now she was leaning against her shoulder.

And for once, for five entire minutes, everything was right with the world.

Which is why Claire surprised herself when she asked:

“So, what’s the battle plan?”

The others stared at her as if they had no idea what she was saying.

“For prom?” Claire reminded them. “The whole no same-sex couples allowed bullshit?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Kaia said. “I know you don’t really care about those things.”

“Are you kidding me? Of course I care!”

“Yeah, you care now that you actually have a personal reason to be,” Alexis replied, pointing at Kaia.

“Well, what can I say?” Claire replied, pulling Kaia even closer to her. “I’m not above bribery from pretty girls.”
Kaia laughed and honestly, Claire couldn’t be mad at anything when there was such a beautiful sound in the world.

Alexis fidgeted with her can. “Well… we’re thinking about it.”

“You’re kidding me, right? You almost jumped at my throat when I told you I didn’t particularly mind going separately and now you’re telling me you have no plan?” Claire asked.

“We’re going the diplomatic route,” Patience said. “We’re redacting a strongly-worded letter to Principal Crowley.”

Ben made a raspberry noise and Claire, for once, had to agree with him.

“Okay,” she said, hoping it wasn’t too obvious that she didn’t think too much of that plan. “And what is the plan for when Principal Crowley wipes his ass with your strongly-worded letter?”

Ben was the only one who appreciated that joke. Alexis and Patience (and even Kaia, though to a smaller degree) glared at her with exasperation.

“It’s going to work,” Alexis promised her. “We’re just politely reminding him that he doesn’t want to have a discrimination lawsuit in his hands.”

“I don’t mean to sound pessimistic,” Jack intervened. “But I don’t see that turning out too well.”

“He’ll know you’re bluffing and no parent is really going to waste their time on a lawsuit like that,” Claire agreed.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Patience asked. “That we march in front of the school with protest signs or stage a sit-in?”

“Yes, now you’re talking!” Ben said, enthusiastically. “Sign me up for civil disobedience!”

They all stared at him in complete silence until he sighed.

“You guys don’t know how to have fun,” he complained.

“I think it’ll work,” Kaia commented. “The way Meg puts it, Principal Crowley’s spine has the consistency and integrity of a beached jellyfish.”

That had to be the funniest comparison Claire had ever heard. She had to laugh about it, simply because of how ridiculous yet accurate it was.

“Well, whatever you need us to do, we’re in,” Claire offered.

Patience and Alexis exchanged a look that should’ve warned Claire of what was going to come out of their mouths next.

“Alright, don’t take this the wrong way, but you and Ben are kind of… troublemakers,” Alexis said.

“What?” Ben said. He stopped to think for a few seconds. “Yeah, alright, fair enough.”

“So I don’t think that having you involved in this is going to earn us Crowley’s goodwill,” Alexis continued. “However, Jack is one of the best students in all of school and if we could count with his help…”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely,” Jack agreed immediately, because of course he would. “Anything you
need.”

Claire was still in too good a mood to fight Alexis on this, so she simply shrugged.

“Well, call me up when that plan backfires,” she concluded. “It’s late. We better leave you to your organizing and your letters.”

Alexis and Patience complained loudly, but Claire ignored them as she picked up her guitar. Kaia stood up to walk them to their car. Claire waited until Ben and Jack were far away enough not to hear them and then stopped in the middle of the yard to look at Kaia.

Her smile was radiant, even as she said:

“This isn’t everything, you know?”

“I know.”

“We still have a lot to talk about. Like, if we’re going to California, where are we going to live? And maybe I don’t want to go to CalArts, ‘cause it’s expensive and maybe…”

Claire held her face between her hands and shut the rest of her complaints with a kiss. No, it wasn’t everything. But it was good enough for now and well, the rest they could figure it out.

Kaia seemed to be thinking the same thing, because she shook her head.

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m your idiot, baby.”

Kaia chuckled softly and went to remove her jacket, but Claire stopped her.

“Keep it. It looks good on you.”

“Have you decided to hit every single romcom cliché in one night?”

“Don’t act like you don’t love it.”

Kaia’s thumb drew a circle in the back of Claire’s hand. She wondered if she knew she was doing it or if it was just a thoughtless movement.

“I do,” Kaia admitted. “Thank you. No one had ever… it was very special.”

“You’re special, Kaia.” Claire leaning over pressed her forehead against Kaia’s, so that their eyes couldn’t escape one another. “You… you deserve so much and I want to give it to you. I really do. I…”

There was a loud honk that interrupted her. Claire groaned.

“… I’m going to kill those two.”

Kaia laughed again, stepping away from her, but still not quite letting go of her hand.

“I’ll see you on Monday, okay? Happy birthday.”

“Okay. Good night.”

They let go of each other very slowly. Even as they walked away on opposite directions, Claire
couldn’t resist the temptation of looking over her shoulder at Kaia’s figure as she walked back to the porch where Alexis and Patience were waiting. In one occasion, she caught Kaia doing the same thing. She smiled and Kaia lowered her eyes immediately, but Claire counted that as a win.

She could still make her all flustered and it was the most adorable thing she’d ever seen.

She climbed on the backseat along with her guitar and looked at the car’s ceiling before covering her eyes and squealing loudly as if Ben and Jack weren’t there to hear her.

“Well, I’m glad that turned out well for you,” Jack said, and he sounded completely and absolutely sincere.

“Yeah. And the video is going to be all over Twitter by tomorrow,” Ben predicted, as he quickly typed away in his phone.

“You know what? I ain’t even mad,” Claire decided. “Because we are damn cute and the entire world needs to see that.”

“Hell yeah, sister!” Ben approved and offered her his fist to bump. “Alright, let’s get going before my mom calls me up to tell me I’m late.”

Claire waited for Jack to start the car… and then nothing happened.

“What are you waiting for?”

Jack patted his pockets and looked around.

“Do you have the keys?”

It took several minutes for them to realize the keys were in the jacket that Claire had given to Kaia. So she had to get out of the car, cross the front yard and ask Kaia to give them to her. She laughed in her face, but Claire took it magnanimously. Life couldn’t be like a romcom all the damn time.

Claire was smiling widely and giggling whenever her cellphone chimed the following morning. Jack didn’t have to wonder if it was Kaia who was texting her, because she was the only person capable of making Claire smile when she hadn’t finished her cup of coffee yet.

Strangely, he didn’t feel as annoyed about it as he thought he would. He wasn’t sure what had changed. Perhaps having witnessed firsthand just how miserable Claire was without Kaia made him realize he had been selfish for feeling jealous. Or maybe, after everything that’d happened with Luc, he simply was more confident that nothing could come in between the two.

Castiel settled a plate filled to the brim with pancakes on the table.

“Really? Pancakes two days in a row?” Claire asked, barely lifting her face from her cellphone. “Are you trying to make us fat so you can sell us to a witch that’ll eat us?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Claire,” Castiel said. “Witches have their own food to make you fat.”

He moved his chair and sit down in front of them. He eyed Claire for a second.
“I assume last night went well for you.”

“Yeah, it went…” Claire’s phone rang again. She picked it up, eyed it, and laughed softly one more time.

“That’s great.” He sipped from his cup and started: “Listen, children, about what I was trying to tell you yesterday…”

“Umh, Uncle Cas?” Jack interrupted him. “I know what you’re trying to tell us is important, but I also have an important thing to tell you.”

Castiel exhaled very slowly and closed his fist, as if he was trying to control his frustration. Jack thought he was going to ask him to wait until he’d said his piece first, but in the end, he nodded, giving Jack the word.

“It’s about the book,” Jack said. “I’m sorry I reacted the way I did when I first read it.”

“Jack, you don’t have to apologize for your feelings…”

“No, I know that,” Jack interrupted him. “But I do have to apologize for the way I acted. I sort of threw a tantrum and it was very entitled on my part to tell you how the story should go. It’s your book, after all. You can write it however you want it.”

Castiel stared at him, his eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Jack… yes, the books are mine, but…”

“Yes, I know, you wrote them for us,” Jack said. “But they are yours. Undoubtedly. They are something you created out of love and I’m sorry if anything of what I said hurt you.”

Slowly, a smile appeared on Castiel’s face.

“Jack, you don’t have to worry about it. Nothing you say compares to what people on the Internet sometimes say about it.”

“How would you know what the people on the Internet say?” Claire asked, as she typed away in her phone. “You don’t even have a Twitter.”

“I have a Facebook…”

“Yeah, ‘cause Facebook’s for old people.”

“Are you calling me old, young lady?”

“Don’t worry, Uncle Cas,” Jack said, stretching a hand to place over his forearm. “You look very good for your age.”

Castiel scoffed indignantly.

“You little demons!” he complained while Claire burst into laughter and high-fived Jack. “I should have sold you to a witch when you were still small and tender…”

The bell rang, interrupting their breakfast one more time. It was odd how that seem to happen a lot in the last couple of days.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Castiel warned them as he stood up to open.
“Oh, that was good,” Claire said, wiping the tears of laughter that were rolling down her cheeks. “That was really good.”

“I guess,” Jack said, though he wasn’t quite sure what had been so funny about his comment. “Hey, Claire, I’ve been thinking… why don’t you ask Castiel to let you design the book’s cover? You’re so good, I’m sure it’ll look great.”

That managed to get her to look up from her phone. Finally.

“You have way too much faith me. I would draw a giant picture of Agatha and Raven making out.”

“I mean, if you want to.” Jack frowned. “Wouldn’t that be kind of a spoiler, though?”

Claire laughed again. Jack was about to insist in proposing the idea to Castiel when he walked back in again. His face was serious.

“Children. Your father is at the door.”

Both Claire and Jack were stunned silent for a few seconds.

“By ‘our father’ you mean a Mormon trying to convince us to talk to God or…?”

“I mean, Luc.”

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say,” Claire groaned.

“What does he want?” Jack asked. After the fight they’d had on Friday…

“He is leaving and he wants to say goodbye to you,” Castiel explained. “You don’t have to. I told him that I’m not going to make you see him if you chose not to.”

Jack turned towards Claire, unsure on what to do or say. She had crossed her arms over her chest and she looked very much like she’d rather swallow a spider than have to actually talk to Luc. And on one hand, he understood now why it would be that way.

But on the other, he felt like he wasn’t done saying what he needed to say to Luc.

“I’ll go,” he volunteered. “It’s okay.”

“No way, dude.” Claire shook her head. “I ain’t gonna let him think that I’m afraid to see him.”

Jack was certain that Luc wouldn’t interpret it that way, but in any case, he was glad that Claire was coming with him. He wished he had half her strength when facing him.

Luc looked impeccable as always in his suit. There was a soft smile in his lips, as if he was pleased to see them, but Jack had learned by then not to trust his facial expressions. They both stopped in the middle of the leaving room, way outside of his reach, and Luc made no effort to close the gap.

“Children. I’m glad you decided to see me before I go. It’d be a while before I return, you know.”

Claire merely glared at him. Jack felt the need to fill up the awkward silence again.

“Well, we hope you have a nice trip,” he said.

“Thank you. That is very considerate of you,” Luc replied.
Well, that had been almost civilized…

“I wonder well all of this consideration was on Friday night, when you screamed at me.”

Of course.

Claire took a step forwards, but Jack put a hand on her shoulder to prevent a parricide.

“Dad… I really…” He stopped and took a deep breath to try to organize his thoughts. “I’m sorry for the way I said those things to you.”

“Oh.” Luc blinked at him, taken aback. “Well, thank you…”

“But I’m not sorry for saying them,” Jack added. “You really let me down, but… I’m going to be okay in the long run. To be honest, I feel sorry for you. You’re the one who missed out on watching us grow up and who is going to miss out on being in our lives in the future as long as you don’t change. And I mean really change.”

He made a pause. Luc was staring at him with an unreadable expression.

“You think you’re so grown-up, don’t you, boy?” he asked.

It was strange. A few days ago, his sarcasm would have really been a blow to Jack’s feelings. Now, they just felt like the words of a very sad, very lonely man. And he was sad and alone because he had chosen to be that way.

“No. I still have a lot to learn,” Jack admitted. “So… goodbye.”

Luc scoffed and turned towards Claire.

“And do you have sermon prepared too?”

Instead of answering, Claire raised a middle finger at him.

“Very mature,” Luc said, rolling his eyes. “Honestly, I should have known better than to expect any different from the two of you.” He turned to Castiel. “After all…”

“You’re going to be late for your flight, Luc,” Castiel stated flatly.

Luc scoffed one more time and headed towards the door. He didn’t look back over his shoulders at them, not even once. They remained where they were, watching him go without moving until they heard his scar speeding down the street.

Only then Jack dared to breathe out in relief.

“Well, that was entirely pointless,” Claire said.

“I don’t think it was. But… yeah, it was kind of too much.”

“We need like, a week to rest from all the drama,” Claire declared. She turned around and headed back to the breakfast table, with Jack following close behind.

“You’re right. I don’t think I can handle any more life-changing revelations or events right now.” He pulled up a chair and helped himself to another pancake. He was still a little shaken, but having his system overflowing with sugar would certainly help.
“I hear you. I’m gonna start screaming non-stop at the next drastic thing that happens,” Claire said, grabbing her cup to continue sipping her coffee.

It took them a moment to realize that Castiel hadn’t gone back to sit with them. They both looked up at him.

“Is there something wrong, Uncle Cas?”

Castiel’s blank expression changed a little: he gave them a weird smile, sort of as if he was pressing his lips together because he was the one about to start screaming.

“I’m just… very impressed at how you handled that.” He finally moved the chair and joined them.

Jack smiled at him. “Thank you!”

“Hey, what was that thing that you wanted to tell us?” Claire asked.

“Nothing important.”
On Wednesday, the Inksters met up outside of Principal Crowley’s office.

“Alright, you guys let me do the talking,” Alexis requested, as if it was necessary. Jack still wasn’t confrontational enough to handle this and Patience had no experience whatsoever speaking truth to power.

“This is gonna be a disaster,” Claire predicted.

“No, it won’t,” Kaia said, but Claire noticed the way she squeezed her hand a little tighter. “It’ll be fine. He got the letter and said he wanted to talk to them in person. That means he read it.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean…” Claire started. She stopped herself and took a deep breath. “You know what, you’re right. It might be fine.”

She honestly didn’t believe it, but what did she know? Maybe she was just a cranky idiot.

“We go in, we state our demands for equality for LGBT students, we explain calmly what it entails,” Alexis continued. “Any questions?”

“Do you think maybe the tie is a bit too much?” Jack asked, pointing at it. Claire knew for a fact that he’d raided Castiel’s closet in order to find it and in her opinion, it was definitely over-the-top.

“No, you look good,” Patience said while Ben showed his appreciation with two thumbs up.

“And we need to look serious so he will take us seriously,” Alexis added.

The door opened and Principal Crowley himself popped his head out.

“Ah, Miss Jones,” he called. “It’s good to see you’re so… punctual.”

“Good morning, Mr. Crowley,” Alexis said, smiling. “May we come in?”

“Please.” Crowley extended his hand to signal them inside. “I’m eager to hear what you have to say.”

Well, that was extremely kind of him. Perhaps Claire just was predisposed against the guy for all those times she’d found herself sitting in front of his desk after fighting with someone or sassing a professor. Perhaps with kids like Alexis, Patience and Jack (meaning, utter and complete nerds) he was a different kind of Principal.

Their friends walked inside the office and the door closed behind them.

“Well, now we wait,” Kaia sighed.

“You guys want to know what’s being said in there?” Ben asked.

“Why, do you have supersonic hearing?” Claire arched an eyebrow at him.

“Ha! I wish. No, but Sam told me that there was a hole behind the chalkboard in the classroom next to Crowley’s office that he never got around fixing ‘cause he’s a cheapskate.”

Claire was really worried about what other kind of secret school knowledge Ben had and what he’d
do with it. But after exchanging a look with Kaia, she knew for certain they were not throwing away this chance.

Getting inside the empty classroom was easy enough. Claire closed the door behind them and pushed a chair against it so people wouldn’t come in looking for a quiet place to make out. Meanwhile, Kaia and Ben each climbed a chair and grabbed the board by the sides.

“You know, I always thought these things were screwed to the wall,” Kaia commented.

“Common sense would indicate that they should be, right?” Ben agreed.

For a terrifying second or two, Claire feared that it would fall over and cause a commotion that would get them caught, but after some fumbling around (“Be careful!”, “Okay, on the count of three”) they managed to settle it down without breaking anything. Claire examined the wall for a second, half-believing that this was one of Ben’s pranks, but then she noticed it: it was the size of a coin, perhaps because someone had indeed drilled it with the intention of screwing the board, but never got around to. They all leaned against it.

“Watch my foot!”

“Be quiet!”

“Can you see anything?”

Claire pressed her eye against the opening, but all she perceived was darkness on the other side. She was about to declare that spying mission a bust, but then she had the brilliant idea of pressing her ear against it.

The voices came muffled, but after shushing Kaia and Ben, she could make out some of what was being said.

“… I’m sure you understand that LGBT students have the right to have the same experience as their heterosexual classmates when it comes to prom…”

Alexis, at the very least, was doing them the favor of speaking loud and clear (or maybe she was just sitting closer to the hole). Crowley didn’t do the same thing. Claire could barely make out one of three words and the rest sounded like the babbling adults of a Charlie Brown cartoon:

“… the board of education… the PTA would not like… this isn’t an issue that we can prioritize right now,” he said. Claire frowned and pressed her ear even tighter, as if that would make the words any clear.

“I don’t understand,” Alexis said. “In your email you said you wanted to talk to us about this issue…”

“I wanted to talk to you… you’re very smart… you deserve to hear it from me.”

Claire supposed the last phrase should have sounded contrite, but she didn’t believe that Crowley was capable of something so sincere.

“What are they saying?” Ben asked. Both Claire and Kaia shushed him.

“Mr. Crowley, are you aware that what you’re saying could lead to a discrimination lawsuit?”

Claire cringed. Oh, so that was where they were going? That couldn’t be good.
“… let me worry about that sort of thing, Miss Jones.”

“But…”

“That’s not really fair.”

Claire froze.

“Jack’s talking,” she informed Kaia and Ben, and to her relief, they reacted with as much horror as her.


“What is he going to…?”

Claire shushed him one more time. This seemed like it was important.

“… you have the power to make all students feel equal and like their love is accepted,” Jack said. He definitely hadn’t prepared notes like Alexis had done, but he sounded confident enough to balance that out. “But you won’t do it because you think that the homophobic parents outnumber the ones who want inclusion for everyone?”

“Oh, no, Jack,” Claire whispered. “He just accused the PTA of being homophobic.”

Ben and Kaia groaned. They all knew what they meant. When they were trying to get something out of a homophobe, it was counterproductive to outright accuse them of homophobia.

There was a long silence at the other side of the wall, or perhaps Claire just couldn’t make out what they were saying. But whatever the case, she was certain that the meeting was over now, so she helped Ben and Kaia put the chalkboard back in its place and they tiptoed out of the classroom, one at a time so they wouldn’t attract attention to themselves from any passing teacher.

Not half a minute later, Principal Crowley’s door opened and Alexis, Jack and Patience walked out, looking so defeated it wasn’t even necessary to ask how it went.

Claire would’ve told them she’d told them so, but she felt like there would be no satisfaction on it.

“It’s just pure politics!” Alexis complained later, once they were sitting in Patience’s grandma coffee house, eating their hearts out along with some delicious muffins and pieces of pie. “Not even good politics, mind you. Outdated, terrible politics.”

She was the one who seemed more frustrated with that development. Knowing her, Claire realized it was because this had been her pet project for some time and being an overachiever, Alexis just didn’t handle failure with a lot of grace.

“Maybe we should have made the words in the letter a little stronger?” Patience suggested.

“Guys, come on. The problem wasn’t the letter,” Claire intervened. “The problem is that you’re never going to convince Crowley, because he’s afraid of the homophobic moms on the PTA.”

“So what do we do now?” Ben asked. “Do we talk to the PTA or…?”

“I’ll have my mom talk to them,” Alexis suggested. “But the way Crowley made it sound, it’s not likely we’re going to get anything out of it.”

“I can’t believe it’s the twenty-first century and you still have to beg them to let us go to prom with
whoever you want,” Jack commented. “It’s just so unfair.”

“Well, that’s the world for you,” Claire shrugged. She turned towards Kaia, who had been quiet for a while. “Are you okay, babe?”

Kaia snapped from whatever thoughts she was having and shook her head.

“No… I mean, yeah. It was a good try, guys,” she sighed. “Maybe we can do what Claire said and just… switch partners when we get there.”

The minute she heard her say that, Claire’s heart broke. This was the first school dance that Kaia got to go to because she had moved around so much in the past and she had been so excited about it…

“No,” Claire decided. “We’re not going to give up without a fight. We go to the PTA. We try the diplomatic way one more time and if that doesn’t work…”

“What then?” Alexis asked.

Claire leaned back on her chair with a smile.

“We try the troublemakers’ way.”

“I’m not entirely sure what I can do,” Castiel said, as Jack helped him put on his jacket and Claire adjusted his blue tie. “You know I don’t usually go to these meetings so I don’t have a lot of influence in them…”

“Look, we need everyone on our corner,” Claire said. “You just have to go and talk about how important it is for children to be themselves in this world and whatnot.”

“I still don’t think…”

“Look, I really, really, really want to go to prom with Kaia,” Claire said. “Please? This is really important to me.”

Castiel looked at her in the eye and sighed. What could he do? Claire rarely asked for anything from him and besides, she was right. It was a travesty that the school still had those terrible rules in place. If he could be help, even marginally, he should do it.

“Very well,” he sighed. “I shall try.”

“Thank you!”

“Alexis told us that Mrs. Mills is going to bring up the topic,” Jack reminded him. “All you have to do is second her. Miss Masters will do the same thing.”

“Jack, you know you don’t have to keep calling Meg ‘Miss Masters’,” Castiel pointed out. “You almost graduated, your sister is dating her daughter… it’s okay.”

Jack frowned at him as if he’d suddenly started talking a strange, foreign language.

“But… she’s still my teacher. That’d be disrespectful.”
Castiel bit the inside of his cheek and lowered his gaze, resigned.

“I will be back in a couple of hours. Remember your curfew. Where did you say you were going again?”

“The arcade,” Claire said.

“The movies,” Jack said at the same time. They both exchanged a quick look and then Claire explained:

“We’re going to the arcade until it closes and then we’re going to the movies. We’re going to be home by ten.”

Castiel stared at them. His gut was telling him that they were lying through their teeth, but he couldn’t accuse them without any evidence.

“Very well,” he said, resigned. “I’ll see you when we get back.”

As soon as the door closed behind them, Jack and Claire got on the move. They’d only had a couple of days to prepare for everything, but with the six of them working together, the results had come pretty fast. Claire seemed satisfied with them.

“Okay, look,” she said, pulling out two crudely drawn caricatures of Crowley on her computer screen. One of them had a snout and ears while the other showed him with horns and carrying a trident while grinning widely. “Which one do you like more, piggy or devil?”

“They’re both pretty offensive, Claire…”

“Jack, it’s a protest pamphlet. They’re supposed to be offensive.”

Jack supposed she was right.

“Devil. He looks evil. The piggy one just makes him look funny.”

Claire picked that one, opened the file that Patience had emailed them and quickly pasted Demon Crowley on the space they had left designed for that. She clicked a couple more times and then sent the file to Ben.

“Alright.” Claire grabbed the backpacks from under her desk and passed one to Jack. “Let’s go pick the others up.”

Castiel, who loved Claire and Jack very much and would do anything for them, had of course been affiliated to the PTA at every single level of their education. However, being a natural introvert and knowing many of the parents considered Claire a “bad influence” on their children, he had long avoided going to them if it wasn’t entirely necessary.
So he was more than a little lost when he stepped into the classroom where everybody was having
snacks or cups of coffee. He wondered awkwardly if he should’ve showed up there empty-handed.
He slowly backed away against the wall, hoping no one would notice him, but of course, somebody
did.

“Hey.” Meg grabbed him by the arm, startling him. “I thought you weren’t coming to this thing?”

“Uh, yes, well… Claire said something about me having a duty to come and defend her honor.”

That made her smile and as always, Castiel’s heart fluttered. She looked more like how he’d always
seen her at school: with a formal blouse and dress pants, though she’d let her long brown hair flow
freely down her shoulders. She looked beautiful, of course (she always looked beautiful), but Castiel
had come to prefer her in her more informal clothes, her jeans and shirts and even her old leather
jacket that lent credence to her affirmation that she’d been a “bad girl” in the past. They were just a
little more “her”, that was all.

“Well, this was supposed to be just a calm reunion about not very important stuff,” Meg said. She
looked around to make sure there were no other parents or teachers nearby that could hear them, but
the others were reunited in groups of two or three, talking to themselves without paying much
attention to them. So Meg stepped closer to Castiel and lowered her voice: “But Jody is going to
bring up the prom rules thing.”

“Yes, the twins informed me of that and said they needed my vote here.” Castiel nodded. “Do you
think there’s any chance it’ll go well?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Meg admitted. She slid her hand down and discreetly squeezed his. “Many
of these folks are… not that open-minded. And unless someone holds a gun to Crowley’s head in the
form of a lawsuit, I doubt he’ll come around.”

“But if he…”

“Castiel!”

Meg stepped away, quickly letting go of his hand as Sam walked up to them.

“How you’ve been?” he asked, shaking Castiel’s hand.

“Very well, thank you. How is your daughter?”

“Oh, don’t ask him that!” Meg said, cringing. “He’s going to show you all the baby pictures.”

“No, I won’t,” Sam said, quickly putting his cellphone away as if he hadn’t been about to do just
that. They laughed, however, leading Castiel to think that perhaps this was an inside joke between
the two. “Anyway, how’s Jack and Claire?”

“They’re doing great. Claire waits by the mailbox every day for her acceptance letter and Jack…”
He made a pause and looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“Well, at the start of this year, he was very confused and more than a little lost. I reckon you had
more than a little to do with how much he grew up and how he was able to make up his mind about
his future. So much, in fact, he now wants to be a counselor like you.”

Sam straightened his back, surprised.
“Really?” he asked and chuckled when Castiel confirmed it. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. Jack is a good kid. Claire is too and she has got a lot better at channeling her anger.”

“She has,” Castiel agreed, with a nod. “Again, thank you for that.”

“Please. The credit is not all mine,” Sam said, humbly. “You raised them and I hope one day I’ll be as good a parent as you are.”

Castiel stared at him.

“That is… one of the nicest things anybody’s said to me.”

“Alright, boys, I hate to cut the love fest,” Meg intervened. “But it seems things are about to start.”

She was right. People were taking their seats and Principal Crowley had walked up to the front of the classroom.

“Don’t be jealous, Meg,” Sam said, sliding an arm around her shoulders. “You are a good mom too.”

“As demonstrated by the fact our kids are currently in an outing with their friends and not getting in trouble.”

“Are you absolutely certain about that?” Meg asked, crooking an eyebrow.

Castiel sighed. “I want to believe.”

They parked the car in a playground near the school. Kaia and Patience had been quiet in the backseat.

“You guys okay there?” Claire asked, turning to look at them over her shoulder.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Kaia said, stretching her hand to grab Claire’s.

“Fine!” Patience repeated, in a tone too loud for it to be sincere. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not like we’re about to do anything illegal or…”

“It’s not illegal, Patience,” Jack told her. “It might be skirting the rules a little bit, but…”

“Jack,” Claire interrupted him and shook her head slightly to indicate he needed to stop talking.

“Oh… I mean… but we’re doing it for an important reason…” Jack continued. “LGBT students that come after us are going to be grateful. Think about this as… a legacy!”

“I’m straight, though.”

“Yes, and we appreciate your allyship very much,” Claire said. She was thinking maybe it wasn’t too late to turn around and drive Patience back home. She might’ve been a little bit of a liability. Then again, if she ratted them out to her parents…

She didn’t have time to keep thinking about it. Ben’s car (well, technically, Ben’s stepdad’s car) parked right behind them and Ben and Alexis exited and waved at them.
They all climbed out of the car, even Patience, though she still seemed nervous and hugged herself, even though it was nice spring night over head.

“Did you get it?”

“Did we get it?” Ben repeated with a grin as he walked around the car and popped the trunk open. “Check these babies out.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Alexis add as Claire opened one of the boxes inside to gander at the contents. “The guy at the printing house did not like that we showed up at the possible last minute with an order this big. We had to tip extra.”

“But it’ll be worth it,” Claire declared.

“Not if the PTA goes our way.”

“You’re an incurable optimist.”

“And you’re way too pessimistic for…”

“Can you guys… shut up?” Patience interrupted them, doubling over as if she was about to vomit.

“Is she alright?” Ben asked.

“Yeah,” Kaia said, as she rubbed Patience’s back. “She’s just, uh… not used to this kind of pressure.”

“Do you need some water?” Jack asked her.

“Where are you going to get…?” Claire started asking, but she went quiet when Jack opened their own trunk and extracted several bottles of water. “Okay. Why?”

“We’re going to do a lot of physical exercise tonight,” he said as he started passing them around. “It’s very important that we keep hydrated.”

“Ha, that’s funny. Keep hydrated while we break the law.”

Claire figured it was pointless to tell her, again, that they weren’t technically doing anything illegal. She turned towards Alexis.

“What time did your mom say she was going to call to tell you how it went?”

Alexis took her phone out of her pocket and check the hour.

“Any minute now.”

She said nothing else, but they all held their breaths. If things didn’t go the way they were hoping, then it’d be time for them to move.
Chapter 59

The first half… well, the first three-quarters, if he was being honest, of the PTA meeting were things Castiel didn’t really care for. They discussed things like the finances and security at the upcoming junior-senior prom dance, that would be taking place in a hotel ballroom where the students could check into the rooms if they chose to instead of driving home late at night.

“We assure you, we will make sure the children are all on their best behavior,” Principal Crowley assured them. “Our chaperones will make sure boys and girls stay in separate rooms.”

Claire would’ve guffawed at the heteronormativity of that statement. Castiel himself had trouble keeping a straight face. If it wasn’t for Meg elbowing him slightly, he would’ve burst into laughter right then.

“Now, if there’s no other topic that you wished to discuss…” Crowley started saying.

Jody Mills’ hand shot up from one of the seats at the front. Castiel knew her from when Claire and Alexis had dated and he knew she was a tough as nails, no-nonsense woman. Perhaps the best one to speak out at a moment like that.

Crowley stared at her, listlessly. It was obvious that had been a rhetorical question and he wasn’t expecting to have to take any questions.

“Yes, Sheriff Mills?” he asked, finally.

“Yes, my daughter tells me there’s a very antiquated rule that she and other students had asked you to strike down, but you said you needed to discuss it with us,” she stated. “I was actually surprised that you didn’t bring up the topic in the first place. It seems like a glaring omission.”

“Oh, I love this,” Meg whispered in Castiel’s ear. “Roasting of Crowley must be my favorite song.”

Castiel covered his mouth with his hand and feigned a little cough to hide his laughter. He was having way more fun at this thing that he’d expected, but then again, that might have been because Meg was there.

Crowley showed Jody a tense smile.

“Ah, yes, that issue. Well, while I appreciate your daughter’s concern and passion, I told her, we are not in a position to address it at the present time.”

“Why not?” Jody insisted. “I think we should all discuss it and hear everyone’s opinion on it.”

“I’m sorry,” a blonde woman sitting on the left intervened. “What is this issue that you’re talking about?”

“That Mrs. Davis,” Meg informed Castiel. “She’s a bitch.”

Why did the name ring a bell? Castiel started searching inside of his mind. Had he met this woman before or…?

“It’s about the ban for same-sex couples,” Jody said. “My daughter and her friends requested that it’d be lifted as it’s an outdated and ridiculous rule. Principal Crowley told them that he’d discussed the issue with the members of the PTA.”
Crowley’s face still expressed no emotion, but Castiel noticed he was hanging on the edge of the desk as if he was trying to keep himself from reacting.

“Yes, well. Thank you for reminding me,” Crowley said. “Now, I know this might be a bit of a controversial issue…”

“What’s there to discuss?” intervened another woman, a brunette one. Meg quickly whispered to Castiel that her name was Mrs. Frankle. Castiel was sure he’d never crossed paths with her, though he was still raking his brains trying to remember where and when had he met Mrs. Davis. “The ban is in place for a reason.”

“And what would be that reason, exactly?” Jody asked, lowering her voice in a tone that clearly indicated she would have no mercy on her if Mrs. Frankle said something bigoted next. The rest of the classroom had gone completely silence as everybody awaited with bated breath the results of this discussion.

Mrs. Frankle shifted in her seat, uncomfortable.

“Well… it’s to… protect our students, of course.”

“Protect them from what? The fact that some among them aren’t straight?” Jody asked.

Oh, she was good. Claire would’ve been hooting and cheering at that exact moment.

“I just think they are too young to be taking part in such political discussions…”

“This isn’t political,” Jody interrupted her. “Some students aren’t permitted to go with the person they choose to go and it’s unfair. And besides, they’re not children anymore. Some of them are graduating this year, they’re going out onto the world and deciding what they think or believe by themselves.”

“Well, exactly!” Mrs. Frankle replied. “And it’s not fair to impose on them…”

“What? Good values? Tolerance and acceptance for people who are different from them?”

At that point, several other parents started talking at the same time, one over the other. It was impossible to make out which argument each of them was making.

Crowley bit the inside of his cheek and hit his gavel against the desk several times to bring order to the classroom.

“I understand we’re all very passionate about this topic, but please…”

“I just don’t see the point in this discussion at all,” Mrs. Davis intervened. “It’s not like the gay students are being bullied every day in this school.”

“Yes.” Crowley’s lips twitched, as if he was barely containing a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Davis…”

“Considering they are such a minority, I’m not even sure there’s one, let alone two to go to prom together,” Mrs. Davis continued. “So why are we wasting time discussing a rule that affects no one?”

Castiel stared at her, baffled at the tone-deafness of that statement. It was at that point that he knew he had to raise his voice.

“Cas, no,” Meg muttered in horror as he stood up.
“Well, I would like to say, as the uncle and legal guardian of an LGBT student, that this rule does, in fact affect her. It sends the message that her love is somehow lesser. And just because there aren’t many students like her, that we know of, it doesn’t mean they’re less important and they don’t deserve to be taken into consideration.”

Mrs. Davis narrowed her eyes at him.

“Oh,” she muttered. “You’re Claire Novak’s uncle.”

Castiel felt a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach, as if someone had walked over his grave.

Davis. Tracy Davis, the girl Claire had had an altercation with at the beginning of the year.

This could not be good for him.

After what felt like an eternity of Patience pacing around the pavement like a lion in a cage and Claire wondering how to politely ask her to leave, Alexis’ phone finally rang.

“Well, answer it!” Kaia urged her.

“Wait, we don’t want to make it seem like I was waiting for the call,” Alexis said.

For being such a good girl with such a brilliant future ahead, she definitely knew more than enough on how to get her way whenever she wanted. Claire respected that.

Finally, after two more rings, Alexis picked up the call and put Sheriff Mills on speaker while beckoning them all to stay silent.

“Hi, mom, what’s up?”

“Hey, baby. I’m really sorry. Things… didn’t turn out how we were expecting it.”

Claire was so sure of the result that she wasn’t surprised at all. She was, however, surprised at how disappointed she felt. And angry at how distressed Kaia suddenly seemed. She put an arm around her and pulled her close.

“What happened?” Alexis asked.

“Mrs. Davis kind of convinced the other parents that all gay students are delinquents and bullies and they shouldn’t be given ‘special treatment’.” The contempt on the sheriff’s voice was palpable. “So they voted against lifting the rule. I’m sorry, I knew this was important to you.”

“Oh, that sucks,” Alexis said. She managed to sound sincere in her irritation. Or maybe she really was sincere. “I was really hoping we could go over Crowley’s head on this.”

“I get it. But hey, don’t worry about it. Remember, ten years from now, this won’t matter and things will be better.”

“Yeah, I hope you’re right about that,” Alexis said. “Anyway, we just got out of the arcade and we’re heading to the movies now. I’m gonna have to silence my phone.”
“Alright. You kids have a good time, okay? Say hi to everyone for me.”

“Will do.”

She ended the call with a sigh.

“Don’t say ‘I told you so’,” she warned Claire.

“I wasn’t going to,” Claire replied.

Before she could say another word, Jack’s cellphone rang. They all stared at him with confusion as he fumbled with the buttons to answer it.

“Hello, Uncle Cas. Yes. We’re at the… the movies,” he said.

Claire closed her eyes. Even when he’d agreed that lying was a necessary evil to get what they were about to do, he still managed to be awful at it.

“Yeah. Oh, no, that’s… that’s terrible. Claire will be disappointed,” he sighed. “No, don’t worry about it. We’ll see you at home. Bye.”

“Did he just call you to tell you that the results of the voting sucked?” Ben asked.

“No, he called to tell me he was going to be home late because he was going out with Sheriff Mills and some of the other parents for drinks.”

Claire had to stop and wonder at that. In fact, the only one who didn’t seem to find it odd at all was Jack.

“So… why the hell did he call you?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, that sounds like something Alexis’ mom could’ve mentioned,” Patience pointed out, taking two seconds of her imminent panic attack to analyze that mystery.

“Maybe she forgot?” Jack frowned. “Or didn’t think it was important.”

“No, my mom would’ve said something like that,” Alexis said.

Claire exchanged a look with Kaia and was suddenly certain they were both thinking the same thing.

“You know what? Who cares?” she interrupted them. “Better for us. We have more time to do our thing.”

“Oh, so we’re still doing that?” Patience muttered. “Okay.”

“Hey.” Kaia put a hand on her shoulder. “If you don’t feel well doing this, you can go home. We’ll handle it.”

Patience stared at her with gratefulness in her eyes, but just when Claire thought she was gonna bow out, she shook her head.

“No.” She straightened her back and took a deep breath. “No. You guys helped me. It’s only fair that I help you.”

“Alright.” Claire checked the time on her phone. “Let’s give the rest of the parents time to leave. We reconvene behind the school in twenty minutes, then we spread out…”
“Oh, oh!” Jack lifted up his hand as if he was in class. “I made a map of the school.”

“You… really?” Claire asked.

“Do you want me to text it to everybody?”

“Yeah. I think that’d be useful.”

Jack’s grin was enormous. Claire had the suspicion he was just happy he could be useful.

And the map was color coded, because of course it was.

Infiltrating the school wasn’t that hard. Alexis, as head of the prom committee, straight-A’s student and daughter of the sheriff, had been given a key to the front door, so she and her team could stay behind late and hang posters reminding people to buy their tickets and stuff like that. Claire would’ve wagered that Crowley wouldn’t have done that if he’d known that Alexis was a force to be reckoned with when she was angry and she was absolutely going to abuse that privilege if she thought it necessary.

“They’re going to know it was us,” Patience said, breathing heavily as Alexis manipulated the lock. “Oh, God, they’re going to…”

“Patience, relax,” Alexis said. “I have a plan. Don’t worry about the details.”

“Alright,” Claire said once they were inside. “Everybody grab some pamphlets and tape. I want every inch of this school covered in Demon Crowley’s face. Just absolutely go to town with it so they won’t have time to clean it all before classes start. We spread in groups of two and we meet together here in an hour. If you hear someone coming, you run like hell. Am I clear?”

Everybody nodded.

“Babe, go with Patience and call us if she starts having a panic attack,” she added. “Jack, you’re with me.”

Nobody seemed to protest that plan. Claire had no idea why everybody was listening to her. Ben also had experience with getting himself into trouble, but his seemed to be more on the prank spectrum. Claire, on the other hand, was proud of herself for this meticulous planning. And also because of the drawing of Crowley. He definitely looked evil.

“Hey, why do you think Castiel told us he was going out with the other parents if he wasn’t?” Jack asked while they were deckering the wall outside of the library. Jack hold the pamphlets up while Claire cut the tape, because he was taller and could reached more heights.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not like we were truthful with him about where we were and what we were doing.”

Jack seemed to consider that matter seriously.

“I mean, I don’t like lying to him,” he admitted. “But this was necessary.”

Claire glanced at him.

“You’re taking this remarkably well. I thought you’d be freaking out, like Patience.”

“We’re fighting a great injustice, Claire,” Jack said. “It’s okay to break the rules when the rules are wrong.”
Claire had to chuckle at that. If she’d known the way to get Jack to misbehave was to convince him he was doing something for the greater good, she would’ve tried it years ago.

Ben and Alexis were already waiting for them by the door, with their box of pamphlets empty.

“Mission accomplished, captain,” Ben said, showing a military salute at her.

Kaia and Patience approach them from the other hallway, also with an empty box. Patience looked a little less stressed out than before.

“How’re you hanging in there?” Claire asked.

“I didn’t realize the school could be… so quiet!” Patience said. “It’s almost eerie, you know, like a horror story!”

Claire looked at Kaia, who promptly shrugged and mouthed “I don’t even know”.

“Holy… my heart is beating to fast!” Patience continued saying, placing a hand on her chest. “I feel so exhilarated. I had no idea it’d be… like this, you know? We’re breaking the rule! We’re fighting the system!”

“Yeah, we’re certified rebels,” Ben said, looking at her quizzically. “You want us to get out of here?”

“Yes, please!”

“Okay, now we get rid of the evidence,” Claire indicated as Alexis locked the doors behind them.

“Throw the tape and the boxes elsewhere. Alexis, get rid of the keys. Patience, are you dying on us?”

“I’m fine,” Patience said, doubling over herself while Kaia rubbed her back. “A little lightheaded, maybe. Should’ve had dinner before we got here…”

“Oh, here!” Jack opened his jacket and extracted a granola bar from one of his pockets. “Eat this, you’ll feel better.”

Everybody stared at him in silence for several seconds. Claire realized no one was going to say what they were all thinking unless she did.

“You brought snacks?”

“Well, I just thought someone might get hungry,” Jack said, shrugging and casting Claire a defensive look.

Ben laughed and snatched the granola bar, happily peeling it as he commented:

“You’re the best person to get in trouble with!”
Chapter 60

They drove around for a while until they found what Claire determined to be a good recycling bin. (Jack insisted they needed to be environmentally conscious). Patience called her dad and told him she was staying at Kaia’s home “to study” for another hour, but it was actually at Kaia’s suggestion so she would calm down a little and not blurt out what they’d done at the first chance they got.

“God, no, I’m not going to tell my father!” Patience said, opening her eyes wide as if the mere idea horrified her. “Do you have any idea how much trouble I could get in? I’m going to be grounded until I finish college…”

She kept rambling as she walked through the yard. Kaia and Claire looked at each other and giggled.

“Hey,” Kaia said, catching Claire’s hand. “I had a lot of fun tonight with everybody. You know, even if it doesn’t work, I wanted you to know that.”

“It’ll work,” Claire promised her. “Okay? It’s going to be the best prom dance ever and we’re gonna go together and have fun with all of our friends.”

She noticed a glimmer of skepticism in Kaia’s eye, but she said nothing as they kissed and wished each other goodnight.

“It’s funny. You didn’t use to care this much about prom and stuff,” Jack commented later, as they were driving back home.

“Well, you know. Kaia didn’t have a stable home after her parents died and she didn’t get to do a lot of the things that I took for granted and thought were super lame,” Claire replied. “I want her to experience all of that.”

“That’s very noble of you.”

“Shut up,” Claire said, rolling her eyes. “It’s just what any good girlfriend would do.”

Jack didn’t insist on it and Claire was glad for it. She didn’t feel like she was doing anything particularly difficult or that she should get praise for it. It was easy to do all these things for Kaia. Because she was Kaia.

Castiel was already home when they got there, in robe and sitting on the couch with his feet up the coffee table a book on his lap.

“You’re here,” he said, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, we live here.”

“I know, but you still have another… half hour until your curfew,” he commented, after looking at the time in his phone.

“The movie ended, everybody wanted to go home,” Claire said, trying to sound casual.

“We had a really good time, but some of the guys still had some homework to do,” Jack pointed out. He was becoming a master of lies very easily.

Castiel narrowed his eyes at them as if he suspected something, but in the end, he nodded.
“Did you eat? ‘Cause if not, there’s some leftover pizza that you can have.”

“Oh, thanks! I’ll heat that up!” Jack decided, marching in the kitchen’s direction.

Claire was about to follow him when she heard Castiel calling her name.

“What were you doing?” he asked point blank, standing up and walking up to her. “Because I remember you clearly telling me that you’d be back by ten.”

“Well, I got it wrong. What are you, the time police?” She was about to roll her eyes, but then she noticed a red smudge on his shirt. “Is that… is that lipstick on your collar?”

Castiel’s face didn’t change expressions at all, though his cheeks became slightly redder as he raised his hands to cover the stain. Now it was Claire who was staring at him with suspicion.

“Did you really go out for drinks with the other parents?”

“Yes, I did,” Castiel declared. “And I’m really glad you and your brother had fun. With your friends. At the movies. Where you said you’d be.”

He then turned around and… it wouldn’t be fair to say he fled, but Claire did notice he seemed suddenly in a rush to climb the stairs and disappear from her view.

“What’s so funny?” Jack asked, as he took out the pizza out of the microwave.

Claire suppressed her chuckles long enough to answer:

“Nothing. Let’s eat.”

They met right outside the school the following day, all six of them.

“Does any of you know what’s going on in there?” Alexis asked, jerking her head to point at the school’s building. Everybody shrugged.

“One way to find out,” Claire said, grabbing Kaia’s hand.

As they were climbing the stairs and heading for the door, it hit her that this was her group of friends. It wasn’t as if she’d never had friends before, but they were usually a byproduct of Jack being nice and sociable with everybody. They tolerated her presence and then stopped talking to her when they inevitably stopped talking to Jack.

They’d never had friends like this, people who understood each other and worked together and shared a passion for something. She’d never stopped to consider that she’d initially got into the Inksters to try and conquer, Kaia, but now…

The doors opened up and they were ambushed by a bunch of yellow papers raining down on them.

Some people were running around, picking them up from the walls, making airplanes or balls with them and throwing them at each other. Some others were making dramatic readings of the pamphlet’s contents:
“The Tyrant King Crowley!” one guy guffawed as they passed him by. “Ethan, come read this!”

Claire thought it was hilarious too. Kaia had composed that poem with some select insults that were downright swiftian. At some point, they sort of insinuated that Crowley liked having intercourse with his pet hamster. Or it could have been insinuating that he thought allowing same-sex couples to the prom was a slippery slope to everybody wanting to fuck hamsters. Either way, it was clever and hilarious, like Kaia.

The only moment when Claire felt a little badly about what they’d done was when they turned around the corner and saw Crowley screaming at the janitor. His face was red and he looked like he was going to have a stroke at any moment.

“I want it all cleaned out!” he was ordering. “I want every single one of them gone! Am I making myself clear? Gone!”

The janitor, however, didn’t seem all that impressed or scared by Crowley’s shouting.

“Sure thing Mr. Crowley,” he said calmly. “I’ll do whatever is in my power.”

He then looked at the pamphlets flying around, with a little smirk in his lips, as if he knew there was absolutely nothing he could do and he was in no rush to even try it.

“Make sure you do, you incompetent idiot! Why didn’t you clean it all up before the students got here?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Crowley, I thought it was some sort of school spirit thing.”

“What? Are you blind on top of stupid?!” Crowley bellowed. “Have you not read a single one of these things?!”

“No, Mr. Crowley. I’ve been too busy cleaning them up, like you told me.”

There was no way he didn’t know what he was doing, and even if he didn’t, it was still way too funny. Claire had been trying to hold back her laughter for the last two minutes, but she couldn’t anymore. A second later, her friends and all the other students that had stopped to look at the altercation were laughing as well, which only made Crowley more furious.

“What are you all looking at?! Go to your classes, right this instant or I’m going to throw every single one of you in detention!”

That only made people laugh even harder as they scattered and fled the principal’s rage.

“Miss Jones!” Crowley shouted.

Alexis and the rest of the Inksters froze on their place. Patience’s eyes opened in terror and Ben gritted his teeth. Claire looked at her and realized they should have discussed what would happen when they inevitably suspected her and her magical key. They should have sworn a blood oath to keep their mouths shut or something like that.

Alexis, however, just straightened her shoulders and turned to face him.

“Yes, Mr. Crowley?” she asked, sounding so casual and calm it could have been mocking.

“My office, right now!”

“I have classes…”
“You’ll be excused!” Crowley said. He pointed towards his door and at that point, Alexis didn’t really have much of an option.

As she followed him, though, she turned to look at them over their shoulders. She didn’t seem distress or scared in any way. She simply smiled at them, winked and briefly placed her index fingers over her lips. Then she marched with her head held up high into Crowley’s office.

They kept their heads down for the rest of the day. Despite the janitor’s diligence, most students had managed to get a hold of one of the pamphlets. Claire even heard someone had made a rap with Kaia’s poem. They laughed and joined in the jokes whenever they encountered them, because it would’ve been suspicious not to.

By lunch, three of them had been thoroughly interrogated.

“I told him I lost the key and I have no idea who could have possibly got their hands on it,” Alexis told them when they met up to eat together.

“I started crying,” Patience said. “Talking about how I had never been accused of anything before and that it wasn’t fair he suspected me. I think it made him so uncomfortable that he just… let me go.”

“That’s a good strategy,” Ben congratulated him.

“Yeah, a strategy,” Patience repeated, bitterly. “That’s what it was.”

“I said I understood why he suspected me, but that I had nothing to do with it and that I wish I had,” Ben said. “I got detention for being a smartass, but this late in the game…”

“I’m sorry, guys,” Claire said, cringing. “I mean, Alex, Kaia, Jack and I are all graduating, so we literally have nothing to lose. But you guys still have another year to go.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Ben said. “Patience is so awesomely smart that they’re not going to come for her.”

“Oh. That’s really sweet of you,” Patience said, touched.

“And I’m just a mess all around, so… no one will be surprised if I get expelled and have to get a GED,” Ben continued, shrugging.

“You’re selling yourself short,” Jack said. “You’re smart. You’ll do much better if you only applied yourself…”

“Okay, guys, I’m really sorry to interrupt this lovefest we have going here,” Claire said, while aware that she was doing exactly that. She looked around and then lowered her voice: “But we need to think what’s going to happen if Crowley finds some sort of evidence to use against us.”

“He won’t,” Kaia assured her, squeezing her hand. “We were careful, we got rid of everything. So unless one of us talks, he’s going to have nothing. And he already asked Patience, so… I’m just saying, you’re the weakest link,” Kaia added when Patience glared at her.

Patience opened her mouth, then closed it again and lowered her head, accepting the truth in that statement.

“I’m just wondering how it was that he immediately suspected us,” Jack said.
“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Claire said. “No one in this table is straight. Except Patience. That’s why
she’s the weakest link.”

“Listen…” Patience started.

“No, she’s right,” Alexis interrupted her. “Of all the people in the school, we’re the ones who have
expressed an explicit interest in having the same-sex couples ban lifted. It’s not surprising that he’d
come for us. I’m betting that you three will be interrogated before the end of the day,” she added,
pointing at Jack, Kaia and Claire. “So you need to keep your mouths shut.”

“Who do you take us for?” Claire asked. “None of us in an Orange.”

She received completely blank expressions from everybody.

“Is that some sort of gay slang?” Patience asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Mr. Orange? *Reservoir Dogs*?” Claire explained. Kaia shrugged slightly and Jack shook his head.
Claire stared up at the ceiling with exasperation. “Why am I friends with all of you?”

Crowley came to pick them up himself during Miss Masters’ class.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Crowley?” she asked him, arching an eyebrow at him.

“I’m conducting an investigation on the act of vandalism from this morning,” Crowley declared, his
beady little eyes piercing all three of them. “And I have reasons to believe that these students might
know something about it?”

“I see.” Meg crossed her arms over her chest. “And what are those reasons?”

Crowley’s mouth twisted up in discontent. He clearly did not like that she was questioning him.

“That is a matter between me and then.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I think I need to remind you that I’m also Kaia’s legal guardian,” Meg said.
“So, if there is a problem with her…”

“I’ll let you know immediately,” Crowley replied. “Now, if you don’t mind.”

Jack, Claire and Kaia picked up their things and followed him down the hall towards his office. They
sat down on the bench right outside. It was a familiar place for Claire, though she hadn’t been there
since the beginning of the year and the Tracey Davis incident.

Of course he called on her first.

He placed one of the pamphlets on the desk in front of him and crossed his fingers over it while
watching her intently. Claire kept her face completely expressionless.

“Do you happen to know anything about this, Miss Novak?” Crowley asked after several seconds of
awkward silence.

Claire shrugged briefly. “Sorry. No.”
“No?” Crowley pointed at the caricature of him with a trident and horns. “I happen to know you’re very adept with the arts. Mr. Fitzgerald speaks highly of your talents. Did you happen to draw this?”

Claire looked down at her own work, then looked up at Crowley in the eye and lied:

“No.”

“Perhaps you didn’t know what purpose it’d serve,” Crowley continued. “Perhaps you were asked to do it by someone who later wrote this… hideous poem to go with it.”

“Nope.”

“I understand if you’re trying to protect someone, Miss Novak,” Crowley said. “Love makes fools of us all, after all.”

Claire felt her stomach twist up in a knot, but she managed to remain calm.

“What, you think Kaia did this?”

“I think you and your… paramour…”

“Girlfriend,” Claire corrected him.

“… have a special interest in what the poem is denouncing, do you not?”

“Oh, I see.” Claire rolled her eyes. “You’re going after the lesbians because you think we’re the only ones who would benefit from denouncing your rampant homophobia, is that right?”

“Please, Miss Novak. We pride ourselves in being as inclusive as possible…”

“Then why don’t you just lift the damn ban?”

“It was voted by the PTA…”

“Oh, spare me,” Claire interrupted him. “You’re just a petty and spineless little man who’s too afraid to do anything that could possibly cost him an ounce of power. You hide behind the PTA because you just don’t have the balls to upset the conservative rich parents who threaten to pull their kids out and put them in Christian schools if the poor little ones are subjected to the horrors of seeing two girls holding hands. I don’t know who did this, but I hope I did so I could pat them in the back for having the courage of giving you just a little of the humiliation and shame you deserved.”

Damn, she wish someone had filmed that.

It was more or less the same sentiment that Ben had expressed and Claire got the exact same result as him.

“Very well, Miss Novak,” Crowley said, his nostrils flaring. “It’s obvious you’re not willing to share any information right now, but you might change your mind after you had time to think about it in your three days detention.”

“Fine. Are we done here?”

“Five days detention.”

Claire stood up and headed for the door, raising a middle finger at Crowley as she walked out.
“A week!” Crowley shouted, but Claire had already closed the door behind her. 

Jack and Kaia looked at her with worry in their eyes, but Claire smiled at them confidently.

“He’s got nothing. He’s going fishing,” he told them, lowering her voice.

“Are you okay?”

“A week of detention is nothing I can’t handle,” Claire said shrugging.

Crowley opened the door and stared at them fiercely.

“Go back to your classes, Miss Novak,” he ordered. “Mr. Kline, come on in.”

Jack stood up, smiled warily at them and then followed Crowley. Claire sat on the bench next to Kaia, holding her hand.

“You’re staying?” Kaia asked.

“Of course I am,” Claire chuckled. “I’m not going to leave you alone here, babe. And besides, in how much more trouble can I get?”

Kaia stared at her, impressed, and then chuckled.

“Oh, you’re a bad girl,” she commented, leaning closer to her.

“You like that?”

“Yeah. It’s kinda sexy.”

Claire moved closer and gave her a deep, sweet kiss. She had the feeling that, even if they didn’t win this one, things were going to be just fine.
Crowley didn’t say anything until Jack was sitting comfortably in the chair in front of his desk.

“Mr. Kline,” he began, “are you familiar with the prisoner’s dilemma?”

“Uh… no, I don’t think so.”

“It’s a philosophical question. You’re a very smart young man, so I think you’ll understand it easily. So, two criminals are captured, but the prosecution doesn’t have enough evidence to convict the both of them, so they’re each offered a deal: if they tell on their partner, they’ll serve a lighter sentence. However, if they remain silent while their partner talks, the one who chose not to speak will get a harsher sentence and the other will be set free.”

Jack frowned.

“What happens if both of them speak and accuse each other? Wouldn’t that make it harder to determine if they should go to jail once they testify against the jury…?”

“It’s a game theory, Mr. Kline,” Crowley interrupted him. “I’m bringing it up to illustrate the situation that you’re in right now. I have reasons to suspect that you know something about this.” He pushed a copy of the pamphlet towards Jack.

He tilted his head. “Why would you think that?”

“You were very passionate about this cause when we talked a few days back. And your own sister would be affected by it if it was successful.”

“Yeah, I reckon that’s right,” Jack admitted.

“So… you do know something about who did this? Or were you involved in any way?”

“No,” Jack said simply.

“I see,” Crowley said. He sounded extremely displeased with that answer. “I suppose you are aware that I’ve already talked about this to your sister and some of your friends.”

“Yeah, they’ve told me,” Jack said, because it would be useless to deny it. He had seen Claire coming out of the office. What did Crowley expected him to say at that point?

“What do you think they said?”

“Well… that they had nothing to do with it, of course.”

“Of course,” Crowley repeated. “And are you willing to bet your spotless record on it?”

“Uh…” Jack blinked at him, trying to assimilate those words. “I don’t think I understand.”

“Let’s circle back to the prisoner’s dilemma. You have a lot to lose by remaining quiet, Mr. Kline, if it turns out that one of your friends implicated you. And a lot to gain if you’re willing to… tell me what you know.”

Jack made a reflective pause.
“I suppose you’re right,” he said. Then he looked him in the eye and said the biggest lie he’d said in his entire life: “If I knew something about it. Which I don’t.”

Crowley’s nostrils flared. He clearly wasn’t happy about that answer, but he had nowhere else to go from there.

“Very well. I am willing to trust your word, since you’ve proven to be an excellent and well-behaved student in the past.”

“Thank you, Mr. Crowley. I try my best.”

“And I trust that if you knew something about this vandalism, you’d come straight to me, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. After all, we should all strive to do the right thing. Right, Mr. Crowley?”

He beamed at Crowley’s glower. Claire would have been proud of him.

“Send Miss Nieves in,” Crowley instructed him, curtly. “And go back to your class.”

“Yes, Mr. Crowley.”

He felt strangely satisfied when he stepped outside. Was this what Claire felt when she got away with something she wasn’t supposed to be doing? No wonder she did it so often.

“How’d it go?” Claire asked him in a whisper when he joined them.

“He wants to see Kaia now,” Jack said. “Don’t worry. I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Atta boy, look at you!” Claire said, giving him a friendly bump in the shoulder as Kaia walked inside the office. “Lying to the authorities and whatnot. We might make a troublemaker of you yet.”

“Well, there’s not much time left for that here, right?”

“We’ll think of something,” Claire said. She sat back down on the bench.

“Aren’t we supposed to go back to class?”

“You go if you want to. I’m gonna wait here for Kaia.”

Jack figured that made a lot of sense. In the end, he plopped down next to Claire on the bench. Kaia was his friend too and he was in on the conspiracy, after all.

“Do you really think nothing’s gonna come out of this?”

“Well, Crowley obviously is going to think we did it.” Claire shrugged. “But he doesn’t have any evidence. And since we’ve all managed to keep our mouths shut…”

When she put it that way, it was clear there was nothing to worry about. They sat in silence, enjoying the silence and peace around them until the bell rang. Then the hallway was inundated with the sound of students chatting and laughing as they passed them by on their way to their lockers or their next class. Some of them still had the pamphlets sticking out of their backpacks or books, so it was safe to say that they had survived the janitor’s zealous cleaning.

After a while, though, Claire sneaked a glance to her phone.
“Do you think this is taking too long?” she asked. “He was finished with us a lot faster.”

“Uh…” Jack started, but Claire didn’t give him time. She stood up and tried to peer inside, but of course, the frosted window prevented her from seeing anything. “Claire, I’m sure it’s fine. Like you said, he already went through the weakest link.”

“Right.” Claire sat again, but she toyed with her phone, clearly nervous. “You’re absolutely right.”

She didn’t move, not even when the bell rang announcing that the next class was starting and they should really go. And Jack, of course, wasn’t willing to leave her alone, even if the professors were in general using their classes to review everything they’d studied during the year. He was already up to date with everything, so…

A pair of heels clacking against the floor distracted him. He was surprised, but only a little bit, to see Miss Masters marching towards them. She seemed extremely worried.

“You’re still here,” she commented, surprised.

“We already talked to him, but he’s taking his time with Kaia,” Claire explained. Apparently she was happy that she’d found someone who would share her concern.

Miss Masters looked at the door and licked her lips.

“Children, if you know anything about this…”

Claire and Jack exchanged a look and Jack finally understood the prisoner’s dilemma. If they talked now, they might not get in trouble because… well, she was Miss Masters. She’d understand, unlike Principal Crowley. But what if Kaia…?

The door opened up and to their horror, Kaia stepped outside. Her eyes were red and puffy and she was shaking slightly, as if she was trying not to burst into tears. She looked at Claire, and then lowered her eyes.

“What’s going on?” Meg asked, suddenly scared. Kaia took a step towards her and Meg hugged her, holding her close as her crying grew louder and louder.

“Ah, Miss Masters,” Principal Crowley said, stepping outside, beaming as cat that had just swallowed a very fat mouse. “I was just about to go look for you. You would not believe what your daughter just confessed to me. Honestly, I would’ve have expected better from her, as the child of a member of our staff…”

“What?” Claire said. Jack couldn’t speak. His stomach had suddenly dropped and his heart was pounding faster. He was certain the horror he felt was perfectly reflected in Claire’s expression.

“What are you talking about?” Miss Masters asked. Her tone was low and threatening, a voice that Jack had only heard her used when someone was interrupting her class too much for her liking.

“Miss Nieves just admitted to being the sole planner and executor of the recent acts of vandalism in this school,” Crowley said… gloated. He was gloating about his victory. “She even admitted to writing the poem and drawing this rather crude caricature of me.”

“That can’t be!” Meg declared. She pushed Kaia aside a little to look at her in the eye. “Kaia…”

“I’m sorry,” Kaia whimpered. “I’m sorry. I…”
“Wait, that’s not true!” Claire said, taking a step forwards. “She said that to protect me. I did it. All on my own!”

“Claire!” Jack said, more horrified than anything else.

“Claire, wait…” Kaia stammered.

Crowley’s grin only grew wider.

“Well, what an interesting development this is. Could I maybe assume that you did it together and are now lying to protect one another and confuse me?”

“No, you can’t assume anything, you piece of shit!” Claire said, and Jack jumped backwards, more at the fact she’d used an expletive in front of Crowley than at her fury. “I’m telling you, I did it!”

“Well.” Crowley raised his eyebrows. “Given the fact that you’ve both confessed, I believe it’s fitting to punish the both of you… by banning you from the prom altogether.”

“Wait, you can’t do that…” Claire started protesting, but Crowley’s eyes were shinning as they set on her.

“I can and I have and if you want to keep making things worse for yourself, Miss Novak…”

“What’s going on?”

The last person the twins expected to see appeared around the corner. Castiel was walking towards them, once again wearing his black suit and blue tie combo, followed closely by a man with grey hair, also dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase.

“Mr. Novak,” Crowley said, raising an eyebrow. “Why are you here?”

“What’s happening?” Castiel asked, looking at the twins, then at Kaia, who was still crying with her face buried on Meg’s chest and finally at Meg. “Kids, did you get in trouble?”

“We…” Jack started.

“No,” Kaia said. She moved away and despite her voice sounding broken, she wiped her tears and shook her head. “No, they didn’t. I’m sorry, Meg. I didn’t know he could fire you if I was caught doing something bad. I told him you didn’t know anything about it… and neither did anyone else. I acted alone.”

Crowley’s face grew pale all of the sudden, as all eyes fell on him.

“You said what?” Meg said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Crowley said, trying to sound casual. “It’s clear you need to get a better handle on the girl. She has been consorting with the wrong company…”

Jack instinctively put a hand on Claire’s shoulder when he noticed how she was clenching her fists. The last thing they needed was for her to deck Crowley in the face right now.

“You threatened to fire me if she didn’t confess?” Meg repeated. “You little, slimy…”

“Meg,” Castiel interrupted her. He was very calm, but it was the sort of calm that Jack knew hid a storm. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding. Even if Kaia did what Mr. Crowley thinks she did, that’s not grounds to fire you.”
Crowley’s jaw tensed.

“And how are you sure that is the case?”

“Because that would be terribly illegal,” the other man in a suit intervened, speaking with a soft English accent.

“I’m sorry, who exactly are you?” Crowley asked.

“Balthazar Roché, pleased to meet you,” the man said, shaking Crowley’s hand quickly before he opened his briefcase and extracted an envelope from it. “You have been served.”

“What?” Crowley asked, listlessly staring at the envelope and then up at Castiel.

“Balthazar here is my attorney,” Castiel explained. “I talked to him after the PTA meeting and he informed me we have enough of a case to sue you and the school for discrimination against my niece.”

“What?” Crowley repeated, his face growing slightly red.

“Oh, shit,” Claire muttered under her breath. Jack was inclined to echo that sentiment as they both looked at Castiel, open-mouthed.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Crowley. I advised Castiel to seek out monetary compensation, but he wouldn’t agree to that. We’re suing you for the symbolic sum of just one dollar. Of course, in case of the suit not going your way, the school district will be liable for all the legal fees,” Balthazar said calmly as Crowley opened the envelope and read its content with his eyes bulging at every line.

“And I’m sure you don’t want the bad publicity that could follow a case like this,” Castiel said. “This is a story that has the potential of, as the kids’ say, becoming viral.”

Jack didn’t know what was more impressive: that Castiel was actually doing this or that he’d used Internet slang correctly.

Crowley finished reading the letter and looked up. His smile was an angry rictus, but when he spoke, his voice had a triumphant undertone.

“Fine. If you want to take this to court, that is your choice, Mr. Novak. But when you do, please keep in mind that legal times can drag a lot. By the time a jury hear us, the prom might be long behind us. And keep in mind—“. He raised a finger at Claire “—that your niece confessed to vandalizing the school.”

“Yes, I was about to ask what that was all about.” Castiel nodded. “And I’m not saying she didn’t do it and that you don’t have the right to punish her however you see fit…”

“Hey, what side are you on?” Claire asked, indignantly. Jack shushed her softly.

“… but what exactly is the evidence you have against her?”

Crowley’s entire face was a mask of exasperation, as if he thought Castiel was being obtuse on purpose.

“She just admitted to it!”

“Because you put her girlfriend in distress,” Castiel said. “I’m inclined to believe that Kaia had nothing to do with the supposed vandalism either, but the stress you put her under by threatening
“Doesn’t matter,” Crowley interrupted him. “They’re going to be punished accordingly.”

“He’s not going to let them go to the prom!” Jack pointed out.

“He’s not?” Balthazar raised an eyebrow and took out a little notepad from his briefcase. “That’s very interesting.”

“Why?” Crowley narrowed his eyes at him. “How is that interesting?”

“Well, you see, now we can argue you’re actually banning the girls from going to the prom because they protested your absurd ban and not because they really did anything wrong,” Balthazar said. He pointedly look around. “I don’t see this place particularly vandalized. So, by the time I’m done presenting the argument, you’re going to look like a petty, vindictive little man with a homophobic streak.”

“And don’t worry about the time it might take us to get there,” Castiel added, with a grin. “I work from home.”

Jack had to squeeze Claire’s shoulder a little tighter. He didn’t think it’d help their case if she burst out laughing in Crowley’s face. No matter how comically enraged he was at that moment.

In the end, Crowley gave Claire and Kaia two weeks’ worth of detention, but he didn’t dare to ban them from the prom. What was more, he made sure to let Castiel now that going forwards with the lawsuit was unnecessary. They could go together, if they wanted to. He didn’t care and if any of the other parents complained, he was going to direct their concerns to him.

“I don’t want them to think I’m rewarding their behavior, but you leave me no choice,” he said, after he invited Castiel and Balthazar to talk to him alone in his office. “I hope they don’t take the wrong lesson from all of this. The world is not going to coddle them and give in to every single one of their whims.”

“Believe me, Mr. Crowley,” Castiel said, smiling at him. “They don’t expect that at all.”

They ended the meeting with a firm, curt handshake and then they walked outside.

“Well, that was easy,” Balthazar said, already fishing his cellphone out of his pocket. “I’ll send you the bill, Cas. Gotta go.”

“Thanks, Balt.”

His lawyer bolted towards the school’s door and Castiel was left alone in the hallway. That was strange. He fully expected Jack and Claire, if not Meg and Kaia, to be waiting for him outside despite Crowley’s direct orders that they should go back to class. Well, he’d talk to them when he came home.

The entire Inksters club was waiting for him in the parking lot, Meg included.

“There he is!” Ben shouted when he spotted Castiel. “The hero of the hour, Mr. Castiel Novak!”
They all started cheering and clapping at him, as if they didn’t have a care in the world if the rest of the school could hear them making a ruckus out there. To his surprise, Kaia ran up to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Novak!” she exclaimed. “Thank you!”

“It was nothing,” Castiel assured her with a smile. “And you can call me Cas, if you want.”

“That was epic!” Claire exclaimed. “You guys should have seen it! I thought Crowley was going to shit himself!”

“Now, that would’ve been a viral video,” Ben commented.

“I was a little worried,” Jack said, which made everyone turn to stare at him. “I didn’t want him to have a stroke or something.”

All the kids laughed at the same time, while Meg shook her head, amused. Castiel didn’t think any of them realized Jack was being his candid, honest self again.

“Alright, guys, you need to get back to classes,” Meg said. “I can only borrow you for so long.”

“Thank you, Miss Masters,” Alexis said. She was smiling radiantly. “And thanks to you, Mr. Novak. My mom is going to laugh so hard when I tell her about this.”

Kaia gave Claire a quick peck and then lassoed her arm to Patience’s as they started walking back to school.

“I guess you had this coming since you called me the weakest link,” Patience commented.

“Oh, my God, are you ever gonna let that go?”

“Never.”

Meg passed him by and squeezed his arm softly. Castiel followed her with his eyes for a second before he turned to Jack and Claire, who had hanged back for some reason.

“For real, though,” Claire said, still smiling but looking a little more serious. “Thank you for having our back.”

“You’re very welcome,” Castiel said. “You’re also very grounded, by the way.”

“What?”

Castiel pulled out one of the pamphlets out of his pocket and held it up for her.

“You really want me to believe you had nothing to do with this? Don’t run away, Jack,” he added when he tried to take a step towards the school. “I know you helped her.”

“We didn’t… that wasn’t… we weren’t…” Jack mumbled, miserably.

“Jack, stop. Just stop,” Claire told him and he lowered his gaze to his shoes.

“We were just trying to bring attention to the problem,” he admitted. Claire closed her eyes, because at least she was good enough at getting in trouble that she knew that was akin to a confession.

“I know,” Castiel said. “That’s why I’m only grounding you until prom night.”
“Okay, fair,” Claire accepted. “But consider this: we’re eighteen. That means we’re legally adults. That means that you making us stay at home is akin to kidnapping.”

Castiel glared at her for several seconds.

“Yeah, I did not think that would work.” She sighed. “But I had to try.”
Despite the fact that they were supposedly grounded, it didn’t feel like it. Yes, Claire had to stay at school most days for her detention and they weren’t allowed to go out with their friends, but with so many final exams and preparations for the prom, it felt as they were too busy to really feel that loss.

“So, Patience,” Kaia said with a smile during lunch. “I heard that Mike Wheeler asked you to the prom.”

Patience choked on her milk. It took her several minutes of coughing before she could answer that:

“You heard that?”

“I thought he was dating Kate Whatsername?” Claire asked.

“Yeah. They had a fight and he’s trying to get someone else to go with him to make her jealous,” Alexis explained.

“I don’t understand. If he wants to go with Kate, why don’t they just make up?”

Claire put a hand on his shoulder and Jack understood that was one of those situations he just wasn’t wired to fully comprehend.

“I definitely don’t want to get in the middle of that mess,” Patience said. “And besides, I’m already going with someone.”

“Really?” Kaia’s eyes shot up in surprise. “Who?”

“Me,” Alexis clarified with a smile. They all stared at them confused for a few seconds until she laughed. “We’re going as friends! But I thought it’d be a good idea to show our appreciation for the same-sex couples ban being lifted and to support the two of you.”

“You mean, so people will have more than one couple of lesbians to stare at,” Claire said. “That’s actually clever.”

“Ah, goddammit!” Ben exclaimed, frustrated. “I was gonna ask one of you to be my date! Alexis, preferably, so I could brag about going with a senior.”

“Sorry, dude.” Alexis shrugged.

“Too slow,” Patience added and patted Ben in the arm, sympathetically.

Ben mumbled something, looking down at his food, dejected.

“Hey, I’m a senior and I don’t have a date yet,” Jack pointed out. “We could go together.”

Ben didn’t choke, but the look he gave him made Jack think he would’ve if he’d been drinking something.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to…” Jack added quickly.

“No, no!” Ben cut him off. He managed to keep his voice firm despite his cheeks burning bright red: “I… think that’s a great idea, actually. Yes. Let’s. Let’s do that.”
“Aw!” Claire said, mockingly. “Are you gonna get him a corsage?”

“Oh, we should get each other corsages!” Kaia exclaimed, excitedly. “That would be so cute!”

“Babe…” Claire muttered, frustrated and it was Jack’s turn to laugh at her. It was really hard for her to be her usual sarcastic, kinda mean self when Kaia was around her making her think about adorable and lovey things.

It was going to be a pain to live with them.

The letters were waiting for them next to their breakfast plates one Tuesday morning.

“They came together,” Castiel told them. “I swear, I didn’t plan this.”

“Oh,” Claire said. Despite her make-up, she looked slightly pale as she sat down and stared at the piece of paper that was going to decide her future. “That looks a little thin. Don’t you think it looks a little thin to be an acceptance letter? Maybe we should open them together…”

Jack stopped midway into tearing the envelope open.

“Uh… yeah, sure. I’ll wait ‘till you’re ready,” he said.

Claire huffed and shook her head. Jack had the impression he’d ruined the moment.

The first line of his letter was a jubilant “Congratulations!” It was strange, he hadn’t really been too nervous about receiving a rejection letter from the USC or the University of California or any of the other places he’d applied to. He still had to take his SATs over the summer and only after that he could think about transferring to Stanford on the following semester, if at all, but he didn’t feel like he would be missing out on something for not going to his preferred college right out of the gate. It just wasn’t the end of the world that Luc had made it seem if he didn’t go to a prestigious school. It wasn’t the end of the world that he’d missed so many deadlines while hesitating.

He had time. He had support. He could afford to be certain of what he wanted to do before he went ahead with them.

Claire on the other side, had pure terror in her eyes as she read and re-read the letter in her hand. She remained quiet so long that Jack started feeling the worse. Castiel was also looking at her with apprehension.

“Claire?” he asked, stretching his hand to touch hers.

Claire took a deep breath, the edges of her lips twitching in relief.

“I got accepted!” she announced.

“Congratulations!” Jack shouted, throwing his arms around her.

“I knew you could do it!” Castiel added, also standing up and surrounding the table to hold her.

Claire received the dual hug with her usual stoicism, but she was still smiling when they let her go.

“Thank you,” she told them. She grabbed Jack’s letter and read it quickly. “Hey, you got accepted too. Nerd.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Jack laughed and rubbed the back of his neck.
“Oh, we should take a road trip to California over the summer and look for an apartment,” Claire continued. “You know, it doesn’t have to be anything big, but we’re going to need at least two rooms…”

“What?” Jack asked, confused.

“Oh.” Claire stopped her rambling to look at him. “I just thought… well, CalArts and the USC are like an hour away from each other, so if we find something right in the middle, we can just take turns with the car to go to classes and… but you know, if you want to live on the campus or just… not live with me and Kaia, that’s fine. I just thought it’d be cheaper if we all roomed together.” She toyed with one of the napkins. “But again, you don’t have to.”

Jack stared at her in silence, trying to register her words. After she decided she was going to live with Kaia after they graduated, he’d just assumed he would have to look for somewhere else to live. Apparently, Claire had assumed something different.

“No,” Jack said. “No, I’d love to live with you guys. Really.”

“Oh. Oh, good.” Claire turned her attention back to her coffee. “Well, I’ll tell Kaia…”

Jack hugged her again, because he knew the moment merited it but Claire was too proud to admit it.

“I’m glad to know you guys will be sticking together,” Castiel admitted. “It’s a great challenge, living on your own for the first time, and you’re going to need each other.”

His voice broke down slightly at the end of his words. He stood up and pretended to wash his mug for several seconds while Jack stared at his shoulders.

He hadn’t realized this meant that Castiel was really going to be left alone after all.

“Hey… maybe you can come with us to help us choose our apartment?” he suggested.

“Of course I’m going. I need to make sure you don’t end up somewhere with rats and gas leaks.”

“You think we won’t be able to tell if a place has rats and gas leaks?” Claire said.

When Castiel turned back to them, he was smiling and his eyes were dry, but still slightly red.

“Double-checking is never superfluous.”

“Miss Masters could come too,” Jack said, and grimaced when he realized he’d done it again. “Meg. I mean, Meg.”

He was still getting used to calling her by her first name, like she’d asked him to.

Castiel and Claire both cast suspicious glances in his direction.

“You’re not still trying to get Meg and me together, are you?”

“Oh, no! No.” Jack shook his head. “I learnt my lesson.”

Claire snickered softly and Jack had the impression there was some kind of joke he was missing out on. Castiel ruffled his hair, also smiling softly.

“Well, I think that’s a great idea. I’ll tell her about it.”
And suddenly, the future was there. It had come faster than Jack had expected and it wasn’t at all like he’d imagined it. It was better in many ways, but still much scarier than anything he’d faced before. But for the first time since he’d begun imagining what it would be like, he felt ready to face it.

Castiel immediately regretted having agreed with Patience, Alexis and Ben’s parents that renting out a limo was a great idea for the kids to arrive at prom. Mainly because he wasn’t ready for the honk outside. He stared down at the tea stain spreading on his robe and sighed deeply before he stood up to open the door.

“What’s up, Mr. N!” Ben greeted him, stepping inside as if he lived there. He looked strange in his tuxedo, as if he wasn’t quite comfortable wearing it. His bowtie was crooked and he kept touching it and toying with the corsage in his hand.

“Ben,” Castiel sighed, knowing he should’ve been ready for that invasion to his home. “Girls. You look very pretty.”

“Thank you, Mr. Novak.”

“Thanks, Cas.”

Alexis, Patience and Kaia looked much more comfortable in their dresses than Ben did in the tux. Alexis and Patience were both wearing the same shade of blue, but their dresses were different: Patience’s was long and strapless while Alexis’ resembled more a sundress with a wide skirt that revealed the vertiginous heels she’d chosen to accompany it. Kaia, on her part, was donning a pink one with white flowers appliques that started on her shoulders and rained down all the way down to the skirt. Very feminine, very cute.

It’d go great with what Claire had chosen to wear.

“Kids!” Castiel shouted. “Your friends are here.”

Jack stepped down first, his black tuxedo looking sharp. Castiel was certain that he’d counted with Claire’s help to get his dark red tie to be straight.

“Claire’s touching up her make up!” he announced, smiling at all of his friends. “You guys all look amazing!”

“You look great too!” Alexis praised him. “Doesn’t he look great, Ben?”

Ben swallowed, closed his eyes and opened them again.

“Yeah. Awesome,” he mumbled, clumsily. He raised the corsage. “I got you a…”

“Oh, I got you one too!” Jack replied. He picked it up from the coffee table with a smile. “The store lady said it goes on your lapel.”

“Great, yeah. They told me the same thing…”

It was awkward to watch, so Castiel turned his attention towards the stairs just in time to see Claire make her triumphant descent.
True to form, she had ditched the dress in favor of a form-fitting three piece suit and a very thin tie. She’d tied her long blonde hair in an elaborate braid on top her head and added a pair of black heels and tons of colorful make up around her eyes and lips. She looked very pleased with herself at the soft gasp Kaia let out when she walked towards her.

“Hey, babe,” she greeted her with a wink.

“Oh, my God!” Kaia laughed. “You look…”

“Like a baby butch,” Alexis intervened.

Castiel wasn’t sure what that meant, but either it was something good or Claire was in too good a mood, because she grinned widely.

“Why, thank you!” she replied. She also brought up her corsage and gently placed it on Kaia’s wrist. “And I’m taking the prettiest girl with me. I can’t get any luckier.”

Kaia laughed softly and Claire put her arms around her waist to pull her in for a kiss.

It warmed Castiel’s heart that they seemed so happy after all.

“Alright, you know what comes next. Gather up, everybody!” he said, lifting up his cellphone.

The Inksters got together for a group photo and then Claire asked him to take some of Kaia and her alone. Castiel asked if Jack and Ben also wanted one of just the two and after some hesitation, they agreed. Castiel wasn’t entirely sure what was going on there, but he was glad that Jack and Ben managed to relax and laugh a little after they made a joke about looking like the Men in Black.

“I’ll keep my cellphone on all night,” he told them. “If you need me to pick you up early, all you have to do is call. Don’t drink. Don’t get in trouble,” he added, with severe glare in Claire’s direction that she was too ecstatic to truly notice. “Have fun.”

“I love how us having fun is an afterthought for you,” Claire said, rolling her eyes, but there wasn’t enough meanness in her words for them to really sting.

Castiel hugged them both and waved at the kids as they ran through the yard and got inside of the limo, laughing and chatting way too loudly, as if they’d already were at the party with the music that would drown out their voices.

As soon as the limo disappeared down the street, Castiel got moving.

He changed into a presentable shirt and pants with no stains, he placed a rose on a jar and put in the middle of the table, lowered the lights and turned on some soft jazz music. The doorbell rang just as he was lightning up the candles.

“Well, hello,” Meg said, as she stood inside.

“Well, hello,” Castiel greeted her and he took her jacket off her shoulders. “You look beautiful.”

He wasn’t lying: Meg was donning a red short dress that match her lipstick and shoes. Her long curls flowed freely down her shoulders and there was much skin exposed down her neck and cleavage that he had to remind himself to stop staring and get the food and the wine out.

“Well, you really went all out, huh?” she laughed as he moved the chair for her to sit down.

“It’s the last night of this relationship being a secret,” Castiel declared. “I want it to be special.”
He brought the plates in from the kitchen and settled them down in front of her.

“‘You really know how to spoil a girl,’” she commented. She grabbed his hand and her foot settled against his leg when he sat down next to her.

“I like spoiling you,” he said, smiling like a fool at her. “I want to spend all my time with you. Not just stolen moments like this.”

Meg’s smile became a little tense all of the sudden and she let go of his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asked, frowning. “Did I say something…?”

“No, no,” Meg assured him, but she wasn’t looking at him. “I just… you said you had something important to ask me?”

“Oh, yes.” Castiel cleared his throat and took a sip of wine to refresh his suddenly dry throat. “I know we haven’t known each other that long. But I think what we have is very special.”

“Cas…” Meg started cringing.

“That’s why I wanted to ask you… once the kids leave for college, would you be interested in coming to live here?”

Meg raised her head and blinked at him.

“What?” she asked, softly.

“Perhaps you’d like to wait until your lease is over,” Castiel said. “And I know your work with foster kids is important to you, but we’ll have three empty rooms that could potentially… why are you laughing?”

Meg was covering her mouth with her hand, but it was plain to see she was trying to suffocate her chuckles. When he asked her, she just began laughing harder and shake her head.

“Oh, my God!” she mumbled. “I’m sorry. I just… I thought you were going to propose and I panicked for a second.”

Castiel blinked at her, disconcert twisting up in his stomach.

“You… what… what made you think that?”

“You were so serious!” she explained and gestured towards the table. “And you did all of this!”

“Well… I mean, it is a proposal of sorts,” he said. He still wasn’t quite sure why she was laughing, what was so funny about the situation or… maybe she was laughing to conceal something else?

“Meg, did you want me to propose?”

“Hell no!” she replied, shaking her head. “No. I love you, but it’s too soon for that.”

Castiel hoped his sigh of relief wasn’t too noisy. Meg wiped her tears with the closest napkin.

“I thought I was going to have to turn you down and that things would be really awkward afterwards.”

“Well… I’m very glad we’re on the same page, then.”
Meg continued laughing for a few minutes, and in the end, Castiel had no choice but to join her. It was a ridiculous idea, to think that he would propose to her…

… at least, that he’d do it so soon…

“Oh… just so we’re clear,” he said, when they were done laughing about the confusion. “It’s still okay if I propose… someday, right?”

Meg chuckled a little more and looked away. After a few seconds, tough, she looked up. Castiel stared at her, breathless once again because of her beauty and the strength in her gaze and the way she leaned over to him.

“Someday,” she repeated, with a smirk upon her lips. “Not someday soon. But someday.”

There was not much more Castiel could ask for.

Limos definitely lived up to their hype. The chauffer that came with it let them put whatever music they wanted and they all sang along as they headed for the school, screaming with almost uncontainable excitement. They took turns to stick their heads out through the roof and waved at passers-by and cars that honked at them. When it was Claire and Kaia’s turn, she stood behind her, extending her hands out to imitate the stupid Titanic scene, because, why not?

“I’m the king of the world!” Claire screamed at the top of her lungs and Kaia laughed so hard she ended up choking on air.

Even Patience was uncharacteristically animated and laughing in a way that Claire had not seen her done in… ever. She posed with Alexis for a selfie and then she did the same with Ben and Jack, each of them giving her a kiss on one cheek.

“Oh, my God, my dad is going to be so mad if he ever sees these!” she laughed, as she passed them by.

“I have to ask,” Claire said. “What did he say when you told her you were going with Alexis? Like, was he mad that you were hanging out with the gays or…?”

“Are you kidding me?” Patience shook her head. “He was relieved that I was going with a friend instead of some boy that was going to corrupt my morals and steal my virtue.”

“He did not say ‘steal your virtue’,” Alexis said, looking horrified. Patience smiled at them and even Jack laughed out loud, even though Claire wasn’t entirely certain he got the gist of the joke.

“I’m going to tell him,” Patience declared, after a few seconds where the conversation was paused while they decided what song to listen to next.

“Who?” Ben asked, turning her head towards her. “And what?”

Claire used his distraction to punch in a Panic! At The Disco song from her own cellphone.

*I don't wanna hear you've got a boyfriend
Sometimes you're better off alone*
But if you change your mind, you know where I am…

“My dad,” Patience explained. “I’m going to tell him that I want to be a writer. I’m going to take a year off after graduating to write before I decide if I want to go to college.”

They all stared at her, completely baffled. They all knew that, of all of them, Kaia and Patience were the ones who took writing more seriously, but still. That was another level of dedication.

Kaia was the first one to react.

“Alright, yes!” she said, offering her hand for Patience to high five her. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Patience said, looking down at her shoes, embarrassed. “Dad will probably kick me out of the house, though.”

“Well, if he does, you can come stay with us in California,” Kaia offered. “We’ll make sure to find you a really nice couch where you can crash.”

“Can I go visit too?” Ben asked.

“Sure, why not?” Claire sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “Anyone else? Alexis?”

“Umh… I’m going to Yale,” Alexis said. “I got the letter this week.”

Another stunned silence fell upon them.

“Wow, that’s… that’s amazing!” Jack said. “Congratulations!”

Claire congratulated her too, but there was a dull ache in her chest.

Alexis was going to be on the other side of the country. Ben and Patience still had a year to go and they might change their plans during that time. Jack was going to live with her and Kaia for the time being, but then maybe he would transfer to Stanford and they’d only see him on breaks or for the summer or the holidays.

But if you change your mind, you know where I am

Yeah, if you change your mind, you know where to find me

Perhaps this would be the last time that the Inksters would be together. Even if they met up again during the summer, even if they somehow found a way to get together in the coming years, it could be a long while before their paths met again.

She never thought she was going to miss anyone from school. Especially not her ex-girlfriend, the class clown she could barely stand and a nerd so insufferable she could rival Jack.

And never did I think that I

Would be caught in the way you got me

Push another girl aside and just give in

So she decided she was going to refuse to be sad about it.

The song reached her climax and she opened her mouth and sang at the top of her lungs:
Girls love girls and boys!

They all stared at her, but after a second, they laughed and joined in:

Girls love girls and boys

And love is not a choice!

“Play it again!” Ben said when the song ended, and Claire wasted no time in doing exactly that.
Chapter 63

The theme of the prom was “Fairytales”, so the hotel’s ballroom was decorated with small fairies, pixies and goblins everywhere. There was a mural depicting a tower that might or might not have been taken from the Tangled movie and the centerpieces were pumpkins on wheels to look like carriages.

Claire mocked Alexis relentlessly for it, but deep inside, she found it quite appropriate. That night as they danced and laughed and drunk too much punch, it was almost as if there was some sort of magic in the air, a wish that could come true if only they closed their eyes and believed it hard enough: that they were going to be friends forever, that nothing was going to change between the six of them.

They took several pictures, in group and with their dates. They found a spot on the dance floor near their table and they remained there, dancing cheesy song after cheesy song and ignoring the looks the chaperones and some of the other students cast at them. Claire danced two pieces with Kaia, then another with Jack, then another with Alexis, then one with Kaia again, and then they stood in circles and tried to follow Ben’s movements as he regaled with what seemed to be a deranged version of the Macarena. Claire filmed it and swore she was going to upload it to YouTube, which prompted a very intense game of tag around the ballroom as her cellphone passed from hand to hand that ended twenty minutes later as they couldn’t remember who was on whose team.

But the end of it all, she was breathless, thirsty and her feet ached like hell.

Yet, when a slow song came on and as the other four sat down, Claire grabbed Kaia’s hand and walked with her until they found a nice spot underneath the blue spotlights.

“You okay?” Claire asked, as she put her hands on Kaia’s waist and pulled her close. “Are you tired?”

Her beam was enormous, full of joy such pure that Claire’s heart fluttered hard in her chest.

“No, I’m fine,” Kaia said. “This night has been… it has been everything I could have imagined. Thank you.”

They spun together and Claire stepped even closer to her.

“Anything for you, babe.”

“And what about you?” Kaia asked. “I know this isn’t your usual thing. Are you having fun?”

Claire had to think about it for a second and she discovered that yes, for the first time, she was not looking for the nearest exit at a school dance. She hadn’t thought about sneaking out and catching a cab once, not like last year when she’d followed Madga Peterson to the bleachers because she was bored and tired and her ears hurt because of the terrible music.

Now, maybe the music had been terrible, but she’d been son entertained, she hadn’t been able to tell.

“I’m having a lot of fun,” she admitted. “But that might be because you’re here.”
Kaia laughed once more and lifted her head to kiss her. With the heels she was wearing, she didn’t even have to stand on her toes to do so.

“I love you.”

Claire’s hand almost let go of her, her knees suddenly weak. She stared at Kaia, her breath caught in her throat as what she’d said finally registered in her brain.

“You… you do?” she stammered, because suddenly she was out of breath.

They had stopped dancing, but she barely realized it. Kaia’s smile seemed to light up the entire world.

“Yeah,” she said and she laughed, as if she too felt dizzy and entranced by everything that surrounded them. “Yeah, I do.”

“Oh, good.” Claire put her hands on Kaia’s cheeks. “Because I love you, too.”

Kaia chuckled and Claire leaned on to kiss her softly on the lips, closing her eyes to breath the soft scent of her perfume…

“Hey, you two!” somebody shouted at them. “Miss Novak, I’m talking to you!”

Claire was almost tempted to raise a middle finger at whoever it was that was interrupting them, but for once, she felt way too happy to be petty or angry like that. When they broke away, they both giggled and held hands as they walked back to their table with all of their friends.

There were still a lot of things going on in the party. People dancing and shouting and joking. More food than they could possibly eat. The crowning of the prom king and queen (Tracy Davies, because of course, and some guy that was so inconsequential Claire barely even register him). But to her, the night had already reached its peak.

The only thing that could top that moment was when, around four in the morning, people started either leaving or picking up the cards for the room they’d rented. Mr. Walker, the chaperone that had made stop kissing, narrow his eyes at them when he gave them theirs, but he didn’t say a word. Patience, Alexis, Jack and Ben all had a rooms on the same floor, but instinctively left them behind as they headed for them.

“Alright, limo’s picking us up at eight,” Alexis told them with a big yawn. “Make sure to get some sleep, everybody.”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Whatsoever you say, mom.”

No one was sleeping that night.

Claire’s hands were trembling slightly when she closed the door behind them.

There were two beds in the room, but they were wide enough that they could fit in one if they cuddled closely. If Kaia wanted to, of course.

She looked up and found that her mouth was dry. Kaia was already sitting in the nearest one and taking off her shoes. She looked up and smiled.
“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” Claire replied. She swallowed lightly, wondering why the hell she was so nervous. She’d been with other girls before.

But none of them were Kaia.

She sat next to her, their fingers lightly touching. Her heart was beating so fast it was like a constant drumming in her ears.

“So…” Kaia started.

“Look, before you say anything,” Claire interrupted her. She took a deep breath, because what she was about to say was going to be hard, but it was necessary for her to say it: “If you don’t want us to do anything tonight, that’s fine. I can wait until you’re ready, no matter when that’ll be.”

Kaia sighed softly and then lifted her face to kiss Claire one more time.

“I’m ready.”

“Are you sure? Because I really don’t mind…”

This time, when Kaia kissed her, it was different. Hotter and heavier and insistent, with her fingers looking for the edges of Claire’s braid as if she wanted to pull it undone. Claire melted into her. She held Kaia tight against her and with a sigh, pull them both down to the bed.

Jack opened his eyes, feeling a little groggy and disoriented. Despite Ben’s assessment that they should watch a movie on the enormous TV in front of their beds, he’d fallen asleep rather quickly. He was all danced out and exhausted and didn’t even realize when he slipped into unconsciousness.

But now he was awake, he looked around the room, wondering what it’d been that woke him up. Their jackets were exactly where they’d left them, hanging inside of the closet so they wouldn’t get creases. The TV was off (he couldn’t even remember what movie they were supposed to be watching) and Ben was slipping inside with the shoes on his hand.

“Hey, sorry,” he mumbled, cringing. “I couldn’t sleep, so I went to see what Alexis and Patience were doing.”

“Oh.” Jack yawned and rubbed his eyes. “And what were they doing?”

“Sleeping. Patience threw a pillow at me.”

Jack had to chuckle at that. It was just like Ben to get into that sort of predicament.

“And what are you doing now?” Jack asked, as Ben pulled his jacket out of the closet and put it on.

“Well, I found out there was a pool on the rooftop and they’re opening it soon. I asked if I could check it out and the clerk said I could, as long as I didn’t jump inside. I thought I could get some nice pictures of the sunrise up there.”

Jack checked the hour on his phone. The battery was dying, but he still could make out that it was
almost six in the morning.

“I’ll come with you,” he decided.

“You don’t have to, dude. You’re toasted. Go back to sleep.”

“No, I want to,” Jack insisted. He stood up and went to grab his own jacket to prove it. “I’m already up anyway.”

Ben eyed him for a moment, but then he shrugged.

“Okay. If you’re sure…”

The rooftop pool wasn’t too large or too deep and the people getting it ready and cleaning the tables around it eyed them with suspicion. There was a fence around the roof, but Ben managed to snap some pretty pictures of the sun rising above the buildings by standing on the edge of the pool and lifting his phone at the end of a very long selfie stick.

“Which one you like?” he asked after sitting back down and swiping them for Jack to see.

“They’re all very beautiful,” Jack said.

And they were. The sky was a pale shade of blue, with a handful of stars slowly disappearing into the pink and soft oranges of the horizon. There was a quiet peace in the silence and the chilly air around them. The hotel workers had all disappeared, leaving them alone with their thoughts.

Jack breathed in softly, almost wishing that moment would last forever. He glanced at Ben, who still was looking through the pictures he’d taken the night before and smiling.

“Look at this one,” he said, showing one where the girls were all sticking their tongues out at the camera. “I’m gonna tag them all over on Instagram.”

“That’s nice,” Jack replied. And then he thought about it for a few seconds. “Do we have one of us?”

Ben stopped staring at his phone for a second and slowly looked up at him.

“Uh… your uncle took one…”

“Yeah, but… we didn’t.”

Ben’s eyes were big and confused and Jack didn’t want to laugh at him. He really didn’t, because Ben was cool and funny and patient with him even when there were things that he couldn’t quite understand. But he still had to laugh at his expression, because it was as if he’d just suggested they climbed the fence and jump down the hotel’s building.

“Do you want us to take one?” Ben asked, finally.

“Why not?”

They moved to be closer, shoulder against shoulder and while Ben maneuvered the selfie stick to get a good angle, Jack stretched his arm and placed it over his shoulders. Ben tensed up, but after a moment, he moved a bit closer. They both smiled as he snapped the picture. Jack wasn’t particularly fond of selfies, but he had to admit, they looked very good in that one.

“Okay,” Ben said, laughing nervously. “You can like… let go of me now.”
Jack lowered his arm, with the irritating feeling that he’d done something wrong again.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter.”

There was silence between them again, but it wasn’t peaceful as before. That saddened Jack. They still had the summer ahead of them, but it felt like that night was the end of an era and he didn’t want his last moments with Ben to be awkward like that.

“Ben…” he started.

“Jack,” Ben said at the same time. They both stopped, stared at each other and laughed again, the uncomfortable feeling disappearing into thin air. “Look, dude… I’m getting better at managing it, but I still have such a huge crush on you it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I really don’t understand that,” Jack admitted. “Why is it embarrassing to like someone?”

“The embarrassing part is that you don’t like me back.”

“Oh.”

Jack scratched his arm, reflecting on this.

“But you’re still awesome,” Ben continued. “I really liked coming to prom with you. Thank you for asking me.”

“You’re welcome. I had a lot of fun, too,” Jack replied. He went quiet again. “And I don’t know if I don’t like you back.”

Ben jumped, startled, and Jack to grab him by the shirt to prevent him from falling into the pool.

“Dude!” he exclaimed. “You can’t just say shit like that to me!”

“I’m sorry,” Jack apologized, his cheeks burning. “I just never liked anyone. Romantically, I mean. I’m not even sure if I can. I have no idea how that feels like. But I think, if I had to like someone that way… it would have to be you.” He fixed his eyes on Ben, who was staring at him open-mouthed and red-faced. “Am I making sense? Does that make sense to you?”

“Not a lot.”

Jack sighed, frustrated that he couldn’t explain himself better.

“I’m sorry. I know this must be hard to hear for you, but I’m just not sure. And I have no idea how to figure it out.”

Ben licked his lips slowly.

“We could make out. I have no idea why I said that,” he added quickly. “I’m a mess. If you want to talk to a functional bisexual, you’ll have to go wake Alex up.”

Jack laughed, but he was even more confused than before.

“How would making out help?”

“It’s… it’s hard to explain,” Ben admitted. “But when you like someone, when you really like
someone, kissing them feels… different. Like, your heart beating fast and butterflies in your stomach and all that good stuff.”

“Really? I thought that was just a figure of speech.”

“No, it’s a thing. It’s very much a thing.”

To Jack it still sounded like something that couldn’t possibly be literal, but he was willing to take Ben’s word for it.

“Okay. Let’s try it.”

Ben froze, closed his eyes and then opened them again. He sighed very softly as he put his hands on Jack’s neck. He pulled him closer and…

“You’re not going to freak out on me, are you?” he asked, moving his head away a little. “Cause last time you freaked out and it was very much not fun for either of us.”

“Last time you caught me off-guard,” Jack reminded him. “Now I want you to do it.”

Ben let out another heavy sigh and this time, he didn’t stop until his nose grazed Jack’s and their lips met.

He was slow and soft, and Jack was thankful for that. Suddenly he was hyperaware of how hard the edge of the pool was, how the sun was coming out in an angle that hit him right in the eye and how heavy his entire body felt after dancing so much and barely sleeping two hours in a row.

He soon realized he was thinking of all those things to distract him from the fact he was kissing someone and it wasn’t… it wasn’t great. It wasn’t terrible, but none of the things that Ben had described happened to him. He even opened his eyes at one point. Ben just kept his close.

After a few seconds, just as Jack was beginning to feel more than a little bit awkward, they broke away. Ben scanned Jack’s face closely.

“Nothing?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

Ben clicked his tongue and lowered his gaze.

“Guess it’s back to the friendzone for me, huh?” he commented, as he let go of Jack.

“The friendzone it’s not so bad.” Jack frowned. “Is it? I mean, that’s where friends are.”

Ben looked at him quizzically and then burst into laughter.

“Never change, Jack.”

They came down from the rooftop around eight. Alexis was already up and waiting for them in the hallway, along with a very disheveled Patience who kept yawning and yawning.

“Alright, I need someone to wake Claire and Kaia up,” Alexis requested.

“Not it!” Ben said immediately.

“Not it…” Patience repeated, rubbing her face.
Jack wondered for a second why Alexis didn’t do it herself, but in the end, he went to knock on their door anyway. Claire opened up, her hair flowing freely over her shoulders and her face free of make-up and a little wet, as if she’d finished washing up. She wasn’t wearing her jacket and the top button of her shirt was undone.

“Hey,” she greeted him, with a smile. “We’re just… we’ll be there in a sec.”

“Okay,” Jack said. He turned towards the rest of their friends. “That’s odd. She’s not usually this friendly in the mornings.”

Alexis and Ben chuckled as if he’d said something very funny. Patience might have laughed too, but she was too sleepy to do anything other than yawn again.

After a few minutes and some giggles that were clearly heard on the hallway, Claire and Kaia finally emerged. Neither of them were wearing shoes but they both looked very happy for some reason. Claire had her arm wrapped around Kaia, as if she didn’t want to let her go for even a second.

“Hey, stay with us to sleep for a while,” she told her as they climbed back into the limo. “I’m sure Meg won’t mind.”

“Okay.” Kaia yawned and hid her face on Claire’s neck. “I’ll just… text her after I’ve rested my eyes…”

The trip back to their homes was much different than on the way there. For one, it was quiet. They were all too exhausted to do anything other than pile up on top of each other and close their eyes, even though the motion of the limo wasn’t exactly comfortable. Jack still managed to fall asleep for what felt like five minutes but must have been a lot more like that, because when he opened them again, they were in front of Ben’s house.

“Okay, this is my stop,” he said, with a sleepy smile. “I’ll see you guys.”

“Bye!”

“Sleep well!”

They dropped off the Alex and Patience’s at Alexis’ house and spotted Sheriff Mills standing on the doorway in her rode with a cup of coffee in her hand. She waved at them and they waved back as the girls crossed the garden.

“Do you think those two will end together?” Kaia asked.

“Nah. Patience’s too straight,” Claire replied. “But can you imagine all that nerdiness in one relationship?”

They snickered together. Jack would’ve joined them, but he was dozing off again and he couldn’t come up with any coherent words anyway.

He still wasn’t awake enough as they tiptoed inside of the house. The lights of the kitchen were on and they heard the clattering and clicking of pans and mugs, as if it was any other morning and Castiel was making breakfast for them again.

“Oh, great,” Claire said. “I could use some coffee.”

“Me too,” Kaia said.
“Yeah.” Jack rubbed his eyes. He was barely able to stay awake at that point. “I’ll go upstairs to
change and then have breakfast.”

He was half-convinced that he was going to collapse on his bed the moment he stepped into his
room. He was certain there would still be breakfast when he woke up, so it wasn’t really a problem.
He was thinking about how nice it would be, to sink his face on a pillow and let the sleep carry him
over.

But first, nature was calling.

Castiel was in the shower. Jack stopped outside of the bathroom’s door, blinking into the light and
waiting patiently for the sound of the water turning off.

It wasn’t until the door was creaking open that he realized they’d heard Castiel downstairs, so he
couldn’t possibly in the shower. Also, there was the possibility that he was already sleeping and
having a very weird dream, because the person that stepped out of the bathroom was Miss Masters,
with her hair wet falling over her shoulders and a towel wrapping her body.

“Jack!” she exclaimed, her eyes opening with shock. “You’re already back!”

Jack blinked several times, until the astonishment finally managed to win over his exhaustion.

“Miss… Miss Masters?” he muttered, stumbling backwards.

“Uh… we… I can explain…” Meg replied.

Jack turned around and marched towards the stairs. He was half-convinced that this was a
hallucination. It had to be. Because it made absolutely no sense otherwise.

Claire and Kaia were sitting on the kitchen’s table, holding hands and lazily sipping from their mugs
now and then. Castiel stood in front of the stove, cooking his signature pancakes.

“Do you like them with maple syrup, Kaia? Because I think we also have some strawberries in the
fridge… ah, Jack!” He smiled at him when he walked inside. “Good morning! Are you gonna have
breakfast with us after all?”

Jack stared at him. He looked so normal and so unperturbed he was convinced now, more than ever,
then he must have lost his mind.

“Miss Masters was in our shower,” he said, because he hoped hearing it out loud would cause
everybody to laugh at him and make him realize just how ridiculous that was.

Claire chuckled a little, surely, but Castiel didn’t. His eyes grew wider for a second before he took a
deep breath and put the pancake he was making along with the others in the platter.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh?” Jack repeated. “What do you mean ‘oh’?”

“Oh, that wasn’t how I was planning on bringing it up.”

“What?”

Claire was now openly laughing and Kaia was hiding her mouth behind her hands, but Jack was
certain by the way her eyes shone, that she was laughing as well.
“What?” he asked again, because this was definitely one of those times when everyone seemed to be laughing at a joke that no one was bothering to explain to him. “What does this mean?”

The door behind them opened and, as if to confirm that no, he wasn’t dreaming or hallucinating, Meg stepped inside, wearing a pair of sweatpants and a shirt that Jack was certain belonged to Castiel.

“Uh, kids,” Castiel started as Meg walked up to him so he could put an arm around her waist, the way Claire had done with Kaia earlier that morning. “I know this might come as a shock to you, but Meg and I… we are dating.”

“We would have told you sooner, but someone—“ Meg glared at Castiel “—kept postponing it.”

“It just never seemed like the right time,” Castiel said, looking down in shame.

“That’s okay,” Claire said. “I knew.”

“You knew?!” Jack screamed.

“I knew too,” Kaia said. “I mean, the both of you disappearing over Valentine’s Day? You weren’t slick at all.”

“You mean to tell me this has been going on for months?”

“Jack, get over it.” Claire rolled her eyes at him. “Wasn’t this what you wanted way back in September?”

Jack opened his mouth… and immediately closed it again. Slowly, the realization that all of the scheming and humiliation that he’d gone through had been worth it, because, well… he was right. They were a good match for one another.

“I don’t want to hear it, Jack,” Castiel said, raising a finger at him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Jack replied, though he was grinning so hard he was sure his satisfaction was obvious. “I’m just really happy for you, Uncle Cas.”

Castiel glared at him, for some reason.

“Sit down and eat your breakfast,” he ordered.

Jack didn’t have to be told twice.

“So that’s why you asked me to call you Meg?”

“That, and because you calling me ‘Miss Masters’ was far too stuffy,” she replied, as she also sat down and reached to grab Castiel’s hand.

Jack laughed and placed two pancakes in his plate. This morning was shaping up to be worth staying up for, after all.

“Where’s the syrup?”

“There isn’t any left,” Claire said, while very clearly soaking her own pancakes with it.

“Very funny,” Jack huffed. “Give it to me.”
“I’m not done with it!” she replied, holding the bottle over her head.

“You’re going to use it all up!” Jack complained. “Uncle Cas!”

“Children, please!” Castiel sighed, staring at the ceiling, while Meg and Kaia burst into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

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