And Watch What Happens

by Hth

Summary

Cass Novak was really only looking for a hookup – one night to let the whole world go away, all of his responsibilities and the ghosts of a bitter past that he’s done everything he can to move beyond. When he wakes up with a strait-laced but very cute businessman named Dean Smith, he’s ready to declare success and walk away.

Except that Dean keeps calling him. And Cass isn’t interested in buttoned-down yuppies in suits who’ve never experienced one real moment of pain in their lives…right?

Except that maybe he is. And maybe Cass is somehow falling in love for the first time since his soulmate died five years ago. Which he could handle – probably….

Except that he’s also beginning to have a strange series of nightmares and flashbacks to a whole separate life he never lived, in an apocalyptic hellscape with a version of Dean he barely recognizes. And once he starts to notice, the whole world begins to seem…just a little off.

Cass is the happiest he’s ever been, and he’s also losing his mind. It’s a very weird year.
Written for the 2018 DeanCas Mini-Bang, so thank you to the organizers, who have done a ton of work and mayyyyybe gave me an extension at one point for flu-related purposes, which was good of them.

Art by Alpacasfluff

See the end of the work for more notes.
Cass wakes up before dawn to the chirp of a ringtone he doesn't recognize, which fits the pattern, because he's naked in a bedroom he doesn't recognize either. Must have been some night.

He rolls over and finds the second half of the bed warm and rumpled, and things start to come into focus a little. It's not before dawn, but the bedroom has heavy drapes that block out all but a pool of soft gray light on the soft white carpet. It's the only light he has to see by, except for the light coming from under the bathroom door – definitely a bathroom, because he can hear the shower running – and the screen of his hostess' phone, which is flashing DAD at a pulse that makes Cass' head ache, so he reaches across and flips it upside down on the nightstand before collapsing to his back.

It's just barely possible that he's getting a little old for this kind of thing, but in his defense, it's not a regular occurrence these days. Cass can't even remember the last time he was blackout drunk. Of course, he can't remember a lot of things at the moment. He's lucky he remembers his own name.

Now that he's more or less awake and more or less able to see the room as his eyes adjust, he thinks maybe hostess wasn't the right word. The painfully tasteful décor reads to him as masculine, all neutral shades of brown and cream, straight lines and minimal personal detail. Was he at The Blue Room last night? God, it's all a blur, and just so embarrassing. This kind of thing makes a cute story to tell in your twenties, maybe – your early twenties – but--

He didn't even notice the shower turning off, so both his eyes and his brain need a moment to adjust when the door opens, spilling light into the room. When things start to settle into place and Cass gets a look at his (definitely masculine) host, the embarrassment subsides a little. Maybe Cass isn't as young as he used to be, but he must be pulling off dashing or some such shit, because fuck if he didn't go home with a goddamn supermodel last night.

Now it's really a damn shame he can't remember a minute of it.

The guy is-- look, Cass considers himself mostly straight, straight with an occasional blind alley to keep life interesting, but he couldn't deny if he wanted to that this guy is a full-tilt, traffic-stopping stunner. He's wearing a towel around narrow hips, and his torso and chest look to Cass' eye like they've been sculpted by a trainer who gets paid by the ab; the professional in Cass is bitching silently about six-pack showboaters who compromise their clients' core strength in pursuit of aesthetics, but hey, everyone has their niche, and right now Cass is feeling very indulgent toward a little showboating. “Morning, gorgeous,” Cass says, and it's early enough that he doesn't have to kick any extra huskiness into his voice to get his point across.

“Oh,” he says, “hey – good morning. Hope I didn't wake you up.” He flashes a ridiculous, sweet smile that meshes well with the whole vibe he's got going on, with the freckles and the long lashes and the absurd hotness, like he's definitely the kid in the porno who'd have a lot of I've never done anything like this before dialogue, even though you've seen him in eight other movies getting gangbang-banged by firemen and possibly their Dalmatian.

“I could be talked into forgiving you,” Cass purrs.

And damn, he guesses he must be dashing as fuck, because Gorgeous is right there on the bed in a hot second, his hand sliding over Cass' chest, his lips and tongue nudging against Cass' mouth. Cass hums his pleasure, but he takes his time before he lets Gorgeous coax his mouth open, because boys
this pretty never have to work for anything, and it's good for the soul. Cass strokes up his muscular arm (should've gone into personal training, he really blew it with this *oh, I wanna heal people* bullshit), and the towel is coming untucked, so fuck that thing, too; Cass jerks it loose and pushes it off the side of the bed so he can get his other hand on the back of a thigh and slipping upward.

“We should, uh – probably talk about last night, right?” Gorgeous says.

“Yeah?” Cass says vaguely. By the time his brain catches up and realizes that the right answer was *no, let's absolutely not*, the damage is done. Gorgeous settles back on his heels, and he's still mostly hard, but he definitely looks like he plans to put his shoulder to the wheel and have this talk, so the best thing to do is probably to get out ahead of the whole thing. Cass pushes himself up against the painfully tasteful wooden headboard and says, “Listen, honey, this is a little embarrassing for me, but the truth is I don't party quite that hard most of the time, and – I'm afraid I need to ask you to tell me your name again.”

Several quick emotions pass over his face. “It's – it's Dean,” he says. “Wait, do you – do you not even remember-- ?”

Cass is tempted to feel sorry for him, but he reminds himself that if not being the highlight of Cass' entire sexual history is the worst indignity Dean's ever had to put up with, then he definitely needs this character-building experience. He touches Dean's cheekbone lightly and says, “Dean. Great. I'm Cass.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, faintly dry. “You told me last night. Well, this is – this is what I thought we should– Look, man, I'm really sorry, this was – or it wasn't – it really wasn't cool. I mean, I don't usually-- well, I don't *ever*-- I really was going to put you in a cab, but-- I don't know, I don't want to make excuses.”

“Is this a consent thing?” Cass says, and when Dean looks even more guilty, he waves it off. “Don't even worry about it, honey. I know me, and there's no doubt in my mind it was completely my idea. Right?”

“Well, not – not completely,” Dean says. “But you were....”

Yeah, Cass just bets he was. “Hey,” he says kindly. “Not traumatized. Just sorry I don't remember more.” He pets Dean's face again, because he still looks sad and guilty and just so stupidly pettable. “I bet you were one for the record books.”

He flushes a little darker in the dim light, probably not sure if he should feel flattered or objectified. Cass kind of hopes he ends up going for both. “I wasn't – really anything,” Dean says. “I mean, we didn't....”

There's a twist. “We didn't-- Really, at all?”

“Well. Um. At the bar, we, uh – we made out, and you, uh – we went into the bathroom and you....”

Cass nods, trying not to preen visibly. He doubts there was a single person at The Blue Room – man, woman, or nervous virgin twink with a fake ID – who wouldn't have blown Dean in the bathroom, but look who actually did it. *Dashing as fuck.* “I can imagine,” he says.

“I knew you'd had a few drinks,” Dean says, “but so had everyone, that late at night. You seemed okay. I invited you home with me, and you started – um, acting a little weird in the car, kind of zoning a little, and then it just got worse from there. I could barely keep you on your feet in the elevator. I should've put you in a cab, but you were – um. You were still pretty into it, apparently. I
tried to get you some coffee and put you on the couch, but you were – fairly insistent that you wanted to be in bed, so. Like I said, no excuses, it wasn't cool. But you were, um. I mean, you are – really attractive, and.... Anyway, we just, we fooled around for a while, and then you – fell asleep. So. It probably wasn't actually a night that was going to break any records for you. If that makes you feel any better about missing it.”

It sounds a lot less dashing once the details are filled in, and Cass groans a little and rubs his eyes. “No, I owe you an apology. I swear, I'm not usually such a sloppy mess. I guess my tolerance isn't what it used to be. That's what happens when you get older.”

“Oh, I hear ya!” Dean says, which only makes Cass want to strangle him. “Man, I remember some of the parties my fraternity used to throw, and then I'd just go to class the next day like it was nothing. There's no way I could get away with that now.”

“You're fucking kidding me,” Cass says. “You can't even be thirty yet.”

“Twenty-nine,” he admits. “But you – you can't be all that much older-- “

Cass laughs. “Oh, honey. Give me a call in your forties and we'll talk.”

“You're forty?” Dean says, and Cass could genuinely go either way on laughing versus strangling. “I mean-- no, that's-- you should feel good, I would never have-- you don't look forty at all.”

“That's what clean living will do for you,” Cass says wryly. “By the way, your father wants you to call him.”

Dean blinks. “How do you--?”

“Because I'm fucking psychic,” Cass snaps, before rolling his arm out to point vaguely in the direction of the nightstand. “Your phone rang while you were in the shower, I saw the caller ID; it's not an unsolved mystery.”

Dean reaches for his phone, then hesitates, then picks it up. “Sorry, I should really-- “ he says, as if Cass has any right to complain. “It's an hour earlier there, and I don't know why he'd call so early on a Saturday if....” Cass nods and stretches back out on the bed, ready to get laid or get out, whichever way this ends up going.

“Hi, Dad,” Dean says. He seems to decide that it's too risque to call home naked, so he fishes his towel off the floor and drapes it tidily over his lap like he's in the sauna. It's cute. The guy's cute, you can't take that away from him. “No, I haven't, not since – Thursday? Yeah, Thursday night. Why?” He listens with a little frown, and Cass is mildly curious, not that any of it is any of his business.

“Well, that's not weird, they do that all the time. So that's – what, twelve hours? Dad, twelve hours is nothing. She's probably at her idiot boyfriend's house. Okay, then she's somewhere else, I don't really understand-- “ He chuckles a little bleakly and rubs his eyebrow as he listens. “Well, I mean, it's her car, what's she supposed to be driving? Dad, she's fine, the car's fine, everyone's fine. I think you should just go back to bed. Of course I will. I know. It's okay, I was up, I was just in the shower. Yeah, love you, too.” He groans as he tosses the phone back on his nightstand.

“So, not a family emergency,” Cass says.

“No. My sister and my mom had a fight last night, which is, like, the opposite of an emergency, or even a surprise. Then she didn't come home and she isn't answering her phone, so everyone's freaking out.”

Cass frowns a little. “Your sister ran away from home? You don't think that's possibly-- “
“My sister is twenty-three years old,” Dean says. “You don’t run away from home when you’re twenty-three, you just – exist out in the world.”

Valid point. Cass shakes himself for automatically siding with Anxious Overprotective Dad when he’s supposed to be in Hot Piece of Ass mode. He lets his fingers crawl across the bedspread and hook the corner of the towel, sliding it off Dean’s lap with his best innocent eyes. Dean smirks at him, then rolls over above him, and this is more like it.

He’s breathing a little heavier than he’d like just from Dean lowering down against him, their chests brushing, the muscles in Dean’s arms flexing, and okay, fine, Cass takes it all back, he loves this guy’s douchebag personal trainer. He gets a little confused and tries to wrap his legs around Dean, forgetting about the blanket between them, and he leans up to meet Dean’s mouth as it comes down, and yeah. Yeah, this is good; Cass can’t remember why he suddenly decided to go shopping for dick last night, but he’s a fucking genius, because this is so good, and it’s been so long, and he needs it. Dean is broad and fucking strong and Cass can smell something inherently male on his skin, even under the chemical smells of his shampoo and bodywash, and the thing about good-looking men is that they think they deserve you, and that's a shitty way to be a human being but in bed all bets are off. Dean kisses like he deserves whatever he wants, and it flips switch after switch all the way through Cass, lighting up a pyrotechnic chain straight down to his cock. Dean might be a shitty human being on his own time, but this morning, Cass is one hundred percent going to fuck him, and he's not going to regret it for a second.

“You made a lot of pretty ambitious promises last night,” Dean murmurs against his mouth. “Now, I work in marketing, and I know that nothing ever really lives up to the hype, but I figure if you’re half as good as you seem to think you are....”

“Oh, honey, is that a challenge?” he asks with a chuckle. “Are we doing some alpha male thing here, is that the game? That's adorable. You're adorable.” He pushes two fingers just into the cleft of Dean's ass, then strokes back up to his sacrum and says, “I'm not going to work extra hard to prove myself to you, sorry. It's seven in the morning, I'm pretty comfortable like this, and I'm at least three-quarters as good as I think I am, so I think maybe you're the one who needs to work for it a little.” Dean looks startled, at least until Cass smiles at him and he goes a little dazed around the eyes. “You don't hear that a lot, do you?” Cass says sympathetically, before leaning up to nip lightly at Dean's bottom lip. “It's good for the soul.”

Dean kisses him again, and Cass' cock twitches, which hopefully the blanket disguises a bit. He'll do his part, sure, make Dean feel all sexy and whatnot, but he'll do it in his own time and he doesn't need his dick jumping the gun. “Wondered if you'd be as confident when you were sober,” Dean says.

“And am I?”

“I'm pretty sure more,” Dean says, sounding puzzled. “But I give you this, you've already been an interesting experience. I think this is the first time anyone's ever gotten me naked and then showed any concern for the state of my soul.”

“I like to provide a holistic experience,” Cass says. “Mind-body-spirit and all that.”

“So I'm gonna see God?”

“Well, I don't want to overhype myself,” he says dryly, “but I would say there's a chance of some higher planes being accessed. We'll see.”

The condoms and lube are right where Cass figures they would be; of course they are, Dean doesn't seem like a wildly unpredictable guy. Cass is a pretty good judge of character, and he thinks he's got a bead on this kid – nice guy, bright enough, latent douchebag tendencies a side effect of wanting very badly to impress and be accepted. Fraternity, personal trainer, *marketing* – all excruciatingly conventional life choices. A little shy and stammering about getting head in a gay bar, but clearly not new to the whole scene, so experienced enough in a domesticated sort of way. Affectionate nuclear family somewhere in the Mountain time zone – Wyoming? The more cowboy parts of Colorado? Cass can't totally place his accent. Buys his design aesthetics off the rack, either because he's scared to make a mistake or because he just doesn't care what things look like. It all screams that Dean is a little conservative, a little conformist, but basically decent. A long way from Cass' type, but nothing to be ashamed of. And maybe Cass can broaden Dean's horizons just a little bit. Do the world a good deed.

Cass has made some well and truly fucked-up decisions in the past, trying to do a good deed. This one seems nice and low-stakes.

Twenty minutes later, with a condom on and three fingers buried inside undoubtedly the hottest guy Cass has ever had the privilege of seeing on his elbows and knees, he's thinking *nice* is probably underselling it a little. Jesus, no wonder guys like Dean are usually so insufferable; Cass is a well-balanced and almost completely functional grown-ass person who carries life insurance and meditates, and he thinks he would commit war crimes right now to get his dick into Dean. Imagine going through life being a person who has that effect on others. If Cass had power like that back in his misspent youth, he would've been a full-blown narcissist at best, so if Dean's worst crime is overpaying for his six-pack, he should probably be canonized.

“God, *come on,*” Dean growls. Oh, that growl. Cass wants it as his *ringtone.* “You made me wait *eight hours* for this, you can hurry the fuck up.”

“You seem a little pent-up,” Cass says. “You should get laid more often.”

“I'm trying,” Dean says.

“Am I winning the alpha thing?” Cass asks as he lines himself up. “I feel like I am, but I don't do this a lot, so I could be fuzzy on the rules.”

“You know that's not even a real thing,” Dean says. “That's just how wolves are in captivity, in real life they're much more--” A hard shiver runs through him, his spine undulating beautifully as he tries to adjust to the head of Cass' cock breaching his hole. “-- cooperative,” he finishes breathlessly.

“You're fucking adorable,” Cass says, which is exactly the type of ego-stroking he had no intention of providing, but he can't help it.

To be fair, though, Dean is giving back his share of flattery, moaning Cass' name as his fingers dig into the pillow and the back of his neck starts to smell a little like fresh sweat along with shampoo. It might be going to Cass' head just a little bit, the way Dean trembles when Cass strokes from his shoulder down to his elbow, the way all the weight and power of that designer muscle sways forward as Cass pushes deeper, just letting Cass in, letting him have control. “Don't stop,” Dean says throatily, as if that was something Cass had been considering. “Wanna come with you in me.”

Something sparks in Cass' brain, and he realizes this pretty little shit is trying to top him from the bottom right now, which is both shockingly sexy and nothing that Cass intends to put up with. He reaches around and strokes his open palm lightly up the underside of Dean's cock, nudging it up against Dean's body but doing nothing in particular to provide more than a tease. Dean moans anyway, and Cass leans up over him and licks along the curve of his scapula before he says, “You
always get this hard when you've got a cock filling you up, honey, or am I as good as I think I am?"

“You're good, you're good,” Dean gasps. “Oh, God, you're whatever you want, just don't stop.”

Not a problem. Cass is still feeling sleepy and a little unfocused from the night before, so it's not optimal circumstances for throwing someone down and raling them, but actually this is working surprisingly well for both of them; something about the lazy pace Cass is setting seems to make Dean want to work harder for it, and the utter decadence of having Dean at his mercy and on his schedule is one hell of a high. Cass keeps things slow and steady, enjoying the sweat-slick glide of Dean's thighs against his, Dean's hips under his hands, and the way Dean rocks and arches, trying to follow Cass' lead and trying to urge him on at the same time is – yeah. Maybe one for the record books.

“Please,” Dean finally says, and Cass has to call on reserves of discipline he'd forgotten he possessed to keep from reacting too much to that. “Please – touch me, I wanna come, let me....”

“Put out your hand,” Cass says, and Dean pries his fingers loose and lets his hand fall on the mattress. Cass squeezes some lube into his hollowed palm and says, “What did I say about working for it? It's my day off; make yourself come.” He can't tell if the whine Dean makes is pleasure or protest, but it doesn't really matter, because he starts to jack himself right away, and the way he tilts and the way his muscles work puts a new pressure around Cass' cock that he thinks is going to make him access the higher planes in a minute.

He only wishes he could see Dean come all over his belly and the sheets, but he can hear it and he can feel Dean thrash and bear down around him, and that's nothing to sneeze at. He wraps his arm around Dean's ribs and leans up a little, angling his cock down so that the head pushes forward against Dean from the inside. Dean makes a choking sound that Cass knows comes from a sensation that can't fully resolve itself into pleasure or discomfort, and Cass shushes him and lips along the muscles of his back, letting himself push in tight and sharp for just the few more thrusts that it takes before the pressure right on the tip of his cock triggers an orgasm that vibrates outward to suck all the tension out of his body at once. He almost falls over on his side, but he drags Dean with him, so hopefully it seems intentional.

“Holy shit,” Dean says breathlessly. “That....”

“Mmhm,” Cass says, reaching up to run his fingers along Dean's lips. Dean kisses them lightly, and Cass runs his thumb down Dean's jaw and says, “See, aren't you glad you didn't call me that cab?” Dean snorts a sleepy laugh.

He turns his head to give Cass a wounded look when Cass starts to disentangle. “Don't pout at me,” Cass says. “Condoms work the same way no matter how cute you think you are.”

“How cute I think I am?” Dean repeats with a little smile. “I think I'm fucking adorable; tell me I'm wrong.” Cass flicks his ear lightly on the way out of bed.

The painfully tasteful bathroom is still humid from Dean's shower; he doesn't have a tub, but it's a sizable shower encased in frosted glass, and there's a frosted skylight overhead. Cass looks up at it thoughtfully, and then at the second door. Jack and Jill bathroom? Or one-bath apartment, with access from the bedroom and the living room? But if it's an apartment, it's on the top floor, and the tile in the bathroom is showroom-new, and twenty-nine seems young to Cass, but it's old enough to be doing pretty well in the right industry. Cass shakes his head a little as he starts to wash up; when did he turn into someone who picks up corporate yuppe frat bros with a couple of drinks in him? This is a side of himself he would rather not have known existed.

Amelia would never let him live this down, he thinks. Not that Amelia has had anything to say about
his life in a long time, but the comfortable pain of her memory is oddly soothing, like picking at a
scab. Cass supposes that's how injuries fail to heal, but – what's healthy, anyway? Does anyone ever
really get to that mythic land?

Dean comes in behind him, his reflection distorted by the condensation dripping down the mirror,
and he puts his hand on Cass’ waist before licking up the side of his neck. It's a little – overly
familiar, but Cass is feeling generous, so he doesn't say anything against it. He sidles out of Dean’s
way so that Dean can use the second washcloth on the rack to clean the come off his abs and the
lube off his inner thighs. “How far are we from The Blue Room?” Cass asks. “I walked there.”

“Not too far, but not really walking distance,” Dean says. “I'll take you home.”

“You really don't have to,” Cass says. His voice is flatter than it should be, and he scowls at himself.
Dean hasn't done anything to deserve taking the brunt of his moodiness, other than be a capitalist,
which Cass hears a lot of people are doing these days.

Dean looks over at him warily. “I'd like to,” he says quietly. “I'd like to take you to breakfast,
actually.” Cass snorts before he can stop himself, but Dean keeps a calm, professional sort of smile
on his face and says with the smooth friendliness that Cass is sure they teach in business school,
“Hey, I know you weren't out looking for a dating thing last night. I don't want to force anything
that's not there or that's not gonna work for you. It can really just be breakfast, if that's what you
want. Everyone's gotta eat, right?”

“Don't try to sell me,” Cass says. “I can't stand that shit.”

“It's not a line,” Dean says. “I think you're funny. I think you're interesting. I could read the paper
over breakfast, but I'd rather talk to you. I won't even give you my number unless you ask for it.”

“I won't,” Cass says shortly.

Dean smiles. “If you don't, you don't. You still gotta eat breakfast.”

It's a bad idea. He's really not looking for someone to date, and certainly not someone like Dean,
who's wrong for him in a dozen different ways that Cass has figured out before even learning his last
name. And who has exactly the kind of smile that makes otherwise well-balanced and mildly-to-
moderately functional people forget to be smart.

“Give me a minute to think about it,” Cass says. “At least let me put some clothes on.”

“I'd offer to let you borrow something clean,” Dean says cheerfully, “but I wouldn't want you to
think I was trying to trick you into seeing me again.”

“Just as well,” Cass says. “Don't think I'm above stealing your clothes, if I really don't want to see
you again.”

“If?” Dean repeats, and Cass shoots him a look before going back into the bedroom to scavenge
around for his clothes.

He slides back into his underwear and jeans, then inspects his linen shirt. They managed to get Cass
out of it last night with only one button lost, and it's not obvious when he puts it back on, so he
decides that wearing it as-is is less embarrassing than relenting and asking for a shirt from Dean. His
phone and his Visa are still in the back pocket of his jeans, and he hasn't missed any messages since
he turned the ringer off, whenever that was.

Dean is also in the process of getting dressed, threading a belt through the loops of his khakis (of
course he wears khakis and a belt on Saturdays; how can someone who's such a good lay be so boring when he's vertical?), when Cass makes his decision. “Fine, I'm hungry,” he says, and pretends he doesn't see Dean's grin. “Let me just call my neighbor first and make sure she can go over to my place to feed and water my kitten.”

“You have a kitten?” Dean says. He sounds surprised. Cass doesn't know why – does he not come off as nurturing and all that shit? Because he is.

“Well, I still call her that,” Cass says with a half-shrug as he starts texting. “She's actually fifteen.”

“Is that old for a cat? I've never had one.”

“Getting up there. I should get another couple-three years out of her, at least.” Still out, he sends.

Check up on everything for me?

Almost immediately, Jody texts back, On it right now. Relax, enjoy yourself! He sends her an eyelash-batting emoji and puts his phone away.

When he looks back up, Dean has slid into a gray Stanford Baseball t-shirt with red sleeves, and the cut between the red and gray draws Cass' eye straight to the breadth of his chest and shoulders and the thickness of his arms, and God Cass is going to hate himself if he asks for this phone number, but he truly believes that some things are worth a little bit of self-loathing, and a second shot at fucking Dean might be one of those things.

Maybe. He hasn't made up his mind yet.

“Let's hit it,” Dean says with an infuriatingly easy smile.

Cass feels vindicated when he gets to see the main room of Dean's apartment (sober) for the first time. It's big and tidy and boring, and the huge bank of windows to his right prove that he was also right about it being a downtown penthouse, which is the most colossal waste of money Cass can imagine. You could foot a kid's tuition to college for a whole semester on what Dean probably pays in one month on this place – not Stanford, of course, but Kent State for sure. The only part of it that actually looks lived-in is the corner tucked behind the kitchen counter, where a messy desk blocks off a Bowflex machine, and none of that is newsworthy to Cass, because he already figured this guy spends too much time working and working out to be genuinely interesting.

There's no earthly reason Cass should call him. They can't possibly have anything to talk about, and now that he's already had the experience, even the hookups are bound to get repetitive pretty quickly. Repetitive at best. Emotionally messy at worst, although... repetitive seems more likely. He's certainly not going to fall for this bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Young Republican, and however smoothly and earnestly Dean flirts, he can't imagine that he's going to get that attached to Cass, either. They'll just get bored, and they're both nice enough people, so they'll feel awkward calling it off, and it'll drag on in limbo way too long and--

A loud buzzer jolts Cass out of his head, and he stares around looking for a smoke detector or something before he processes Dean leaning into the call button of the speaker by the door. “Mr. Smith?” a disembodied voice says, sounding unbearably chipper for this hour on a Saturday.

Smith. Of course it is.

“Hey, morning, Garth,” Dean says.

“Morning, Mr. Smith! I got a, uh, Joanna Smith here.” Dean's face goes blank for a second, his
mouth open while he gathers his thoughts. “Do you want me to...?”

“Yeah, yes. Yeah, send her up, Garth, thanks.” Dean turns toward Cass and says flatly, like he still hasn't quite digested it, “My sister.”

“Found her,” Cass says casually. Well, this will probably scuttle the post-coital breakfast, and that's really just as well. Cass has a life to get back to, and clearly so does Dean.

When he's pictured Dean's sister, he's mostly seen a female version of Dean: tall and sandy-haired and freckled, athletic and expressive, with a big smile and that particular brand of corn-fed Midwestern attractiveness that's surprisingly effective in spite of being about as intriguing as a glass of milk. The real Joanna Smith is a tiny little thing, and she's doing her best to radiate efficiency and grouchiness with the handicaps of a bright blonde ponytail, apple cheeks, and a decidedly snub nose. She's wearing leggings under a denim miniskirt and a shapeless Army jacket over a Green Day concert t-shirt, and Cass wouldn't have pegged them for related, not even in the slightest, until she puts her arms around Dean's ribs and he folds her up in his arms with an unmistakably familial protectiveness. “Did Mom and Dad tell you?” she asks.

“Dad told me you took off last night and weren't answering your phone. You're really freaking him out. Did you drive all night?”

“I didn't know where else to go,” she says. “I can't stay with them.”

Dean puts her away from him gently and says, “Good. I've been saying you should move out for years. Do you have any savings at all, or did you blow everything on those stupid road trips?”

“They're not stupid road trips, Dean! I'm seeing the country, I'm experiencing life. You know that when you die, you don't get any points for how expensive your suits are, right?”

“Right, you get points for how many states you've seen the biggest ball of twine in,” he says.

“No, she's right,” Cass says, and they both look at him like he just teleported into the room. “They've done studies on it. People who prioritize experiences over possessions live longer and have greater life satisfaction.”

“Thank you, wise stranger,” she says.

“Oh,” Dean says. “Right, this – this is my sister Jo. Jo, this is – my friend Cass.”

“Joanna,” she corrects firmly, and Dean rolls his eyes. “Your friend Cass, huh?”

“Good friend. Old friend,” Cass says seriously as he shakes her hand. “Heard a lot about you, actually.”

Dean gives up glaring daggers over her shoulder, probably realizing that implicit threats only egg Cass on. “Come on,” he sighs. “We were just heading out to breakfast, and you look like you desperately need a Bloody Mary.”

“I'm pregnant,” she blurts out.

Dean looks so deeply shocked it almost makes Cass laugh against his will – as if surprise pregnancies are a completely alien concept to him, instead of practically a rite of passage in your twenties. Maybe he doesn't have many heterosexual friends. Then he scowls, and – huh. He can actually pull off threatening. “I'm gonna kill that idiot,” he says in his sex growl.
“He's not an idiot, and it's not his fault,” Joanna snaps. “But also – we broke up.”

“Because of--”

“No! Well – yes, but no. He doesn't know yet, I haven't told him.” She sees Dean start to speak, and she says, “Because I don't want to marry him! I – love Ash, I'll always love him, but he'll think this means we should get married, and – he's the sweetest person in the world, but he's not cut out for that, he's not husband-and-father guy. And….”

“Okay, look,” Cass says when he can't take this any more. “You don't actually have to stand here and justify all of your life decisions in the next thirty seconds. Here, sit down.” He pulls out a chair for her at Dean's table, and she shoots him a grateful look as she sinks down. “Dean, get her some water, at least.” While Dean's doing that, Cass sits down next to Joanna and puts his hand over her wrist, speaking softly enough that it's obvious he means it for her only. “I know this is intense,” he says. “And it's easy to be scared and angry when you feel like things are happening to you and you're not the one in the driver's seat. But you're going to be okay. I'm all for travel, but this is what a life experience really is. This is the kind of experience that makes up a life. Someday you're going to look back on this and realize that it's never the things you plan that teach you who your authentic self is. It's the things that just happen – the wrong turns and the accidents and the mysteries.”

She nods at him, eyes wide. Dean gives him a strange, warm look as he sets the glass of water down by Joanna's arm. “I feel like such a baby,” she says. “This isn't – the worst thing in the world. Mom's pissed because it means I almost definitely won't be going back to school-- No, Mom's pissed because Mom's always pissed. But I have a good job, and my folks and Ash will help out, and – I know I'm luckier than a whole lot of people.”

“You're not a baby,” Cass says firmly, “and you definitely don't have to compete against every other pregnant person in the world to earn your right to have feelings. Were kids ever a part of what you saw for yourself, before this?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I mean – yeah, sure? In five or ten years. But not with Ash. We've been on and off since high school, and he's – he's this huge part of my life, and I do love him, but....”

“But also you kind of don't?” Cass says gently. She looks immediately guilty, and he squeezes her wrist. “Honey, it's okay. There's nothing wrong with being young and exploring the world with someone you trust and feel secure with. Maybe he'll be hurt when you have this conversation with him, maybe he feels the same way deep down; you can't know, and it's not your job to work out his stuff about his first love, only your own stuff. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to try for the big love before you give up and marry the you-do-but-you-don't guy. Big, power-ballad, stars-in-your-eyes romantic love – it's not the only thing in the world, but it's – singular. If that's an experience you want, don't let anyone tell you that but he treats me so well or we have so much history together is almost the same thing. Nothing else is the same thing, and if you want it, you deserve it, even if you broke some dude you went to high school with's heart when you were twenty-three, even if you have ten kids to take care of. You are too young not to give yourself a chance to want the things you actually want. Even if you never get them, lying to yourself about what you want is the stupidest, pettiest, most pointless way you could let yourself down, and I promise, you'll always live to regret taking that route.”

“Um, who are you?” she asks.

He smiles at her. “A guy who's taken enough weird wrong turns for nine lives. Now, you've got a lot of things to work out in your head, and you're not going to do a good job of that when you're feeling cornered and exhausted. So right now you should go wash your face, finish that water, and come to breakfast with us. Don't demand everything from yourself right this very second. Do the first thing
“I think the first thing is sleep, actually,” she says. “I haven't really laid down and gone to sleep since I found out, and I think it's making me a little insane.” She stands up from the table and says, “You and Dean go ahead and go, and I'll crash for a while,” already aiming herself at the bedroom door.

Dean makes a weird, low whine of panic and says, “Wait, wait, wait. I – I need to change the sheets for you first.”

“I don't care about that,” she scoffs.

“No, you, uh. You do,” Dean grates out, dark flushes slashed across his cheeks.

Joanna looks at him, then looks down at Cass, who shrugs. “Gross, Dean,” she says, and Cass can so vividly imagine her as the whiny kid sister she probably still is in Dean's head that it's adorable. That word again; that keeps coming up since he met Dean.

“Hey, if you'd given me any notice at all, I would've had the place ready, but you didn't, and it's not.”

“My battery's dead,” she mumbles apologetically. “Never mind, I'll sleep on your weird couch.”

Dean sighs. “I'll get you some pillows and blankets. And I'm calling Mom and Dad and telling them you're alive – no, don't argue with me, I won't say anything else, but I am doing that. And I'm driving your car to breakfast.”

“What?” she squawks. “The hell you are.”

“It was my car first,” he says. “Give me the damn keys.”

“That is a lie,” she says, but she hands over her key ring. “Don't you fuck her up, she's not used to city traffic.”

Cass pitches in by stripping the bed while Dean makes up a nest in the living room for his sister. “It was really nice to meet you, Cass,” she says when they're on their way out. “If it takes you a little while to figure out you're too good for my brother, hopefully we can hang out more.”

“Well, you never know,” he says. “But take good care of yourself, okay?”

Dean doesn't say anything directly to him until they're in the elevator and the doors are closed. “Hey,” he says softly, “so – thanks. You're – you're really good at all that. I wouldn't have guessed.”

Cass raises an eyebrow at him. “What, that I'm only an insensitive dick by choice? Yeah, I got layers.”

Dean chuckles a little. “I didn't think you were an insensitive dick. But – yeah, I guess I wasn't expecting you to be so – philosophical.”

“Part of the job,” he says.

“Yeah? What do you do?”

He hesitates a moment, and then smacks himself around for it. Sure, Dean probably won't really get or appreciate what Cass does for a living, but why should he care about that? It's not like they're actually friends. “I'm kind of a therapist,” he says. “I do bodywork and energy healing – mostly myofascial release, but also craniosacral, polarity therapy, dynamic spinal therapy, a lot of ayurvedic
“Oh,” Dean says, with a very familiar look on his face – the look of someone trying to decide if all those words are real things, or some kind of crystal-waving hippie snake-oil. “So you're not like a therapist-therapist.”

“I'm not a shrink, if that's what you mean,” he says, trying to convey with his tone that he's not that interested in getting to the part of the conversation where he's supposed to justify the last ten years of his life to a near-stranger. “I also teach yoga,” he adds. “In case you want to tell your friends you banged a yoga instructor; people seem to find that impressive.”

“Yeah, I might do that,” Dean says lazily. “I'm the VP of Sales and Marketing at Sandover. I bet that impresses someone somewhere.”

“I have no doubt,” Cass says, tossing him a half-smile. “Unfortunately, not the kind of people I generally hang out with.”

“I play guitar?” he offers.

“Better. Are you any good?”

Dean smiles over at him. “As far as your friends know, I am.”

They take the elevator down to the visitor level of the parking garage, and Dean has an unmistakable spring in his step as he jumps out of the elevator and straight for a vintage black muscle car with South Dakota plates. “Well, hello, you,” he says, stroking its hood with one hand and jingling the keys cheerily in the other. “Is she treating you bad? I bet she is, isn't she? It's okay, baby, I got you.”

“Are you going to introduce us?” Cass says.

Dean chuckles a little self-consciously as he unlocks the door. “Sorry. I'm not usually weird about inanimate objects, but – this car's kinda special.”

“I gathered,” Cass says, but there's nothing to apologize for. He likes watching Dean adjust the seat back for his longer legs, and the rear-view mirror, and then just run his hand over the wheel and the dash, checking over everything from the cracks in the vinyl to the iPhone jack with a practiced eye. “So this used to be your car?”

“Well...sort of,” he says. “My dad bought it when he was dating my mom, so it's always been kind of a family thing. Dad took great care of it, and I learned how to drive in it, but some things went wrong, and his business was really building up at that point, so he didn't have a ton of time to spend restoring it. The deal was that he'd give it to me if I fixed it up, but...I never really got around to it, what with school and debate team and wrestling team and all that. Then when I did have time, it had kind of – turned into a power struggle, I guess. About whether I was going to do this for a living or go to college. Anyway, end of the day, I love this car, but I never loved working on cars the way Jo does. So she got the job with my dad, and she fixed up the Impala, and he gave it to her instead of me, and everyone's happier like that. I wouldn't even try to drive something like this every day, can you imagine trying to park this battleship downtown? And forget about the fuel efficiency. But damn, she's a sweet ol' thing.”

“It's funny you think of it as a she,” Cass says.

“Is it? I thought that was pretty normal. Cars, ships, planes, all that – aren't they usually shes?”

“I guess, but this is a particularly phallic car. Long and hard and sleek.”
“Don't listen to him, baby,” Dean tells the car. “I know a lady when I see one.”

Dean's a careful driver, or at least he's careful in this car. As soon as they're out in the daylight, Cass recognizes Dean's building; it has a beautiful old art deco facade with a clock face in its center, but the whole thing was gutted and renovated three or four years ago, turned into a mixed-use cluster of pricey condos on top of a gym and some hipster restaurants and short-term rental office spaces. It sits across the street from an ancient dry cleaner's and the old fire station that's now a charter school, so the neighborhood still shows a few signs of authentic life, but the gentrification is strong here. Cass tries not to get too tense about that kind of thing, because there's no fighting the inevitable, and anyway gentrification is exactly what allows him to pay the bills teaching yoga and balancing people's chakras, so who is he to complain. Eventually it'll spread like a cancer the four or five miles to Cass' end of downtown and he'll be forced into, he doesn't know, probably those ugly corporate apartments out toward the airport, but life's full of disappointments.

They go to DeVille's, which likes to think of itself as a neighborhood diner, which it could probably qualify as, if all the prices were slashed by a third. It's decorated in someone rich's idea of an homage to shabby-blue-highway mom-and-pop Americana, and he almost wishes they had brought Joanna along; he has a suspicion that she would understand why the whole thing makes him want to roll his eyes.

It's funny, now that he thinks about it, that Dean doesn't seem to. He can't possibly be as silver-spoon as he seems, not if he's the son of an auto mechanic from South Dakota who almost didn't get permission to choose Stanford over the family business. So, sure, it makes sense now that he's got a little of that new-money conspicuous consumption thing, with his penthouse and his espresso machine and overpaying for casual breakfasts when there's an IHOP two blocks down – but at the same time, he doesn't seem defensive about his roots, or like he's trying to make an impression. Everything about Dean comes across so casual, so artless and easygoing. He hasn't even made an effort to shed his little cowboy drawl.

Of course, what might not be an asset in a finance job is maybe a different story when you're an Ohio salesman, even after you make corner-office level. Cass recognizes Sandover's name from plenty of signs hung on chain fences blocking off those ubiquitous downtown renovations over the years – so real estate or construction, something where coming off more like a hometown boy in his Sunday-go-to-meeting best might pay more dividends than acting like he thinks Cleveland is Manhattan.

Maybe Dean's not artless or easygoing at all. Maybe he's just one hell of a salesman.

Well, now, that is a little intriguing.

Dean is predictably sweet and casually flirtatious with their waitress, but then he tosses out a little bit of a curve-ball with his order. “A cup of oatmeal,” he tells her seriously, “walnuts, no cream, no brown sugar, no raisins. Two egg whites with spinach, but not the stewed spinach, just have them wilt a little bit of the fresh and lay it on top of the eggs, not mixed in. Olive oil, no butter, no margarine. And black coffee with soy on the side. Thanks.”

“White, wheat, or English muffin?” she asks, and Cass has to physically put his hand up over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud at the look on Dean's face, but he manages to refuse all bread-related products politely.

When it's Cass' turn, he says, “I'll have the chilaquiles and a Bloody Mary.” She stands there with her pen hovering over her paper until he says, “No, that was it. I'm done. Thank you.” When she leaves the table, he looks at Dean and says, “Seriously, Meg Ryan?” Dean raises an eyebrow at him, and Cass says, “Oh, that's right. You're twelve.”
“No, I got the reference,” Dean says. “My mom loves that movie.”

“Oh, yeah, it's a classic,” Cass says, casually flipping Dean off. Dean grins at him, and damn. Damn, he sure hopes whatever this guy is selling, he can afford it.

They spend breakfast chatting about Lake Michigan, where the Smiths used to rent a fishing cabin not too far from where Cass grew up, and about Mexico, where they've both traveled a couple of times. He learns that Dean's favorite TV show is *Mad Men*, except for how it's actually *Dr. Sexy*, and he refuses to be charmed by being let in on the secret, which is the oldest trick in the book; he admits that his favorite is *Dr. Who*, except for how it's actually *Glee*, and he refuses to think about the fact that it's not a trick, it's just that something about Dean's face is difficult to lie to. Nothing is particularly revealing, nothing gets inordinately personal, but Cass still feels like Dean is using the sustained contact with his pretty green eyes to gouge tiny, almost invisible chinks out of Cass' skin, looking for a soft spot. Looking for a way in.

Cass should shut it down, but he doesn't. The truth is he doesn't really want to, which – pisses him off a little, but he's got no one to be pissed at but himself.

“Thanks for the ride,” he says when Dean drops him off in front of his brownstone, throwing Dean a smile that hopefully will leave him wondering if that was polite or dirty. Dean winks at him like there's no question in his mind, and he drives off once Cass has punched the code into the box attached to the iron gate around his building.

Nobody ever mentions getting Dean's number again, and if Dean suspects that while he was in the bathroom, Cass saved his own number into Dean's phone, nobody mentions that, either.

Cass lives on the top floor, too, but there's only three of them in his ancient building, and a fifty-year-old elevator that Cass only takes when he has furniture to move, because it's ten times faster to use the stairs. He lets himself into his apartment, pitches his keys across the hall into a basket on the dining room table, and shouts out over the sound of anime turned up to an antisocial volume on the TV, “Hey, kitten.”

“Ohhh, look who still lives here,” Claire says. She turns the volume down slightly, which is the closest Cass ever gets anymore to an invitation, so he takes advantage of the opportunity, leaning over the back of the couch where she's wrapped up in a hoodie and two blankets and tapping away on her phone. She glances up at him and says, “But if I want to stay out all night, it's 'breaking curfew,'” with exaggerated one-handed air quotes.

“Congratulations,” he says, “you have successfully defined 'a curfew.'”

“Hey, I saw you get out of that cool car,” she says. “What was that, a Thunderbird?”

“I don't think so,” he says. “Some kind of Chevy, I can't remember. You liked it, huh?”

She shrugs. “I could allow you to sleep with a badass chick who drives a classic car, sure.”

“I appreciate that,” he says. “And a badass chick does own the car, but I'm sorry to inform you that I'm not sleeping with her. Her brother's real cute, though.”

Claire makes a gagging noise and says scornfully, “Are you really back to boys? Why?”

“There will be no bi erasure under my roof, young lady,” he says with a little yank to her ponytail. “Who raised you to be so problematic? Hey, so who are you texting – is that *Lola*?”

“Her name is *Colette*,” Claire says with the long-suffering patience that only a teenager can deploy to
such devastating effect.

“I like Lola, it's cute,” he says. “I'm going to keep calling her Lola.”

“Oh-huh,” she says. “And I'm going to keep not inviting any of my friends over here.”

“Then I've done my job. Hey, are you sure you're okay staying here by yourself when I'm out? It's totally fine if you want to keep staying with Jody and Alex; for some reason they seem to enjoy you.”

“It's fine,” she huffs. “I said a million times that it's fine. I know how to call them if I change my mind, or how to, like, walk across the hall. Jody even came over this morning to make sure I was eating breakfast.”

“What did you have?”

“Toaster waffles and chocolate syrup.”

“And Jody let that slide?”

“What do you expect from free babysitting?” Claire points out, not unreasonably. “She made sure I wasn't slamming PixieStix and malt liquor and then she left.”

“Have you done your homework?”

“No, because it's Saturday morning. Have you done your homework?”

Cass snorts a little, because come on, it's Saturday morning. He straightens up and gestures at the tv as he circles around the couch. “I see even one tentacle, I swear I'll have you in therapy for so long your grandchildren will come out of the womb with PhDs.”

“Ha,” she says. “Like that's why I'm gonna need therapy.”

“Love you, kitten,” he sing-songs at her.

“Love you, Daddy,” she sings back.

That's about as much family time as Cass has the energy for this morning, so he heads into his own bathroom to take a shower and almost fall asleep under the spray. The back of his mind buzzes pleasantly over the concept of Dean Smith soaking wet and on his knees, but the rest of him is far too drained to pay any attention. He doesn't even get redressed when he comes out, just slings on a towel and crawls into bed for a power-nap.

The light outside his blinds has gone distinctly afternoon-ish when he wakes up to banging on his door and his daughter shouting, “Andrea's mom is picking me up and taking me to the bus, okay?”

“Oh – yeah,” he says.

It must not be too convincing, because she's silent for a second and then says very judgmentally, “You remember I have an away game tonight, right?”


The roll of her eyes is loud enough to clatter against the door as she chants, “Be kind, be smart, have fun, and two out of three isn't bad.” He mouths the last part along with her, smiling drowsily at the ceiling. If he can manage to get them through high school without fucking her up, he swears this kid
is gonna save the world.

“Go get ’em,” he shouts, “and call me if you need--”

The slam of the front door cuts him off, and he sighs and reaches for his phone to check messages. There's a rambling, three-part text from Lisa Braeden that boils down to, her kid had a minor playground accident that shook them both up, and she wants Cass to take over her five o'clock class. Since he guesses he's not doing anything but rattling around by himself this evening anyway, he agrees – and anyway, he'd have felt like a shit saying no to a fellow single parent in distress, even if it doesn't seem like major distress. Lisa is a sweet girl, but maybe wound a little tight, in Cass' opinion.

There's another text from an unknown number that just says, Found you :) Cass smiles in spite of himself and saves the number, but he doesn't reply.

So that's the rest of his evening, he guesses. Cass takes clients most weekends, but he carves out one per month to hang out at home with Claire, and occasionally to go on something he charitably terms a date, even though nothing in Cass’ life has really risen to the level of what he would call dating since – arguably ever. He toys with the idea of taking advantage of this unexpected gap in his Saturday schedule by going out for another drink, but the thought doesn't really appeal, so after he finishes up Lisa's class at the health club he's been trying to ease his way out of for months (he's losing his patience with – everyone, really, but especially these chipper young women who survive on avocados and credit card debt and think Cass’ mission in life is to bolster their confidence about their asses), he takes himself and his Kindle out for Thai food at the place that has outdoor seating and tiny cats in the window of the apartment building across the street. He doesn't know why it fascinates him to watch cats napping three to a sill, but he finds it so soothing.

There's a small amount of excitement when a short, jittery guy with strawberry blond hair and a beard takes a header on the sidewalk outside the Thai restaurant and loses control of the six shoeboxes and twelve white sneakers he's carrying. Cass comes around to help him up, especially because he's afraid the guy is going to dive into traffic trying to retrieve his shoes. “Thank you,” he says when they’ve cooperated to get everything back in a box, if not the correct box, and gotten him back on his feet. He adjusts his glasses and looks Cass over, but not in a cruise-y sort of way. He looks oddly older than his years, like one of the old dziadzias Cass grew up around who were always pinching his cheek and speaking Polish at him. “You're very kind,” he says approvingly, and it still makes him sound like a grandpa, but an English-speaking one for sure.

“Good karma,” Cass says. “How fast do you go through these shoes, anyway?”

“Oh, I'm a collector,” he says. “You know, it's fascinating how the smallest differences can just make things so – different. They're like people, in a way.”

Cass can't help but smile at his earnestness, but he also can't help saying, “They're really not, friend. They come off an assembly line in China. People are the opposite of that.”

“Hm,” he says. “Maybe. Tell me, do you like it here?”

The question brings Cass up a little abruptly. “In – Cleveland?” he says.

The guy gestures in a vague circle all around them and says, “Just, around here. Do you like it, are you settling in? Are you happy here?”

Settling in? “I've lived in this neighborhood for seven years,” Cass says. “Over on Brookings, just down from the park.” He has no idea why he's providing that much information, but he feels vaguely
offended to be talked to like – some kind of transplant. “I mean, I grew up in the Detroit area,” he says, which again, seems like too much information to give a stranger, but it comes out of his mouth anyway. “But I've been in Cleveland for – forever.”

It's odd that he can't remember exactly how long. Since before Claire, he knows that, but the years blur together if he goes far enough back in his mind. God knows he worked hard enough to keep himself nicely blurred, back then. It's probably a miracle he remembers anything at all.

“Hm,” the guy says again. “But you're happy.”

Cass can't tell if he's asking or stating. He sounds like he's...hoping. “Sure, yeah,” Cass says. “As happy as anyone, I guess.”

He is happy, most of the time. He likes his job. He loves his kid. It's a good neighborhood, diverse and walkable and artsy without being pretentious. He's in good health, his age wearing on him in terms of his cynicism and his alcohol tolerance, but not yet in terms of his back or joints or ability to get laid when he wants to. He's managed to pull a kind of curtain in between himself and his past – not a closed door, not a reinvention of himself, but a comfortable distance that allows him to say I went through some hard things when I was younger instead of, sorry, if you take me you get my PTSD and my drug problem and the blood on my hands and the dead love of my life, wait, where are you going?

It's as much, Cass thinks, as most people can say. He's not happy every minute of every day, but he leads a happy life.

The stranger winks at him and trots off with his shoeboxes blocking his view of the sidewalk, leaving Cass feeling oddly unsettled and not that hungry. He gets the rest of his pad see ew boxed to go.

He is happy, isn't he? He's kind, he's smart, and he has fun on a reasonably regular basis, so what else is there? Yeah, the world at large is basically a shit show – as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen – but Cass didn't make it that way, and a whole lot of years of coping mechanisms all up and down the scale of healthiness have finally made him able to accept that it's not his job to fix it, either.

Maybe he's lonely sometimes. Not all that often, because he's a naturally independent person, and until recently he spent a lot of time with Claire, which is probably co-dependent, but fuck it, they're lucky to have each other and they both know it. Still, she's turning into a pretty normal teenager, which means he tends to get bumped down her priority list a lot, and even though he's deeply grateful that she's come out of everything as well as she has, he knows it means this phase of Claire having things to do and Cass missing her like hell is just beginning.

He reminds himself about impermanence and change and non-attachment, and it helps a little. Claire was never his property; he was only her caretaker for a while. No one is anyone's property, and if you go through life looking for that, everything is going to fall short, you're always going to be lonely, because you're not at peace with being alone.

Cass is at peace with being alone, but it's not a static state. There are lonely days, in among the peaceful ones. Every day ends up a little bit different from the one before, and thank God for that. The world is a shit show, but a world where every day was identical to every other day – Cass is pretty sure that's actually Hell.

On his way home, he passes Mystic Hand, and the sign is still lit up in the window, a single glowing bulb behind the yellow plastic palm with its lines diagrammed and labeled with astrological symbols.
He hesitates a minute on the sidewalk, because he's feeling a little moody, a little raw, and in this state he usually tries to take better care of himself, to attend to his emotional state and not let it pull on his strings from behind the curtain. But there's a song stuck in his head and a ghost waiting for him at home, and the world has felt just slightly off since he met a sneaker collector who asked him if he was happy here, and the weird part is that Cass could go on for hours about are you happy? but he's not sure he knows where here is. The porch seating at Thai Gazebo? This neighborhood, this city, this planet?

*Are you settling in?* He doesn't even know where to start with that question. So yeah, maybe this is exactly the night for it.

Sra. Candela lets him into the back room ahead of the three weary-looking women waiting in the parlor, and she kisses him on both cheeks while she takes his money, cooing over him in what he thinks is nonsense Spanish, or else his Spanish isn't what it used to be. "*Te ves tan triste, lindo,*" she says, slipping the baggie into his pocket for him. "¿Porque?"

"¿Sí?" he says. "*Debe ser mi vida amorosa. ¿Puedes arreglarlo para mí?*"

She chuckles darkly and says, "*Debería arreglarlo para las mujeres cuyos corazones rompen, creo.*"

"*Nunca, no me* ,” he promises seriously.

They exchange a little idle conversation about Sra. Candela's headaches and sciatica, about Cass' persistent failures in tamale-making, about all the girls who surely cry themselves to sleep because he's still single, about the stupid lawyer who won't even return her nephew's phone calls even though the court date is almost here. When it's been just long enough that they don't look too shady, Cass starts his goodbyes, and she surprises him by grabbing his hand and forcing it flat to examine. He knows this is her line of work – her other line of work – but she's never insisted on it with him before now.

She touches his palm and says, "*Un alma tan vieja. ¿De dónde salió tu luz, ángel?*"

"*No sé,*” he murmurs, at a loss. "¿*Me veo oscuro?*"

"*Te ves perdido,*” she says sadly, and folds his hand in on itself with a gentle pat that rattles her bracelets. "*Deberías llamar a tu amiga,*” she advises. "*Ella también te extraña. *" Cass starts to protest, and then he realizes that the best thing is just to go, so he kisses her forehead and does that.

When he gets home, Cass is reluctant to turn on too many lights. He's haunted tonight, and he's learned that if you make a little room for them now and then, the ghosts will mostly take it and be satisfied. He uses the light of his phone to dig through his disorganized stack of CDs until he finds *Wave* and puts it on the stereo, then lets the first song play through while he kicks off his shoes under his bed and drags out the lockbox where he keeps his rolling papers, along with his gun and his wedding ring and the key to his safe-deposit box and a thousand dollars in emergency cash. Other than him, only Jody has the combination, but he thinks Claire should have it soon; she's not a little kid anymore, and even if he's honored the promise he made to Amelia not to teach Claire how to shoot, there are situations when she might need quick access to the key or, more likely, the cash. It's something to think about.

He rolls two joints, then returns the papers and the rest of the weed to the safe and goes back to the living room to sprawl out on the floor under the speakers. "Dancing Barefoot" has just started, and he puts it on repeat, then lights up and lies back. He keeps his eye on the red spark of its tip in the darkness as he breathes out slowly, and an old memory floats up to him out of nowhere, of his father.
smoking a cigarette in Cass' bedroom while making up bedtime stories of The Witch With One Red Eye that Cass found terrifying and delightful.

“Here I go and I don't know why,” he sings along softly, so softly, almost afraid to disrupt the ghost-rich silence of his apartment. “I fell so ceaselessly – Could it be he's taking over me?”

She loved this song, and he loved her. They danced to it together, made love to it together, shot up to it together. He wipes a tear out of his eye, unsure if it's from sadness or just the beauty of the music; the beauty and the grief and the joy always come together when she's near him, and she's near tonight. He always hears this music in his head when she comes near.

He doesn't romanticize any of it – not Amelia, not their marriage, not their failings, not love in general. They were young and self-righteous, they damaged each other and far more than just each other. They believed in so much, and then they believed in nothing, and in the end he knew where she was headed and he let her go, because he'd already forgiven her, erased all her debts, absolved her of everything in his power. For a while he went to a support group, because it seemed the thing to do, and they told him it was normal to feel angry, to feel betrayed, but he never did. She made promises and broke them, yes, but he stood by for years and watched her suffer and did nothing to help, so which of them betrayed the other? They were a love story, but they were no romance.

He misses her constantly. She wrecked him, she broke him, she remade him. There is no part of Cass' life that doesn't at least play a descant over the music of Amelia, and if he could still call her, even knowing everything he knows now, he would do it.

She has the slow sensation that he is levitating with she – Here I go and I don't know why –

Oh God I fell for you – Oh God I fell for you –

He's drifting on the smoke and the hypnotic pulse of the song's back half as it slips over the falls for the tenth or hundredth time, and his phone beeps. He picks it up and sees a text from Claire: 3-2 VICTORY!!! He smiles at it. Good for her. Fierce little thing, bullheaded like her mother and an idealist like her father – like he was at her age, anyway. They named her for Lake Saint Clair, where he and Amelia met and fell in love waiting tables one summer at the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, and he loves the perverse way their child turned out, the way their whole family turned out, passionate and rebellious and combative and scarred, from such placid and wholesome beginnings. The goddamned Yacht Club.

Oh God I fell for you – Oh God I fell for you –

He thinks of Joanna Smith, who isn't so much older than Claire, who isn't so much younger than Amelia was when a pregnancy test sent her world into a sudden tailspin, too. Their world. He wonders how Joanna is doing – if she's called her mother, if she's called her ex-boyfriend, if she's going to name her child for the place she was when she thought for a minute she'd fallen in love.

He thinks of Dean Smith, and he lets his eyes slip closed, remembering the weight and the heat of him as he crawled naked over Cass' body, kissing hungrily. Dean is the kind of person, Cass thinks, that is supposed to make you happy – handsome and charming, successful and smart, loyal to his family, respectful to his one-night stands. Any normal person would feel like they'd hit the lottery, but of course Cass doesn't really get normal, doesn't know what to do with it, can't imagine what it would feel like or why the fuck you'd even want it. There's no going back to Grosse Pointe now; he's a long, long way past that.

Yes, okay. He'd like to see Dean again – naked for sure, and maybe even fully clothed and making an ass of himself to a waitress somewhere hopelessly bourgeois. It's not because Dean's the polar
opposite of Amelia, and it's not really in spite of that, either. He guesses he'd just...like to be happy, and Dean smiles like he knows the secret to that. Even though Cass knows, he knows it's just because Dean has wrapped himself tightly in the protections that his safe background and talents and good looks have afforded him, he can't help being seduced by the possibility that Dean knows secrets. That he knows something he could teach Cass about...settling in.

*Heading for a spin – some strange music draws me in* –

Cass holds his hand up above him and wonders what Sra. Candela saw – something about losing his light? And an old soul? Well, he's heard that old soul line before, plenty of times, but the other bit rattled him, he admits. People tell him he lights up a room when he smiles, that he has a clear, bright aura, that he's a ray of sunshine. Even when he's churning with rage and fear and bitterness, people tell him that kind of thing, and he just smiles and thanks them, he never argues.

No one's ever told him his light is gone, before. No one's ever told him he looks lost, no matter how deeply, terrifyingly lost he's been. It's strange. He wonders if he should go back and ask her more.

He doesn't light the second joint at all, just lies there basking in the expansive, blurry sort of alertness he gets when he's high, the world around him full of mystery and allure and diffuse eroticism. He runs his hand down his stomach, hyper-aware of the beating of his heart and the way his mouth wants the weight of Dean's tongue in it.

Cass is pragmatic about physical needs, and he's been careful to keep himself sane and mostly sated, in the seven years since his marriage ended, with strategically chosen and executed hookups every two or three months – no one allowed close enough to start expecting the privileges of a girlfriend, or even of a friend with benefits. Cass has friends, but he prefers to sleep with acquaintances. Less destabilizing for Claire, he used to tell himself, until he was finally ready to admit that he just likes the stability of solitude himself. It's the only pleasure he gained from the incalculable loss of Amelia, and he's protective of it.

Or he always has been, at least. Suddenly the routines that have kept his body complacent for years are so inadequate that there's some kind of revolt in progress, and he never even saw it coming. There's no strategy to this, just an abrupt, riotous shout of *fuck solitude* coming from every inch of his skin, and he wants Dean over him and inside him and under his tongue and in his fucking veins.

He refuses to let this own him, though. Maybe he'll call Dean – probably he'll call Dean – but he intends to do it from a position of strength, of non-attachment, not from the depths of a craving he hasn't felt for a stranger in his whole life. Cass stretches his arms up over his head, dragging his knuckles across the carpet, hyper-extending his spine and then letting himself melt back to the floor. His shirt is rucked up over his stomach and he stares at his erection, debating whether or not to at least unzip his pants and take the pressure off of it. He lets his eyes drift closed and holds in place, pouring all his floating concentration into the fantasy of Dean, naked and fucking gorgeous, unbuttoning and unzipping Cass' pants for him – pressing one palm down against his groin to hold him still, stroking hot and firm up his cock with the other hand.

He lets out a slow, unsteady groan and catches himself just as he's letting his hand move, reroutes it to rake through his hair as his hips circle restlessly against nothing at all.

*Oh God I fell for you – Oh God I fell for you* –

He fumbles for his phone, distantly aware that it makes not the slightest fucking sense to decide that jerking off is giving Dean too much power, but *calling him* sounds like the perfect compromise. This doesn't even qualify as stoned logic. Cass has never been high enough in his life to pass this off as logic, and that's saying something.
“Hey – Cass?” Dean says when he answers, and he sounds both hopeful and wary. Cass holds the phone near his ear but not against it, still lost in the music, still – lost. He closes his eyes and has the random, stoned thought, *Everyone is a ghost except us,* and like most random, stoned thoughts, it feels intensely, profoundly true. “Is that-- Cass, are you on?”

“Yeah,” he croaks. “S me. Sorry – to bother you. I'm...high, and horny, and making some pretty dubious choices.”

“We seem to be setting a pattern,” Dean says. “Am I going to have to introduce myself again tomorrow?”

Cass lets out a soft laugh. “No,” he says. “I know who you are.”

He can hear shuffling sounds, then what sounds like a door closing, and Dean says quietly, “I'm glad you called.”

“I can't stay,” Cass says. “I mean – I'm not – We don't make any sense when I'm sober. So you see the problem. Or – maybe you think I'm never sober, but actually I am most of the time.”

“That's good to know,” Dean chuckles. “Do we make sense when you're not sober?”

“Not really,” he admits. “But I don't care as much.”

“Do you want....” There's a pause, and in the silence Cass could swear he hears Dean's tongue sliding across his lip. His back arches again, and he almost misses it entirely when Dean says even more quietly, “Do you want me to come over there?”

Yes, his body groans, but he can't – he doesn't – not at the apartment. He can even remember why, just barely. “No, you can't,” he says. “Don't do that.”

Dean hesitates and then says, “You're not married, are you?” He's trying to make a light joke out of it, but the question is not rhetorical.

“Not currently, no,” Cass says. He drags his fingers over the strip of bare skin across his stomach, and it's the most intense thing he can remember feeling; even though his memory only extends to the beginning of this conversation, that's intense. His breath catches sharply.

It must make a sound of some kind, because Dean says, “God, are you--? Fuck. Cass, why'd you call me?”

“Wanted you,” he says. “Want you.”

“I – Cass, I – my sister's in the other room, I told her I had to take this because it was my boss calling.”

“After ten on a Saturday night?”

“He actually does do that,” Dean says. “He's not great with boundaries. But I can't-- God, I want to, but I can't.”

*Dime que no eres un fantasma,*” Cass pleads, sliding his thumb inside his waistband, the cool hardness of his nail pressing against heated skin. “Dime que eres real.”

There's a little thud, like Dean is backing into the door, or letting himself fall against it. “Okay, that wasn't even English. If you OD, I'm going to feel so guilty about how hot this is getting me.”
Cass chuckles. “Won't happen. Just – oh. Just come here, lie down on top of me like you did before, I loved how you held me down like that. I don't need you to do anything, just let me put my legs around you. God, you turn me on.”

“Jesus, Cass,” he says, thin and breathless, and then he coughs a little and pulls himself together, says in a lower, more confident voice, “Okay, yeah. I can do that; I got you. What else do you need?”

“Just kiss me,” Cass says.

“Yeah,” Dean says, and under his warm, smoky voice, Cass can hear the distinctive sound of his fist moving over his cock. He smiles to himself, because it feels like a victory to drive Dean here when Cass himself has been able to resist. It's not a competition, of course, but Cass is still winning. “Oh, man, you – you kissed me at the bar, and I thought you were so cute before that, but then you kissed me, and – and I thought, God, I'd walk through fire for this, I didn't know kissing could feel like that. It was better than half the actual sex I've ever had.”

“Mmm,” Cass says. “Chemistry. Shhh – you can kiss me, you can kiss me now, anywhere you want. Did you miss me, Dean? I'm here now, I'm settled right here. I'm all yours.”

*Oh God I fell for you – Oh God I fell for you –*

He listens to Dean biting back every answer to that, coherent and incoherent, and he lets the world rotate around him and the universe expand, and he doesn't know why he struggled against this at all. Dean is so easy to be with, so innocent and undamaged and – and good, heroic, righteous – so strong, holding onto all the blessings that life should have found a way to strip from him....

Dean is so unlike the first time Cass fell in love, when it all descended into blood and delusion and despair, and Cass never stopped loving him – her – his soulmate, the love of his life – but he's been happier now that he's alone. Until he met Dean, anyway.

“You don't know where I come from,” he murmurs to Dean. “You've never seen the things I've seen – the things I've done.”

“Don't care,” Dean says without hesitation. “You were – you were so nice to Jo, I can tell you're – you're a good person, you're kind. Whatever you've seen or done, it made you kind. That's rare.”

Kind and smart and happy – at least two out of three. That's his goal, and he gets there almost every day. His eyes are closed and his body is gone, the apartment is gone, Cleveland is gone, he exists everywhere and nowhere – he hasn't lost his light, it's just spread out across the curved surface of this world, where fantasies play out prismatically in front of their eyes. “I want you to fuck me,” he says. “It's been so long, and I miss you so much. Dean, are you happy here? Is this where we're happy?”

“Ah – Cass,” he says, soft and broken and choked in a way that no one, no one else ever hears him, Cass knows. “Miss you, too. Want to see you again....”

“You will,” Cass promises. “I'll find you.”

Maybe he makes other promises, fond or dirty or both, but he loses the thread of things at that point, disappears into the cracks and shadows between worlds to kiss his ghosts. He doesn't remember how he gets off the phone, or even off the floor, but he's standing on his apartment's narrow balcony now, face raised toward the starlight, the music still playing behind him – the same song over and over and over again.
He has a dream. He only holds onto a little bit of it.

Rocky ground, and a sloped and broken old road. The Jeep is parked across it, bristling with men and rifle muzzles, and Cass has the familiar weight of an M16 strapped across his back. It's getting dark quickly, the headlights of the Jeep cutting through the twilight fog.

“Because I don’t trust any of this,” Dean says. “First we were going to pick up a few riders, but they can’t come--”

“That’s not suspicious,” he protests. “It’s a contaminated well, we see them all the time – it’s typhoid fever, I’d bet my life on it. Of course they’re not walking two miles up the pass.”

“--so now we’re supposed to split up? Fuck, no. I said we’d hold the pass, I didn’t say half of us would hold the pass while the other half waltz blind into a trap.”

“Listen to yourself!” he yells. He thinks they can hear him back at the Jeep, is pretty sure he can see heads turning their way as the camp’s gossip machine grinds back into gear. “What’s wrong with you? These are civilians, they’re mostly children. I’ll go myself, I might not even have to evacuate them if I can--”

“You can’t,” Dean says flatly, and Cass hates the surge of fury and self-loathing that comes from knowing Dean is probably right. “You don’t have the juice for that, not anymore.”

“Croats don’t set traps,” Cass says.

“Yeah, well, people do. You want to go in there with weapons and pharma, like that shit’s not worth ten times more than money now? And once they have our guns and they’ve cut our force in half, then they take the Jeep. This ain’t rocket science; it’s what I would do, if I was hard up enough for gear that works. You hear one sob story about sick kids and you just buy it, you don’t even think. Well, I gave them a chance to ante up with some proof and they didn’t, so we’re going home.”

He looks back at the red sun, and he knows that if he has any chance of getting around Dean’s paranoia, it’s disappearing with the daylight. “Don’t split the force,” he says quietly, because he has to try, doesn’t he? Who is he, if he won’t even try now? “Just send me. One gun, one box of amoxicillin. Worst case scenario, if that’s all you lose--”

“One gun, one box of amoxicillin, and you? Not acceptable. Not happening.”

Cass knows he’s lost, but he can’t help smiling. His brain has been on fire ever since the marks on his back stopped oozing blood and bile, ever since the pain meds.... He smiles a lot. He can’t stop, except when Dean kisses his mouth into futile prayer and makes his eyes ooze blood and tears. “If that’s all you lose,” he says again, “then what have you really lost? And maybe you keep your soul another day.”

Dean’s hand, stiff and scarred under the thumb from old fang marks but still strong, winds in the collar of Cass’ shirt, jerking him closer to the scent of dirt and gasoline and sweat and the disgusting maple-flavored meal shakes that Dean’s been downing quietly for weeks, handing off his own rations of canned chicken and canned peaches and Velveeta to Risa and Luna and the other women. Cass will never be able to reconcile Dean’s cruelty and his kindness; Dean doesn’t match any of the clear, bright lines that Cass was always taught existed between sin and righteousness. “Last night was good,” Dean says next to his ear in a blunt, ragged voice like fingernails tearing through skin, a voice that makes Cass shiver as hard as a caress, “but it doesn’t change anything. You undermine
me again in front of my people, I'll shoot you in the fucking foot and make you crawl back to camp.”

Cass presses his eyes closed and weighs his chances of getting punched in the nose if he tries to lick Dean's jaw right now. High. “I never thought it did change anything,” he says. “I'm asking you as the one friend you have left.”

“I don't have friends,” Dean says, releasing him. “I can't have friends, and this is why.”

It hurts more than he would've expected, given how accustomed he's gotten to Dean's bouts of temper. “Then what am I?” he asks.

Dean shrugs, but he doesn't really answer the question until later that night, when he's got Cass naked in his lap in the backseat of the Jeep, his fingers dragging over Cass’ lower back and losing purchase against the sweat, his tongue flicking under Cass' jawline, his cock pushing deeper with every deliberate roll of his hips. Cass can see the red glow of the campfire out the back windshield; this should keep the gossip going for quite some time, but he's past caring now. “Mine,” Dean growls. “You're mine.”

And Cass smiles, curling one hand around the back of Dean's neck and grabbing the torn vinyl on the roof of the Jeep with his other hand, sinking his nails deep and holding on, but what he thinks and doesn't say is, The fuck I am.

He wakes up unsettled, the same way he was unsettled by Sneaker Guy the night before – like something that doesn't belong in his quiet world has broken into it by force. It feels like coming home and finding his door jimmied open and the lock broken, but nothing missing and nothing moved. He can't say he's been harmed, exactly, but that almost makes it worse – a violation that defies his brain's attempt to understand it.

He sits up in bed and scrubs his eyes. A sex dream he can deal with, even one that's almost ruined by the undercurrents of aggression and resentment. It was just – so strange. He almost recognized himself – himself as he was long ago, at least – but the man in the faded military coat with the scars on his hand was both so like and so completely unlike Dean that Cass has no idea how to process the whole thing. It's already beginning to fade from his mind – were they arguing about medicine? Relief supplies?

Maybe he doesn't want to remember. It all touches a little too close to...things that aren't home. Things he had to leave behind in order to make a home.

Speaking of. He has a kitten to feed.

He cracks her door and makes sure she's in bed, which she is. He changes out Patti Smith for Janelle Monae on the stereo and starts scrambling eggs for breakfast burritos; one or the other of those things is bound to lure her out.

It doesn't take too long; Claire's always been an earlier riser than him under normal circumstances. She shuffles out in her panda slippers like she's still a little kid, and his heart hurts when he looks at her, because someone is going to let her down sometime soon, someone is going to break her heart, and it won't be the first time and it won't be the last. And there's nothing he can do, because those are the experiences that make up a life, and part of him wants her to have all of it while another part wants to wall her up in a room full of stuffed animals and cartoons and waffles and never let the world touch her at all.
He brings her a room-temperature LaCroix, because there's something wrong with this kid, and that's what she likes. “Good game, huh?” he says, and she nods, still half asleep. “I'm proud of you,” he says, laying his palm briefly on top of her head. “Just...all the way around.”

She smiles at him, small but real. “Were you okay last night?” she asks, and he panics briefly, because he can't remember when she got home, or what she might have seen. “You just – you fell asleep on the couch, and you had Mom's song on repeat,” she says. “I thought... I don't know.”

“Well. Yeah,” he says. “You know. You think about her sometimes, and – I do, too. It is what it is, right? I'm okay now, and that's what matters. You wanna go to a movie this afternoon?”

So that's what they do, and on the way they get food truck paletas in the park and trade on Claire's cuteness to get permission to play with other people's dogs, and it's a good day.

It's a good weekend off, basically. Weird, but – good.

He doesn't contact Dean or hear from him again until Tuesday, when he's stuck in a long grocery line after work and gets a pair of texts.

Hey! the first one reads. Jo thinks I'm boring, so now I have to take her out for a drink tomorrow (Wed).

The second says, She'd like to hang out with you, and so would I, if you're free. 7 @ Blue Room, hope to see you!

Cass smiles at his phone until the harried mother behind him maybe-accidentally hits his ankles with her cart to prompt him to move forward into the available space. He doesn't respond, but not because he has any doubt about going – just because he suspects Dean doesn't have any doubt about it, either.

He mentions very casually to Claire that he's probably going to meet up with some people Wednesday night for after-dinner drinks, and she not-casually-enough suggests that she could probably study late at her friend Colette's house if he would like her to be supervised. “Fine,” he says, “but this isn't a slumber party, for either of us. Your weekday curfew stands.”

A good parent would probably take this natural opening to have The Colette Conversation, but he punts on it yet again. He doesn't know how to approach it, since he isn't even settled in his mind yet about how much it's actually his business at all; Claire's a little young to be having sex, if she is having sex, but if she is having sex with another fifteen-year-old girl, that's kind of – ideal, comparatively. He wants to be there for her, but he also wants her to figure out what it feels like to be in charge of her own life, in small doses, and he knows he can't just sit this whole situation out forever, but – right now, he's doing exactly that.

And anyway, God forbid she asks him for any romantic advice. He doesn't think, “Never text and hope desperately that they do” is going to be across-the-board useful, even if it's paying out for Cass recently. He already gave her everything he's got with the House Rules; it's the sum total of what he knows about life by now, and beyond that, they're both on their own.

He doesn't remember ever going to The Blue Room on a weekday night before, and it's surprisingly nice, dimly lit and unhurried, mellow lounge electronica playing over the speakers. He sees Dean and Joanna right away, in a booth with a bowl of peanuts between them; they are, respectively, drinking something that looks from a distance like a dirty martini and something fizzy, and they're
absolutely murdering the peanuts as they talk intently. Joanna is wearing jeans and a tank top, but Dean seems to have come from work; his jacket is crumpled on the bench next to him, but he’s still wearing his tie and suspenders, his sleeves unbuttoned and rolled up, and Half-Undone Business Bro is Cass’ new favorite look in the entire world. He knows if he goes over there, he's going to stare at Dean's forearms and trip over his words and do everything wrong that he's barely been managing not to do wrong since they met. He needs a better strategy.

So instead of joining them immediately, Cass goes over to the bar and takes a seat. He orders an amaretto sour and spends a few minutes pulling himself together by flirting with the tiny, androgynous bartender with the pixie cut and the surprisingly great biceps on their small frame. He's not timing it or anything like that, but it doesn't seem like very long at all before a careful, heavy hand lands on the back of his shoulder and Dean's voice says, “Hey, you. Glad you made it.”

Cass swivels around, his knees bumping against Dean's thighs until Dean moves back just slightly, and Cass wants to say hello, but instead he just smiles. He forgot how – how warm Dean looks, all those shades of sand and sun-baked gold and hazel, and the bright attention in his eyes, and his sweet, lickable smile. “Yeah,” Cass finally says, and Dean's mouth quirks a little like he's used to making people speechless. But Cass isn't just people, so he makes himself clear his throat and say, “Glad you called. How's your house-guest situation going?”

“I put her in a hotel on Monday,” he says. “My apartment is just not built for couch crashers.”

Cass nods to show active listening, because he is listening, even if he's also running one of Dean's suspenders between his fingers. Dean doesn't look like he minds it at all, and when Cass widens his legs to make enough room, Dean steps closer to him and waits. Cass gives him a short nod, and gets Dean leaning down to kiss him in return.

It's brief and gentle, but Cass still can't say that he wouldn't walk through fire for a few more like it. He'd definitely want to keep that option open, at least.

So this, Cass thinks, is a date by almost anyone's definition. Yes, “hang out with my sister and me” was just the right level of ambiguous to provide them both cover if they needed it, but there's been hey, you and a hello kiss and Dean cracks out his wallet to pay for Cass' drink, and dating isn't really something Cass does, but he's seen it on television and it looks just like this.

Joanna brings her drink and Dean's over to the bar and sits on the stool beside Cass. “Hi,” he says. “I'm really glad to see you.” He is; even though he can't stop tugging on Dean's suspender, he's thought a lot about Joanna recently, and he's not sorry she's here at all. “How are you?”

“I'm good,” she says, sounding a little surprised by it herself. “I went to my first gyno appointment today. Everything seems good.”

“You have a doctor here?”

She and Dean exchange looks briefly, and she says, “Yeah, I'm – staying in Cleveland. I mean, I have to go back to Sioux Falls soon, to get my stuff and to – talk things over with everyone, but then, I'm coming back here.”

“I'm surprised,” Cass admits. “You said that one of the things that made you feel less anxious was that you had a reliable job and family close by to help out. I guess I didn't think you'd-- Unless you're not having the baby.” That should've occurred to him sooner, but she did say the appointment went well, which implies--

“No, I am,” Joanna says. “It was – up in the air until Sunday, I guess, but Dean and I talked a long
time, and...yeah, I definitely am. I know I'm doing this the hardest possible way, but--"

“But that's not really out of character for her,” Dean interrupts, smiling at the half-hearted kick she directs at his shin.

Cass holds out his glass for a toast. “Congratulations,” he says, “you'll be having a Clevelander. Hey, if you're interested in working with a doula, I can make some recommendations.”

“I don't know what that is,” she says cheerfully, “but I will take all the help I can get.”

So, very surreally given their surroundings, they talk about mother-centered childbirth, and even the bartender gets into the conversation, as it turns out their wife gave birth less than two years ago. Dean looks a little bemused by the whole thing, but he seems entirely content occupying the space he's in, and Cass drapes one arm over Dean's shoulder and lets his knees rest comfortably against Dean's hips as the conversation meanders around allopathic health care in general, and then how far out of downtown Joanna will have to widen her apartment search to find an affordable place where the parking isn't crap. It's – good. Everyone seems relaxed, no one seems excluded, and it's definitely not a traditional date, but Cass has never been put off by nontraditional before.

The nighttime crowd starts showing up by nine, and the music changes over to more predictable dance-floor fare. Predictable isn't inherently bad, and Cass likes the half of it that he recognizes, and about half of the half he doesn't. He finds himself singing along under his breath when a remix of “Heads Will Roll” comes on, and Dean says, “ Seriously?”


Joanna barks with laughter. “That'll be the day. My brother doesn't dance.”

Challenge accepted, Cass thinks, but he won't press the issue on their very first date. “You want to dance with me?” he asks Joanna instead.

She sighs a little and says, “That sounds fun, but I'd probably catch hell for taking you away when Dean is obviously trying to establish residency in your lap. What are you trying to do, Dean, register to vote?”

“Shut up,” he says, unruffled. “You guys can dance if you want. I have about ten million messages I should respond to if I don't want Charlie's head to explode.”

“Really?” Cass says, reaching behind Dean to slide his phone out of his back pocket. The screen says thirty-one rather than ten million, but that still seems like a lot, and it vibrates again in his hand while he's snoop ing. “Who's Charlie?”

Dean gives him a slight smirk like he knows how much Cass actually does want to know the answer to that, but Dean is too polite to call him out on it. “My PA,” he says, holding out his hand for his phone. Cass gives it up reluctantly, because he's just located the photo folder and that has real potential. Next time.

They do go out on the dance floor, and it's fun, Joanna's not half bad. She'd be attractive if she didn't remind him so much of his daughter, and if he weren't semi-obsessed with her brother, but she does and he is. Cass doesn't go out of his way to look for Dean, but he catches a couple of glimpses – one time Dean is working assiduously on his phone, and the second time he's leaning with his elbow on the bar, watching them. Cass gives him a wink and lets himself get pulled deeper into the crowd.

He's not worn out, but he's reaching what feels like a natural stopping point when Dean does come to join them; he doesn't dance, exactly, but he catches Cass' hips from behind and pulls him up
against his chest. Cass relaxes against him and tries not to shiver when Dean puts his hands on Cass' elbows and then takes his time sliding them down until their fingers are tangled together. Dean leans down to say against his ear, “Let me take you to dinner on Friday.”

That does make him shiver a little, but he shakes his head. “I have plans.”

“Date?”

“Tickets,” he says shortly, then shamelessly uses his every advantage to change the subject by turning around in Dean's arms and kissing him. Dean's hand fists the back of his shirt, but he doesn't react much otherwise, just letting Cass take what he wants.

“You're a hard guy to pin down,” Dean says when he pulls away.

“Oh, well, if you'd led with that offer...” he says, and Dean laughs softly. “I'm sorry, I just – I really am busy on Friday.” He knows he should suggest a different day, but this is starting to get incredibly real, and Cass is all too aware that this is when, if he wants to keep doing this, he really needs to disclose what kind of plans he has, what kind of responsibilities he has... what getting involved in Cass' life actually means. And that's only the beginning of a conversation that gets very long, very fast, and probably sends Dean running very far away.

It is what it is. But he doesn't want it to happen tonight.

They both get another drink and sit down at a new table, and Joanna joins them only a minute later, looking uncertain. “If you want me to, I can get an Uber back to the hotel,” she says to Dean

“No, stay,” Dean says, to Cass' relief. “It's good to see you having fun.”

“Last hurrah, I guess,” she sighs, sliding into Cass' half of the booth.

Cass puts his hand on the back of her neck and says, “We are really letting you down, aren't we? Here you are, a beautiful, vibrant, newly-single woman in the final days of your wild and unencumbered youth, and we take you to a gay bar.”

“We're not trying to get her laid, Cass,” Dean says gruffly.

*Challenge accepted,* he thinks, and it must show in his grin, because Dean pales slightly. “Come on, Dean, be a bro,” Cass says slyly. “This is Joanna's last opportunity to make a truly appalling mistake with relatively little in the way of consequences; you can't stand by and let her waste it. All we need is one heterosexually inclined man who cleans up okay and is willing to let a beautiful woman get away with murder. You have to know someone who fits the description.”

“I don’t—” Dean starts, but then he cuts himself off abruptly, startled and intrigued by whatever idea is surfacing in his head. “Hm,” he says, pulling his phone out and scrolling.

“You are magic,” Joanna says, holding up her hand for Cass to high-five.

“Don't get excited yet,” Dean says. “You haven't seen this guy's haircut. Then again, look who you let impregnate you. Maybe you two are perfect for each other.”

Of course Cass has to see how this plays out, so he ends up staying a little later than he planned, at least long enough to meet Dean's co-worker. Sam turns out to be tall and gawky – definitely not unattractive, but awkward in that tech-sector sort of way, like he's perpetually just now realized that people don't make good programming sense and has no idea how to handle this knowledge. He looks a little terrified of Joanna, but he's obviously at ease around Dean, and then once Cass asks him
a couple of questions about the beer he chose, he's latched onto the topic eagerly. It turns out that
craft beer is a passion he and Joanna share, at which point Cass excuses himself and hooks Dean by
the suspender, pulling him along.

Dean gives the two of them their privacy with a slight, ungracious scowl, but Cass tries the kissing
remedy again, and it truly is a miracle drug. This time Dean does more than just allow it, cupping
Cass' face in his hands and leaning him back against one of the columns that set the seating area off
from the dance floor. Cass tucks his fingers into the back of Dean's waistband and lets his tongue
slide against Dean's, and it's strange to think that he was here just five days ago, trying to fuck a
stranger. “I don't really take people home on weeknights,” Dean says, sounding apologetic. “I just
get up so early, and I have – kind of a routine that really helps me focus my day, so....”

“No, I – that's okay, me, too, I have class in the morning,” Cass says.

“What kind of class?” Dean asks, and it's a weird little jolt of reality when Cass is reminded
that, right, they barely know each other.

“I'm getting my Master's in physical therapy,” he says.

Dean kisses him again and says, “That's awesome. I think you're....”

“Awesome?” Cass suggests dryly.

“That,” Dean says. “And also a little complicated.”

Cass thinks almost anyone probably comes off complicated by comparison to Dean, but he doesn't
say that. He just says, “Would you like me better if I were boring?”

“Boring's not the opposite of complicated,” Dean says, which is actually interesting, because – isn't
it? He'd follow up with that, except that Dean is saying, “Go out with me for real. I really want you
to. An honest-to-God date.”

“I'd invite you to come with me on Friday,” Cass says, “but then you really would be bored.”

“What is it, like – ballet? Opera? It's not opera, is it? I really like you, so please tell me I'm not going
to be sitting through operas for you.”


The blank look on Dean's face is kind of priceless, but then he blinks a couple of times and says, “Is
that your sport? Girls' volleyball?”

“At the moment,” Cass says. “Is it making you rethink the virtues of opera?”

“Not even a little bit,” Dean says. “Okay, so – what's our colors?” Now it's Cass who isn't sure what
just happened, and that must be on his face just as vividly, because Dean smiles a little and explains,
“I don't want to show up accidentally dressed like I'm cheering for the wrong side. Our team, what
colors?”

“Purple and white,” Cass says.

“Awesome,” Dean says. “I look good in purple. I'll pick you up at...?”

“Five-thirty?” Cass says faintly. “Is that too early? The game's at six, but you probably work--”
“It'll be fine,” Dean says. “Five-thirty.”

Cass kisses him with all the things he isn't ready to say – you look good in anything and I don't think you're a truly appalling mistake but I also might not care if you are and I really hope you're still up for this when you actually know me.

He knows he's in serious trouble when – well, he's known for a while, but he's been able to lie to himself until he sits down with his coffee in the student union between classes and finds himself Googling Dean instead of studying.

You can't Google someone named Smith, which makes the whole thing beyond stupid, but here he is doing it anyway. It's been so long since he's had a crush on someone that he forgot about how it's functionally identical to a mild head injury. The first page of results is all about a famous basketball coach and the stadium named after him, so he tries again with both + Sandover and + Stanford, but as soon as it works and he's seeing the right Dean Smith in his alumni newsletter and his goddamned LinkedIn profile, he feels like a stalker and shuts the whole thing down.

Dean is who he says he is, not that Cass ever doubted him, and a basic Google search isn't going to turn up any red flags on a guy who Cass is still convinced is almost pathologically reputable. If he writes erotic Atlas Shrugged fanfiction he probably does it under a pseudonym, and if he can never return to Indiana because he and his band banged too many underage groupies in Gary, Sandover probably cares about that as least as much as Cass does. Cass isn't going to find anything incriminating.

He's not even looking for anything incriminating, honestly. He's just...curious. And that seems like a bad reason to go down this road, too, because it would actually be a lot more fun to learn who Dean is by – talking to Dean. Which he can do tomorrow, on their date, like a normal human being.

Colette isn't returning Claire's texts in a timely manner on Thursday night, so Cass gets to be a damn superhero by recruiting her to help make strawberry-cream cheese empañadas. It's win-win, in that nobody plays a whole lot of Sara Bareilles in their room and cries, and everybody gets to eat empañadas. He wishes every parenting decision were this simple.

“What do you think about me bringing a date to your game tomorrow?” he asks while they share the one empañada they have room for after all the filling they ate straight from the bowl.

She looks at him suspiciously and says, “Is it the Chevy?”

“The Chevy's name is Dean,” he says. He can't blame her for being suspicious; this is new territory for both of them, and Claire is at least as defensive of their hard-won stability as Cass is.

She shrugs, which is usually Claire's way of saying she isn't fussed about something either way, but then she says, “Are you sleeping with him?”

“Are you sleeping with Colette?” he snaps, and Claire looks so shocked that it's almost funny. He doesn't laugh, though, and he does mean it when he says, “Sorry, that's – I didn't mean it to come out like that. You don't have to tell me, but – you could, if you wanted to talk.” Claire nods, focused intently on the marks she's making with her fork in the pastry dough. “You don't have to tell me anything,” he says again, softer, and only feeling a little bit defeated. “I'm going to make an appointment for you with a gynecologist, though, and I want you to promise me you'll answer whatever she asks you, and tell her the truth. Okay? This is your business, it's – your decision, but I really want you to tell me you'll take good care of yourself, okay?”

He's not sure if he's supposed to answer her question or not – probably not, but he's always hated having to pretend that somehow he knows everything, that the reason she should talk to him is so he can pass judgment on whether or not she's growing up correctly, and not just because in the real world, everyone needs someone to talk to. So he says, “I slept with him last weekend, but...I really shouldn't have. I was pretty drunk, and I just... I was lucky. He's a nice guy, but he might not have been.” She's at least looking at him now, with big, stunned eyes. Cass shrugs a little and says, “Nobody's smart all the time. You won't – you won't always like your own decisions, or be proud of them, in your life, but – that's okay. You already know how strong you are. You'll learn from things, or you'll just deal with them, and you can..... You can talk to me even if you think you've been stupid or made the wrong call or whatever. Believe me, I'll get it.”

He can tell by her face that she's thinking it all over seriously, even when she gives him a slow half-smile and says, “Well, as long as you were kind and had fun, I guess.”

“See how easy the rules are?” he says. “Even I can manage to follow them.”

It must be a pretty successful conversation, because she leaves her door open a little when she gets in bed, which means she'll allow him to come in and kiss her goodnight. He tries to be grateful for that, and not maudlin about how rarely it happens now.

He has the two ass-in-the-morning classes on Friday at the health club (he swears he's going to ditch those last four classes he does there, but then he's been swearing that for at least six months), and he puts a few empañadas in a gallon bag and takes them to Lisa for her and her kid; she's not the only person there that he's friendly with, but he's pretty sure she's the only person there besides him who isn't orthorexic and won't take a sugar-cheese-bread gift as some kind of covert death threat.

She takes it – pretty damn well, actually, or at least he guesses that's how he ends up making out with her in the Membership office. Damned if he knows, except that he gives her the empañadas and asks how her son is doing, and next thing he knows he's sitting on the desk with her kneeling across his lap, and she's shedding clothes as fast as Lycra will allow itself to be shed, and her mouth tastes good and her nipple tastes better, and they've done this before once, almost two years ago and then never mentioned it again, so as far as he's concerned it counts as completely out of the blue.

“Hang on, hang on,” he hears himself saying through kisses, his hand shoving her yoga pants down but still hovering a couple of highly critical inches away from the heat he can feel making his palm sweat in sympathy. He shudders a little, then slides both hands carefully to her hips and pushes her back to look at him. “I....”

He doesn't really know what to say, but she's not stupid and it only takes her a second to fall all the way back to reality. “Oh – oh, God,” she says, putting her hand up over her eyes like she's hoping object permanence isn't really a thing. “Oh – I'm sorry, I'm such an idiot-- “

“No, no, hey,” he says, trying to figure out where to stroke her in a soothing, unsuggestive way. He settles for squeezing her upper arms gently. “You're not an idiot at all. You just didn't know I – I'm kind of seeing someone.”

“Really?” she says, a little challengingly, and he realizes that she's probably two or three items of clothing too naked for him to play this card and come off like a good guy.

“No,” he says, like a fucking moron. “I mean – yes. I – don't honestly know, but we have a date tonight, and.... I just really want to see where it goes. I want to give it a fair try, and I feel like – this is not that.”
She seems to consider being pissed for a minute, then sighs and smiles and kisses his cheek, because Cass has always kind of had this superpower where women can't stay mad at him. He tries not to abuse it, he swears he does. “I still feel like an idiot,” she says, reaching for her sports bra, which is hanging off the corner of the desk.

“You really shouldn’t,” he says. “I think you’re just – lonely. Trust me, I’ve done much stupider things for that reason. Do you – want to have lunch?” She stares at him blankly, and he shrugs a little and says, “If you want to talk to someone....”

They end up having lunch, and it’s actually really nice. She is wound pretty tight, but now that Cass is middle-aged and responsible himself, that's not the turn-off it once was. If nothing else, he likes knowing he can make her laugh; he's pretty sure she needs that a lot more than she needs some jerk who'll fingerbang her in someone else's office.

Cass doesn't know when all the pretty girls in the world started seeming to him like they're in desperate need of volunteer dads, but he guesses this is his lot in life now. He and Lisa spend most of lunch commiserating about life as an independent contractor with shit health insurance, and he's one glass of Chardonnay away from offering to book a gynecologist's appointment for her. Maybe he can get a bulk discount.

Friday is a booked-solid afternoon for him with his private clients, so he springs for an Uber to be sure he gets home in time to shower and change for Claire's game. He feels obligated to wear the Cleveland Science & Math t-shirt that he over-paid for at a fundraiser, but to keep from making himself black out from boredom, he wears it with the jeans he almost never wears out of the house anymore, because they're older than Claire and worn so soft and faded that they drip suggestively over his ass and thighs. He knows the aggressively casual look is not going to coordinate well with Dean, who will almost certainly be coming straight from the office, but fuck it, it's their second date, and the theme he's working with is don't you wish it was our third?

Cass has never had a third date in his life. He never saw the appeal, and now all of a sudden he deeply, genuinely does.

Jesus, Amelia would laugh her ass off at him. For once, it's just a thought, and it doesn't make him feel any particular way.

He runs into Jody and Alex as all three of them are headed into the stairway. “Hey, stranger,” Jody says. "You need a ride to the game?"

“No, I – kind of have one, thanks,” he says, leaving it awkwardly at that. Jody Mills is the closest thing Cass has to family, and it feels strange, after everything he owes her, to keep secrets. Dean's not a secret, exactly, he's just – something Cass isn't sure how to explain yet. But he has about half an hour, he realizes, to figure it out, because he can't not introduce them at the game. “I'll tell you more as soon as I have a chance,” he promises.

“About your boyfriend?” Alex says with perfect innocence. Cass trusts it about as much as he trusts innocence in general, but – he did tell Claire, and without specific instructions and explicit threats, that means he basically told Claire's best friend.

“It's just a date,” Cass mutters.

Jody loops her arm through his and says, “You're right. You will be telling me more, very, very soon.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he says. Cass doesn't take orders from too many people, but he'd dive off a cliff if
Jody told him to. They met at the very lowest point in Cass' whole life, and she hadn't had the slightest reason to trust or believe in him, but she did exactly that. He knows good and well that without Jody's help navigating the unbelievably labyrinthine corridors of family court and the foster-care system, he would never have managed to get Claire back – and while he knows that Jody mostly did it for Claire, because she's the city's most kick-ass foster mom and is always looking out for the girls who stay with her, he also knows she saw something in Cass, beyond the failed marriage and failed drug tests and failed life in general, that even he wasn't sure he saw at that point. Nothing will ever be enough to pay her back for giving him her friendship so long before he had the strength to earn it.

Dean pulls up by his front gate on the dot of five-thirty, driving a Prius; Cass admires the pragmatic and/or socially responsible choice of cars, though he thinks it'll be hard to break it to Claire that the Chevy doesn't get to stay. Kids can get so attached.

“Hi,” Dean says, letting his eyes drop to Cass' mouth and smiling a little, a combination that makes for a surprisingly effective substitute for a kiss. True to his word, he's wearing a royal purple shirt with white collar and cuffs and a white tie, and true to his word, he looks fucking fantastic in it.

Cass goes ahead and punches the school into Dean's GPS without asking permission, and Dean looks unsurprised, like he's starting to figure out that Cass isn't really big on permission in general and he's maybe okay with it. “How was your day at work?” Cass asks, and then, God help him, Dean actually tells him.

None of it makes any sense, and he stops listening pretty early on. Cass doesn't know shit about contracts and projections, and there is no part of him that has any desire to learn. He doesn't care if he ends up marrying this dude: hard pass. But he does pay enough attention to pick out names, because he might meet some of these people someday. There's a lot of Charlie, which creates some pronoun confusion before he finally twigs that Charlie is a she, and a lot of Crowley, who he gathers is the boss-of-poor-boundaries Dean mentioned once before. Both names carry a certain weight when Dean says them, like they're relevant to Dean and not just to today's sequence of events, so Cass files them away for future nosiness.

“I'm boring you, aren't I?” Dean finally says.

“Yes,” Cass says, “but I did ask. Do you – like your job?”

Dean thinks about it for a second and then says, “Yeah, I do. I know it's not like – trial law or firefighting or something, it's not exactly action-packed. But there's more to it than you'd think. And I get to meet a lot of different people, and I like that. I'm good at it, and I like that, too.”

“Fair enough,” Cass says.

Admittedly, a JV volleyball game is an extraordinarily weird place to bring a date, but to Dean's credit, he acts the whole time like it's really not. While Cass picks up his tickets from the cafeteria table set up outside the gym, Dean reads labels on the trophy case trophies and says the kind of genial hello to people who pass by him that implies a genuine love of his fellow human beings, or a guy who works in sales. Dean debates the merits of different seating areas as they climb the bleacher steps as if he really wants a good view of the game, and by the time they've been in their seats for ten minutes, the game is about to start and Dean Smith knows more of Cass' daughter's classmates' parents than Cass does. He claps and cheers when the girls come out on the court like he gives a shit, and Cass feels a very tiny bit guilty for really not giving a shit at all about Sandover Bridge and Iron.

It's probably all fake, but Dean fakes it really well.
He leans closer to Cass while the girls take their positions and says with soft, warm humor, “Do we have a favorite?” Cass is almost confused, until he realizes that the giant NOVAK on the back of Claire's jersey isn't a giveaway, because *Dean doesn't know his last name.*

“Number 12,” he murmurs, a little spun by the thought. Dean's taken him to bed, taken him to breakfast, driven him home, had phone sex with him, invited him out, bought him drinks, invited him out again, and is sitting here doing an absolutely masterful job of acting excited to be invited to the kind of event that actual parents have to force themselves to attend — and he couldn't even Google Cass if he wanted to. Who does that? Who does all that for someone who's completely allergic to answering the most basic personal questions, let alone capable of letting an amazing guy get close?

Who does all that and doesn't even *ask* for a full name? Other than a guy who can clearly see how screwed up Cass is, and who's working his ass off to prove he's interested without going too far and spooking Cass.

Cass holds his hand for a while during the game. It honestly seems like the least he can do.

It's a hard-fought game, but the Lady Falcons win it 1-0. Colette scores the winning serve, and the whole team collapses in on her like a school of hugging piranhas, but he notices that Claire gets in there first and hangs on the longest. The kid's got it bad, Cass knows, and he hates to be a cynic but he really is, and he's dreading the first adolescent broken heart he has to deal with. What do you say to that, anyway? *Yeah, I know it sucks, honey, but just remember, we all die alone in the end?*

Claire's changing her shoes on the bench by the time they make it down to the gym floor through the milling parents and darting teenagers. “Good game, kitten,” he says, high-fiving her.

She accepts the high-five but sticks her tongue out like she's spitting out something bitter and says, “Yeah, if I hadn't fouled out on the halftime buzzer.”

“Hey, you won. Sometimes good enough is good enough,” he says, which is probably terrible advice, but the nice thing about being Cass is that nothing he does for the rest of his life is likely to be his low-water mark as a parent. “Claire, this is Dean. Dean – uh, Claire.”

“Hi, Claire,” Dean says, putting out his hand. “Hey, I know it sucks not to get the point, but you got a lot of power behind that serve.”

She looks down at his hand, or maybe at his gold watch, and there's a very slight narrowing of her eyes that Cass just knows means she's going to say or do something he'll probably never live down, so he says loudly and brightly, “Hey, is that Lola? I should go say hi--”

“Hi, Dean!” Claire says, grabbing his hand like she's falling out of a helicopter. “It's really nice to meet you. Daddy, can I--”

She's knocked sideways by an attack hug from Alex and thoroughly distracted before she can ask for anything; Cass can barely understand the strange, high-pitched sounds the two of them are making, but he assumes it's communication of some kind. Jody's there, too, and she just waits patiently until Cass gets a grip on himself and says, “Oh – hey, Dean, this is Jody Mills. She and Alex live across the hall from us, and they are both amazing angels who are definitely slumming it by being associated with the Novak family. Jody, this is Dean Smith, he's....” *Same? Yeah, no, that's not gonna work. “Taking me to dinner, I think,” he says instead.*

“Good to meet you, Dean,” Jody says, fixing her intimidatingly frank eyes on him as she shakes his hand firmly. “Don't take this one too seriously, he thinks he's funny.”
“He is funny,” Dean says with a shrug of one shoulder. “I mean, I'm not totally sure he's not a serial killer, but I'm sure he's funny.”

“Is anyone ever totally sure someone isn't a serial killer?” Cass says. “You hear that every time they catch a serial killer: oh, none of us had any idea.”

“Take a compliment, sweetie,” Jody says, kissing his cheek.

“Jody, can I go with Claire for pizza?” Alex says. She and Claire look so tightly laced around each other's shoulders that Cass isn't sure it's optional at this point, but he guesses it's nice of her to ask.

“Sure, if it's okay with Claire's coach,” Jody says. “Call me if you need a ride, either of you.”

They dash off together toward the locker rooms, leaving Cass to say dryly into thin air, “Yes, I also hope that you have a great night, thank you so much.”

“And you,” Jody says sternly, poking him right in the joint of his shoulder, “call me very soon. We have a lot to talk about.”

“I'm sure she doesn't mean you,” Cass says after she walks away.

“Hey, I have nothing to hide,” Dean says. “I'm one hundred percent not a serial killer.”

“Always reassuring to hear,” Cass says. “So, uh, that was – obviously mine. My kid.”

Dean nods. “I thought of a lot of reasons you might have invited me to this,” he says, “and has a daughter on the volleyball team was by far the least creepy, so. Feelin’ pretty good here.”

He can't resist leaning in and putting a little kiss high on Dean's cheekbone. “You're funny, too,” he says. He doesn't do it to make Dean flush a little pink under his freckles, but that's a nice bonus.

“So, do you, uh – you share custody with her mother?”

Cass isn't sure how to answer that without answering eighty-five other questions that he should probably have an answer ready for but doesn't. “We tried that for a little while, after the divorce,” he finally says. “But now it's just Claire and me.”

All true, as far as it goes, and orders of magnitude more charming than hey, fun fact, did you know that when two wildly unstable heroin addicts try to sue each other for custody, the State of Ohio has some pretty strong feelings about that?

“Now I need to ask you something very serious,” Cass says, very seriously. Dean frowns a little and gives him a supportive it's okay, go on nod. “Where is it that you're taking me for dinner? Because if I have to listen to you describe to some poor girl who makes two dollars an hour exactly how you want your plate of wicker steamed, I'm going to start rethinking you. And I'm going to be honest with you, I did not put on these jeans hoping to think tonight.”

A few different emotions flicker across Dean's face while his mouth twitches, but he finally settles on, “Well, I was going to ask how you felt about Japanese food, but now I'm a lot more interested in finding out what you were hoping for when you put on those jeans.”

“I love Japanese food,” Cass says.

Dean takes him somewhere that's – naturally – a little overpriced and seems to have an entirely Korean waitstaff, but he promises the Yelp reviews are sound, and actually it's pretty good. Cass
orders ramen with braised pork belly and a plate of gyoza. Dean orders miso soup, a seaweed salad, and two spring rolls. “I am genuinely going to kill you,” Cass says, pushing the gyoza toward him. “Eat a dumpling, you neurotic fuck.”

“I'm not neurotic!” Dean protests. “I just bloat really easily, and I don’t know if you've noticed, but I'm trying to get laid tonight.”

“Well, pro tip,” Cass says, and gestures up and down Dean's whole general area with his chopsticks, “this is not sexy.”

“I would've thought you'd appreciate the value of clean eating,” Dean says. “You're in the health-care field.”

“Well, now that the court has established my credentials as an expert witness, I'm going to tell you that this? Is not all that healthy. Your body needs fat and protein. Okay, I'm going to give you an option. This is how I used to convince my child to try new food, understand; this is where we're at now. You can eat this dumpling, which I will literally hand-feed to you off of my own chopsticks, and it will be adorable and romantic, or you can split that green tea cheesecake with me. See, it's your choice.”

“I can't eat dairy,” Dean says faintly, even though Cass has not missed the light that kindled in his eyes at the sound of the word cheesecake.

Cass knows he's about to cross the line that separates cutely harrying Dean and just being a dick, but – honestly this shit pisses him off so much. “No, you don't eat dairy,” he snaps. Yeah, that was the line; saw it as he crossed. “You can eat whatever you want, because you're a rich guy living in the middle of the richest country on the planet, you have the option of eating a damn panda bear, if you wanted it bad enough. You choose to struggle through life malnourished, for reasons of your own, and that's fine, choose whatever you want, but own it.” Dean blinks at him, obviously at a total loss, which – yeah, what the fuck did Cass expect him to say to that? He sighs and rubs his eyebrow. “Sorry. I'm sorry, that was – really shitty. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Dean says faintly. “Just... if you can eat whatever you want and look like you do, that's great. You're lucky. I really can't. And I know you probably think it's shallow to care--”

“No, I don't,” Cass sighs. “Food is like sex, you know? We all could be completely rational about handling our needs, but we're not, none of us are. There are always emotions tied up in it. That's not shallow, it's human. So for me, it's-- I did relief work for three years in Central America when I was younger, and I can't think about hunger without remembering – handing out emergency-rehydration popsicles in the worst slums in San Salvador, to kids who would throw up if you tried to give them solid food, because they’d been hungry so long. So that's my thing. And it doesn't make it the right thing, it's just where I am.”

“I'm sorry,” Dean says softly.

“No, that's – I don't want you to be sorry, I'm not trying to guilt-trip you. I'm saying, that's my story, that's what's playing in my head. It's not more real than your story.”

“I don't really have a story,” Dean says.

“Yeah, you do. That's what I'm saying: everyone does.” Cass leans back and lets his eyes sweep over Dean, lets his memory wander a little bit. Something interesting usually pops out for him, when he lets himself be interested in something.... “You wrestled in high school, right?” Dean nods. “God, that's such a tough age. Everyone’s so self-conscious, and you're stuck with your classmates for an
amount of time that's totally outside your control. And wrestlers have to think about weight classes all the time. Your coach had you do weigh-ins, right? In front of the rest of the team? I'd think that could make anyone hypersensitive to how they're being perceived – constantly being told your body wasn't where it was supposed to be, and on top of that, feeling like the second you screw up, everyone knows it. Even if you rationally know that after high school, people stop being stuck together and mostly stop giving a shit what everyone else is doing, I'd think it would be hard to let that go.”

“How do you do that?” Dean says.

Cass smiles at him and says, “Hey, I went to a fancy private college, too. I'm smart.”

Dean smiles back, and Cass can let himself relax a little now, pretty sure he's salvaged the mood. “Yeah, where?”

“Loyola.”

Very casually, Dean reaches across the table with his chopsticks and lifts one of Cass' gyoza. Very casually, Cass doesn't gloat, or draw attention to it at all. “Okay, so let me try this game. You went to Loyola, and then you went and did some kind of humanitarian aid thing in Latin America, so – Catholic? Like, really Catholic, not just sort of in a vague, cultural way.”

“Very good,” Cass says. “I was at the time, yeah. See, you're smart, too, that's good. Gives you something to fall back on when your looks start to fade.”

“See, that was two separate compliments,” Dean says, “and yet also incredibly condescending at the same time, so now I don't know whether I'm supposed to thank you or--”

“Try harder to impress me?” Cass says with a smirk. “Hm. Interesting.”

Dean shakes his head with a soft chuckle and says, “I really got in over my head when I let you pick me up, didn't I?”

“Don't worry, gorgeous,” Cass says. “I promise I won't let you drown.”

There was plenty of street parking outside the restaurant, but Dean doesn't seem to trust street parking, so Dean's Prius is a few blocks away in a parking deck. Cass doesn't mind; it's a beautiful night, and he's liking this thing where he holds Dean's hand for no reason. They're waiting for the light to change on Linden Avenue, and Cass gestures off to the right and says, “Five or six blocks that way is the place where my psychic works.”

“Your psychic?” Dean repeats. “Yours personally?”

“Well, not just mine. Although she does usually let me jump the line if I stop by without an appointment. I think she thinks I'm cute.”

“There's a surprise,” Dean chuckles. “So you go there and, what, have your cards read? Crystal ball?”

“She reads palms, mostly,” Cass says. “I mean, she says she does, but she seems to see something new every time I go, so either I have very shifty palms, or--”

“Or she's a con artist?” Dean suggests. Cass gives him a look of fake shock, and Dean snorts and pulls him out into the crosswalk as the light changes. He throws a little smile back at Cass and says, “Did you ask her about me?”
“I did, actually,” Cass lies. “She said your money might be cursed, but she could break it if you bring her five thousand dollars in cash, two magnets, a case of Himalayan sea salt, and a black chicken.”

“Two magnets,” Dean says. “That sounds serious, and not at all like a scam.”

“Here,” Cass says, putting his free hand on Dean's wrist and tugging him under the streetlight outside the parking deck. “Let me see your hand, I'll tell you your future.”

Dean gives it over easily, letting Cass spread it out flat between both of his. “I better be careful,” Dean murmurs. “Soon I won't have any secrets left, will I?”

“That's the idea,” Cass says.

There are faint white scars on Dean's hand, around the base of his thumb, and Cass runs a fingertip over them. “Dog,” Dean says softly. “Big ol' mastiff – our neighbor down the road used to breed 'em, and sometimes they'd get out. I was thirteen.”

“Are you afraid of dogs now?” Cass asks, and Dean gives a short nod. Cass traces his fingers over the curve of Dean's life line and says, “Well, good news: you're alive.”

“That is good news,” Dean says huskily. “Does it say anything about meeting a tall, dark stranger?”


“Old news,” Dean repeats. “Okay, how about my future, then? How about tonight?”

Cass looks up at him, suddenly feeling flushed and a little unsteady – half-drunk without the benefit of a single drink. “I don't know,” he admits. “It's – getting pretty late, and it's only the second date. Maybe your stranger is too respectable for that.”

“I'm almost positive he's not,” Dean says. “But I actually am a gentleman, so if he wants me to drive him home--”

“I just – because Claire – I don't want her to have to spend too many nights home by herself.”

“Yeah, of course,” Dean says. “Cass, if you've been – if you haven't wanted to tell me about Claire because you thought I'd be – competitive, or possessive of your time or something, I want you to know, that's not me. She's your daughter. I want you to put her first; I wouldn't honestly think you were a man worth having at all, if you didn't put her first.”

He folds Dean's fingers over into a loose fist and kisses each finger, right under the bottom of the nail. “Am I worth having?” he murmurs.

Dean looks at him, shining gold in the yellow pool of the streetlight, and Cass doesn't know if anyone has ever looked at him like that before, so – gently. “I know you are,” he says. “You try to come off really tough, and I figure it's because – I guess you had a hard divorce, probably; you got hurt. You say what you're thinking, even if it's a little – abrasive, and you make everything a joke, and you're not easy to get to know, I have a million questions about you that I know you'd up and disappear if I started peppering you with. But you need to know that if those are things you're trying to see if you can scare me off, you're really not as smart as you think you are. Cause all those things just make me want you more.”

The thing is, Cass knows all that, he really does. And the part that freaks him out about Dean is that someday Cass won't be a mystery anymore, he'll just be a bundle of wrong turns and bad decisions.
and old pain that Dean won't have the cure for, and – it just feels a whole lot better to be Dean's dark stranger, the one he can't stop chasing, than Cass knows it will feel to be the real, fucked-up person that Dean actually catches.

But he doesn't know how to say any of that, and he knows Dean would deny it anyway – would really believe none of it's true. So instead, he leans in and kisses Dean's mouth very lightly and then says, “You really are gorgeous, Dean. And you're a lot of fun to be with, and you're sweet--”

“Don’t,” Dean says roughly. “Whatever you're getting ready to say – don't, because it's stupid and I don't think you mean it anyway.”

Cass closes his eyes and leans in, putting his arms around Dean's ribs and his chin on Dean's shoulder. He can feel the weight of Dean's gold watch rucking up his t-shirt as Dean strokes his back. “You should take me home,” he says.

“Okay,” Dean says softly. “Yeah. Whatever you want, okay?”

Whatever the fuck that is.

All at once, something kind of snaps loose, and he doesn't care that they're still standing on a downtown street corner on a Friday night, that it's only their second date, that everything about this is the wrong place and wrong time. He steps back and holds out his hand toward Dean, who instinctively catches it just the way Cass took his hand earlier, spreading it open, holding it steady. Cass touches his own wrist, and Dean leans down a little, squinting in the uneven light until he can see the silvery bands of scarring across Cass' wrist. He looks up at Cass' face uncertainly.

“They're not what you think they are,” Cass says quietly, and he can't quite help adding wryly, “You open a vein down the wrist, not across. They're not even cuts, they're – ligature marks. I'm not-- I don't know if I could tell you everything if I tried. I know I don't really want to. But you have to understand, they thought all the Catholic charities were aiding and harboring the guerrillas – and we mostly were. We'd get permission to bring food and medicine, and we'd – we'd transport messages, too, and guns if we could. Everybody knew it. Sometimes being an American protected you, but more often it didn't. We were incredibly lucky. The National Guard took us hostage. These are where I was tied with electrical cords for three days. All of us survived it, and that makes us damned lucky, whatever else you can say. You can't know – I could never explain what it does to you, to your mind, to touch that kind of violence even once, let alone over and over again. I would never want you to know. But I can tell you that – that if I have to work harder than most people do, to be happy, to be kind, to – believe in anything at all – then it's not because I'm trying to scare you away or because I like being alone. I can't tell you all the things I saw, because I like you. And I can't tell you all the things I've done – the person it turned me into – because I want you to like me. But I need you to trust me, Dean. If I push you away, it's not just some game I'm playing. It's because I don't want blood all over this place where I finally have a chance to maybe be happy. Do you understand?”

Dean nods. Of course he can't, not completely, but Cass believes that he's trying. That maybe he understands enough. Or maybe that's just what Cass wants to believe. Dean covers the scars with his palm, pressing Cass' wrist between his warm hands. “I'm going to take you home,” he says seriously. “And I want you to call me. Tomorrow, or on Monday, or next week or next month or – whenever you're ready, whenever you want. I don't know what to say to you. But I do like you, and I'm – I'm glad that you don't want to be alone, because that's not what I want for you, either. I just...want you to call me, whether you call because you need something or because you just want to see me again.”

They don't really talk on the drive back to Cass', but then, it's not that far, so it's not too awkward. Before he gets out of the car, Cass puts his fingers against Dean's jaw and kisses his lips, but they're both pretty worn out. It's a comfort-seeking touch, not an expression of grand passion, and Cass guesses he does feel comforted by it. He knows tonight didn't go the way Dean wanted it to, but Dean did kiss back, which has to mean something. Something good, Cass thinks.

Cass doesn't call.

Neither does Dean, but of course, he all but promised he wouldn't, so that's – not surprising, even if Cass still feels a thin filament of disappointment every time he glances at his phone. So basically, it's over now if Cass wants it to be.

He doesn't really want it to be, but he still doesn't call.

A week goes by, and by the end of it he's thinking about Dean just slightly less than constantly, the world's saddest achievement. He helps Jody carry her groceries up the stairs and then unpack them, and when she asks him if he has another date tonight, he stares at her kitchen counter and says, “Not – tonight, no. I don't really know if that's something I'm gonna.... I mean, it was honestly nothing serious.”

“Cass,” she says, weary and exasperated, “do you think I'm stupid? You've had a whole lot of nothing-serious since I met you. And how many of them have you introduced to Claire?”

None. For this precise reason, in fact. “That wasn't a good call,” he admits. “It was too soon.”

She looks at him more sympathetically now, and he can probably just let her believe that Dean got spooked if he wants to. “Don't let it get you down, kiddo,” Jody says. “I know it's hard out there, but I still think trying is better than not trying. I think you're brave for trying.”

He nods, feeling obscenely guilty. He's not the one who's been trying all this time, is he? All he's been doing is digging his heels in and expecting the worst, while Dean worked like hell to drag him into accepting one second of happiness, so where the hell does Cass get off pretending that he's brave?

He sits up in bed with his phone for a long time that night. Christ, he thought men were supposed to be easier; out of all the people he's fucked in the past seven years, how is it that the one he picked up drunk in the bathroom of a gay bar is the one who refuses to just – stay where Cass puts him? If Dean were just down to get together and mess around every so often, he'd be the perfect guy. Cass doesn't know who he's trying to convince. Nobody around here is buying it, anyway.

He extends his availability on Saturday and goes from three clients to six, which is physically and energetically exhausting. His treatment room backs up onto the private yoga studio where he teaches the classes he doesn't hate, so when he locks up there, he lets himself into the empty studio and puts himself through a handful of lazy dolphins and bows and bridges to pry his shoulders open, then takes advantage of the spacious silence to sit with himself for a while.

Jody and Alex took Claire somewhere with them while he was at work, and when he finally checks his messages, Claire's decided to spend the night over there. That's a good thing; he's been afraid for a while that Claire and Alex would grow apart in high school, and Alex is studious and responsible and blah blah blah, a general good influence. He's happy that so far his fears have been unfounded, because unless pop culture has lied to him, every jock needs her best nerd.
Still, that leaves him sitting home alone on a Saturday night, and while he feels better about his life than he did yesterday, he knows there's precisely no chance that he won't end up brooding about a guy he actually could have, which is an infinite recursive loop of depressing.

So, fuck it, he decides to put on his indecent jeans and go back to The Blue Room and take a second run at this picking-up-someone-uncomplicated thing. Hell, he could hardly fuck up that simple objective more than he did last time. And maybe there are healthier ways to manage his emotions, but he's a heroin addict; there are also worse. This, Cass thinks, is what you call the Middle Way.

The jeans do their job, as measured by the number of hands that land on his ass while he's dancing, but deep down he knows his inner pep-talk about drowning out maudlin thoughts of Dean with a new hookup was mostly bullshit. He's always been a lot more bark than bite when it comes to anonymous sex; Dean was an anomaly in more ways than one. Dancing is more reliable. Dancing and flirting is a guaranteed good time, which is more than you can say for sex with strangers.

Dancing and flirting and an undetermined number of tequila shots is...a volatile combination. Cass isn't saying he regrets the tequila shots, per se, but it's hard to deny that they do change the equation.

He finds himself somewhere close to midnight sitting on a table making out with a very tall drag queen, and he thinks, yes, exactly, this is just the right kind of palate-cleansing, life-affirming mistake. Good for me.

But then it turns on a dime, as tequila will sometimes do, and he doesn't know where he lost his drag queen, but he is standing in a stairwell pulling up a number on his phone that he plans to regret in the morning, typing out come find me....

He closes his eyes and waits. Not for long.

I'm gonna need a hint, the reply says, and Cass smiles. He can hear it so clearly in Dean's easy drawl. How is Dean's voice so familiar to him, when they've spoken so few times in the sixteen days since they met?

Dance dance dance dance til you're dead, Cass responds.

If I come, Dean texts back, are you gonna make me dance?

Now how is Cass supposed to let an easy one down the middle of the plate go by like that? He's only human. If you dance with me, I'll make you come, he sends, and then he puts his phone immediately away, pretending his heart isn't banging against his ribs, pretending he just doesn't really care that much what happens next.

He hears the blip that means Dean has sent him an answer, but he doesn't look at it. He just goes back to the dance floor, because it's out of his hands now, whatever happens happens. Non-attachment and all that highly spiritual shit.

It almost works. The music has hit a dark, slinky groove, the bass vibrating underneath his feet like he's about to fall through it, and he likes the smell of all this sweat, the casual touch of a stranger's shoulder or ass brushing against him, everyone a little drunk, a little clumsy, a little lost – everyone alone, the way everyone lives and dies alone, but all together. He does forget, for a little while – maybe not for long, but long enough to pick him up and drop him back down a little sharper, a little clearer than before.

He's caught off guard when someone catches him by the elbow and reels him in – it's such a possessive gesture for the ever-shifting constellation of bodies this crowd has mostly been so far –
but then he's pulled up tight against Dean's chest, and it starts to make sense. Dean is wearing a plain black t-shirt that's just barely not painted on him, and Cass can't help stroking his bicep. The bar is too loud to have much in the way of conversation, and honestly Dean doesn't look in the mood for it; he looks intense, not quite angry but not exactly happy, either.

It's too loud to say anything. Cass doesn't know what to say anyway. He shifts his hand up to Dean's shoulder, then lets the other one curl around the back of Dean's neck, ready for a kiss, dying for Dean's kiss. Dean sets his hands low on Cass' hips and steps forward. Cass stumbles back briefly, and then Dean steps again, and he gets it. They're dancing.

There's nothing to it, really. Dean's just guiding him in an easy box step, tuning in to the slower backbeat, the skeletal rhythm under the flashy noise of the production. He uses his thighs and his hips to nudge Cass back and sideways until Cass pulls himself together enough to follow along, and then he just uses his hips to smooth out the predictable, foursquare pattern, adding a little glide and curve to the mix. “You're a good dancer,” Cass says, feeling almost accusatory about it. Dean shrugs slightly.

People start shouting off to the side, and at first Cass thinks it's a bar fight; The Blue Room doesn't seem like that kind of bar, but Cass guesses people are people in every kind of bar. Then he sees that someone's down on the ground, and his mind flashes seizure, and adrenaline and training shock him instantly sober. He tears out of Dean's arms and bolts into the thick of the chaos, shouting at these idiots to clear the space.

This is more than manageable; grand mals look a whole lot worse than they are, though they're sure as hell not comfortable. He sizes the situation up quickly and decides he can do this without injury, so he gets an arm under the guy and another arm over his hip to balance him, and he heaves him over on his side so he won't choke. “You're all right, buddy,” he says, too low to make it over the music, which hasn't stopped. Doesn't matter. All Cass' focus is on holding the energy, holding the space. Things tend to reset themselves if you just give them the space, he's learned. Bodies want what they know; they want to be okay again. They just need to know it's allowed. He supports the guy's head with his hand, trying to protect it from an unpleasant meeting with the floor, and he can feel the heaviness in his fingers that means he's contacting the site of a struggle.

He has a – dream. He sees a library – wooden floors – no, a house full of bookshelves. Some of them have tipped over. Boots stomp heedlessly through them, kicking and tearing them, and no one cares.

Cass is on his knees over a gray-haired man. He's wearing a mala around his wrist, and his hands are soaked in blood. Everyone is shouting except the old man. Nothing but blood comes from his mouth, but his eyes still dart from side to side, betraying his panic. He knows he's about to die.

“You're all right, it's going to be all right,” Cass lies desperately. A bolt of pain shakes the dying man; he seizes, and Cass' hands slip. He can't hold the wreck of this body together any longer, but he can't let go.

He can hear Dean's voice, outside the walls. “Cass!” he's shouting – and “Bobby!” – and “motherfuck!”

“Hold the door!” Cass shouts. “Lock it, don't let him in!”

“We can't--” someone tries to tell him, and Cass' hands are shaking, black blood and maybe worse oozing up through his fingers as he fails to hold the pressure, as every one of Bobby's final breaths only splits his body open further.
He could stop this – he could have stopped this – he can't now, because he's nothing now, but once, but once –

But not now. Shame and fury and sadness draw a red veil over his mind, and he roars, “Keep that fucking door shut, if anyone lets him through that door, I will kill you myself!”

The sound of Dean's fists pounding the door becomes the sound of Dean's shoulder thrown against it, his whole body. He'll break it down soon, but not soon enough. He'll see Bobby's dead body, but he won't stand helplessly and watch him die.

Bobby's eyes are still moving, and Cass wants to laugh. Wants to shake him by the collar and say, What are you waiting for, you stubborn fuck? Just pass out, just let go, just be done. Please.

“Please,” he says. Bobby looks him in the eyes, and Cass watches him die in the grip of one final wave of pain.

Cass stays on his knees, too weak to stand, too sick and ashamed. Around him, people yell and step on books, and he wants to say no, don't, please be careful, those were Bobby's. He says nothing.

Dean's hand grabs him under the arm and hauls him up. “You okay?” he says.

It's not what Cass expects him to say. He doesn't know how to answer. Nothing is okay. “Dean – I'm sorry,” he says, because he couldn't stop it, couldn't do any good, couldn't even ease Bobby's pain.

He puts his arms around Dean, even though he's not supposed to, even though they've talked about this, and why it's not – why they aren't – He knows better, but he can't help it. There's so fucking much he just can't do.

“Okay,” Dean says gruffly. He wraps his arms around Cass, too, even though he's not supposed to, even though they've talked about this. “Hey. Hey. I know, Cass. I know.”

Cass just makes a long, low keen of despair and clings tighter, leaving hand prints that drip blood all down the back of Dean's coat.

A grand mal seizure passes quickly.

Cass blinks, disoriented in the darkness of the bar. None of it is the same, except that he's kneeling, and Dean is saying his name.

Other people are speaking to him, too, thanking him, offering him a hand up, but Dean crowds them away. The man's friends help him to his feet, retrieve his glasses from the floor, talk to Cass in words he can't hear, turn their friend to shepherd him toward the exit.

He glances over his shoulder and smiles at Cass – a warm and knowing smile over a strawberry blond beard, and Cass' mind stutters out and idles helplessly. What the hell just happened?

Dean puts a hand on his back and one under his elbow and helps him to his feet. “You okay, Cass?” he asks.

“I – I know him,” Cass says. “Last week, I-- He tripped, and I helped him-- He dropped his shoeboxes.... I helped him....”

It's the same man, right? It has to be, he'd swear it's the same man. But then, he would swear that Dean is the same man who held Cass in his arms in a house full of books and blood, grieving with him over the death of a man Cass has never met in a place he's never been. And that can't be true,
can it? So maybe the other man – men – maybe they're not both real – or they're one and not two, or two and not one, or they don't exist at all. None of that sounds possible, or even sane, but Cass isn't sure that's the standard now.

“Huh, weird,” Dean says, but not as if he finds it anything more than a passing coincidence. “Guess you're his guardian angel.”

Cass shudders, suddenly feeling like someone is trying to fix a broken world by smashing the remaining pieces together haphazardly, trying to make things fit when they just don't.

Something is desperately wrong, and he doesn't know how to tell anyone without explaining that he's hallucinating these bizarre scenes of blood and sickness and sex and Dean, always Dean there with him. He would sound crazy if he tried, and even if someone believed him, what would they do? Return the defective universe for a better one? He doubts anyone kept the receipt.

“Come on,” Dean says, rubbing Cass' shoulder. “I want you to sit down and drink some water.”

Cass sits at a table near the bar and drinks a tiny bottle of seltzer while Dean keeps a steadying arm around his shoulders. “I'm really okay,” Cass says. “I got – dizzy, I don't know why.”

“It could be shock,” Dean says.

“It's not shock. Honestly, Dean, I'm an EMT – or, I was an EMT. A seizure's not a big deal to me. I was just – I had a head rush or something, and then when I saw the guy's face and realized I met him last week, that.... I don't know, it seemed really surreal. We had such a weird conversation then, too.... It's really-- I'm fine. I am.”

“Okay,” Dean says. “Well, I don't know if I am, honestly. I'm kinda ready to get out of here.”

Cass smiles wanly at him. “You just got here.”

Dean smiles fleetingly, just to acknowledge that, and stands up, offering Cass his hand. “Let me take you home.”

“Okay,” Cass says, putting his hand in Dean's and standing with him. “Wait, whose home?”

Dean drops his eyes to the floor, looking shy and – beautiful. God, why is he so beautiful? “I was thinking mine,” he says. “I'll make you some coffee, and then – I'll take you home after that, or you can – stay if you want.” Cass just nods.

Scrupulously sincere as always, Dean starts messing with his espresso machine the minute they get back to his condo, because of course for Dean *come up to my place, I'll make coffee* is not a figure of speech. Cass doesn't really need it, is sure he's as sober as he's ever been in his life, but he thinks Dean might need some little sense that he's providing for Cass, or taking care of him, or God help them both, healing him.

None of that is what Cass wants, and that should mean that Dean isn't what he wants, isn't right for him, isn't what he's looking for in a – partner or whatever you want to call it. Fine, Cass is lonely as hell, but that doesn't mean that any good-looking person in the world who's willing to have him is compatible with him, with his life as it is now or with the few hopes for the future Cass has allowed himself to hang onto.

He paces restlessly around Dean's condo, trying to keep his feet under him while he's hanging twenty floors above street level, while all the stars and all the city lights burst through the wall of windows at him, doing their best to dazzle. Cass is un-dazzleable. He knows this about himself. He's
been high up before and he's been all the way down, and he knows that nothing stays, everything is impermanent. He no longer believes in the God of his childhood – infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth – and he no longer believes that it's a failure of his faith. It just happened. Life happened.

If you could live long enough, you'd see everything happen, sooner or later.

“Do you like Americano or-- Cass?”

Cass knows he must look like a crazy person, his forehead and one hand pressed against Dean's windows, leaving streaks – hand prints –

that drip blood all down the back of Dean's coat....

“Hey,” Dean says softly, pulling him away from the skyline. Cass goes willingly into his arms, and Dean flips the switch on his gas fireplace before wrapping Cass up against him. “You sure you're okay, sweetheart?” Cass nods and puts his arm around Dean's shoulders, lets Dean take hold of his hand and guide him slowly into motion. “Sorry our dance got cut short,” he says. “It was nice.”

“I thought you didn't dance,” Cass says. He was obviously wrong. They're dancing right now, gliding in perfect time through the silence.

“I actually do a few things I don't tell my little sister about,” Dean chuckles. “You don't have the market cornered on mystery. You're pretty much looking at everything I know about dancing, but if you're any good at music, you almost can't help figuring out the basics. Staying on the beat and all.”

“Right,” Cass says. “You're a guitar prodigy; all my friends think so.”

Dean chuckles and brushes a kiss onto the corner of Cass' eye that almost makes Cass lose the imaginary beat. “Wanted to be a rock star when I was younger – you know, me and fifty million other teenagers.”

“What happened? Sold all your dreams for six figures and a stock option?”

“Just figured out I ain't no Clapton. You always wanted to be a yoga teacher, or a – whatever the hell else you are?”

“No,” Cass says, not sure whether to laugh or cry. “No. Priest.”

“Ah,” Dean says. “And I can probably guess what happened there, huh?”


Tale as old as time.

“I could put on some music,” Dean suggests.

Instinctively, Cass clutches his fingers in the back of Dean's t-shirt. “Stay,” he says roughly, then drags his fingers up the back of Dean's neck to bend his forehead down against Cass'.

“Okay,” Dean says. He hasn't missed a step yet; Cass has totally lost track of where the beat should be, but all he has to do is follow Dean's lead, and the silence can't touch him. “Want me to sing?” he suggests, and Cass nods. “Feel her breath on my face,” Dean sings by his ear, so low and husky that
it's almost a whisper, “her body close to me – Can't look in her eyes, she's outta my league.”

“Dirty Dancing?” Cass scoffs affectionately. “My mom loves that movie.” It's a total lie – he doesn't even think she was still alive when that movie came out – but Dean deserves it anyway.

“Hush,” Dean says mildly. “It's a good movie. Just a fool to believe I have anything she needs – She's like the wind.”

“Swayze was your first crush, right?” Cass guesses.

Dean huffs a little and says, “I swear this is some kind of compulsion for you.”

“Tell me I'm wrong.”

“You're wrong,” he says. “It was Fred from Scooby-Doo.”

“Doesn't count.”

“Says you; I was very serious about it. Fred was total husband material. But yeah, probably Swayze after that. Point Break is the greatest love story of our time.”

“Yeah,” Cass says thoughtfully, and Dean pulls back enough to give him a raised eyebrow. “I mean, no, it's obviously not,” Cass says, “but yeah, I can see why you'd think so. Has that always been your fantasy, honey? Looking for your hippie outlaw so he can seduce you to the dark side, spring you from a lifetime of following every rule, of always having to be one of the good guys? Can't be bad yourself, can't threaten that 401k and that next promotion, but you can always try just one little taste, then look back someday from your comfortable retirement and say you had a love story once.”

Dean stops dancing and pushes him away. He looks – not quite angry, but frustrated. “Stop it,” he says. “Why do you-- You don't think I know what you're doing? I'm not stupid, and I don't-- I don't want to fight with you.”

“I never called you stupid,” Cass says.

“No, but you treat me like I am – like I'm just going to roll over and believe this act you put on, this Zen, free-spirit thing, like I can't tell that you're the one who always has to be the alpha male. You like – exposing people, you like proving that you know things they didn't tell you, that if you want to know something intimate about them you can just take it, you don't have to ask, or God fucking forbid, wait until they offer. That's for other people, right? Because the rest of us are just ants running around on the ground pretending our little lives matter – but you, you're the Last Honest Man, and basic social rules don't apply to you. How am I doing, Cass? Am I scoring any points? Because God knows I tried just being honest with you, just asking for what I wanted, and I don't know what it got me. You act like you might care about me, but then you make fun of my job, you criticize what I eat, you won't even return my calls when you're sober. So I don't want to play this game, I really don't like playing games, but I don't know if there's – any other way in, with you.”

Cass sinks his nails into his palms, trying not to hear his own voice in the back of his head shouting, Lock the door, don't let him in.... “I'm not the Last Honest Man,” he says. “I – used to think I could be, or that I – wanted to be, but I gave that up a long time ago, because I realized that too much truth- - It doesn't set you free. It kills you. A bullet in your mouth, a needle in your arm, it doesn't matter, it kills you if you can't make yourself look away. And I don't want to die. So I live in the illusion as much as anyone now. If I – made you feel like I was judging you, I'm sorry. I'm no better than anyone else, and I'm sure as fuck not more honest.”

“I know my world isn't real,” Dean says, and everything seems to flip upside down. Cass' stomach
rolls and his vision warps, and he feels himself wobbling on the edge of one of those chasms between moments, where the ghosts call to him from far below. He reaches out blindly for support and grips the narrow metal mantlepiece of the fireplace, which is hot enough to hurt a little, but not to leave a mark. “I know we're all just naked apes,” Dean says, “and nothing really matters except sex and survival – that nothing really exists except – having food and babies and running from predators, and that eventually we all die and everyone forgets we were ever here. I know what you think of me, but I am a grown man, and I do get that. I don't believe in God and I don't think the universe cares if I'm rich or happy or handsome, but you know what, fuck, I like being rich and happy and handsome, I want that. I'm not looking to save the world. I'm sorry if you think that makes me selfish or shallow, I – try to be a decent person, an honest person, but if none of this matters and everything I see is an illusion, I just.... I want it anyway.”

Cass looks around him, feeling like an alien, feeling like there's something impossible about this tasteful, orderly place that hovers twenty stories up among the stars. He's so high up, a lightless and wingless thing suspended in the sky, and he doesn't think he's allowed to be here. He thinks the fall is going to kill him, and he doesn't want to die.

“I want it, too,” he says, and he reaches for Dean, who reaches back for him. “Dime que eres real,” Cass says desperately, brokenly, between kisses. “Tell me you're real.”

“I'm here, I'm here,” Dean promises him, holding him crushingly tight. “I got you, Cass.”

Dean somehow drags them both to the couch and sits down, which is perfect; Cass' knees sink into the leather as he straddles Dean's lap, and he loves being up higher, being the one to bring his mouth down while Dean yearns up into the kiss (okay, maybe Dean has him pegged with that alpha thing, maybe that was a little bit of projection on Cass' part). He loves all of it, though – the bright citrus taste on Dean's tongue, the hard shape of Dean's jaw between his hands, Dean's hands cupping his ass and holding him securely in place. “I'm sorry,” Cass breathes, kissing his mouth, kissing the freckles strung along his smooth cheek. “I know, I know you tried so hard to be nice to me, and I made it so hard--”

“It doesn't matter,” Dean says. “Easy is boring. I hate that anything bad ever happened to you, but I don't hate your scars. They're yours; they're beautiful.” Cass kisses him and kisses him and can't stop, can maybe never stop, will maybe never want to.

Not that he's disappointed when they fall off the couch, when Dean is on top of him with one hand dug deep into Cass' hair and the other pushing up his ribs and sending wave after wave of sensation through Cass in time with the waves of Dean's body rocking against him. He wraps one leg around Dean's hips, urging him on, and calls soft, wordless encouragement into Dean's mouth, scratching over Dean's shirt, trying to make every filthy promise he can think up at once with his body.

Dean pushes up on one hand, and Cass feels paralyzed, pinned to the carpet by the sight of Dean's flushed and swollen lips. “Tell me what you want,” Dean demands. “A straight answer, goddammit. I want to hear you say it.”

“You,” Cass says, and then he has to take another breath, because he only has the lung capacity to get through this syllable by syllable, apparently. “Get – get a condom. I want – you. In me, Dean.”

It sucks to feel Dean push away from him, but the sound of Dean's frustrated groan makes up for it a little bit. “You're so lucky I'm a gentleman,” Dean says, reaching down to grip Cass' wrist and help him to his feet.

“No, I didn't want to move,” Cass whines. “Was that not clear?”
“Yeah, well, I’ve tried having sex on this floor before,” Dean says. “Someone always winds up hitting the coffee table. Anyway, I like the way you look in my bed.” And Dean may not have much of a natural sense for interior decorating, but Cass couldn't care less anymore, not when he makes that sound so damn sexy.

“Was this our third date?” Cass can't help asking as Dean pulls him toward the bedroom. “Because this part's good, but a lot of the rest of it kind of sucked.”

“I know, because I let you be in charge of it,” Dean says. “That's not happening again for a while.”

And Dean's such a damn gentleman, he doesn't only help Cass get both their shirts off, he pulls the sheets back on the neatly made bed and draws the pillow down for him. Cass gives him a wry little smile and lies down, teasing himself just a little with light touches across his collarbone while Dean gets out condoms and lube. They work as a team to get Cass out of his jeans and underwear, and Dean looks him up and down so affectionately that Cass almost can't deal with it, so he lets his eyes fall half-shut and starts stroking his own cock, trying to move the needle a little more toward porn and away from – whatever else Dean is thinking.

Cass isn't necessarily opposed to whatever-else. He just needs a little more time and a lot more blood flowing to his brain before he'll be able to process it.

Dean licks his fingertips efficiently, almost casually, and the effect is fucking devastating; Cass is making the most pathetic sounds even before Dean starts to rub circles around the head of his cock. “Is this good?” Dean says, which might make him sound like a sensitive, caring lover, but the glint in his eye definitely says, payback is a bitch.

“I hate you,” Cass says.

“Gee, Cass, that's uncalled-for,” Dean says. “Maybe you should get laid more often.”

“Maybe I should,” Cass says. “Know anyone who's into that kind of thing?”

Dean chuckles a little, then leans down and presses a kiss low on Cass' groin that sparks what feels like a direct physical pressure on Cass' thighs, pushing them apart. Dean follows along lower to kiss the freshly exposed skin of his inner thigh, and Cass decides if there were ever a time to practice non-attachment and just let whatever happens happen, this is it. He tips his head back and breathes as deeply as he can; he can't help stroking through Dean’s hair, but he doesn't try to gain control of his head, or of anything else. Giving up control isn't Cass’ instinctive response to – anything, but he suspects something nice will happen to him if he gives it a try.

About a million nice things happen. Dean, it turns out, can do the most amazing things with his mouth – sharp little tugging kisses that feel almost like bites, lazy slides of the tip of his tongue, hot drags of his open mouth that make Cass arch up into them like he’s magnetized – and he's not shy about trying all of them out on every bit of Cass he can reach. The things he can do with his hands are somehow less flashy, but it doesn't take Cass long to start appreciating the nuances, and it doesn't take him long after that to start calling Dean’s name like it's the only word he still knows.

It takes forever to get Dean naked except for the condom, but by that point Cass doesn't care; he expects to spend the rest of his life in this bed letting Dean do whatever he wants, and he has no regrets. It does seem like it would be nice to make good use of all those hip-opening stretches, though, so he pulls his leg up, tucking Dean's solid shoulder in the crook of his knee, and Dean shudders and pauses with his fingers inside Cass, looking a little overwhelmed. “Don't stop,” Cass murmurs. “Dean – honey, c'mon. Don't leave me like this.”
“Wait,” Dean says tightly. He bows his head a little so Cass can’t see his expression, but Cass can definitely see the labored way his back is moving as his ribs expand and contract, like no matter how deeply he breathes, he can’t pull himself under control. “Just – gimme a second.”

“No,” Cass frets, stirring restlessly underneath Dean, tightening his leg around him a little. “Dean. Please, I want it. You’re so good at this, you’ve got me so....” He doesn’t know the word. He doesn’t know a lot of words he used to know.

“I – can’t,” Dean says. “You’re – still really tight, you’re--”


Dean lets out a rough snort of laughter and says, “One of us is really wrong about what yoga is.”

Cass laughs back giddily, because Dean is funny, and he thinks Cass is funny, and they make each other so happy. They don’t make any sense at all, and Cass doesn’t care. He just wants to stay like this forever, naked and sweaty and sex-stoned and laughing with this gorgeous boy who chases Cass like Cass is someone you’d want to catch.

He is still pretty tight when he finally manages to drag Dean inside of him; it hurts, and his fingers bite hard into Dean's shoulder while Dean rubs circles with his fingertips over Cass' scalp and murmurs soft, blurry apologies. “Don't,” Cass says, feeling blurry, too. “Don't be sorry. I want this, I came all this way, and I found you...” He doesn't know exactly what he's saying, but it must be the right thing, because Dean groans and moves inside him, and Cass feels himself melting, spinning, glowing bright enough to light the world.

Dean carries him all the way up, and they float without falling, and they both break, but they don't die. Cass suspects they can't die, not anymore. That's impossible, of course, but why? If nothing is real except the two of them, why can't the rules be whatever they say?

He lets Dean play the gentleman and clean him up after, and then he lies snugly in Dean's arms, pressing sleepy kisses against Dean's throat and under his jaw. “What's your favorite love story?” Dean asks.

“*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,*” Cass says, too spacey to think up a lie.

“Yeah,” Dean says, “I can see why it would be.”

“Why?” Cass says.

“Because it's depressing as shit?”

Cass hums a little, slipping his arm over Dean. “No, it's not. It's about perseverance. Bravery. Defying fate.”

“Making the same mistakes over and over again,” Dean says.

“Hope,” Cass says.

Cass wakes up naked and alone in Dean's bed, again, but other than that, everything is different. He rolls over and breathes Dean's smell from his pillow, and he remembers everything, and he smiles.

The bedroom door is open, and he can hear the distinctive sleepy cadence of NPR, and a non-
specific thumping and shuffling as Dean moves around, presumably in his kitchen. A pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt are folded up at the foot of the bed. The t-shirt is branded with the logos of a billion corporate sponsors for some kind of breast cancer charity bike race; Cass is surprised at first that Sandover isn't one of them, but he looks closer at the names and realizes the shirt is from a California event, not Cleveland. He deems it boring, but fit to wear around Dean's apartment, at least. He wonders if it was the first thing Dean pulled out of a drawer for him, or if he chose it specifically – still feeling a little defensive about the possibility that Cass thinks he's shallow and lacks a social conscience, maybe?

Cass shakes himself off, irritated. This really is a compulsion for him, isn't it? It doesn't matter, the stupid shirt doesn't matter. He knows what he needs to know about Dean, which is that Dean wanted him to come here and wanted him to stay.

He pads out of the bedroom and gets a cup of coffee and a quick kiss from Dean, who's fully dressed down to his sneakers and socks, his hair just slightly damp. Cass sits at the breakfast bar and waits for the interview segment to be over – someone's promoting their new book about the Cuban Missile Crisis – but Dean is also waiting for the break, and before Cass can get out so much as a good morning, Dean has fired up a terrifyingly industrial-looking blender, turning twelve square feet of produce into sixteen ounces of maroon ooze in mere moments. “Okay, your face is very expressive,” Dean says, “so I think we can just pretend like we've already had this conversation, can't we?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Cass says innocently. “It looks – delicious?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” Dean says. “I put black pepper and turmeric in it for an extra kick. And it has the equivalent of six servings of fruit and vegetables.”

“Mmhm,” Cass says. “Also, you know what else has the equivalent of six servings of fruit and vegetables?”

“So help me, if you say six servings of fruit and vegetables....”

Cass smiles at him and says, “You know me so well.”

Dean gives him another little kiss, leaning across the bar, and says, “Quit being such a dick and drink some beets.” Cass decides that neither of those things will actually kill him and does what he's told.

It's okay. The juice, that is – it's still too early to decide how he feels about being less of a dick.

“How are you feeling?” Dean asks, and the real sympathy in his voice is confusing for a second. How should he be feeling? Dean starts to blush and look awkward, and he says, “I just didn't know if you were – uh – still kind of overloaded from last night, or...um....”

“Sore?” Cass guesses, and even though Dean doesn't confirm it, his face does. “Aw, honey. You want to hear about how big and strong you are, how you fucked me so good on your big cock that I'm still feeling it?”

Dean rolls his eyes, still blushing. “No. I was literally just checking up on your well-being, because for some inexplicable reason, I kind of like you.”

“I'm good,” Cass says, and then he makes his voice a little huskier and says, “And, yes. So are you.” Dean just shakes his head and tops off Cass' coffee.

“I really hate to rush you out,” Dean says, “but Jo's coming back into town, and I promised I'd help her unload all her stuff into her new place and take her to lunch. I would invite you, but I'm sure we'll mostly talk about how it went with our folks, and I don't want to put her on the spot, in case she
gets emotional or something.”

“I understand,” Cass says. “She already found a place?”

“Well – seems like for now, anyway,” Dean says. “She's renting the spare room in Sam's condo.”

Guess that's what Cass gets for a week of radio silence; he's obviously fallen really far behind on the gossip. “So they're going to be – roommates?”

Dean shrugs, his face very carefully arranged to say, *I can only tell you what I've been told.*

“Apparently she got real attached to his dumb dog.”

“Well, good for the three of them,” Cass says mildly. “Four of them? Anyway, tell her I said hello.”

Dean sits on the bar stool next to him and puts his hand on Cass' thigh to spin him sideways so they're facing each other. Even having Dean's knees pressed to his knees makes Cass feel weirdly cozy, and he wants to crawl back over Dean, wants to feel his heat and hear his heart and God, he's got it so bad. “Cass....” Dean says, and his tone puts Cass' back up almost right away; it just sounds like bad news somehow. “I know that you don’t – rush into things, and I know your plate is pretty full the way things are now. But I don't– after last night, I don't think I'm the only one who feels like this could – this could be something. Like we have a connection. And I've really been trying to let you set the pace, but the thing is, it's kind of not working for me. I'm not saying you have to make a commitment right this very second, but--”

“But you kind of are?” Cass says. He isn't sure what this feeling in his stomach is, if he's scared or excited or guilty in advance for the inevitable way he's going to fail to be the normal, loving boyfriend that Dean so obviously wants and needs in his life.

“A little one,” Dean says. “I've hung out with you four times, and all four times, I was this total ball of anxiety, because I knew that if I blew my chance to make myself seem interesting to you, I'd never see you again. And I kinda can't keep doing that, because – Cass, I'm pretty boring. I have my job and my routines and a few friends, and – that's it, really, I don't have *experiences* or travel the world or do adventurous things, and you're probably right, I'm probably living out some kind of fantasy through you, because you're *so* interesting, you've done so many things, and I want to know about all of them. I don't have much to say that's going to impress you, but I love listening to you, I love that you see the world so differently from me. But I'm going to have a damn heart attack if I keep trying to go out with you like you're the Dread Pirate Roberts, and every date ends with, *Goodnight, Dean, good work, sleep well, I'll most likely dump you in the morning.*”

Cass smiles at him. “How'd you figure out I love that movie?”

“Everyone loves that movie. If I'm not what you're looking for, then – I'll be sad, but I'll understand why. But I think you do want to keep seeing me. And if that's true, then – then I want you to say that. Not just that you'll try going out with me one more time, but that you want to *keep seeing me*, that you're okay with being – the guy I'm seeing. I get that it's probably out of your comfort zone, that you'd probably be happier playing things by ear, but....”

“But you're out of your comfort zone, too,” Cass says, leaning close enough to put his hand on Dean's cheek. “I know. And you're right, you shouldn't have to be the only one. That's not fair to you.”

Dean's eyes close briefly, relieved to be making himself understood. He opens them again and meets Cass' eyes frankly. “I don't need you to promise me your whole life here and now just because we had the best sex of my life last night. Just – give us a little time to see how we adjust to each other,
see if this is working out. My company has an annual banquet in May – it's black tie, it's excruciatingly boring, and it's less than two months from now. I want you to be my plus-one. I want you to just agree that, barring emergencies or the end of the world or something, you expect you'll still be dating me in a few weeks. Can you give me that, Cass?"

It's probably something he should think about. It's definitely something he's never done before. He doesn't know how he feels about the idea that Dean Smith is all at once about to become the person he's devoted more of himself to than anyone in the world except his wife and daughter. That feels huge, but if he's honest with himself, almost everything that's happened since he met Dean feels larger-than-life. "Annual banquet at Sandover Bridge and Iron, huh?" he says, because he's a dick, and he can't just say any of that other stuff. "And you claim you don't have any exotic adventures to share."

"Not gonna lie," Dean says, "some years there are casualties."

"Oh, good," Cass says. "I only like putting on a tux for espionage-related purposes. Yeah. Go ahead and put me down for it."

Dean leans in and kisses him, brief but firm. "I wish I could spend all day here with you."

"Next time," Cass says softly, and he loves the way it makes Dean's breath catch for just a second. "I'll call you this week."

"Will you?" Dean asks, low and sweetly vulnerable.

"Yes," Cass promises, and it's not his whole life here and now, but it's still a big deal.

He takes the bus home, although it seems to tax Dean's every gentlemanly instinct to allow it, even when Cass points out that it lets him stop at the grocery store on the way without taking up Dean's time, and then points out that he's a grown fucking man who's been getting around this city for years without owning a car. Dean still insists on walking him to the elevator – to the elevator, like Cass is somehow going to run into trouble on the way. "You're ridiculous," Cass tells him, between kisses. "You want to ride with me down to the lobby, or do I have to push the button all on my own?"

"This relationship's off to a great start," Dean says.

"Aren't you going to feel stupid if you're the one who can't get through two months of this and calls it off?"

"And prove you right?" Dean says, pushing him away with one last playful kiss to the side of his mouth. "Forget it."

He doesn't think to look at his phone until he's on the bus, and the only text message is the one from Dean that he didn't look at last night – the emoji of the blushing face with big, round eyes. Cass smiles at it for blocks.

By the time he gets home, Claire's already made herself nachos for lunch, which is fine; he bought ingredients to make turkey chili, but it'll turn out better anyway if he can let it simmer all afternoon. She's doing her homework at the table with headphones on, and she looks him over skeptically when he comes in but doesn't comment, so he just gives her a nod and starts separating the groceries into things to put away and things he needs for the chili.

He probably has the option of not telling her anything – just letting it unfold organically, letting her
notice the parts that affect her and ignore whatever doesn't. But that's never really been their relationship, or at least not the better parts of their relationship. There was a lot of lying and hiding and trying to pretty things up for Claire's sake when she was small, but none of it really worked, except to convince her that what her parents told her bore no relationship to reality. Maybe he lets the pendulum swing too far the other way now, at least from time to time, but he thinks it's helped. She trusts him, he never assumes that trust can't be taken away in a heartbeat, and it works for them.

So when he calls her over to taste-test the chili (she wants a lot more oregano), he tries not to make it sound too huge or heavy, just says like it's the interesting news of the day, “So, Dean and I are dating now. Dating seriously. Or – semi-seriously, I guess, at first, with the potential for serious. That means – you know, that you'll be meeting him again. He'll probably come over here sometimes.”

She doesn't really say anything to that, but then Cass didn't really frame it like he was asking for her opinion. He guesses that's because he's actually not asking for her opinion. Down the road, if Claire and Dean get to know each other and they genuinely can't get along, that's a problem, but he's not going to go into this assuming that's likely. She'll get to like Dean, or else she'll ignore him, she's pretty good at that, but either way they'll all get used to the new normal. Cass is – almost totally confident about that.

So he doesn't push the issue, and she doesn't bring it up until pretty late that evening, when they're sharing the couch, eating chili and watching Starship Troopers, and then suddenly out of nowhere she says, “Do you still love Mom?”

Maybe he should've been expecting this, but he wasn't. He was expecting her to feel weird about having to make room for a stranger in her life, and probably to be less than thrilled about losing some of Cass' attention or focus or something, but – not this. “I.... Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I mean – I don't think that's something that really goes away. Not when you really love someone, and when you go through so much with them for such a long time. I'll always love your Mom, but – Claire, you know, she – she didn't even want to be married to me anymore before she died. So it's kind of – not relevant to anything anymore.”

“I know how screwed up she was,” Claire says quietly, stirring her chili. “I remember. But you – you were, too, and you got better.”

“Claire,” he says helplessly. “Claire, honey, you can't think about.... I know it's easy to go over it in your head, and to think – maybe if this, or if that, or maybe it could've gone differently. Believe me, kitten, I know. And you know, maybe it's even true. Maybe she would've gotten herself straightened out, and maybe if that happened, she would've wanted – us all to be together again. I don't know, and you don't know, and we can't ever know. But even if we knew for sure, why would it. matter? It doesn't bring her back.”

“I know,” Claire mutters. “Does he know about her, though? Did you tell him?”

“Not a lot,” Cass admits. “We still have a few getting-to-know-you stages left to go through before we get to – all that. But if you're worried that I'm going to somehow try and hide your mother, or be ashamed of her or something, don't be. Even if I could remotely get away with that, she deserves more from me. And – honestly, so does Dean. I was with your mom for fourteen years. Nobody can really know me or be part of my life without knowing who she was, the good parts and the bad parts.”

That's good enough for Claire, or at least she seems calm about everything when he kisses her and sends her off to bed a little later. Cass is pretty sure the whole thing took five years off his life, but Claire seems okay.
He lies in bed for a while, restlessly trying to decide between reading or meditating or catching up on his news feed. None of it sounds good. He thinks he already might miss Dean a little, and then it hits him like an anvil that – he's actually just allowed to call Dean for no particular reason. Just because he'd like someone to talk to. That's how relationships work, right?

His heart is racing as he pulls up Dean's number, which is crazy, he's – definitely allowed to do this, it's not creepy or stalking or overly needy, it's – good, isn't it? It's something he's almost positive will make Dean happy, so he's not sure why he's being so....

“Hey, you,” Dean says when he answers, and Cass relaxes a little, because he does sound warm and happy – which he admittedly sounds when he talks to almost anyone, but it works on Cass anyway.

He lies down and tucks himself more comfortably in, turning off the lamp so that he's only in the glow of his screen and the dim city lights filtering through his curtains. “Hello,” he says. “Just – wondering how it went with Jo.”

And Dean takes it from there, telling gently mocking stories of Sam's awkwardness, funny stories about Sam's dog's aggrieved jealousy, private and tender stories about his parents, who live in that odd intersection between their old-fashioned Midwestern inability to discuss emotions and their fierce love of their kids. It's not boring at all, and it's – given so freely, given to Cass like he's completely welcome to know all these things and nothing could be more natural. He doesn't know whether to feel lucky that Dean is like this, or worried that he'll never be able to return this generosity, no matter how worthy of it Dean is, how – valuable he already is to Cass.

“Are you okay?” Dean asks him eventually.

“Me? Yeah, I'm fine,” Cass says. “I'm awake.”

“I know, you just – talk more, usually. Just thought I should check.”

“Sorry,” he says.

He probably has the option of not saying anything else, but... Dean deserves more.

“I talked to Claire about you today,” he says. “She's never met anyone I've – gone out with before this, so I didn't know what to expect at all. It was pretty nerve-wracking.”

“And?” Dean prompts after a minute.

Cass strokes his fingers lightly over his ribs – over the t-shirt he stole from Dean this morning – and he decides he won't return it. He wonders if Dean will discover it in Cass' dresser someday soon, and if he'll steal it back, or if it belongs to Cass now. “I don't think she's got a problem with you,” he says. “But it did bring up some stuff for her. Some feelings about – how this makes her mother seem even further away, if that makes sense.”

“Of course it does,” Dean says. “Does she not have any relationship at all with her mom anymore?”

“Her mom is....” He closes his eyes and says something he almost never says out loud, that he always fears he'll betray himself by saying, because he's not really at peace with it and doesn't know if he ever can be. “Amelia died five years ago.”

“Oh, God,” Dean says. “God, that's – so much for a kid to go through.”

“Yeah,” Cass says. “Well, Claire's a warrior. She's okay, she's – really bizarrely normal, actually. She's good.”
Dean's voice drops a little as he says, "When I was, uh– My senior year of high school, my mom was diagnosed with cancer. I ended up putting off college for a year, to help my dad get her through chemo and take care of Jo."

“That's a big responsibility for a teenager,” Cass says.

“I don't think I felt responsible for it, exactly. I mean, not like I had to do it or something. I wanted to be with my family. Anyway, it was – fine, she's fine now. I know it's not the same thing at all, but.... My mom is so strong, she was always the center of the family. And then to shift all of a sudden into thinking of her as someone I had to protect, someone who needed us to take care of her-- I don't know. You always know your parents are human, but then one day you know it, and things change. I guess I can still be a little – overprotective of her. Jo thinks I can, anyway. That I go too far out of my way to avoid upsetting Mom, or – disagreeing with her, or anything. But I was like that before, too, so maybe that's why. I just...don't like it when she's upset with me. Jo loves it when Mom's upset with her, so I think we're just kinda speaking different languages there.”

Cass can't help smiling. “How exactly are you going to upset your mother? Is there some way in which you are somehow not the perfect son?”

“Well, I haven't been real successful at bringing a nice girl home,” Dean says dryly. “And grandkids may turn out to be a little complicated.”

“Ouch,” Cass says. “She doesn't know...?”

“Well, she's not stupid,” Dean sighs. “Maybe she does know. But it's not something we've ever talked about. So – you know, even if it was tough, I think it's awesome that you talk to Claire about your life, that you have that kind of relationship with her. My parents.... I love them to death. I'd do anything for them. But they're not always easy to talk to.”

“That's their loss,” Cass says. “You're – a very cool person to know.”

Dean is silent for a beat, and he sounds even more sincere than he always sounds when he says, “Thanks, Cass.”

The next morning, Cass wakes up and he's a person who has a boyfriend. It's – weird, but not too weird. He's still himself, still facing basically the same day he'd be facing if he'd never met Dean. He can't even spell out what's weird or different, but he can feel the extra weight he's carrying now, the complications and potential complications. It's like the opposite of a phantom limb: instead of feeling something he's lost, he's feeling all the extra attachments that no one else can see.

It's not uncomfortable, except in its unfamiliarity.

He doesn't talk to Dean on Monday, and then on Tuesday Dean and Sam both show up at one of his evening classes at the studio, which he definitely did not see coming in the slightest. “I'm just trying to make some positive changes in my life,” Sam tells him very earnestly. “There are so many things I want to do, and it's so easy to fall into a comfortable job and get lazy and just let life happen to you, you know? I want to find my focus and be in better shape – more mentally fit, spiritually, not just – I mean, all of it. It really feels like the right time.”

Dean says, “I am literally just here to look at your ass.”

“Oh, yeah, I get that all the time,” Cass says breezily. “Does this go both ways? Can I show up at your office and check you out now?”
Sam throws his head back and lets out a startling caw of laughter. “I would give everything I own just to see Crowley's face if you did that,” he says.

“Well, that's no way to start meeting those long-term goals of yours,” Dean says a little too snappishly, not quite meeting anyone's eyes.

“Oh, okay, let's put a pin in this,” Cass says. “One of you is going to be answering a lot of questions soon, because there's clearly a story here. But in the meantime, I actually get paid to do work, so we're going to be starting class soon. Shoo, go away.”

They put their mats in the back of the room and spend about half the class horsing around and occasionally trying to knock each other over, which is probably an insurance risk for the studio or something, but Cass can't bring himself to say anything because they're so damn cute. Sam seems to take it to like a duck to water, though, and he buys a twenty-class pass from the front desk.

Dean does not take to it, and he whines about his hamstrings until Cass takes a hot shower with him and massages his legs and gives him a blowjob, which is so much more work than Cass is prepared to go to on a regular basis that he's actually relieved by how much Dean has decided he hates yoga.

He barely makes it home before Claire, who barely makes it home before her curfew, and he briefly wonders which of them is going to have to nurse the other through a stupid adolescent broken heart first. Then he shuts that thought down, because the part where he and Dean are happy is a legitimate life experience, too, and he wants to enjoy it for a while. Whatever happens after this – happens, but he doesn't have to let it have so much power over him. Being fully present in the moment isn't Cass' strong suit, but he understands the value of cultivating that skill.

It gets easier over time.

Dean likes routines, and he incorporates Cass into his calendar with Friday night dates and Sunday afternoon non-double-dates over beer and pool with Jo and Sam (because Jo and Sam are in theory not dating, even though the Angel Gabriel could descend from on high and proclaim that to be God's honest truth and Cass still wouldn't believe it). Jo resents not being able to drink beer but makes up for it by destroying them all at pool (Dean can occasionally beat her, which seems to thoroughly outrage her; Dean just chalks his cue and says mildly, “Hey, I'm Ellen Smith's kid, too”). He sends Cass funny and random little texts throughout the day, which Cass never responds to, and Cass manages to talk him into phone sex on at least a few weeknights. After they discover that they both have a little bit of a fetish for the idea of Dean bent over his desk in his suit, it stops requiring any talking-into.

Cass waits a few weeks before he invites Dean over to his place for dinner on Friday. “It's a trap, isn't it?” Dean says. “You're going to strand me in hostile foreign territory and then make me eat lasagna or burritos or cherry pie or something.”

“No,” Cass says, “but I'm intrigued by your list of nightmare food scenarios that sound exactly like what a person who's terrified of white flour might miss eating the most.”

“I'll just do a juice fast the week before,” Dean says. “It'll be fine.”

“I'm starting to think you say things like that specifically to piss me off.”

“What kind of person would do that to someone they love? I'd have to be a total dick,” Dean says, far too innocently.

It takes Cass several hours to realize that while he was admiring the sneaky way Dean called him a
total dick, he completely overlooked that whole love thing. It just sounded so natural when Dean said it, he didn't give it a thought. He thinks it's weird that — it doesn't feel weirder to him.

Because he's not a total dick, Cass does spend a few days browsing the kind of holier-than-thou websites he hates, looking for Dean-friendly recipes. He finally settles on cracked pepper shrimp with a salad and gazpacho. “It's too early for gazpacho,” Claire tells him the night before when he takes her shopping with him. “These tomatoes all suck. Anyway, I thought you didn't buy out-of-season produce from Argentina.”

“Yeah, but my gazpacho is delicious,” Cass says.

Claire holds a tomato up to the fluorescent light and squints at it with one eye. “Not with these it won't be.”

“It's fine, his standards are very low.”

“Great, you're really talking this guy up,” she says. “This dinner just sounds like more and more fun.”

“You'll have fun,” he says, grabbing the tomato from her hand and dropping it in his bag with the others. “You vill haf fun, or you vill face ze consequences.” She rolls her eyes and smiles reluctantly, which is good, because Cass needs her not morose and sarcastic tomorrow. Plan B was getting her liquoered up in advance, and that's not best parenting practices, so if stupid dad jokes are still working to get a smile out of her for now, he's happy.

He was sort of hoping that Dean's natural ease with people would provide the social glue for the evening, but when Cass opens the door, he thinks Dean looks about as nervous as Cass feels. “Please relax,” Cass says, loosening Dean's tie a bit. “You have a sister, you know teenage girls can smell fear.”

“Has you should relax ever worked to relax anyone in the history of time?” Dean says, then puts a paper bag in his hands. “I didn't know what to bring.”

It's a four-pack of upscale artisinal sodas, blood orange. Cass looks at it for a second before it fully sinks in on him that of course Dean normally brings a bottle of wine to a dinner party, because it is the Way of His People, but that he wanted to be sure he brought something tonight that everyone could share, and the fact that Dean thought about that, the idea that he went to a store and walked the aisles trying to decide what would appeal to a kid but also not seem tacky and cheap as a gift – the care Dean takes when he cares about something — it really gets to Cass somehow, and he feels honestly a little bit verklempt. He puts an arm around Dean's neck and kisses him softly, and it's not easy to stop. “Uh,” Dean says. “Not that I don't-- but can I come in?”

“Right, yes,” Cass says, getting out of the doorway. “So — this is where I live.” He gestures expansively around, and because the hall and dining area and kitchen and living room are all mostly open space, just cut up by counters and low walls, that's most of the tour right there. “My room,” he says, pointing at the door on the far side of the living room, “and Claire's,” he says, banging sharply on her door right behind him. (“Okay, I'm coming!” she yells, but the door doesn't open.) “Here, it's pretty warm out tonight,” he says. “I'll open the balcony doors.”

“I think it's nice,” Dean says. “It looks... I don't know, normal. In a good way.”

“Much to my dismay, I've gotten awfully normal in my old age,” Cass admits.

“In a good way,” Dean says, and Cass more or less agrees.
Dinner is a little awkward, because of course the harder Dean tries to be charming, the more charming he is, and the more Claire feels obligated to compensate by aggressively not trying at all, and by the time he serves the shrimp, Cass is really wishing he'd gone with Plan B, at least for himself. But then after trying a hundred and five different conversational gambits that don't go anywhere, Dean says something about *Project Runway*, and Claire sets her fork down, stares intently into his eyes and says, “*America's Next Top Model* is better.” Dean's eyes widen like she slapped him with a glove, and suddenly they're engaged in the kind of intensely passionate debate over pure, meaningless trivia that Cass stopped going to PTA meetings to escape, but this time he couldn't be more grateful for it.

“Don't look at me,” he says when they both appeal to him for validation. “I'm a *Drag Race* guy.”

After that things are a little smoother, and Claire doesn't even get defensive when Cass brags about her last game and how she's the one who made dessert, because she used to bug him constantly for chocolate avocado mousse until he told her she should learn to make it herself, and now hers is far better than his ever was. When Cass finally releases her into the wild – or at least into her room where she can re-insert the brain jack that keeps her connected to her friends – he gives her a hug and thanks her. “He's super boring,” Claire says under her breath.


Claire shrugs and says, “I guess he's nice,” and Cass is going to take that as an unequivocal, blowout win.

He brings the rest of the mousse and a bottle of wine over to Dean on the couch, and he hand-feeds the former to Dean while they watch *The Daily Show*. “You could take this off,” Cass says, pushing at Dean's jacket. “Make yourself a little comfortable.”

Dean smiles at him and lets his jacket be taken away and his tie untied. He leans back against the arm of the couch while Cass unfastens a button on his shirt and kisses his exposed throat. “I am comfortable,” Dean murmurs, stroking through Cass' hair. “I like it here. I really like watching you with Claire. You're such a good dad.”

“I know, hot, right?” he says, half-seriously.

“So hot,” Dean says, entirely so. “But not just that. I don't know, it's just – reassuring to see that you – what's a nice way of saying have human emotions?”

“It's the part where you sound surprised that's not so nice,” Cass says dryly. “No, look, I know what you mean. I can come off a little – what's the word.”

“Chilly? Detached? Heartless?”

“*Guarded*,” Cass says with a little glare. “But – I mean, you do know that I'm – not, right? Or – I mean, I am guarded, but not – the other stuff.”

Dean kisses his forehead. “I know,” he says. “But when you're around Claire, you don't come off like that at all. That's why it's nice to watch. Like a little preview of what you might be like if I ever get you fully thawed out.”

“You know, I think you're more of a dick than people give you credit for, too,” Cass says, and Dean's chuckle rumbles through him where their chests are pressed together. He kisses Dean's neck a little more and then says, “It's called non-attachment.”

“Hm?” Dean says.
“I try to – to not get caught up in emotional stuff. Because I can get caught up in it. When I was –
when I was more open, I let everything hurt me, all the terrible things that happen in the world. I felt
everything so intensely, and I didn't really know how to shut it down. I lashed out sometimes; I hurt
people – some people who deserved it and some people who didn't. And then when I couldn't keep
fighting, I – had to shut it off somehow. Heroin worked great, but it turned out to kind of interfere
with the parenting gig. So I went to therapy, and then the meditation and yoga stuff, and I don't feel
as out of control as I did. Maybe it's age, too, I don't know. But I guess I don't – really trust my
emotions. They led me down a lot of shitty, harmful roads. Questioning everything, trying to keep
things in perspective, trying to just focus on what I can affect – all that gave me my life back. And
now I'm – normal, and my kid is doing really well, and business is pretty steady, and I'm just not
inclined to take stupid risks anymore for – idealistic reasons. Or for – love or whatever.”

Dean is stroking over his back, long and heavy and rhythmic. “Sweetheart,” he says, “I promise you
that I am not the guy who's going to talk you into taking stupid risks. If you haven't been able to trust
your heart in the past, I get that. But you can trust me. I won't ask you to do anything crazy, okay?”
He kisses Cass' hair and says, “Let me take care of you. I'm really good at it.”

Cass closes his eyes and puts his head down on Dean's chest. “How are you single?” he says.

“I'm pretty bad at relationships,” Dean says, which sounds hilarious to Cass. “No, really,” Dean says
in response to the involuntary noise Cass makes. “I always put work first, and I'm not spontaneous,
and I don't like people's pets, any of them, and I'm pretty vanilla in bed, and I'm not out of the closet
all the time, and I really want marriage and kids, which you can imagine is not the first thing guys in
their twenties want to hear. It just – ends up sounding like a lot of effort to most people, and not
really what they imagined it would be like to be with a rich, good-looking guy. I'm just...better on
paper, I guess.”

“I think you're a disaster on paper,” Cass says. “Genuinely, if someone tried to set me up with you
on a blind date, I would consider gnawing my own leg off first.”

“Thanks,” Dean says, bemused. “What does it mean that I actually understand what you're trying to
say here?”

“That we have a connection,” Cass says. “So who did it work with? You must have been in love at
least once.”

Dean's quiet for a minute, and then he says, “Once. He was – my first.”

“Of course he was,” Cass says fondly. “Hundred percent chance you fell in love with the first guy
you nailed.”

Dean pokes him pretty hard just under the ribs. “It wasn't like that,” he says. “It wasn't – just some
kid thing. He was a friend. He was– I trusted him like family. He was a little older than me--”

The father-instincts activate instantaneously, and Cass props himself up on his elbow to say
suspiciously, “How much older?”

Dean pushes him back down with a short laugh. “A little older. Jeez, relax. We started hanging out
when I was sixteen and he was twenty, and I was stupid in love with him and stupid obvious about
it, but he tried so hard to ignore it, thinking maybe I'd grow out of it or find someone more my own
age or whatever. He might as well have been the only person who existed, as far as I was concerned.
I was finally desperate enough to just kiss him. It was my first real kiss. It was the Fourth of July,
before my senior year, in the bed of his truck.”
“Sounds romantic,” Cass says, smiling a little into Dean's chest.

“It was. He was. He was good to me. He always was.”

“So you were together for – what, two years? One year of high school and then the year you stayed afterwards? Or did you try to do long-distance for a while, too?”

“Yeah, we were together for – six years, I guess. We talked a lot about it when I left, and we decided it would put too much strain on us if we tried to be completely exclusive, so – we agreed that we could both mess around with other people. And we both did, but we talked all the time, he was still my best friend. The plan was always that after I graduated, he'd move with me to wherever I got a job, but... you know, four years is.... People change. And we still loved each other, but we'd gotten used to having lives that didn't really include each other as much, and...maybe we could've gotten past that, maybe if we'd taken the jump and moved in together, it would've made us closer than ever. But he spent six years waiting for me to tell the people who mattered the most in my life who he really was to me, and – he got sick of it. Eventually anyone would get sick of hearing why it wasn't the right time. And he just stopped believing me when I told him it would ever be different. I hate that I hurt him, because he would never have hurt me. I know that. It just seemed, at the time, like...that's how it had to be. So that's how it was. And now I'm still the good kid in the family, the one who never caused any trouble, and I haven't talked to Benny for years. And...that's how it is.”

Cass winds the narrower half of Dean's tie between his fingers and kisses the hollow of his throat again. “Don't be too hard on yourself, honey. You were young, and these are big decisions to be faced with all by yourself.”

“I want you to know,” Dean says so softly that Cass strains to hear it under the low noise of street traffic three floors down, “that it wouldn't be the same now. I should've come out to my parents already, I know, but – there just didn't seem to be a reason to stir things up. But if I had a reason, I wouldn't-- I wouldn't put someone I cared about through that now.”


He's only known Dean for about six weeks, but Cass trusts him completely. He hasn't felt this way, caught up in destiny and confident of the future, since he was a half-grown kid with a summer job folding napkins into boat shapes on Lake Saint Clair.

He pushes himself up to kiss Dean, who tastes like red wine and chocolate and a little like black pepper, and Dean's strong hands come up his arms to hold him. Cass keeps kissing him, pulling his shirt loose from his waistband, and it feels so damn good, so right, to touch Dean's skin, to feel him tremble when Cass' tongue brushes against his.

Cass has no idea how long they stay like that, clothes half-off and hands roaming, stirring restlessly against each other and exploring each other's mouths, but it's long enough that Cass feels the heady spin of oxygen deprivation and he tastes sweat beading at Dean's hairline when he nuzzles up the side of Dean's face. “Honey – I'm sorry,” he murmurs. “I – I think I need you to go. I'm so sorry, I--”

“No,” Dean says hoarsely. “No, of course. Whatever you need.”

“I just – I'm not ready. Here. It's not you, it's-- Here.” In his home, in his – safe place, where there's never been blood or the kind of love that you bleed for. He can't risk bringing that here.

Dean nods like he understands, which Cass doubts, because Cass barely understands, but Dean Smith is nothing if not a gentleman. “I'll see you at the Viceroy on Sunday, though, right?”
“Of course,” Cass says.

They kiss goodnight again at the door. “I'm glad you came,” Cass tells him.

“I'm glad you invited me,” Dean says. He drags his thumb over the line of Cass' jaw and says, “You growing this out?” Cass shrugs a little, because he hasn't thought much about it, he's just felt a little too lazy to shave for a couple of days. “You should,” Dean says.

“You don't think it would make me look disreputable?”

Dean smiles. “I didn't say that. Maybe I just think disreputable looks good on you.”

Cass nips his earlobe and murmurs, “Would it make me look like a guy who might go down on you in the bathroom of the Viceroy on a Sunday afternoon?”

“Jesus,” Dean breathes. He laughs a little and says, “Sweetheart, you always look to me like a guy who might do just about anything.”

“That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me,” Cass says. It's probably not, but who can keep track? Dean says so many nice things.

He's pretty stirred up after Dean leaves, so he sits in the living room for a long time, playing “Dancing Barefoot” and letting the temperate spring air cool his heated skin as it blows in over the balcony. He still feels every crack and every ache and every place where his heart has crumbled in on itself like ancient ruins. He still feels the wreckage of Amelia smoldering inside him, all of Amelia, the blood and the sin and the pain and the love.

But when have his feelings ever led him anywhere but crashing to earth? When he takes the high view, when he gets up above the smog of his own stories and his attachments and his cravings and his fears, he can see that he's somewhere now that he's never been before, somewhere safer than before, where he doesn't have to burn to feel something anymore. The way he loves Claire and Dean – God, he does, he still can't understand why, but he does love Dean – doesn't hurt.

He doesn't know if that makes it more or less real, or just different, but he knows he doesn't want to let it go.

Oh God I fell for you – Oh God I fell for you –

He doesn't realize how close the Sandover banquet is getting until one whole Sunday gets taken up by Sam and Dean arguing about tuxedos.

“And it shouldn't even be a question for you,” Dean says. “You're a mutant. No rental place in the world is going to have something that fits you right.”

“He's not a mutant,” Jo says. “At least he's not bowlegged.”

“Maybe not off the rack,” Sam says, “but there are places on the internet. You send them your exact measurements and-- “

“No, no way,” Dean says. “No tux will ever fit anyone if it hasn't been altered. There is no such thing as ready-to-wear when it comes to any half-decent suit, I'm sorry, it's just not a thing.”

Sam throws up his hands and says, “Look, I'm sorry, I just can't justify spending five hundred bucks
on something I might never wear again, just to go to one stupid dinner with a bunch of management douchebags – not you, Dean, you know what I mean.”

“You wear the same one every year,” Dean says. “It’s an investment. And I know your friends are mostly hopeless dorks, but one of them might manage to get married someday. You’ll use it more than you think.”

“I don’t even know if I’ll be working at Sandover next year,” Sam says.

Dean rolls his eyes. “You say that every year. Look, you got a promotion this year. You are a management douchebag. I’m sorry, Sam, but you gotta dress the part.”

“Remember, I have it worse,” Jo says. “I have to buy an evening maternity gown, and I’m actively praying that I won’t ever need to wear it a second time.”

“Are you coming to the banquet?” Cass asks mildly, mostly to see both Jo and Sam look awkwardly trapped in headlights. They’re so easy to mess with.

“Well, I – needed a plus-one,” Sam says.

“Sure,” Cass says. “And you have a beautiful roommate who makes everything more fun. You’d be crazy not to invite her. Makes perfect sense. Of course, she is starting to look fairly pregnant, so you’ll probably spend a lot of time explaining to people that she’s not your partner and this isn’t your baby, but I’m sure you’ll get that all cleared up and it’ll be completely normal and not an uncomfortable subject for gossip at every level of your company forever.”

“I don’t like you anymore,” Jo says. “Dean, get rid of him.”

“Nope,” Dean says.

So that conversation not only reminds Cass how rapidly the banquet is approaching, but puts to rest any questions he might have had about what he’s going to be able to get away with wearing. He gets online and finds a cheap tuxedo from one of those sites clumsily translated by Google from Chinese to English where you can get clothes direct from the sweatshops at lower prices than a wheel of farmer’s market cheese, and even if the alterations cost twice that, it’s still not going to break him. It’s nice to be at a point in his life where he can pay all his bills and occasionally do something stupid like buy a tux he’ll probably only need for one dinner, because all his friends are hippies who have beach weddings.

Of course, it might turn out to be more than one annual banquet, and if there’s one person in Cass’ social circle who will almost definitely not attend their second wedding barefoot on a beach, it’s absolutely him. So maybe it is an investment.

He smiles to himself a little as he enters his credit card information. He’s probably getting more than a little ahead of himself, but it does make him feel better.


“See, again, it’s really the surprise in your voice that undercuts the pleasure I should be feeling right now,” Cass says. “You also look fucking fantastic, but see how I said that really calmly, like I kind of expected you to all along?”

Claire makes them pose for pictures, and when Cass complains, she says sweetly, “I’ll quit if you promise not to take any pictures when I go to prom.”
“You see that my hands are tied, right?” he says to Dean.

“I do see that,” Dean says seriously.

He's not surprised that Dean looks like a fucking movie star in black tie, but he is surprised when they get down to the street and Dean holds the door of the Impala for him. “How'd you get this away from Jo?” Cass asks.

“I won a bet,” he says smugly. “You can thank Sam.”

“I want to believe that you and your sister weren't betting on her sex life,” Cass says, “because that actually makes me feel really sorry for Sam.”

Dean scoffs. “Please, do not feel sorry for Sam. I wasn't the one betting against him; I always knew that big doof was the stealth kind of sexy.”

“So Jo was betting against him?” Cass says. “Yeah, that makes me feel better.”

“And she still lost,” Dean says. “So don't worry about Sam, he's doing just fine.”

“Are you nervous?” Dean asks him after he scans his badge and is allowed to drive into the Sandover parking garage.

“I have absolutely no reason to be,” Cass says. “I'm not the one who knows or cares about any of these people.”

“Wow, suddenly I'm nervous,” Dean says. “I mean – you are going to be...?”


“I know you won't,” Dean says, almost convincingly.

It's a perfectly lovely event, Cass thinks, for those who enjoy this sort of thing – if, in fact, anyone really does enjoy this sort of thing. The tables are arranged by department, which Cass thinks must be depressing if you do work here and have to see these same people every day anyway, and also means that Sam and Jo are somewhere else entirely with the other computer people. But it's good for Cass, because he doesn't care to meet anyone except the people Dean already talks about. That includes Charlie, who is younger and smaller than Cass had pictured her, and so clearly a brassy redhead variation on Jo that Cass is tempted to call it nepotism. But she's obviously whip-smart and the dorky kind of funny, and Cass has figured out by now that she's great at her job, so it doesn't really matter if Dean hired a substitute kid sister for his PA, as long as it all worked out. She's here with a tall brunette named Dorothy who doesn't say much and looks terribly bored; Cass gives the two of them another month at best.

It also includes the legendary Fergus Crowley, who is also much shorter than Cass pictured, and he's a little miffed that no one told him about the British accent. Dean and Sam both have a tendency to talk around the subject of Crowley more than directly about him, with just a tinge of superstition, like the guy is fucking Voldemort, which has made it hard for Cass to piece everything together. He knows that Crowley is the Executive Vice President of Dean's department, which makes him Dean's immediate supervisor, and that Dean regards him with some confusing combination of admiration and dread. He knows Crowley has championed Dean's career, and that Dean views him as a kind of mentor, but he also knows that Dean doesn't fully trust him.
He doesn't know, but very much suspects, based on certain veiled and intentionally vague conversations between Dean and Sam, that there is, or was, or might someday be, a not-entirely-professional element to their relationship, which makes Crowley about the most fascinating person in the universe to Cass. He intends to crack this mystery tonight or die trying.

“I've heard so much about you,” Cass says when they shake hands. “You're definitely the person I was most looking forward to meeting tonight.”

“Well, how flattering,” Crowley says, his eyes sliding to Dean, and yeah, Cass is already starting to get it, because there was nothing overtly wrong with that sentence, and yet it somehow managed to sound nakedly intimidating. “And of course I've been just as curious to meet the man who's had our Dean walking on air for months.”

_Our Dean_ meaning _my Dean_ – okay, got it. Straightforward enough. Almost disappointingly predictable, honestly.

_How long has your boss been in love with you?_ he texts Dean while they're waiting for their salad courses to be cleared away. Dean checks his phone a minute later and replies with, **I will do anything to get you to drop this.**

*Anything* sounds good. Cass smiles over at him sweetly. *Anything* also sounds just a tad desperate, as though Dean is truly afraid that Cass might somehow crash his career over the salmon, or as though there's more left to discover.

Cass can behave when properly bribed, so he has a perfectly nice dinner conversation with Fergus Crowley, who is sly and bitchy in the most fun way possible; if it turns out that he has been sexually harassing Dean, Cass is going to feel a little guilty for liking him so much. Cass doubts he has, though, at least in any traditional sense. He'd put down good money that says that when people do what Crowley wants them to do, they almost always believe it was their idea.

No wonder he keeps poor Dean so confused. Cass really does wonder how long Crowley has been working his angles with Dean, and how close he was getting to success before Cass came along. He bets Crowley could answer both those questions for him to the day.

He likes Crowley just fine, but it doesn't stop him from cajoling Dean into eating two bites of raspberry cheesecake off the tip of his fork, mostly to piss Crowley off. Cass has become a lot more attuned to his own controlling and competitive tendencies recently, and he's working on them, but he thinks this counts as using them for good.

When the tables disperse for the greener pastures of mingling and an open bar, Cass puts his arm through Dean's and says, “Show me your office.”

Dean frowns a little and says, “I'm not sure we're supposed to...”

“Not supposed to? You don't think you're _allowed_ in your own office on a Saturday? You're a Vice President, Dean, do you really think anyone's going to stop you?”

“Not really,” he admits.

“Then let's go. I want to see it, and you said you'd do _anything._”

Dean raises his eyebrows at him. “That is – not how I expected you to cash that in.”

“It's like you don't know me at all,” Cass says.
It's not a huge office, but it's nice; the furniture is dark and glossy and decent quality, and the view is
great. It's the same sort of impersonal as Dean's apartment – a little messy and obviously lived-in, but
void of anything very distinctive. There's an aloe plant. There's one photo on his desk, of a
teenaged Jo hugging him in his graduation cap and gown. That's about it. Even the screensaver on
his computer is just one of those automatically generated ones with the floaty ribbons.

“Well, there you go,” Dean says. “Now you've seen it. Pretty thrilling, huh?”

“Has potential,” Cass says. He tugs Dean toward the desk and says, “Sit down.”

“I feel like you're up to something,” Dean says, but he sits down in his desk chair and lets Cass perch
on the edge of his desk. “You do know I'm not actually going to let you bend me over my desk,
right? Cause, man, that's the kind of fantasy that really needs to stay a fantasy forever.”

“I know, my vanilla darling,” Cass says. “But you know who doesn't need to know why we
vanished from the party and went up alone to your office? Crowley.”

Dean groans and rubs his face with both hands. “I knew the two of you were going to get into a
thing.”

“Why would I do that?” Cass says. “I'm winning the thing we're already in. Starting a new thing
could only be to my disadvantage.”

“Please don't make this into a big deal,” Dean says. “Maybe he kind of likes me, but I swear,
nothing's ever happened with him.”

“Oh, I didn't really think it had, but it's interesting that you say it like that. Can I take a shot?” Dean
sighs and gives him the be my guest gesture. “Hm, let's see,” Cass says as he uses his toe to push off
his opposite shoe. He rests his foot in Dean's lap, his heel against Dean's crotch, and Dean gives him
his best attempt at a warning look, but he doesn't make Cass stop. “He helped you get the job. He
takes you along to upper-management things, quasi-social things, because he wants you to learn, and
also because he tells you, all secretive-like, that you make it less boring for him. It's flattering. He lets
you in on a lot of little secrets, mostly other people's secrets. He tries to get you to be a little shadier
than you naturally are, business-wise, but you've seen his generous side, too, so you like to think he
has a heart of gold. He's done you at least one big favor – I don't know what, though, you want to
tell me?”

“Stayed with him for a couple of months while my building was being renovated,” Dean says with a
deep sigh of resignation.

Cass nods. “He flirts a lot, but not just with you, so no worries, that's just what Crowley's like. He
probably doesn't mean any of it. He makes jokes about being lonely, but you worry that he really is,
and you hate that, because sure he's not an easy guy to get along with, but you know he can be a
good friend if he wants to. You think he's a catch, actually – he'd probably cheat on anyone sooner
or later, but he's smart and funny and charming and he has that dead sexy accent. If the
circumstances were different....”

“But they're not,” Dean says firmly. “I would never get involved with a co-worker, let alone my
boss. That's career suicide.”

“Oh, honey. He's grooming you. And I don't mean for upper management.”

Dean shrugs. “It's kind of working out for me, though, isn't it? I would never actually sleep my way
into a promotion, but – hey, the first thing they teach you in business school is that it's all about good
That's a refreshingly selfish and cynical take, especially by Dean's standards. Cass gives him a little rub of his heel in reward. “Piss him off? We had a nice dinner. My existence pisses him off, but there's not much I can do about that.”

Dean grabs Cass' foot, but once again he doesn't go so far as to remove it. “You're trying to make him jealous right now.”

“Honey, I don't have to try, he is jealous already. Maybe I'm trying to fire his imagination a little bit. Look, if he thinks we're fucking up here, one of two things is going to happen. He'll write you off as no longer available and move onto championing the career of some new pretty boy, which will be mildly inconvenient for you, but you've already had this position for a while, your superiors all know you and like your work, it's not really going to do you any harm. Or he'll decide that somebody like him does not get thrown over for a nobody like me, and he'll step up his game a little. You could cash in big from this if you play your cards right.”

“Why am I always attracted to the sharks?” Dean sighs.

“Because we're majestic creatures,” Cass says, grabbing the arm of Dean's chair and wheeling him closer. “Now, all we have to do is make you look just a little rumpled up.” He drags his fingers up the back of Dean's neck and into his hair; it's hard to make someone with such short hair look bed-headed, but Cass knows that someone who's looking for it will see the difference. He leans down and kisses Dean, sucking and biting more color into his lips, and Dean puts his hand on Cass' thigh and kneads there a bit, which is very encouraging.

“Cass, we do have to get back,” Dean says after a minute or two.

“Soon,” Cass says. “Just let me--”

“God,” Dean says, “I'm so terrified of the end of that sentence, because I know you're going to make it sound like a really great idea. Remember how it's my job to keep you from doing risky things no matter how awesome they feel? This is me trying to do that.”

He does vaguely remember that, but fuck it. Dean's risk assessment is for shit anyway. This is fine. “You look so good, though,” he says, dragging his hand down Dean's chest. “And being with you isn't risky. You're my boyfriend; this is fully socially appropriate.”


“I have no reason to be,” Cass says, maybe a little too sharply. “I can have you any time I want.”

“Yeah, you seem pretty motivated to prove that right now,” Dean says with a chuckle. “Who are you trying to prove it to, Cass?”

There's only one guaranteed way to wipe that smug look off Dean's face, so Cass rolls Dean's chair back a little and goes down to his knees. “It sounds like that because it is a really great idea,” he says, and Dean makes a halfhearted attempt to push his hands away when Cass starts on the fly of his tuxedo pants, but it's obviously just for show. Cass catches his hand and slides one finger into his mouth, and Dean cups his hand around Cass' jaw, stroking him gently from the inside.

There's nothing in the room but an old mattress and a trunk and a duffle bag. There are sheets tacked up over the windows instead of curtains, but there's still enough light for Cass to find every mole and every scar down Dean's back. He touches every one of them before he pours out a thin
line of powder, beginning at the swell of Dean's ass and following alongside his spine.

“You know you're supposed to do this with strippers, right?” Dean says, turning his head slightly so his cheek rests on his folded arms.

“I'd put your ass up against any stripper alive,” Cass says. “Assuming there are any strippers still alive.”

“I bet there are,” Dean says. “Those girls are tough. I don't know why I'm letting you do this, this is a dumb idea.”

Cass slides a thumb over Dean's ass and laughs. “Um, because you don't give a shit what happens to me?”

“I don't, huh?” Dean says. “I think you're thinking of you, there, pal.”

“Maybe,” Cass admits. “Still, you should feel special. Do you know how hard it is to get this stuff? I could've invited anyone to this party, but I chose you.”

“Oh, yeah, you're real choosy,” Dean says. “I'm capable of human speech and I said the word yes, so I passed all your qualifications with flying colors.”

Cass licks the cleft of Dean's ass and holds his hips still while he shudders, so he doesn't dislodge any of the cocaine. “Well, consent is important to me,” he says. “Obviously. But don't be so hard on yourself, honey, you know you're still special to me. You were my first, after all. Where would I be without you?”

“Heaven?” Dean suggests.

“Oh, right. Anyway, hold still.”

He leans down and breathes and breathes, sucks in the coke and the smell of Dean's skin and the memory of flight and the lights get brighter and brighter and he laughs and feels the lash of electricity sprayed from broken cords splatter across his back and coil around his wrists and burn and he bites the moles on Dean's shoulder and fucks into his soulmate until they both scream.

Cass scrambles back on his hands and smacks into the desk, flings his arm out to keep Dean away until he can at least catch his breath, until he can--

But it's hopeless. All the lights are too fierce in his eyes, and Dean's voice is both too far away to hear and too harsh in his ears. His brain is burning, and the whole world seems stripped bare and just too much. He curls over his knees and clenches his fingers in the sleeves of his jacket, feeling nauseous from the vibrations of his heart.

He hasn't done coke since El Salvador, but he recognizes the feeling. He never liked it.

“Cass!” Dean is still saying, desperate and shaky, awkwardly crouched beside him and trying to get an arm all the way around the defensive knot Cass is trying to make of himself. “Cass – baby, please talk to me, what do you want me to do? Should I call an ambulance?”

“No!” Cass almost shouts. No, no doctors. No blood tests. He can't be – he can't be high right now from a – vision or a dissociative episode or whatever the fuck these things are, it's not physically possible – but he still won't risk it. He has too much to lose now. “No, I – I'm okay.”

“You're not okay! What the fuck, Cass? I'm not just someone you can-- I need to know what's
happening to you.”

Join the club. “It's – just my head,” he says. “I've started having these migraines.”

“Started when?”

_Started when I met you._ “A while ago. I'm – okay. I mean, not okay, but it's better. It's only happened a couple of times, and they hit really hard and – they hurt, and I can get a little disoriented, but they don't last too long. Just. Just get me out of here, okay? I'm sorry, I know you're supposed to be at your thing—”

“The hell with my thing,” Dean says. “I'm not worried about them, I'm worried about you.”

“Don't worry,” Cass says. “Just take me home.”

It's easier said than done, and that's Cass' fault. He gets on his feet with Dean's help, and he can basically walk under his own power, but he's still sensitive to light and so shaky that everything takes forever. Dean stays with him, though, every step of the way, and when they make it to the elevator he holds Cass tight and lets him press his eyes against the lapel of Dean's jacket. “It's okay,” Dean whispers, and kisses his hair. “I got you.”

The parking garage is much better, cool and dark, and Cass slides gratefully into the backseat of the Impala where he can lie down and rest while Dean texts Jo and Charlie, letting them both know that he took Cass home with a migraine. It sounds so ordinary when he says it like that.

He's well enough to feel like an idiot by the time they get back to Dean's building, but he's a little exhausted, and now he does have a real headache. Dean gets him out of his jacket and shoes and tie and puts him under the blankets in bed, then gets a cool, wet washcloth and folds it up over Cass' eyes. It does feel nice. So does Dean's hand softly stroking his hair back. “What else do you need?” Dean murmurs. “You want water? Should I turn the lamp off?”

“I'm good,” Cass says. “I mean, I'm – the worst prom date ever, but other than that....”

Dean chuckles. “Getting lucky after prom is a total cliché anyway. We're better than that.”

“Just lie down with me,” Cass says, and Dean kicks off his shoes and does that. When he puts an arm over Cass' chest, Cass can feel that somewhere in the proceedings – probably in the bathroom when he was running the water – Dean took off his cufflinks and rolled his shirtsleeves up, so Cass lets his fingers stroke up and down Dean's forearm. “Thank you,” he says. He means it for so many things.

“These seem really serious,” Dean says, and when Cass shakes his head and tries to answer, Dean presses a finger against his mouth. “I want you to see a specialist – a neurologist, I guess – and also get a CAT scan. And I – I want you to let me pay for it, which I know is not going to be what you want, and we can talk about you paying me back later if you really have to, but I want to go ahead and do this.”

“I think you're overreacting,” Cass says. He doesn't really; he's just as freaked out as Dean is, but he's not sure if he can go into a doctor's office and describe what's happening to him.

“I really don't care,” Dean says. “I'd rather overreact than let something go that needs to be caught right away. You can be the cool, rational one if you want. That's never going to be me, not where my family is concerned.” Dean hesitates, a little like he might apologize, then he seems to change his mind and says defensively, “I know you're not, but you might be someday. I'm allowed to want you to be, at least.”
As far as Cass knows, he's allowed. Nobody's going to stop him, anyway. “This is normally where you scare away all the other guys, right?” Cass says.

Dean strokes his hair lightly. “Believe me, I never get half this far with other guys. If I'm overreacting, then let me overreact,” he says, and his voice catches a little bit as he hooks his fingers between the buttons of Cass' shirt. “Do this just to make me feel better if you have to, because I'm neurotic and anxiety-prone, and I will not be okay until we get a handle on this.” Cass smiles a little and starts to reassure him, but Dean cuts him off dead by saying, “I'm not going to lose you to a fucking brain tumor, not when we just found each other. I can't.”

Cass brushes the cloth off his eyes and blinks up at Dean's beautiful face. “Hey,” he says, putting his hand behind Dean's skull and drawing him down so they touch at the nose and forehead. “You won't. You won't, you're stuck with me.”

He turns over in Dean's arms and lets Dean spoon him in the dark room while he dozes, and when he wakes up Dean is deeply asleep and whuffling lightly in Cass' ear. Cass smiles and picks up Dean's hand, running his thumbs over it, spreading it out to look at his life-line in the pool of lamplight.

There's something wrong.

Cass goes rigid and pushes up on his elbow, waking Dean with a little jolt. “Dean,” he says, turning Dean's hand over and then over again, pulling it further into the bright center of the light. “Dean, where are the – what happened to your scars?”

“Scars?” he mumbles.

“Here,” Cass says, pressing his fingers into the ball of Dean's thumb. “They were right here, the – the teeth marks. You were thirteen, your neighbor's mastiff bit you, you have scars right here. You did.....”


“No, I'm not!” Cass yells, struggling to sit up. “Dean, how can you not remember? We were walking to the car from dinner – it was our second date. We stood under the lamp and I read your palm, you showed me-- you told me about the dog--”

“Cass,” Dean says, and now he sounds legitimately scared. Cass can't blame him. “I remember some of that, but there was no dog, I was never bitten, I don't know what you're talking about. Look – look, I have this scar, remember?” He drags his sleeve a little higher and turns his arm over, and there's something on the inside of his forearm, that...

That Cass knows he's never seen before. He feels nauseous.

It's silvery-pink and almost elegant, like a hook or a kind of L-shape, and two small slashes beside it. Cass touches it; it's slightly raised and denser in texture than the rest of Dean's skin. There is no possible way that Cass could've just overlooked it for the past two months. “This is my only scar,” Dean says. “And it's obviously not a bite. It's an electrical burn – an accident in my dad's auto shop, remember? I told you about this.”

“No, you didn't,” Cass says. “I've never--”

Seen this before? Well, he can't fucking say that, can he? Dean already thinks his brain is dissolving. Cass is starting to wonder if he's right.
“I'm sorry,” Cass says weakly. “Sorry, I – think I must've had a weird dream. I woke up and I...wasn't thinking straight, I guess.”

Dean pulls him back down into his arms. “Sweetheart, you're tired,” he says, and then he nuzzles Cass' jaw and sighs softly and asks with quiet, drowsy earnestness, “You're happy here, right, Cass? Here with me?”

“Yes,” Cass whispers.


Cass closes his eyes and thinks, Dime que eres real, but this time he doesn't ask it.

This time he's not so sure he wants to know.
Sioux Falls

Cass wakes up alone and freezing cold before dawn; it's been cold all month, but the past few days have been unbearable, the air so sharp he can barely remember what his fingers feel like.

He doesn't even like to think about what a depressing Christmas season he'd be facing if he were single and dying of exposure in his own apartment. Instead he listens to the beleaguered hum of his furnace and the sound of the shower running and wonders fondly what the everloving fuck his darling boy is doing awake and naked at ten til six in the morning. Every time Cass is forced to take his socks off, he wishes he could reject God and Holy Mother Church all over again in protest against the injustice, but here's Dean, showering in the goddamn dark.

It's really fucking cold.

If Cass had any sense, he'd bar Dean from re-entry into the bed, but of course he doesn't. Dean is wearing a thick robe and sweatpants, but he's still damp and making everything he touches damp, and he's fucking sockless, like a madman. Cass tries to insulate them both under the sheets and quilt, but he's still annoyed by the situation and he's sure it shows. “Sorry,” Dean says sheepishly.

“You can do better than that,” Cass says, and Dean shifts over on top of him. His feet are cold, but his kisses always have Cass at the melting point in seconds. “Love you,” Cass murmurs against his mouth. Dean makes a gentle noise of agreement and smiles at him in the soft orange glow of the nightlight. It's a beautiful smile, but Cass feels no remorse for kissing it gone.

He slides his hand under the lapel of Dean's robe, across his collarbone and up toward his neck, and he can't help pulling back with a disapproving grunt when his hand closes over Dean's upper trap. “How does your scapula even rotate?” he says. “Are you trying to compress diamonds under there somewhere?”

“Maybe I'm a little tense,” Dean admits.

Cass can imagine why. He briefly considers empathy and active listening, but it's really early in the morning, so instead he says, “Lie down. Christ, you require constant maintenance; you're not even thirty yet, you should still be under warranty.”

Dean gives him a slightly aggrieved look, but he moves off of Cass and onto his stomach, and he doesn't even complain about the cold as he strips off his robe. It's awkward when Dean has to keep his neck turned so he doesn't suffocate, and Cass has absolutely no leverage at all from any position except straddling Dean's lower back, but once upon a time Cass was an emergency medic and he likes to think he brings a flexible, problem-solving approach to field conditions. He works his knuckles against the grain of Dean's rhomboid, his thumbs along the border of Dean's scapula, his elbow into that trap, and Dean whines a little. “Don't be a baby,” Cass says. “It's therapeutic discomfort.”

“Don't be a baby?” Dean repeats. “Is that the advice you give your clients?”

“You're not my client,” Cass says. “Maybe if you'd get on my table like I keep telling you to, instead of making me work twice as hard for half the payoff, I'd be inspired to try a little more professionalism.”


“I like your inappropriate boners,” Cass says.
“That doesn't make it less weird.” Cass eases up on him, because there really is only so much he can
do this morning. He bends down and kisses the trail up Dean's back and along his right shoulder that
Cass' hands have just blazed, then sucks softly over the cervical vertebrae where Dean is especially
sensitive. Dean groans appreciatively and shifts his arm up so that Cass can stroke over his lats,
which are undeniably things of beauty, in spite of Cass' philosophical differences with Dean's trainer
(who he's met now, and who really is a huge douche). “Do we have time for this?” Dean asks.

Cass lets his palm glide down to Dean's lower back where the waistband of his sweatpants creates a
barrier. “Why not? Sam and Jo won't be here to pick us up for two hours. You brought all your stuff
over last night, and then you unpacked all my stuff and repacked it to your specifications, which was
just godawfully obnoxious, but I still love you and now everything is fully vetted and ready to go.”

“Are you sure you still want to do this?” Dean asks.

Cass' hands still as he processes what this means. “Is there...some reason I wouldn't?”


Cass kneads gently at the back of Dean's neck and feels him relax just a hair more. “It was just a
nightmare,” he says.

“I know, but before that you hadn't....” Hadn't had a stress episode for weeks. Cass never let himself
start to hope that it meant they were over for good, but he should have realized that Dean had been
hoping.

Stress episode is the catchall term that Cass' brand new therapist has assigned to the colorful panoply
of weird behaviors that Cass now manifests at random and inconvenient times – the nightmares, the
panic attacks, all the dissociative fugues, delusions, and hallucinations that are supposedly symptoms
of his PTSD, because why the hell not. They're certainly stressful, although there is something
perversely fun about the ones where he fights zombies; if Cass were a more ambitious person, he'd
try his hand at turning those into a screenplay or something.

“It was just a nightmare,” Cass says again. “I know you're worried I'll do something intensely crazy
at your parents' house--”

“No, Cass, it's not – that's not it.”

“--and I am, too, honestly; given the option, of course I'd like them to get the mistaken impression
that I'm a stable person--”

“Cass. Stop. Stop – breathe, okay? Come here, breathe with me.” He lets Dean roll over and pull
him down to the mattress, his legs tangling with Dean's and their faces so close they share the same
pillow. Dean strokes over his temple where he claims he saw a few gray hairs recently, a shameless
and vindictive lie. Cass closes his eyes and lets his breath entrain with Dean's. “This is, uh –
mislabeling, right?” Dean says quietly, because he does his therapy homework far more assiduously
than Cass does. “You're not intensely crazy and unstable. You have a trauma-induced anxiety
disorder that you're managing while being a self-employed single parent. You're ten kinds of
awesome and everyone you meet is lucky to know you, and that's gonna include my parents. Okay?”

“Okay,” Cass says. “Then why did you ask if I wanted to bail on this trip?”

“Because I'm an idiot,” Dean says. “We're all going. It's going to be awesome.”

“Yes,” Cass says. He smiles a little when he sees the doubt flicker in Dean's eyes, because this is a
game they've honed to Olympic levels, volleying the freak-out back and forth between them. It's
Dean's turn to freak out now, and Cass' turn to kiss it better. “Look at how we knocked Thanksgiving with Sam's parents out of the park. We killed it.”

“Well, that was easy,” Dean says. “John and Mary are awesome.”

“And your parents are...?”

“Also awesome,” Dean admits. “Old and stubborn, but awesome. And they love me, and when they see how happy you make me, they'll... Everything will be fine.”

Even in the low light, Cass can see something off about Dean's jaw; he moves his hand to stroke the fresh-shaved edge of it, and the heavy compression of the energy is like a magnet pulling him in. He presses a fingertip against Dean's TMJ, and Dean winces a little. “Tender?” Cass says, and Dean nods. “You've been clenching it. Can I try something?”

Dean rolls his eyes a little. “If it doesn't involve crystals or dolphins.”

“Man, I am never going to recoup my investment on all those dolphins,” Cass says. “Trust me, honey. You know I'm magic.”

He gets another eye-roll (he thinks Claire has been a bad influence on Dean), but Dean lets himself be rolled to his back so that Cass can hook lightly into both hinges of his jaw at once, using his thumbs to push Dean's jaw down slightly. “Now close your eyes,” he whispers, “and when you breathe in, imagine that your breath is sky blue. Now hold it, and imagine these points right under my fingers lighting up, like a blue computer screen. Good, honey. Give me a few more, just like that. Take your time. If it feels good, you can see your whole jaw lighting up blue, and down into your throat — your lymph nodes, your thyroid, your Adam's apple.” Dean looks so pretty with his lips parted like this, Cass can't help leaning down to kiss his bottom lip lightly. He's not familiar with any clinical research on using kisses to unbind blockages, and it would be pretty profoundly illegal if Dean really were a client, but it feels intuitively right. If Cass is naturally good at anything, it seems to be kissing Dean's bindings and constrictions away. “Good. Perfect,” he says, using the heels of his hands to push Dean's jaw gently back into place. “Feel better?”

Dean wrinkles his nose, but then admits, “A little.”

“Okay. Now tell me what this trip is going to be like. Don't overthink it, and don't use the word awesome. Just ask yourself what's really true and tell me what comes into your mind.”

“It's going to be hard,” Dean says quietly, “because I feel like this isn't what my folks wanted for me, and I've always cared about making them proud more than anything. But I know I'm making the right decision, for all of us, for my whole family. I can't say I don't care what they think, but I can care about them and still have a right to my own life.”

Cass is almost jealous; there's a softness to Dean's energy, a suppleness, that makes it easy to reshape. Cass knows his own is sheathed in scar tissue, and that in spite of decades of struggling towards the goal, he might never be as vulnerable as Dean can let himself be with a few deep breaths and the subtlest nudge. He kisses Dean's forehead and says, “You are so brave, and so good. You provide for your family, and you protect us, and you take care of us in so many ways. They may not see it right away, but I think you are exactly the man your parents hoped you'd grow up to be.”

After a quick kiss, Dean says, “Are you going to tell me what you did to me?”

“Just pushed your energy into your throat chakra to flush it out and release the armoring in your oral band,” Cass says. “Oh, don't give me that look.”
“There's no look,” Dean says. “Whatever you do, I know it works. You're my magical hippie outlaw healer, and I might not believe in your nonsense explanations for it all, but I believe in you.”

“Gross,” Cass says, nuzzling his lips. “Try not to embarrass me in front of your parents, okay?”

It's dark and cold, and it's the first day of Cass' vacation so has nothing better to do than lie here and be lazy, draped over his full-tilt, traffic-stopping hot boyfriend and kissing his mouth, his face, under his jaw, behind his ear. Dean's hands work underneath his sweatshirt and his thermal undershirt to find skin, and when he does, it's Dean who makes a little whimpery sound like he's lucky to have his hands on something that feels like Cass, and Cass loves him so much, he loves him so much. “Let me go down on you,” Dean murmurs against his cheek. “While we still have time.”

It's still difficult for Cass to wrap his head around the idea that time and circumstance are the only reason he ever can't have Dean now. He's still so used to being kept from what he wants by his own bitterness, by disappointment, by the hardness of hearts that want but have come to expect even the gentlest touch to end in a gush of blood, but he lives in a different world now. He can be greedy for Dean, or bored of Dean, or boring with Dean. He can ask for anything, say anything that comes to mind, and Dean will laugh at him or be irritated at him or be charmed by him, but the weather passes harmlessly, and what it leaves behind when it's gone is the two of them, unchanged and unshaken, like the clear blue sky.

He presses his forehead to Dean's and takes a steadying breath. “You make it sound like you're going off to war.”

“No, I just figured you're the guy who wouldn't let me get to third base in your apartment for like three months, so I wasn't going to count on getting laid during this trip.”

“You think I can keep it in my pants for a whole week around you?” Cass teases, with a little lick over the shell of his ear. “You have a high opinion of my self-control.”

Dean lets his hand push down under the waistband of Cass' sweatpants and says, “You were planning to do me in my childhood bedroom, huh? Next door to my parents, in the same bed I lost my virginity in?”

“Oh,” Cass gasps, delighted, “I was on the fence until that last part. It's really the same bed?”

“Of course it is. God, it was only twelve years ago, it's not like the furniture crumbled into dust or something. Everything's the same as when I lived there.”

Cass kisses him roughly and says, “I have to hear this story, right now.”

“It's not much of a story,” Dean says, with a nip to Cass' lower lip as Cass pulls away. “My parents were at bridge club, my sister was at a slumber party. I invited my boyfriend over. He provided alcohol, I provided the finest romantic pop music that the early 2000s had to offer, and we let nature take its course. I liked it very much, the end.”

“God, you're so fucking wholesome,” Cass purrs, letting his body roll unwholesomely down against Dean's. Dean's fingers tighten on his ass. “How do you make teenagers hooking up with a six-pack of beer and a Backstreet Boys CD seem like a timeless coming-of-age romantic drama?”

“Excuse you,” Dean says, “it was a classy, grown-up evening. We had rosé and Enrique Iglesias.”

“Of course you did.” Cass slithers down far enough to rub his stubble against Dean's sternum. “Mm. Baby, you must have been so damn pretty when you were--”
“About your daughter's age?”

Immediately, Cass comes up on one hand and fixes Dean with a glare. “You are about to lose your talking privileges.”

“I'm so sorry,” Dean says earnestly, and gestures in a vague circle around his neck. “I don't know what's come over me, I just have the strangest feeling in my throat chakra--”

Cass growls and releases Dean's oral band by shoving his tongue in Dean's mouth. Dean's fingers wind into his hair and hold him in place, and a dark thrill spirals up Cass' spine like it always does when he has Dean underneath him like this, so much painstakingly crafted strength given over so willingly for Cass' enjoyment. “God, I want to fuck you,” Cass rasps, licking roughly up Dean's jaw.

Dean grunts unsexily and says, “It'll take forever, and I'll just get all dirty again. Anyway, I already came in the shower.” Cass makes a noise of mild outrage, and Dean says, “Well, I didn't know you were going to wake up! You're never up this early. Just let me suck your cock, baby, I'll make it good.”

There's no doubt about that, and Dean does have logic on his side, so Cass gives his inner alpha male a firm smack on the snout and lets Dean shift him over on his back. He wonders briefly if Dean has an ulterior motive when he disappears under the pile of blankets, but in the end, who cares? He wants Dean to be warm and cozy, after all.

He wants everything good for Dean, and he's not used to it. He thinks he felt this way about Amelia once, but God knows she never put up with being fussed over, never let him look after her in case he got the mistaken impression that it put him in control of her. Cass doesn't hold any resentment about that; he understands full well that Amelia had to struggle all her life, burdened with too many expectations and too little forgiveness for anything that smacked of weakness. It was something they had in common, both of them brittle and braced for the worst from as far back as they could remember, so young and already staggering under the weight of God and family. Cass remembers wanting to take care of her, wanting to make things better, but he knew absolutely nothing at the time about what that even meant, let alone how to do it.

Maybe he knows a little bit more than absolutely nothing now, although he's certainly not the natural caretaker that Dean is. Cass closes his eyes and feels blindly under the covers for Dean until his thumb brushes behind Dean's ear and down to his TMJ again. “Oh, my sweet boy,” he sighs out as Dean's tongue drags softly and unerringly from the flare of his cockhead to the tip. “Always so good to me. I don't--”

Deserve you, he starts to say, then bites it back ruthlessly. Negative self-talk is not allowed; that hasn't historically been a major issue for Cass, but his new therapist is not fucking around, and Cass feels like they haven't so much uncorked all the guilt and shame he's carried around for so long as they have smashed the bottle on the ground. Sometimes he thinks he's barely stuck together with a mishmash of habit, gallows humor, and pure stubbornness. Sometimes he thinks it's all going to come apart sometime soon, and he won't survive seeing himself as he really is – the murderer, the monster that he knows he let himself become once nothing was true and everything was permitted.

“I don't ever want this to end,” he whispers instead, and Dean squeezes his hip and takes Cass so deep in his mouth that Cass doesn't know whether to cry or pray.

He lets himself get so lost in it that he's almost unaware of coming, unaware of anything until he's in Dean's arms, sucking his own come off Dean's tongue, making Dean squirm and release soft noises of almost-protest as Cass nips too roughly at his flushed and sensitized lip. “I love you,” Cass says breathlessly, stroking the side of Dean's face.
“You're so mushy this morning,” Dean says. “I think I like it.”

“Mm. This going to be part of the new routine once we've moved?”

“Right,” Dean chuckles, “because you'd totally put up with me waking you up every morning at six-thirty.”

“For a blowjob like that, I might.” It's a lie; Cass would fucking strangle him within a week. But it sounds nice in theory. “For a blowjob like that, I might get up and make you coffee afterwards.”

“Yeah?” Dean says, lazily nuzzling Cass' stubble. “Would you make me juice, too?”


So maybe morning sex isn't going to be the new normal, but it's a thoroughly acceptable start to Cass' vacation, and as a side benefit, the sun is coming up by the time he gets out of bed for his shower. He still resents having to take off his socks, but then, what would he do without his resentments to keep him sharp?

Dean has started breakfast by the time Cass is dressed and out of his room. He absolutely positively will not let Dean throw money away buying a second juicer or espresso machine, so when Dean stays over they've hashed out a complicated detente that involves a French press, oatmeal with blueberries, and turkey bacon (even though Cass still thinks turkey bacon is both an insult and an oxymoron), and strictly prohibits anyone offering unsolicited commentary on anyone else's dietary habits. “Fine,” Cass grumbled at the time, “I promise not to food-shame you before eight a.m.,” but it turned out to be mutually beneficial, because it prevented Dean from saying something that would've gotten him stabbed in the eye by one Novak or the other the first time he watched Claire eat a chocolate Pop-Tart spread with a layer of Nutella.

Speak of the devil; Cass is sitting on the kitchen counter eating his bowl of dry grains and blueberries when Claire shuffles out of her room, dragging her suitcase and wearing what he's pretty sure is exactly the same eight layers of flannel she wore to bed, with additional boots and a hat. “What, we don't wear people clothes anymore?” Cass says. “Who raised you?”

“We're going to spend all day driving to a hotel in Milwaukee,” she says.

“Madison,” Dean corrects.

She makes a see there? gesture in Dean's direction. “It's cold and I'm tired and I don't care what strangers at some random Speedway in Illinois think of me, so this is what I'm wearing.”

“Come here,” he says, and she rolls her eyes and walks up in front of him. Cass lays a hand on the side of her neck and says, “Claire. Beautiful, marvelous Claire. You are my everything, you know that, right?” She rolls her eyes again. “You are the light of my life and my reason for being. Now, what did we agree your father gets to do to you if you're a giant pain in the ass this week?”

“Drown me like a sack of kittens,” she chants wearily. Dean chokes a little on his coffee.

“Oh, good girl,” he says, smacking a kiss on her forehead. “Now eat something with protein.”

“Why does he always have to be so extra in the mornings?” Claire asks Dean.

“Right?” says Dean, the traitor, shaking a handful of shredded coconut into her open palm. It's appalling how well trained she has Dean already, although Cass very much suspects she had the advantage of being able to build on Joanna's years of effort.
In spite of their heroic efforts to waste a bunch of time in bed, they're still up and dressed and finished with breakfast well in advance of Sam and Jo's arrival. That isn't great, because neither of them are especially good at waiting around. Dean does the breakfast dishes while he listens to some unbearable podcast about *branding*. Cass runs through his morning asanas and feels outside of his body the whole time.

There's no getting out of this trip now, but his every instinct is telling him it's a mistake. He and Dean have a life that works here, in Cleveland, shuttling back and forth between their downtown apartments, juggling work and Claire and therapy and each other – and Cass can admit he was wrong about that, wrong when he blithely assumed there wasn't a version of his life that Dean fit into, and he's never been so grateful to be wrong before. That doesn't mean they're invincible, though. Far from it. Dean's big on words like *love* and *family* and *our future*, and he wears them like talismans against failure, but the reality is, failure is always a risk when your plans move off the page and into the real world where life happens.

No matter how *awesome* they tell each other everything is going to be, the reality is, Dean has spent years building a life in Cleveland that he's never let Sioux Falls anywhere near, and Cass doesn't think that's for no reason. He doesn't know what to expect from this week; neither does Dean, but Dean obviously knows enough to dread it, and that can't be a good sign.

Sam is twelve minutes late, which Cass counts as more or less on time, but is about seven minutes past the point where Dean gets jumpy about schedules on the best of days. This is not the best of days, and it's been nine minutes of Dean silently but visibly losing his shit when their ride pulls up. “Sorry, I--” Sam starts to say, opening the back of the minivan for their luggage.

“It's fine, whatever,” Dean cuts him off unconvincingly. “Just help me with this.”

Things get worse from there. Dean – who Cass swears he remembers is capable of being almost preternaturally charming – is at his most unbearably anal about exactly how all the luggage and the presents ought to fit into the back of Sam's minivan; normally Sam is inclined to let Dean have his way, but this morning he looks particularly stressed out too, and it's turned him stubborn. They argue for a good fifteen minutes about duffel bags, and if Cass lets his eyes unfocus a little he can almost see the two of them feeding off each other's disgruntlement and anxiety, driving the energy in a jagged downward spiral. Cass, who wasn't exactly starting out from a place of maximum tranquility himself, feels the gravity well dragging him in, making him itch to gain control of the dark, crashing wave of tension the way he usually gains control of a situation: by proving he can make it so much worse if he tries.

Nothing gets any better when Jo gets out of the van, waddles up to them as menacingly as a person can possibly waddle, and says, “What exactly is the fucking hold-up here?”

Dean holds his hand up in her direction without looking at her and says, “No, I am still not talking to you. I'm living in the beautiful dream-world where you actually listen to your doctor. Don't interrupt me; it's glorious here, and we don't have to stop every twenty minutes so you can pee.”

“First of all,” she says, “I have a human being sitting on my bladder, so I get to pee whenever the hell I feel like peeing. Second of all, I'm coming to support you, you giant whiner.”

“What do you want, a trophy?” Dean says. “I've supported every single crappy decision you've ever made in your life, so if *one time* you have to return the favor--”

Cass is pretty sure he's the crappy decision under discussion right now, and under different conditions he'd recognize that obviously Dean didn't mean that, but these aren't different conditions, and he's genuinely concerned that there won't be a change in the weather until all of them have South
Dakota in the rear-view mirror a week from now. The thought is exhausting. “I have an idea,” he
snaps, “why don't we all just go into this assuming that your parents are going to hate everyone? No,
seriously, I think it would be really liberating: Sam drives a Honda, I have a penis, everything is bad
forever, and Christmas is ruined. Now are we going to freeze to death on this sidewalk, or are we
throwing ourselves off this cliff? I just want to know what flavor of misery I'm in for.”

“They'll like me,” Claire says. “I'm adorable.”

“I will plant your vibrator in their bathroom,” Cass says. “Do not test me.”

Claire squawks an unconvincing denial, and Dean drags his hand over his face and says, “Thanks,
Cass. Now I feel like I'm going to prison for being in the vicinity of this conversation.”

“Don't be such a drama queen,” Cass says. “You're a rich white guy, you're not going to prison.”

“I'm not convinced any of us are going anywhere,” Sam sighs. “I'm starting to think that dying-on-
the-sidewalk thing sounds like a real possibility.”

Cass closes his eyes and takes a minute to ground and center. He's capable of making this all so
much worse, yes – but he's capable of not doing that, too, and he knows it. He just has to make the
decision, and it's not all that difficult to make when he reminds himself that it's for Dean. “Okay.
Yes,” he says slowly, “everyone is tired and nervous. That's valid. Can we all just take two deep
breaths? Just two.” He doesn't really check to see if any of them obeyed, but at least he's gotten them
all to shut the fuck up for a second. “Okay,” he says again. “Better. So this trip is a big deal, and we
all have a lot of emotional charge around everything right now. Claire, I know you probably feel like
you're just getting dragged along on all this, and in some ways you're right. I know you wanted to
stay here with Jody and Alex, but that's not an option, because I really need your support this week.
I promise I'm not taking anything about you or your situation for granted. Also, I'm making it your job
to keep an eye on the duffel bags and be sure they don't slide around back there. Agreed?” She nods,
and for once doesn't roll her eyes. “Sam, we appreciate you driving so that we can all do this
together, and I know that you're usually the one who gives in to make everyone else happy, which
must get really frustrating sometimes. We'll all make more of an effort to be respectful when you do
set boundaries. Dean, honey, I know it's really helpful for you to have a schedule for the day in your
head, and we'll do our best to stay on target, but you have to be a little bit flexible with us.
Controlling how the car is packed and when we're allowed to stop is not going to give you any more
control over your parents' feelings and actions, it's just going to tire everyone out in advance. We
have the hotel reservations, thank you for that, and we will get there, and everything will work out in
the end. Joanna, nobody is questioning your loyalty to Dean; we all love you for being the way you
are. You are stressing people out a little, because you're due in two weeks and your doctor did advise
you not to travel, but remember that if we didn't care about you, it wouldn't be so stressful. I love all
of you, and I know you all love each other, and all of this only works if we are on the same team, do
we agree on that, too?”

“Is he always like this?” Sam says.

“God, yes,” Claire says.

Dean gives Cass a smile that's a little weak but not insincere and rubs his arm briefly. “You're right,
yeah,” he says. “United front, right, guys? Let's go, Team Chosen Family.”

“I want the record to show I never chose you,” Joanna says, but only in the regular way she gives
Dean shit, and it's good to see Dean smile for the first time since they got out of bed.

What's one long overnight drive for one girl in a classic car is a full two days for a Honda Odyssey
with six passengers (if you include the one sitting on Jo's bladder), but once they actually get underway, the experience isn't entirely hell on earth. Cass does very sincerely love the shit out of these people – loves hearing everyone's stories of hilariously traumatic family vacations as children, loves the way that Dean and Jo share the same habit of answering NPR’s rhetorical questions as if they're in a conversation with the correspondents, loves how Sam's low-key, dry sense of humor makes even conversations about real estate and renovations bearable.

It's a helpful reminder about why Cass is putting himself through all of this. Sure, a few small things have degraded precipitously since he met Dean – his independence, his heterosexual privilege, his coping mechanisms, arguably his mental health in general. But he's getting his first hilariously traumatic family vacation, and it's easy to imagine that he'll be an old man someday (someday far, far in the future), telling the story of the first Christmas he spent with the Smith family. It's so much more valuable than Cass ever realized – having stories that you can look forward to telling, having a life history that you want to share with people, instead of one you only want to shield them from.

They have dinner at a Denny's in Madison, across the parking lot from the first hotel he's ever stayed at with Dean, and he can't shake off the thought: this is a story, this is their story – their first road trip, their first Christmas, the first year they met, the year they chose this, that Dean said *I still really want marriage and kids* and Cass said *I could be into that* – and everything is an illusion and everyone dies and nothing really matters, but if there's a point to anything, it has to be that you wind up with a good story to tell about a really big ball of twine, and maybe if you're lucky it's a love story, too. Maybe from the outside it's just a mundane story about sitting in a corner booth between two people who won't look up from their cell phones, about a guy who orders a dry sweet potato and green tea for dinner, about an interchangeable Midwestern hotel on an interchangeable Midwestern highway exit, but Cass has a few dramatic stories of heartbreak and high stakes and heroism under his belt, and this one, in all its mundanity, is better. It just is.

He puts an arm around Dean's shoulders and one around Claire's and says, “Why is it only my side of the family who doesn't know how to behave at dinner?”

“I have to take this, it's Charlie,” Dean says.

“I have to take this, it's Alex,” Claire says.

“I don't know if this really counts as dinner,” Sam says. “I mean, it's food and we're eating it, but – I don't know, that's different from being *at dinner*, right?”

“Either everything counts or nothing does,” Cass says.

“Says who?” Claire says.

“Your father,” Dean says. Cass can't decide if he's offering backup in a *don't argue with your father* way, or if it's more of a *don't bother arguing, you know how your father is.* Either way, it's something close to support, so Cass accepts it.

The hotel room is another new experience. Because he and Dean still live separately and can just stay home if they don't get a better offer, the two of them don't really have a history of chastely sharing a bed, which makes it feel especially awkward now to share a room with Claire. Still, Cass is the last person to argue that new experiences are inherently bad, and he decides as he's lying next to Dean and listening to Claire brush her teeth in the bathroom that this one is – good. It feels like *love* and *family* and *our future* and all that stuff that Dean believes in and Cass doesn't necessarily.

He believes in Dean, though.
Madison is just as cold as Cleveland was, but the hotel heating unit is cranked up, sucking all the moisture out of the room so that the inside of Cass' throat and nose feel raw and sore. “Is that my Joy Division t-shirt?” he says when Claire comes out of the bathroom, dressed for the first time in weeks in something less than every layer of clothing she owns.

Claire looks down at herself like she isn't totally sure what a t-shirt is and says, “You mean, like, technically are you the one who bought it...?”

“I mean, like, technically I want to see it back in my closet after you've washed it,” he says, and she huffs like he's being completely unreasonable before she crawls into her bed. “Are you sure you want one of these?” he grumbles to Dean. “They're a total money pit, and they steal.”

“Yep,” Dean says comfortably, turning over and settling his arm over Cass.

So in spite of some ups and downs, Day One starts strong and ends strong. It feels like a good omen.

Everyone is very quiet on Day Two – even Dean, and even though they get a late start and stop too many times and waste too much time at lunch and never get back on schedule, which means he should be griping. Instead he just keeps his earbuds in most of the trip and holds Cass' hand tight. Cass doesn't think he has anything to eat or drink all day except his morning coffee and two bottles of coconut water out of the cooler in the back, but Cass doesn't have the heart to badger him about it.

It's about nine when Sam pulls up in front of the house and parks on the street. It's an aggressively ordinary house, its paint a little faded but otherwise well maintained, two stories with a wide porch that seems wasted, since the house sits at the end of a winding road with no neighbors to spy on while you pretend you're just taking in the evening air. “Well,” Sam says, when no one makes a move to get out of the minivan. “We made it.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Cass asks softly.

“Yeah,” Dean says automatically, then shakes himself off a bit and says, “Yeah, of course.”

They each grab something light, leaving the serious luggage alone for the time being, and follow at Jo's pace up the front walk and the porch. She hesitates a second with her hand raised to knock, then just opens the door.

There's a certain amount of controlled chaos as all five of them suddenly crowd into the living room at one time, but Cass feels far away from it all somehow. A faint sense of déjà vu pricks along the back of his neck as he steps into the house, but he brushes it aside quickly. “Well, look at you,” Ellen Smith says, putting one arm loosely around her daughter's shoulders and touching her belly with her other hand. “You're gigantic!”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Mom,” Jo says with a wry but genuine laugh in her voice. “Mom, this is Sam.”

“Good Lord,” she says, shaking Sam's hand. “You're gigantic, too.”

“Yeah, stuck like this, I'm afraid,” Sam says.

Ellen is hardly taller than Jo, but Cass is amazed at how much of Dean he can see in her – the thick, sandy hair and strong, handsome features, her relaxed but perfectly balanced posture and even her resonant voice, it's all so strikingly Dean. She pats the back of Sam's hand and fixes him with the same direct, attentive gaze that Dean gives to everyone he meets, and she says, “Sam, I'm glad you
“Thank you for having me,” he says, and she nods once and is finished with him for now.

Cass' heart catches a little in his throat when she turns to hug Dean. He knew – of course he knew that Dean loves his mother, but when she reaches her arms up around his neck and he folds his arms tight around her, everything about their body language radiates the kind of mutual devotion that Cass never had time to develop with his mother, and for the first time in a long, long time, Cass remembers that he used to miss her. Now she's been gone so long and his few memories of her are so badly faded that she's only negative space in his life, which is his normal, but it's a shock to be so viscerally reminded that Dean's situation is very different. Dean is loyal to a fault and believes in family above all else; Cass has always understood that, but right now he understands in a whole new way that Dean's love is about more than just duty and respect. Cass doesn't know how he could've made the mistake of underestimating Dean's heart, but there it is, he's kind of an idiot sometimes.

She leans back on her heels and strikes Dean lightly on the side of the head with the heel of her hand and says, “You're late.”

“It's not my fault!” he protests. “Jo-- “

“Oh, it's Jo's fault? Jo wouldn't let you make a phone call to tell me you were coming in late?”

“No, ma'am,” he says. “That was me. Sorry.” Ellen snorts, then gives his face a little stroke that seems to signal her forgiveness. Dean glances over his shoulder to where Claire and Cass are hovering near the threshold, and he moves aside. “Mom, this is – this is Cass Novak, and his daughter Claire.”

He's mostly heard about Ellen Smith's pool-sharking days, but she has one hell of a poker face, too. Cass isn't used to dealing with people he can't read, but she stays carefully, coolly neutral as she shakes his hand. “Novak,” she says. “Is that a Russian name?”

Without meaning to, he laughs a little. “That rumbling sound is my father spinning in his grave,” he says. “No – Polish. We're Polish.”

She makes a noncommittal sound. “Cass short for something?”

“Casimir,” he says.

Dean cocks his head and frowns a little. “Your name is Casimir?”

“Uh – yeah?” Cass says. “My family was pretty excessively Polish, so. Is that okay with you?” he can't help adding.

“Yeah, of course,” Dean says, still frowning like there's something deeply wrong with this answer. Cass isn't crazy about his name, either, but he doesn't know why it seems to unsettle Dean so much. “I just-- I don't know. Guess it's not what I was expecting.”

Ellen casts her eye over Claire and says, “Huh. You look an awful lot like Joanna; the two of you could pass for sisters.”

Claire smiles hesitantly and says, “Thanks?”

“Now, we only have the one guest room,” Ellen says, “so I figured we'd just give you the choice. There's an air mattress and a good sleeping bag, but if you don't want to share the room with your father, you're welcome to sleep down here on the couch. It's pretty comfortable; it's where I make
Bobby sleep when he's snoring.”

Claire looks over at Cass, who tries to glare intently enough at her to keep her from saying anything too... anything. “The floor's okay,” she says.

“Good. Bobby, get your ass inside, the kids are here! All right, need any help getting the rest of your things in from the car?”

“No, Mom, don't worry, Sam and I can get it,” Dean says, tugging on the shoulder of Sam's coat to move him toward the door.

He doesn't mean any harm by it, Cass knows he doesn't. Dean's not overly rigid about his machismo – he's far too fond of *Project Runway* and mani-pedis to get away with that – but that vein of old-fashioned gentleman runs rock solid and bone deep in him. Dean opens doors for Cass and walks him to the elevator every time he leaves Dean's apartment, and Cass hasn't had to carry anything heavier than three pounds in Dean's presence since the day they met. Cass' sense of masculinity is perfectly fine and unbothered by Dean's quirks, but in this one very specific case, he could absolutely have done without being left behind with the three women while the heavy lifting happens, because there's no doubt in his mind that Ellen is noticing everything and working hard to construct her concept of – whatever she thinks their relationship is all about.

“Claire and I can take your things upstairs with us,” Cass tells Jo.

“Thanks,” she says. “The – uh, the guest room is the first door on the right at the head of the stairs, then the bathroom, then my room after that.”

“She hates us,” Claire hisses as they drag several bags up the narrow stairwell.

“Well, I don't know what to tell you,” Cass snaps. “You think everyone's always going to like us? Because the whole world isn't your hipster magnet high school; some of it is South Dakota.”

It's the truth, and he tries to be honest with Claire, but it doesn't take him very long to regret it anyway. He holds the guest room door open for Claire and their bags, and he takes Jo and Sam's stuff down the hall, and he doesn't even have the heart to pay much attention to the family photos on the walls or to guess which heavy wooden piece of furniture is an heirloom or to play any other damn game with himself like knowing who the Smiths are is going to make any difference, is going to give him the power to change anything.

Claire is sitting on the guest bed when he comes back, looking straight through her reflection in an old-fashioned standing mirror. Cass comes closer and puts his hand on her shoulder. “It's just – awkward because it's new for her,” he says quietly.

“I think it's awkward because she's a bigot,” Claire says, and her voice sounds thinner and higher, like he remembers from years ago.

“Maybe,” Cass says. “But people change. And if we can help her change, then we have to.”

“Why do we have to?”

“Because Dean loves her,” he says. “Because I know you of all people don't want him to lose his mother if there's another way.” Claire nods, and he squeezes her shoulder. “I know this isn't fun,” he says. “That's why we have to be kind and smart this week.” She gives him an *are you fucking kidding me with this?* look, and he says, “Hey, rules are rules. United front, right, kitten?”

“United front,” she says wearily. She stands up and squares her shoulders, and he knows this is a life
experience, a learning experience, probably a skill set she can use for the rest of her life, and he tries to be proud of her instead of bitter because the world isn't good enough for his little girl.

The world isn't good enough for a lot of people's little girls. He's let himself get pretty damn soft if he's forgotten that.

So he's feeling wise and well-balanced and like he's got a handle on life as he comes back down the stairs. He can hear another voice added to the mix in the living room, undoubtedly Dean's father, and when Cass comes around the corner, Bobby Smith pauses in hugging his daughter and turns to look at Cass, and the pressure changes in the room all at once, ringing in Cass' ears and dropping him from a great height into nothing.

Because he's seen this man before. It's a common name, Bobby, so he never thought – of course he would never think – it never once struck him as odd or significant, but Dean's father Bobby is Bobby, the same stocky, gray-bearded man that Cass has seen and spoken to in his dissociative states, Cass would swear to God he's exactly the same. Cass can remember kneeling over him on a blood-streaked wooden floor while he died.

The sound in Cass' ears is drowning out almost everything else, building in low intensity like an internal scream of endless panic. His eyes dart around, and this is – the house is different, there's only one bookcase instead of a full wall of them, but he recognizes it. He was on the floor right there – a bare floor, that area rug wasn't there in the dream – but he remembers the window behind him and the doorway through the kitchen and out to the back door, and he remembers yelling not to let Dean through the door, trying uselessly to protect him from watching this man die.

He's seen this place. He knows this man. And it's not possible, but it's true, and Cass is compliant and well-behaved in therapy because he knows he truly is all manner of fucked up, but some part of him has always dragged his heels a little, and this is why.

Because it's not possible, but he knows – this is the thing he doesn't say to his therapist or to Dean or to anyone at all, doesn't even admit to himself most of the time – he knows that these impossible things are as real as he is. He's not crazy – okay, he's probably crazy – but he's not wrong about this. It's the world that isn't obeying the rules, not Cass.

Something is very, very wrong with Cass' happy life, and God help him, he doesn't want to know what it is. He wants to keep everything, everything he has, and he's being so compliant, so good, but the cracks keep appearing and he doesn't know how to stop this, even though he would give anything not to know what, underneath it all, he knows.

Bobby Smith is not here; he died in a pool of blood while Cass tried and failed to hold his extensive wounds together. This man is a ghost, and for all Cass knows Bobby's sweet, green-eyed son is a ghost, the ghost of a hard and dangerous man that Cass used to love before they slipped through one another's fingers.

He never came home from the war. He doesn't know if he's still there or if it followed him here, but he knows it never let him go. It never will.

“Cass?” he hears Dean say.

And maybe Dean is a ghost but he's Cass' ghost; Cass doesn't believe in the ground under his feet right now, but he has to believe in Dean, he has no other choice. So no matter what this is, no matter why Cass has come unmoored from his real world and wandered into this one, for as long as he can manage it he's going to keep on acting like Dean needs him. He puts out his hand and steps forward and says, “It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Smith.”
“Oh, Bobby, just Bobby,” he says, gripping Cass' hand firmly. “Happy to meet you, too, finally. We've been hearing a lot about you from Dean.”

“I hope he's kept the bar nice and low,” Cass manages to say. “I like to exceed expectations.”

Bobby grants him a short chuckle, so maybe Cass is pulling this off. Or at least, maybe he is to a stranger's eye, but he can feel Dean just over his shoulder, Dean's hand poised just under his elbow exactly like someone who's seen where things like this can go. “Are you okay?” Dean says, under his breath for some tiny fraction of privacy in this overcrowded room. “Is it your head?”

And it really, really is, so he nods. There's still a noise in his ears, and twin points of fierce pressure just above his sinuses, and he's pathetically grateful when Dean cups his elbow, his fingers supporting Cass' forearm. “I'm sorry,” Cass murmurs.

“I know,” Dean says, “it's okay. It's a migraine,” he says to everyone else. “Cass gets them sometimes.”

“What can we do?” Ellen asks, and to her credit she sounds perfectly sincere.

“Nothing, I got it,” Dean says firmly. “I'm going to take him to the upstairs bathroom. It's fine, everybody just — go on and visit, catch up. Everything is fine.”

Cass feels briefly guilty about abandoning Claire, but if she does need a defender, she's got Joanna, who's more than up to the task, so he lets Dean herd him back up the stairs and into the bathroom. He sits on the edge of the tub while Dean turns off the light, letting only a bit of hallway light in through the cracked door, and runs cool water over a washcloth and wrings it out like a pro.

“This is going great so far,” Cass says wryly as Dean crouches down in front of him and lifts the neatly folded cloth up to his eyes. Cass lets his head fall back to keep it in place and tries to maintain steady, three-dimensional breathing.

“Everything is fine,” Dean murmurs gently, rubbing his hand over Cass' thigh. “I'm sorry, I – I should've said something about the rooms, shouldn't I? It just caught me off guard.”

“You know what, I'm glad you didn't,” Cass assures him. “I don't want to fight about every little thing, and the rooms are not the ditch I want to die in.”

“It's not fair, though,” Dean says gruffly. “She didn't have a word to say about Sam staying in Jo's room, this isn't any--”

“Honey, that's why they call it injustice: it's not fair. So we have to work harder. Okay, we work harder. And we let a few go, so we have chips to cash in when they really matter. We live six miles apart; I think we can survive being across the hall from each other for a few days.”

“They're better than this,” Dean grumbles. “It just bugs me so much, because – I know they're better than this.”

“I believe you,” Cass says. “I wouldn't be wasting my time here if I didn't.”

Dean sighs and presses the washcloth up at the corner where it's beginning to slip down Cass' cheek. “How are you feeling?”

Good question. “Oh...getting better,” he hedges. “Still a little dizzy.” Still pretty sure my entire life is some kind of hallucination. “Dean,” he says quietly, and when he puts his hand out he has no doubt that Dean will grab it and hold on.
“Right here. I got you,” Dean says. Cass didn’t realize that was what he was waiting to hear until he hears it, and he feels his muscles start to relax.

There’s a soft knock on the door, and Cass lets the cloth fall away from his eyes. Ellen Smith is hovering in the doorway with a mug in her hand. “Don’t want to bother you,” she says, “but Web MD says caffeine can help. You drink coffee?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Thank you.” He takes a few sips and it does seem to help, even though whatever he has, it’s probably not exactly migraines, and he’s definitely way beyond the reach of Web MD. “I’ll probably just go on to bed,” he says. “Sorry, I’m usually the life of the party, I swear.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” she says. “Sleep in if you want, we don’t have much planned for tomorrow.” She looks from Cass to Dean, who’s still on one knee, his hand still laid firmly in Cass’. Cass still can’t quite crack her expression and he hates it. “You coming back downstairs, kid?”


Cass sits on the bed in the guest room, waiting while Dean goes down for his suitcase and Claire’s. The air mattress is already inflated on the floor between the bed and the tall mirror. The corner of the dresser is cracked off. The bookcase is mostly full of, weirdly, Greek and Roman history and philosophy, liberally spiked with travel guides to various national parks and some collected essays of nature writing – Muir and Carson and whatnot. There’s a Bible, and a matched set of The Complete Works of Mark Twain with well-worn spines. Cass wonders who it was who pored over them time and again over the years.

Dean brings his stuff and a bottle of water and makes Cass say forty times that he’s fine, he’s just going to sleep and he’ll be fine. “Come get me if you need me,” Dean says, kissing his forehead. “Or you can call or text me.”

“So, just the normal ways that a human can pass messages and information to other humans,” Cass says. “Got it.”

“I’m so glad you’re feeling better,” Dean says pointedly.

“Our time on earth is brief and precious,” Cass says. “Don’t waste it telling me things I already know.”

“Does that include I love you?”

“It does not,” Cass says with dignity. Dean smiles and leans down to kiss him. “If I need you, I’ll find you,” Cass promises.

He doesn’t think he’ll be able to sleep, but even with the jolt of caffeine, he finds the gravity field of a bed irresistible once he’s alone in the dark, and almost immediately his thoughts have the fuzzy-edged grayscale quality of the smallest hours of the morning.

He’s still unsettled, to understate the case by quite a lot. The sense of recognition he felt, seeing Bobby Smith for the first time – he can’t push it aside or rationalize it. It happened, and it means something. But the sense of terrifying certainty is slipping away from Cass already. It means something, but it can’t mean what he told himself it meant.

His name is Cass Novak. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his sixteen-year-old daughter, he has a job and a partner he loves, and everything about his world is – is normal, is a normal life with its routines and its tedium and its small hurts and small joys. How can he not believe in it? Who would make this up? It has to be the rest that's the illusion: a messy jumble of traumatic memories and
emotional triggers and the sheen of the fantastic to obscure the brutality he can't bear to face in his own past. He sees monsters because he doesn't know how else to process the atrocities he's witnessed and the ones he's committed. He sees someone he loves distorted out of all recognition – Dean's name, Dean's face, stretched over a core of callous violence that he knows Dean's not capable of – because it's the thing he can't stop fearing.

Because the worst thing that ever happened to Cass was falling in love and watching his beloved self-destruct, every holy and precious thing they'd shared turning to regret and contempt and desecration. Of course he fears falling in love again. Of course his mind conjures fantasies of devastation, fuses his two great loves together in a literal waking nightmare of history repeating itself: Dean's sweet face, Amelia's terrifying fall.

Doesn't that make so much more sense than...the alternative?

There is no alternative. Not everything about his theory quite hangs together under scrutiny (Bobby Smith is an anomaly, Dean's peripatetic scar – he's sure the red-bearded man means something, plays some role Cass can't understand), but there is no viable alternative.

He falls asleep because... because what's the alternative? Whatever the world is, it's undeniably physical, subject to physical limitations. Cass can have all the nervous breakdowns he wants, but at the end of the day, he still has to eat and sleep.

Claire tries to be quiet when she comes in, but the little noises she makes unrolling the sleeping bag and digging through her suitcase to change clothes in the dark are loud enough to wake him. He can dimly hear footsteps on the stairs, the bathroom sink running next door, the wind outside. He flips his phone over and sees that it's a little after midnight. Claire freezes, catching the motion just at the edge of her vision. “Dad?” she whispers.

“Mm,” he says. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she says. The nylon squeaks as she wriggles down into the sleeping bag. “They're.... You know. They're okay.” He nods, and even though he's vaguely aware that she can't see him, he doesn't have the energy for anything more. He slides back into sleep, unsure if she's saying something or not.

Cass wakes up once more in the light of false dawn, and Claire barely registers as a lump inside the thick heap of bag and bedding, but he can make out the fan of her long hair, and he wonders how the hell he could have taken the idea seriously that she somehow doesn't exist. She's the light of his life and the reason he's still here at all, and Cass knows that he could be trapped in the bowels of Hell itself and he'd make his home there if that's where Claire needed him to be. There's nothing he needs to know about this world except that it's where Claire is; he's never seen her in any of his fugues or nightmares. That world doesn't belong to her, and so Cass doesn't belong to it.

He goes back to sleep reassured by that thought.

There's blood in his dreams, and the sound of Dean's voice. Find me when this is over, Dean says, and he sounds grim. When Cass wakes, he can feel the words Honey, it already is on his lips, and he shivers even though he's lying in a river of morning light.

It was the last thing they ever said to each other.

Cass sits up and scrubs at his eyes, willing himself to make landfall on Planet Earth again. The last thing Dean said to him was Goodnight, and it was about eleven hours ago in this room. He knows that. And the last thing Cass said to him was--
Fuck. Maybe... maybe it's time to revisit the idea of combining some medication with his talk therapy. He was so convinced that he'd do better without it, that he'd doubt his own perceptions even more if he knew he was stirring up his brain chemistry with a stick – and, to be completely honest, convinced that his ego couldn't take the hit, because he's a holistic healer and he should be above that sort of thing. Now he's a lot less sure he made the right decision. He guesses that's what he's going to be discussing in therapy in a couple of weeks.

But that's a long time from now, and in the meantime he's going to have to take ownership of his own healing process and get the fuck out of bed to face reality.

He takes a quick shower – especially quick because the water takes so long to heat up that he's worried if he spends too long dicking around, he'll be finishing in cold water; he reminds himself not to be the last person up in the house again – and gets dressed. He can feel his heartbeat ticking steadily faster and louder as he comes down the stairs, half-afraid that he's going to arrive in the living room and find bare, bloodstained floors and torn, trampled books spread everywhere.

All he finds is Sam and Claire playing Jenga on the coffee table while Ellen plays ignored on the tv. “God, I thought you were dead,” Claire says dryly.

“I can see how torn up you were about it,” he says. He glances through the doorway to the kitchen and sees Ellen – Smith this time, not DeGeneres – working by herself. “Did you even offer to make yourself useful?” he asks. “Remember how I told you to pretend I raised you right?”

“Yes, I did,” she protests. “I fed the chickens, actually. It was kinda cool.”

“Yeah?” he says. “You think we should get chickens at the new place?”

Claire only shrugs, but Sam says, “I'm for it, if we buy in a neighborhood that's zoned for it.”

“I think most of them are now,” Cass says vaguely. “If we can keep Dean out of some kind of prissy gated community with a totalitarian HOA.”

“We outnumber him,” Sam says. “Maybe we can just tell him that Claire really wants chickens.”

“Hang on, I'm not going to get chickens instead of a car, am I?” she says.

“Maybe,” Cass lies blithely. “Take one for the team, kitten.”

“Hey, come on,” she protests.

“United front!” he says cheerfully, and heads into the kitchen.

Ellen is expertly dicing celery with a large, sharp knife, which he reminds himself is a very reasonable thing to do and carries no implied threat whatsoever. “Morning,” she says, and points with the tip of her knife toward the back door. “Bobby and the kids are playing around in the salvage yard. You know how they are.”

“I guess they get it from their dad, huh?” he says, and Ellen snorts a little. “Are you not as much of a car person?”

She shrugs as she works. “I know enough to help out here and there, but mostly I let Bobby handle the car side of the business, and I handle the accounting.”
“Sounds like a good partnership,” he says. “Can I do anything to help? In the kitchen, I mean. I already know I can’t do anything right with cars; I’ve been told multiple times.”

She hesitates a minute, but then says, “Can you peel eggs?”

“I thought about going pro for a while,” he says. Ellen gives him an odd look, and he reminds himself that his sense of humor does take a little adjusting to for some people. “I’d be glad to,” he says, and she sits him down at the kitchen table with a dozen hard-boiled eggs and a plastic bowl for shells.

Cass isn’t sure if they’re going to have a conversation or not, but before the silence goes on too long, Ellen says, “So you’re not a mechanic, huh?”

“Not even a little bit,” he says. “It’s been so long since I’ve owned a car that I can barely drive anymore. The nice thing about living in the middle of the city is that it’s easy to get around without all the hassle and expense of traffic and parking and all that.”

“Guess that’s nice,” she says skeptically.

It probably doesn’t seem remotely like a benefit to her, and Cass flounders around a minute trying to think of something that makes him sound slightly less like a hipster douchebag. Nothing comes to mind, so he tries an alternate track altogether. “Dean’s been teaching Claire how to drive,” he says. Ellen makes a little noise that’s somewhat affirmative and something like a question, which seems to have potential. “He’s so good with her. I wasn’t sure how that would work out, because he’s – you know, he’s really too young for her to think of him like a parent, and too old for them to be friends. But of course, he’s got all that big brother experience, so I shouldn’t have been concerned.”

“He was always good with Joanna,” she says. “Never the tiniest bit jealous of her, and he’d always let her tag along when he went out to play, at least up until he was in high school. I think he was more patient with her than I was. Lord, she thought he hung the moon when she was little.”

Cass thinks she still does, whether or not she’d ever admit it. He feels like he’s got one foot on safe ground with this complimenting Dean business, so he keeps that rolling. “Dean’s just – he’s such a good guy in general. I hope you’re as proud of him as you should be, because he’s... I’ve never met anyone like him. He wins everyone over so easily, and he could’ve been – you know, one of those guys, all slick and entitled and self-important, but he’s the absolute opposite of that. He treats Claire like a second sister, and he’s been-- I had kind of a health scare not long after we met, and ninety-nine guys out of a hundred would’ve ghosted right there, but he was amazing, he went to doctors with me, he – was just there for me every step of the way.”

“Mmm,” Ellen says, which isn’t quite the response Cass had been hoping for. “And what about you?”

Cass blinks. He wishes to God he hadn’t completely lost his people-reading superpowers the instant he met Ellen Smith, because he could really, really use a fucking clue right now. “What about me?”

“Well, that’s a whole lot of things you just said about what you get from Dean, and I’m just wondering, if I asked Dean, what would he say he’s getting from you?”

“I guess I’m not the person to answer that question,” Cass says. “You – actually could ask Dean, if you wanted to know what he’d say.”

She translates that into, “You don’t know.” It doesn’t entirely drip with sarcasm, but only because it’s so bone-dry.
“I mean, I think he'd say he's happy.” Cass knows he shouldn't say anything right now; he can feel the defensiveness crackling under his skin, the combative instincts, and this is so far from the right time and place to prove – whatever he thinks he needs to prove. The only smart thing to do is to shut the fuck up.

“Well, I guess that's something,” Ellen says. “Course, you know, Dean's been very, very successful, and he's worked so hard all his life that he's never made time for himself. So here he is, about to turn thirty, and like you say, he's got so much to offer, but he's always been alone. I guess you aren't the only person out there who'd be willing to come along and trade a certain kind of happiness for some of what Dean's got.”

Cass' rational brain sticks hard on She can't possibly mean... – too hard to know what to say next, so it's a surprise to him, too, when he hears, “What the fuck, lady?” come out of his mouth like it's been kicked out of him.

Ellen slams down her knife and turns to face him, one fist on her hip and the other hand gripping the handle on the oven beside her, and suddenly Cass' vision focuses in at last. He sees everything in her that he feels – the same defensiveness, the same spoiling for a fight, the same alpha nature unused to being challenged for control on her own turf. He could kick himself, because it's so clear now, and such a cliché. He had trouble seeing Dean's mother clearly because he is Dean's mother. "You come into my house, and you try to tell me what kind of a man my son is? I know how good a man he is, how he works himself to the bone for everyone around him, how high his standards are for himself, how set in his ways he gets. He was always like that, even when he was a tiny thing – didn't like to get messy, didn't like surprises, didn't like to rock the boat. Always wanted to be told what he should do, and then by God he'd do it or he'd kill himself trying. So I'm sorry, but with Dean being the way he is, and not having much experience with relationships at all, let alone serious relationships, I care a whole hell of a lot about who's setting the expectations that Dean's gonna kill himself to meet.”

“If you think I give a damn about his money, you're wrong,” Cass says. “And if you think that Dean somehow can't say no to me, you're spectacularly wrong. Look, I get that you're protective. I'm a parent, too. But Dean hasn't been a small child for a long time, and he's not as naive as you seem to think he is. Whether you think he was lonely or not before he met me, he does have high standards, and he wasn't about to go all-in for anyone until he decided it was the right person. You want to know why he thinks that's me? I can't tell you that, I don't even know. But no matter what you say or do, you're not going to talk him into changing his mind; if you know Dean like you think you do, you know how stubborn he is. So you don't have to like me, but I'm a fact of life for you now. You would've picked someone else if it were up to you, I get that, but it's never been up to you. The only thing you can do is make Dean miserable trying to keep both of us happy at the same time, and I really hope you go a different direction on that, because I have to tell you, I don't want to keep being the one who takes care of him because you made him cry.”

“I would never--” she starts hotly, and he doesn't want to hear it, he just fucking doesn't.

“It was August 29th, it was a Friday, and he was on the phone with you both for forty-five minutes. I don't know what anyone said, because of course he wouldn't tell me, of course his first priority was protecting you. He just said it wasn't so bad, it could've been worse, he was glad it was over, he wished it hadn't had to be over the phone. I told him everything was going to be okay and I loved him, so let me ask you this, Ellen: did you?”

She looks pale, which Cass thinks means he's winning, and he tries not to feel good about that, because when the adrenaline drains away he knows he's going to remember that a scene like this doesn't constitute winning for anybody. He's been here about twelve hours and he's cashed in all his chips and then some. “He knows I do,” she says tightly.
“Yeah, he does,” Cass says. “But now you could maybe work on respecting him enough to let him make his own decisions. You know he's always done the smart thing, you know he's not an impulsive guy. Just – seriously, I'm begging you, don't tell him you think he's been tricked or conned or – seduced into this, or whatever it is you're thinking. It would really hurt him to know that's how you see him.”

“Of course I won't,” she says sharply, like she never would've dreamed of such a thing, and Cass bites the inside of his lip to keep from smiling. She'll probably figure out sooner rather than later that she got manipulated into that promise, but he's already set the terms of the debate, so it'll be pretty hard for her to change her mind without having to justify to herself why it's okay to hurt Dean.

Maybe he hasn't entirely lost his magic.

They're so fixated on metaphorically circling each other that they both jump when the screen door bangs open and the rest of the family troops noisily into the kitchen. “Well, hello, Sleeping Beauty,” Dean says with a smile.

Cass catches a glimpse of Ellen studying her son's face carefully, before he looks down at the half-peeled egg in his hands and starts working on it again. “Hello, Dean,” he says innocently.

The rest of the day is – surprisingly pleasant, actually. Cass and Ellen seem to be entirely simpatico about maintaining absolute silence on the small matter of trying to eat each other alive before lunch, and because there are three new people for the elder Smiths to get acquainted with and two junior Smiths to embarrass with childhood stories, there's no lack of conversation.

Now that he's back on his feet, or at least as much as he ever is these days, Cass finds it pretty fun to be thrown into the deep end of a family's history and dynamics and have to teach himself how to swim. Bobby, who seems like the more easygoing parent, turns out to have a brutal, sarcastic sense of humor and a passionate love of ragging mercilessly on his kids, who reflexively treat his insults as though they were fond paternal praise. Cass prickles slightly when Bobby extends the same roughhousing to Claire, and then isn't sure how to take it when Claire seems to find that perfectly acceptable and possibly not that different from home.

Bobby is less brusque with Ellen, but Cass wouldn't say he's entirely gentle with her, either. The two of them are quintessentially old and married, lazily griping at each other for little habits they've obviously made fundamental peace with ages ago, but there's a certain softness in their eyes when they look at each other that feels like the distilled essence of decades' worth of love and loyalty. Now and then Bobby's hand lands on Ellen's back or neck as he passes by, a casual touch that still conveys a longing for connection, and it's a little weird and a little reassuring to see his own future with Dean in the crystal ball of their marriage – the way that someday the fire of Dean's lust for him may come to a smolder, but his hands will keep seeking out Cass just like they always have.

As for Ellen, when he finally gets to see her relaxed and more securely among her own people, he finds himself becoming kind of a fan. She's a little cooler than Bobby, laconic and sparing with her opinions, and Cass watches both of her children circle unconsciously around her, alert and attentive for signs of her approval. The therapist in Cass thinks it's probably not healthy, but the narcissist in him can't help but admire her. Even he catches himself falling for it a little, noticing when she slips into a moment of genuine laughter as if she can't stop herself, noticing the little sideways quirk of her mouth when someone tells a story that conjures up a particularly good memory for her. Even he catches himself feeling better about himself when Ellen's laugh or smile is because of him, and Jesus, no wonder she's the undisputed and unquestioned empress of this family. She's so fucking good, and he wants to be her so badly when he grows up.
She's powerful enough that when she and Bobby and Jo run out of lovingly mocking stories to tell about Dean's shitty high school band adventures and she asks Dean to get his guitar from upstairs and play for them, Cass knows he's going to do it, even though he blushes and protests that he's out of practice. "Oh, hush," Ellen says. "You could always play a song one time and remember it forever. I know you still know everyone's favorites." It takes another minute or two of cajoling, but of course Dean does it. Of course he was always going to.

His family might tease Dean about his younger rocker self, but Cass notices they're all on board when he settles down to tune his guitar; they are all three obviously fans. Cass is, too, of course; he loves Dean's smoky voice, and not just because he sometimes gets to hear it from the best seat in the house, which is wrapped in Dean's arms. "Okay," Dean says when he finds the chords he likes. "Where do I start?"

"Well, you know who I always want to hear," Ellen says, smiling at him, and Dean smiles back at her with such unself-conscious happiness that Cass aches with the ferocity of his desire to do damn near anything to preserve that bond. If he's gone into the red on chips, he'll earn back more. He'll do whatever it takes.

The answer turns out to be Springsteen, and Cass knows Dean must have played these songs hundreds of times before from the way he falls right into them, "Born to Run" into "Dancing in the Dark" into a version of "I'm On Fire" that Cass actually wishes were a little less sexy, because the back of his neck is sweating, and he'd rather not replace his reputation as the guy who's only here for Dean's money with a reputation as the guy who's only here for Dean's ass.

Fortunately, Bobby says, "Does anybody else get a turn around here or what?" which breaks the spell and takes Dean into a less hot set of his dad's favorite songs. Cass relaxes into his chair and gives himself permission to watch Dean's face and his hands while he plays "Running Down a Dream" and "Jack and Diane" and "Night Moves."

Dean takes a little break for some water, but performing seems to suit him, and he's nowhere near ready to stop. Cass doesn't know why he's surprised; Dean's a sweet and generous guy, but he's vain in his own way, and he's openly basking in this much affirmation from the people he loves. "I haven't forgotten about you, little mama," he says in a shitty Elvis voice in Jo's direction where she's tucked under Sam's arm on the couch, and she cracks up laughing.

"He was always so good with the girls," Ellen says dryly. Bobby grumbles her name at her in disapproval, but Dean just tosses her a quick seriously? eyebrow and starts in on "Seven Nation Army." He follows it up with a Red Hot Chili Peppers song that Cass doesn't recognize, but sounds exactly like all the Red Hot Chili Peppers songs he does know, bless their hearts, and closes out Jo's set with a surprisingly poignant, almost acapella "Wake Me Up When September Ends."

"You're really good at this," Sam tells him in surprise.

"Nah," Dean says, for form's sake. "I mean, the ones I've done a million times like this, I'm okay at."

"So how long do we have to hang around before you learn all our favorite songs?" Claire asks him.

"Who says I haven't?" he says, and maybe he's been plotting this all along, because suddenly he seems to know all the words to "Royals," and then to another song that Cass doesn't recognize but Claire obviously does, even though if Dean's version is in any way accurate to the original, Cass crankily thinks that she might be too young for it. Certainly somewhere around the one love, two mouths, one love, one house, no shirt, no blouse bit, Cass is wishing he'd gotten some kind of advisory sticker for this performance.
And he's got three more days in this house, and one night after that on the road, before he can do much about the situation that Dean is creating here. Suddenly Cass empathizes deeply with all the hopeful but ultimately disappointed girls who no doubt used to come around to all Dean's shows.

"You gonna sing one for Cass?" Sam says, the tease buried so deep in his voice that only the people who know him best can hear it.

Dean's eyes flick up to Cass', and the corner of Dean's mouth curves up just a bit at whatever he sees. "Not here," he says mildly, which is devastating like a fucking earthquake when all the implications hit.

"He knows I don't like anything but Journey," Cass says.

"You think I won't play 'Don't Stop Believing'?" Dean says, picking out the first couple of notes. "Wanna bet?"

Cass laughs, his throat still a little dry, but less raspy than before. "No, please. Uncle."

"Cass likes all this weird 80s electronica stuff," Dean tells everyone. "Way outside of my wheelhouse."

"What, you don't want to just bang out a little acoustic Echo & the Bunnymen?" Jo laughs.

Dean makes a face and says, "I don't even want to learn what a Bunnyman is."

"All right," Ellen says. "One more, and then let's let the superstar take a breather." She moves to perch on the arm of Bobby's chair and rests her arm around his shoulders, and they smile at each other like they know what comes next.

What comes next is "Wonderful Tonight," and Dean may be no Clapton, but he knocks that one out of the park, too, lingering warmly over just the right phrases like he's put years of craft into this arrangement. When he's done, Cass looks over at Ellen and Bobby and says, "That was your wedding song, right?"

Ellen cocks her head at him and says, "How did you know that?"

Dean laughs ruefully and says, "Mom, don't encourage him or he'll do his Amazing Kreskin act all night long."

"Oh, what, only you get to live for the stage?" Cass says.

"Uh, what is an Amazing Kreskin?" Claire says, and that launches Dean and Bobby into a surprisingly passionate lecture on the history of stage magic, of all things, which apparently they both love? Cass had no idea.

They keep at it for a few minutes, until Ellen interrupts by bringing in a tray of Old Fashioned glasses full of eggnog. "Any whiskey in these?" Bobby asks as he takes one.

"No, because we've got children and pregnant women here," Ellen says tartly.

"Well, I ain't either one," he grumbles.

"Nobody asked you, you old drunk," she says, and he smiles.

Everyone else takes a glass until the last one comes around to Dean. He glances at it and then quickly away, fiddling with the tuning keys on his guitar, and murmurs, "No, thank you."
“No?” Ellen says, and even though she doesn't raise her voice, Dean flinches a little. Cass can't really blame him. “You love eggnog.”

“I know, I just – it's – “

“Take it,” she says sharply, and Dean does. He shifts the guitar aside a little and balances the glass on his knee, the small crease of a frown between his eyebrows as he stares at it. “You're not going to be on this damn diet the whole time you're here, are you?” she says. “It's Christmas.”

“I know,” Dean says softly. “It's just – a little rich for so soon before bed.”

Cass notices that he's started to clench his own hands around the arms of his chair, and he makes himself breathe and release. He's seen a variation on this go down a hundred times since he met Dean – hell, usually he's the one giving Dean shit, although sometimes it's Jo, and once in a while even Sam will throw his weight around to get Dean to try some of his homebrew – but Dean's reactions always range between grumpy and kind of playful, depending on how much of his resistance is for show that particular day. Right now he looks tense and miserable, and Cass realizes with a little wrenching sensation that there's no complete separation of Dean's love of his mother from his fear of her. He glances over at Claire, who's watching the whole thing with wide eyes, and although his fuck-ups as a father have been legion and are no doubt not over, he thinks she'll never understand this kind of love mixed with the threat of punishment – the love of a parent like Dean's or a childhood God like Cass’ – and he lets himself be proud of that.

“I know you're hungry,” Ellen says, sounding frustrated, and – and Cass can empathize with her, too, he really can. How many years has she been worried about this, worried that she was failing at the most basic of her responsibilities: keeping her own child fed? He knows Dean's weird food issues go back a long time, and they must have been even more dramatic when he was a teenager – isn't everybody more dramatic then? “All you had at dinner was a few bites of chicken and some peas.”

“I'm not hungry,” Dean says.

“Don't you think you've lied to me enough?” she snaps, and the whole room seems to stop breathing at once.

Dean's chin jerks up so he's looking at her, and for a moment they're frozen, each of them feeling each other out, looking for the edges of this new zone they've found themselves in since Friday, August 29th. “Well, Mom,” he says very carefully, “it doesn't always seem like there's a point to telling you the truth. I mean, I just did, and it's not like you listened.”

“Oh, I listened,” she says. “Just because I think you're making stupid decisions doesn't mean I'm not listening.”

“Stupid decisions?” Dean repeats, amazement warring with hurt in his voice. “When have I ever done anything – name one thing I've ever done without thinking it over. And I've done okay so far, haven't I? I mean, everything is – my life is pretty – a lot of people would say I'm doing really well, actually.”

“Why are you selling your house?”

It comes out of the blue for Cass, and from the way Dean's eyebrows go up, it's not what he was expecting, either. “Is this about my--? It's not even a house, Mom, it's an apartment. I'm selling it so I can buy a bigger place in the suburbs. That's not a stupid decision, it's literally what people are supposed to do. When they're – when they're ready to start a family.”
Ellen points in the direction of the couch and says, “Bailing out your sister's mistakes is not starting a family.”

“Hey, okay!” Joanna says, pressing her hand on Sam's thigh to push herself from her recline into her best attempt at a fighting position. “Just to be clear, you mean your granddaughter, right?”

“Joanna doesn't listen to me and she never has,” Ellen says, still talking straight to Dean like she can't even see or hear Jo. “But you were never like this. You don't just come out with these half-baked surprises. Now all of a sudden you want to throw everything about your life up in the air, change everything all at once, make all these choices you can never take back again-- “

Dean sets the glass back on the tray she's still holding and stands up. Every muscle in his body looks tense, and his voice grinds out through his tight jaw, but Cass can see him practicing his diaphragmatic breathing like the A+ therapy student that he is. “If I change my mind about the eggnog, I know how to find the fridge,” he says. “If I change my mind about the house, I'll sell it, too. And if I change my mind about marrying Cass, I'm sure you'll be the first person I tell, Mom. Goodnight.”

It's a pretty great exit, mostly because they all help him out by maintaining absolute, stunned silence while he heads up the stairs, until Bobby finally rubs his forehead and says, “Well, hell, Ellen, that ain't quite what I call letting him be.”

“I don't want to hear it,” she says, and Cass thinks it's supposed to come out in a snap, but she sounds a little choked. She turns on her heel and disappears back into the kitchen.

“This has been fun,” Cass says, because he's not a person who can let be, either. He knocks his eggnog back, really wishing Bobby had held firm on that whiskey thing, and stands up. “Can't wait to find out how we're all going to top this tomorrow.”

“She's not mad at Dean, she's mad at me,” Jo says. “I just didn't think she'd take it out on him like that, I'm sorry.”

“She's not mad at either of you,” Bobby says. He probably says something else after that, but Cass figures it's for Jo and her parents to work out, so he just heads upstairs to where he has jurisdiction to interfere.

He knocks a little on Dean's door before pushing it open. Dean half-turns his head from where he's sitting at a desk, and Cass comes up behind him and strokes over his shoulders. “How are you?” he says softly.

“Ohay,” Dean says, a little robotically. “I'm sorry. I know you were right – what you said before about having to work harder. I should've...tried harder.”


He hasn't had a chance until now to look around Dean's bedroom. It's like every room Dean's responsible for, blandly handsome as a hotel room. The furniture is a matched set made of lovely golden-brown wood – bed frame and dresser and desk and a rocking chair – and the carpet and bedspread and pillows are navy blue. There's a stereo within reach of the bed, and a tall plastic tower of CDs on either side of it, the only especially modern-looking touches, and other than the guitar Dean's tossed on the bed, anything he might still keep here that's a sentimental memento of his childhood is stored away out of sight. For the first time Cass wonders if Dean decorates the way he does not because he's apathetic or uncertain of his own tastes, but because he's been seeking security for so long in the privacy of being unseen and unknowable. How much of Dean's life has been
wrapped around this fear that he's most at risk of discovery and betrayal in his own home? Cass, who didn't decide to try absolutely everything in life and see how it all shook out until he was in his mid-twenties, isn't sure he can really imagine the weight of it all.

He's sure he doesn't have the power to lift the weight for Dean, either, so he does the only thing he can do and kisses the top of Dean's head. Dean covers Cass' hand with his own where it rests on his shoulder, and they stand like that for a minute until Dean tries to lighten the mood by saying, “I should've just told her you don't approve of me putting on weight. She already doesn't like you.”

“No, you're just getting the narrative all confused,” Cass says. “I'm the trophy wife.”

Dean turns to look at him, his eyes narrowing slightly, and Cass remembers too late that he wasn't going to tell Dean about all that. “What?” Dean says.

“Uh. It's – nothing, just – she said something while we were working on lunch that kind of made it sound like....” He freezes, trying to think of a framing device for this story that will make it sound awkward, but in a funny way.

“Made it sound like what? Cass, tell me.”

He shrugs a little. “Like she thought I was kind of – taking advantage of how well you're doing and how generous you can be. You know, you're rich, I'm cute....”

It doesn't sound awkward or funny to Dean, if his scowl is anything to go by. “She said that to you?”

“Not...in those exact words. She didn't call me cute, I promise.”

Dean stands up, forcing Cass to jump out of the way of his rolling desk chair. “Pack your bag. Whatever you need for tonight and tomorrow – Claire, too. We'll go to a hotel.”

“No – Dean, come on,” Cass says.

“Yes,” Dean says, and this is exactly why Cass has always felt that Dean's spirit animal is a bull – he's a peaceable, herd-oriented herbivore, right up until his herd is threatened, when he turns into a thousand pounds of pure muscle. “I didn't bring you here to be talked to that way. Not by anyone.”

Cass has never been quite sure what his own spirit animal is, but probably a stupid one, because he puts his hand against Dean's chest and stands his ground like he has a chance in hell of not being trampled. “Dean, think about this. Think about it. She's upset because she feels cut out of your life, okay? All these huge things are happening to you, and they're happening without her. Her last kid just moved out. She's not going to be around her grandkid that much. She doesn't know if either of you need her anymore, and she's not used to that feeling.”

“Don't defend her,” Dean says. “Her feelings don't give her some automatic right to--”

“It's not about rights. I'm trying to tell you that leaving right now makes it so much worse. I'm being selfish, okay? I have to stay, because if I walk out of here with you tonight, then I'm always the guy who literally took you away from them, from your home. It doesn't matter who's in the right and who's in the wrong. If we go now, you'll feel bad in a few days or a few weeks, and you'll make up with her. Great, I want you to. But I'm pretty sure we're talking about years before I get a second chance. Am I right?” Dean looks down. “Okay,” Cass says, curving his hand around Dean's face and stroking over Dean's cheek with his thumb. “I'm not saying I can win her over this week. But you have to give me a chance to try. We'll both regret it if I don't even try.”

Dean puts his hand behind Cass' neck and sighs. “If you change your mind--”
“I'll appeal to you for rescue post-haste,” Cass promises with a little kiss to the corner of Dean's mouth. He tries to withdraw virtuously after that, but Dean holds him steady and tilts into it, brushing his lips against Cass' until Cass slips his arms around Dean's waist and groans a little into the kiss. “You're up to something,” Cass accuses. “I know when you're trying to butter me up.”

“I can't just miss you?” Dean murmurs.

“I'm right here.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I just like it when you say it,” Cass teases.

There's no return tease in Dean's voice when he says, “Stay. Spend the night.” Cass knows all the reasons it's smarter not to, but he can't get a single one of them out before Dean says, “I understand about saving our chips, but there's such a thing as a show of strength, too. I have to do something to stand up for us, don't I?”

“You did,” Cass says. “You are doing it.” He risks one more kiss, scoring his nails lightly over the small of Dean's back through his shirt, and it only confirms his hypothesis, so he pulls back to say, “I can't sleep next to you. You've got me way too wound up.”

“I could wear you out first,” Dean says in that sex-growl that Cass would swear he rehearses.

“Okay, gorgeous, settle down,” Cass says, extricating himself from Dean's arms. “Not that I'm not happy to be your decade-plus-late teenage rebellious phase, but I need a little more privacy than this.”

“No, you don't,” Dean says, sounding a little outraged and a lot amused. “You love messing around at inappropriate times and places. It's kind of your thing.”

“I wouldn't say it's my thing,” Cass says, trying to sound dignified and respectable. “I appreciate the value of spontaneity, sure.” Dean gives him a look. “Okay, but details matter. Risk of discovery leads to the potential kinky thrill of everybody knowing I'm fucking the sexiest human being who ever lived, and I like that. In this case, risk of discovery leads to – what? You getting to prove to your mother that you aggressively don't care what she thinks of your boyfriend? Not so thrilling for me.”

“Who ever lived, huh?” Dean says with a little smile. “Careful. You're gonna make me full of myself.”

Cass kisses him quickly. “Just remember it's not an unbiased assessment. I have a little crush on you.”

“Even better,” Dean says.

Cass is so keyed up he's almost giddy with it when they finally quit kissing each other goodnight and he stumbles drunkenly into the guest room alone. He's not even horny – well, that's not quite true, but it's not the horniness that he knows is affecting him. It's just Dean.

He's a million miles away from being able to sleep, so he meditates and reads on his phone, hoping he'll bore himself into a more restful state, but it doesn't really work. Claire creeps into the room around midnight, and he says, “I thought you might be walking back to Cleveland.”

She snorts as she unzips her suitcase, and he turns the bedside lamp on to make her life easier. “We just watched Rudolph.”
“Well, that sounds very cozy,” Cass snipes, startled by how quickly and viscerally he reacts against the idea. He's already going to spend the rest of his life splitting Dean's love and loyalty with these people – that's not enough?

“Well, I mean – do you want me to be nice to them or not?” she says. She sounds tired.

“Yeah,” he says. “I'm sorry – yeah, of course. You're doing great, kitten.”

She takes her things to the bathroom and comes back a few minutes later. He leaves the light on until she's settled into her sleeping bag, and when he clicks it off again, there's only the glow of both their phone screens, splashes of color in the dark. “How's Dean?” she asks quietly.

“Good,” Cass says, but the reality is he has no idea, and guilt is starting to set in. Yeah, spending the night in Dean's room would have been uncomfortably freighted with intentional and unintentional meaning; yes, Cass was right that the safest route is to avoid compounding Dean's small rebellion by further taking it on themselves to rewrite the guest-host contract. But safety isn't the only virtue in the world, and it's never even been Cass' favorite.

Once he starts to think about it, it's impossible not to obsess about how Dean must be feeling, isolated in the boring bedroom where he's always stored his secrets out of sight, probably brooding about just what kind of consequence he'll face in the morning for taking one step outside of his sanctioned role as the family's golden child. It's been twelve years since Dean took the plunge and snuck his boyfriend into that bedroom, and it kills Cass that the price Dean had to pay was one more lie of omission to the people he loves most, but isn't it as bad or worse that the price Dean has to pay for being honest is that he's alone right now?

Yes, is the answer.

Claire doesn't stir when he gets up and finds his shoes, or when he steps over her to get out the door; he wonders briefly if he's setting a terrible example, but honestly, at sixteen she's already figured out that sneaking out of the house is possible.

He isn't sure if it's okay to open Dean's door uninvited – he has a key to Dean's apartment, but he's never had cause to use it – so he knocks softly instead. He has to do it three times before Dean opens the door, wearing his Stanford Baseball shirt and boxers and rubbing his eye sleepily. It doesn't seem like he was lying awake and suffering after all, but before Cass can apologize for waking him up, Dean gives him a slow smile that steals his breath. “Changed your mind?” he rumbles, reaching for Cass.

“No, no,” Cass says, deflecting Dean with his palm against Dean's wrist. “I have a counter-offer. Let's go somewhere.” Dean tilts his head and blinks. “Come on, this is a city – basically. There must be something open late. Let's get a drink, or – pancakes, or something, I don't care. Let's just get out of here. You and me.”

“You and me,” Dean repeats softly. “Yeah, that – that sounds pretty good. Let me – pants.”

Dean goes through Sam's coat on the hooks by the door until he finds Sam's keys. “Can you drive a minivan?” Cass asks him as he holds the front door open. “It's a lot different from a Prius.”

“My first car was an F-150,” Dean says. “Trust me, I can handle Sam's dumb Honda.”

“I love that little bit of good ol' boy you put on that,” Cass says. “It's so sexy on you.” Dean just shakes his head and smiles a little.

It's snowing out – not heavily, but enough that the roads are slick and there are flakes scattered over
the shoulders of Dean's black wool coat when they get into the diner that Dean drives them to, and Cass' hands are red and damp. "It's not supposed to add up to more than half an inch," Cass reports, scrolling through his phone's weather app. "That's not a lot, right?"

"I also know how to drive in snow," Dean says mildly. "Quit worrying."

"You know, if I told you quit worrying every time you researched a contingency--"

"You do," Dean says. "You tell me that pretty much constantly."

"I say it much more empathetically than that," Cass grumbles.

The diner sits one block over from the local hospital, and most everyone in here has the weary look of out-of-town ER visitors or the differently weary look of hospital staff – or maybe it's just the bright fluorescent lighting, which tends to make everyone look vaguely miserable. Everything is done up in a checkerboard of black and white tiles with chrome and red vinyl seats, with menus both on the tables and on a changeable letter board above the counter. Dean slides into an empty booth and pulls Cass in next to him, placing one arm around Cass' shoulders and one menu on the table between them. "Oh, look," he says blandly, "their shake flavor of the month is eggnog. So festive."

Cass turns his head slightly to muffle a laugh against Dean's arm, and then says as seriously as he can, "Want me to buy you one?"

"Is this on you?"


It's good that they can joke around, but even though he knows it's a joke, a part of him is disappointed when Dean just follows his order of mozzarella sticks and a cup of tomato soup by asking for coffee. "Not hungry?" Cass asks as casually as he can when the waitress leaves.

"I'm always hungry." Dean's tone is as carefully casual, but it's not something he usually admits, and Cass doesn't underestimate the importance of the fact that he just said it.

Cass doesn't respond right away, and Dean just waits him out, because obviously that's the kind of thing that requires a response of some kind. He waits until the water and coffee arrive and the waitress is gone again before he says, "You know that's not the case for most people, right?"

"I know," Dean says. "Look, I know I overreacted today--"

"I don't care about that," Cass says. "I'm not here to tell you how to react, or what to eat, for that matter."

"Uh-huh," Dean says, and Cass has to admit he's more than earned the skepticism in Dean's voice. Cass sighs. "I'm not going to sit here and claim that I always make the healthiest decisions, especially when I'm – stressed out. But...I mean, it's not always as bad as this week. I stay really busy and active, and I always have enough energy; I go to the doctor twice a year, I know my health is good. I know that...you're right when you say that.... I know you're right about a lot of it. But I'm just.... If I'm doing okay right now, and there's so much going on in my life.... I don't think I'm really ready to change yet. The – the consistency is still working for me. Right now."

It's the closest he's ever heard Dean come to admitting that he regiments his food so carefully at least in part as a bulwark against disorder – which of course Cass knew anyway, but it's good to know that Dean knows. "That's fair," he says. "I just want to raise one point. We're talking about fostering older kids, and I think we have to be prepared in advance for a pretty wide range of possibilities
there. We don't know what they're going to come to us with, but we can make some safe assumptions. They're likely to have some combination of neglect and control and abuse in their history. They'll almost definitely come with the real world's normal supply of self-esteem issues, and issues around their right to take care of themselves, their bodies, sex and sexuality – all the hits, you know? And what we say and do around them is going to matter. I just want to put it out there that we need to be on the same page with some stuff before we get to that point.”

Dean opens his mouth a couple of times, then frowns and nods. “I hadn't thought about it like that, but that's a really good point. I – really will think about that, okay?”

“Okay,” Cass says. “Hey, that's all I ask. We have time.”

To prove his sincere commitment to being less of an overbearing douchebag, at least on this topic, he doesn't even offer Dean any of his mozzarella sticks when they come, even though he can tell Dean is keeping a careful eye on him as he tears each in half and dips it in his soup. He's making bets with himself about whether or not Dean will ask for one when he's startled by the long drawl of an unfamiliar voice saying, “Why, Dean Smith, as I live and breathe.”

It doesn't strike him as so odd that someone might know Dean, in the town where he grew up and a restaurant that he picked, but he feels Dean's arm tense up where it's still resting against Cass' back, and that gets his attention. Cass looks up at the speaker, and sees a handsome middle-aged man carrying styrofoam take-out boxes – no, younger than that; Cass was briefly misled by the gray dappled through his hair and beard, but he's younger than Cass. He's tall and, Cass thinks, looks even taller than he is because of his lean build and the graceful way he moves as he walks toward their table. “Hi,” Dean says. “I – hi. God, I didn't expect – obviously, but – it's so late.”

The man smiles a bit and says, “I just finished work. I'm the front-of-house manager at the Monarch now. Don't usually have to close the place up, but a lot of folks are gone for the holidays.”

“I love that place,” Dean says.

He smiles again and says, “I know. It's good to see you.”

All at once it falls together, and before he can stop himself, Cass says, “Holy shit. You're Benny.”

It's so rude; he might as well say, Hello, I'm the total stranger who knows an incredibly weird amount about your personal life.


“Well, congratulations, both of you,” Benny says, offering Cass his hand.

“I love your accent,” Cass says as he accepts it. “Dean always leaves out the sexy accents when he tells a story; it's probably his worst flaw.” Dean says his name helplessly under his breath, but Benny just chuckles and gives him a deep nod to acknowledge the compliment. “You want to sit down?”

He glances to Dean. “I don't want to intrude....”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Cass says. “Please, sit.”

Whatever he sees on Dean's face must read like permission, because he sets his food down and slides into the booth across from them. “So – engaged,” he says. “That's exciting.”

“Well, it's not really – there's no date or anything,” Dean says. “Right now I'm getting ready to sell my place so we can buy a house, and Jo's about to have a baby. So we figured we'd wait on making serious wedding plans until things are a little calmer.”
“Naw, that can't be right,” Benny says. “Jo's a little scrap of a thing, pigtails, banged-up knees....”

“Yeah, she got a little older,” Dean says ruefully, and Benny shakes his head over the vagaries of time. “What about you, are you--?” He stops abruptly as he realizes it's a little fraught to come right out and ask if his ex is seeing anyone else.

Benny seems determined to ignore their every attempt to make things awkward, though. He just smiles and says, “No big news to share, no. Just enjoying life. So how'd you two meet?”

They should probably have a cover story for this, judging by how Dean apparently reacts to that question when uncoached. “Uhh,” he says, flushing guiltily, “there's not really a – story, just – out. Socially.”

“He's just trying not to embarrass me,” Cass says. He has to do everything around here. “We were at the same bar, and I was too nervous to chat him up until I bolted – well, let's just call it more than the recommended dosage of whiskey sours. He made sure I got home and tucked safely into bed, like the angel he is.” Eh, it's basically true. “Obviously I wasn't going to let him get away after that.”

Benny gives Dean a fond glance. “Yeah. They don't make 'em like Dean anymore.”

Dean frowns down at his fingertips where they rest against the rim of his coffee mug. “I'm no angel,” he says shortly. “I've done things I'm not-- I've hurt people. Who didn't deserve it.”

“Maybe,” Benny says. His blue eyes are kind, even tender, where they rest on Dean. It's an intimate sort of gaze, but not one that makes Cass uncomfortable. It makes him happy, actually, to see for himself that Dean wasn't whitewashing or over-romanticizing his first love – that he really did have someone who took care of Dean the way Dean takes care of everyone around him. “You're easy to forgive, though. How's your family?”

Dean shrugs a little. “They're – you know. Good. They don't change much. They're good. Your dad?”

He hesitates just briefly, then says, “Passed about three years ago.”

“Oh. Oh – God, Benny, I'm sorry.” Benny gives him another of those graceful thank you nods. That's so classy; Cass wonders if he could pull off that gesture if he tried it. “He was always so nice to me,” Dean says softly. “I – I wish I'd known.”

“Well, he liked you,” Benny says.

“George used to help us set up when we did shows,” he says to Cass. “Taught us how to handle all the speakers and sound equipment and everything. He was a musician. Benny, I – I really am sorry I couldn't – pay my respects.”

“Are you on Facebook?” Dean nods. “You should look me up. I think it'd be nice to see baby pictures and wedding pictures and whatnot. As long as it's all right with--”

Even though Benny nods in Cass’ direction, the whole idea that Cass would put his foot down over something like that is so alien to him that it takes a minute to process. “Of course,” he says. “Yeah, of course it's all right with me; I think you should.”

It's not the kind of world, in Cass' experience, where it's smart to lose a friend you don't have to. They don't come along so often.

“I'm afraid I'm half asleep,” Benny says, sliding out of the seat. “Not used to these late nights
anymore. It was good to see you, though, Dean. You look good. You look happy.”

“I am,” he says. “I hope you are.”


“Yeah, I'm famous for those,” Cass says.

Dean waits until Benny is out the door before he fully exhales with an involuntary low whining sound and reaches for Cass' lukewarm mozzarella sticks. “You're fine,” Cass says, rubbing a circle over Dean's back while he snaps one in half and puts the whole thing in his mouth at once. “That was fine.”

“This town is going to give me a damn heart attack,” Dean mutters.

“You were great,” Cass assures him. “And he seems really nice. Cute, but not as cute as me, which I approve of.” It gets a slight eye-roll and a smile from Dean, as Cass was hoping. “You really have a thing for the blue-eyed boys, though, don't you?”

“Please,” Dean scoffs, almost sounding like himself again. “I've never been interested in boys.”

Cass leans further into the curve of Dean's arm and lets his eyelids drift downward. He's exhausted, too, not that he'd ever admit it. “What song did you always sing for Benny, back when you were dating?” he asks.

“I don't remember,” Dean mumbles.

“Don't lie to me,” Cass says. “It's so much weirder if you act like you have to lie.”

Dean sighs and reaches for another mozzarella stick. “It was 'Maps.'”

Cass nods thoughtfully. “Reasonably cool song.”

“I'm a reasonably cool guy,” Dean says dryly.

“Are you, though?” Cass says.

It gets a smile out of Dean, which was the mission. “I really feel like I could've picked a lot of people who would've been way nicer to me than you are,” he says.

“Could've,” Cass says, dozy and content, pressed close enough to Dean to hear his heart. “But you didn't.”

When Cass wakes up in the guest room, he's still fully dressed, just the way he collapsed when he came in, and his mouth still feels hot and a little tender from all those endless goodnight kisses. He doesn't remember making it into bed, but he remembers the kissing like a lucid dream – pressed up against the wall of the stairwell with the railing digging into his back and Dean's hands tight on his hips, both of them slurring drunken whispers into the kisses – we should and no, I know and you want--? and don't, don't stop.

Cass smiles at the ceiling, still feeling the buzz playing across the surface of his skin. There's no drug in the world like Dean, and Cass has tried them all.
It's the morning of Christmas Eve. There's snow on the ground and Cass feels full of the spirit of the season – hope and peace, family and generosity. Christmas hasn't meant anything to him for a long time, other than a vague guilt and compensating sense of defiance over how he's never been able to provide all the safe and happy memories for his daughter that other parents can; he's not so broke he can't buy her something nice, but it's never so obvious as it is at Christmas how isolated the two of them are, ticking off year after year with nothing much to believe in except their ghosts.

He didn't just want to come here for Dean. He hasn't admitted it to anyone, but he was hoping this year would – mean something to Claire – make her feel like part of something normal for once. So far the jury is out on that one, but he hasn't given up yet.

It's barely nine o'clock when he talks himself into getting out of bed and making a half-assed attempt at getting ready for the day, which mainly consists of changing his shirt and brushing his fingers through his hair. The house is weirdly quiet as he heads downstairs, and he makes it all the way into the kitchen before there are signs of other life forms – specifically, Ellen sitting at the table scrolling through Dean's phone while Dean rolls out a thin dough on the counter.

“Look at your cute sweater,” Cass says, putting a hand on the back of Dean's shoulder. It's black and heavy, with a row of white reindeer stitched in angular Scandinavian style across his chest. “You look like a hot European ski instructor. I can't decide if your name is Klaus or Leif, though.”

“Jeez, Cass,” he says, visibly embarrassed but not really displeased. “Little early in the morning for improv class, isn't it?”


“Morning,” she says. “There's a quiche in the fridge, so feel free to heat yourself up a piece if you're hungry. This morning is catch-as-catch-can.”

“Sam and Jo are sleeping late,” Dean tells him. “And Dad took Claire with him to pick up the tree.”

“There's a tree?” Cass was kind of surprised the Smiths didn't have one, but he wasn't going to bring it up.

“My family is very strict about Christmas decorating,” Dean explains. “It happens on Christmas Eve, and everything stays up for twelve and only twelve days.”

“Because that's how you do it,” Ellen says. “Dean, is that starting to dry out? Drip a little more water on it.”

Dean runs his hand under the faucet and flicks a little water on the dough. “I can't get over you baking from scratch,” Cass says. “I had no idea you could bake. What is that, pie crust? I could be eating homemade pie every day and I'm not?”

“Pie is a sometimes food,” Dean says. “Surely we can come together and agree on this. Also, you can bake. I've seen you do it.”

“Yeah, it tastes better when someone does it for you.”

“Quit breathing on my crust,” Dean tells him, shifting back a little to nudge Cass away with his shoulder. “God, you're like a cat. You either won't return my calls or you're putting your paws right in the middle of whatever I'm trying to focus on. You have no middle setting.” He's doing his best not to smile, and he comes so close to pulling it off.

“Fine, I know when I'm not wanted,” Cass says, and moves away to investigate this quiche situation.
He settles in next to Ellen with his quiche and his coffee, and finds out that she's looking over the houses that Dean has bookmarked on Zillow. She and Dean resume their conversation about house-hunting, most of which is stuff Cass already knows and doesn't have much to add to, so he's able to relax and enjoy his breakfast. “All of this is estimated, really,” Dean says as he washes his hands. “Until we know how much my place sells for, we won't have hard numbers to work with, and the real estate agent says there's no reason even to put it on the market until after the holidays.”

“But you're estimating that you can find a place this size for about what you're paying now.”

“Yeah,” Dean says. “Location, you know? My apartment is crazy expensive, and it's worth more than I paid for it because of all the work they've done on the building and the rest of the block. We can get a ton of space if we buy far enough out. Obviously that creates some extra expenses; Cass and Claire will both need cars and insurance and all that, but that shouldn't be a problem, since he'll have the money he's spending now on rent.”

Ellen cuts Cass a sharp glance, and Cass just smiles and sips his coffee. “That money won't go toward the mortgage?”

“No, Mom,” Dean says with a little sigh of forced patience. “I'm buying the house. Everyone's going to be paying into the household account for utilities and food and all, but the mortgage is mine. Like I said, if we do it right, it shouldn't be much more than I'm paying now.”

She sets the phone down on the table and leans back, one arm resting on the back of her chair. “So you buy a house,” she says, “and your sister and her child and whatever boyfriends the two of you have just live there for free, forever. That's your big plan?”

Well, that took a quick turn. Dean chucks the floured cutting board and rolling pin into the sink with more force than necessary, but he's obviously still struggling to keep a light tone as he says, “It's not whatever boyfriends, Mom. These are the boyfriends. There's no line-up change coming.”

“It's fair that she's worried, though,” Cass tries to remind him. “Both these relationships are less than a year old; this is happening a lot faster than normal.”

“Whose side are you on?” Dean grumbles, and Cass tries not to roll his eyes. “Mom, this isn't about just – letting people crash at my house. Yeah, I'm investing more in this financially, because I make way more money than they do, but I don't understand-- Since when is that how we measure a family? Sam saved the IT department from being downsized by letting the company cut his position; he got a severance package, which by the way he's already put into a college fund for Robin, and they hired him to head up his old team as a part-time contractor. So yeah, he's making less, but he can work almost completely from home, which means that in a few months when Jo is ready, she can get a job at a garage and Sam will be home with the baby. The last thing Sam is doing is freeloading; without him, we'd be plowing everything Jo makes right back into child-care costs. And because Cass is self-employed, he can already control how much work he takes on. So for now, he'll do what he's already doing, and cutting his expenses means he can add in the cars and save more for Claire's college expenses. But after we're in the new house and after the wedding, we'll be applying as foster parents, and he can cut down to however much work makes sense for him to do. Given that if it was just me, with my work schedule I'd have to wait until after retirement to have kids -- I mean, Cass is what makes that possible for me now. So yeah, I don't consider any of that living off my dime. I consider that what families do.”

Ellen doesn't say anything, but she picks the phone back up and takes another look at the last house on the screen, which to Cass' eye implies that she hasn't completely washed her hands of this insane project yet. Dean looks like he's struggling with the whether or not to keep pushing her to validate the whole thing, and Cass tries to communicate silently that he should really shut up and let this
percolate a little longer.

The tension is broken by three long, loud honks from outside the house. “Go help your father with the tree,” Ellen says, and Dean does it immediately. Cass puts his plate and mug in the dishwasher and follows suit.

And then the most amazing thing happens. Cass, who isn't wearing any shoes, contributes by holding the door while Bobby and Dean wrangle a giant fir tree inside, and Claire comes in after them, stomping the slush off her boots and wiping uselessly at the staticky hair clinging to her knitted hat and forehead as she pulls the hat off. She gives Cass a hug for no apparent reason, and Bobby swears up a storm, and Sam and Jo amble downstairs and are put in charge of untangling strings of lights, and everything just gets–

Really good.

Oh, there's widespread dissent over whether or not the tree is level in its stand, over uneven bare patches on the tree, about yea or nay on Christmas music – there's every bit of what Cass is coming to realize is the baseline Smith level of crankiness and perfectionism and judgment. But for the first time Cass gets what all that looks like when it works, when all their eccentricity takes the supporting role and what's front and center is how they know each other and love each other and fit here in this unchanging, reliable, trustworthy home together. And somehow he and Claire and Sam all fit, too – at least for now, at least while they're helping unpack plastic greenery and old, unmatched ornaments that all have a story to be told.

Maybe it's the Christmas Spirit or whatever. Maybe it's just a sign that things are bound to get better if they just slow down and don't push so hard and let it happen organically. Cass doesn't know what's going right or if they can keep it going, but he's not going to question it right now.

“I don't know what to do with this,” Claire confesses after she's been entrusted with a box that turns out to contain a wooden nativity scene.

“Oh, come on, you do, too,” Cass says, peering inside the box and rifling through the figurines. “Manger, baby, camels. All pretty standard stuff.”

She sits on the floor in front of the coffee table with a sigh and begins fitting the roof pieces onto the manger. “Nobody's going to get offended if I get things in the wrong place, though, right?”

“Try to resist the urge to replace the Virgin Mary with the best-looking shepherd, and I think you'll be all right,” he says.

“No, she can stay,” Claire says. “Otherwise the whole thing's a total sausage-fest. Can I replace Joseph with an angel, though? I mean, angels are technically nonbinary, so that's cool.”

“No, you may not turn their very nice nativity scene into any variety of queer studies art installation. Can you just try being a normal person for ten minutes? I promise it won't kill you.” Claire wrinkles her nose, but she compliantly assembles the pieces without further creative flair.

“So I gather you're not a particularly religious family,” Bobby says dryly.

Cass startles a bit, having forgotten that – right, not everybody kind of – automatically gets the way he and Claire talk to each other. “Oh,” he says, stumbling a little, “uh – we're just playing around. No disrespect intended.”

“You're all right,” Bobby says. “Just wondered if you'd be coming to church with us tonight.”
He glances at Dean, who shrugs to indicate that it's up to Cass. "Probably, sure," he says. "I'm not really-- I was raised Catholic, but I guess now I lean more-- "

"We're atheists," Claire says.

"--Buddhist," Cass says at the same time. Everyone looks puzzled, and Cass decides the way to go with this is just to steer into it, because the Novaks are a deeply puzzling people and that's not going to change anytime soon. "I consider myself sort of atheist-Buddhist-Catholic," he says airily. "I'm working my way through alphabetically. Up next is Druidism, looking forward to that. Trees and... so forth. Should be a good time."

There's dead silence for a second, until finally Ellen laughs. "You sure got yourself an odd duck, Dean," she says.

"Yeah, he's – one of a kind," Dean agrees.

Claire elbows him and says, "But right, I can't act normal for ten minutes," and Cass can't do much but shrug.

Thankfully the Smiths seem to have a high bar for blasphemy, or else they've already learned that it doesn't pay to hold Cass too stringently to anything he says. Either way, the mood recovers quickly, and everyone goes back to laughing and nitpicking about food and music and plastic holly centerpieces and ancient grievances that seem to be as cherished as the good memories. Cass is pretty sure it's normal. It's the kind of normal that he likes to hope is normal, anyway -- the kind he'd like his own kids' significant others to be confused and charmed by when they come to Cleveland for Christmas, years from now.

Everyone winds up pleasantly wiped out by mid-afternoon. Claire is power-napping on the couch and Dean is back in the kitchen with his mother and Joanna. Cass can't think of anything he can do with either of them except annoy them at the moment, so he's all for it when he gets invited into the basement to drink beer with Bobby and Sam.

The basement seems like it once had aspirations toward being a full-fledged Man Cave, but other than a stereo and a pool table and a single recliner, it's mostly been taken over by storage over the years. Cass finds a steamer trunk to sit on and drink while Sam goes on about his new homebrewing hobby and his plans for expansion once they're in the bigger place. Cass has heard it before, so he lets his attention wander.

He doesn't mean to interrupt, but when he realizes that what he first took for an ordinary steel door, maybe to a furnace or a wine cellar, has a heavy combination lock built into it, he can't help saying, "What's that?"

Sam breaks off and follows his line of sight. Cass is sitting close enough to him on the trunk that he can feel Sam tense up slightly, and Cass can't blame him; the thing does have a bit of a creepy vibe to it. He wants to make a joke about where previous boyfriends' bodies are stored, but -- he's not feeling it. The thing is off somehow, and he's learned to take these gut reactions of wariness seriously.

"Oh," Bobby says, scratching his beard. "That's-- I have -- some guns. I installed the safe when the kids were little, and Ellen's happier when they're out of sight now anyway."

The door is definitely a door, so the thing is less of a safe and more of a vault. "Some, huh?" Cass says.

"I'm not preparing for the black helicopters," Bobby says. "There's a couple of hunting rifles, and all
the rest are-- I collect interesting guns. Mostly Colts; I inherited a couple of antiques from an uncle, and after that I got interested in the history of 'em. Either of you boys hunt?"

Sam shakes his head. "My father did," he says. "But he never could talk me into it."

Bobby huffs a laugh. "Yeah, I tried to teach Dean and Joanna both. He didn't like getting dirty in the woods, and she loved the idea, but never could pull the trigger. Ah, they're good kids. They're just both – sensitive. In their own ways."

"I used to," Cass says. "Haven't needed to for a long time, but I learned a little when I lived in Central America. Can we see your collection?"

There's not a collector alive who can resist that question, and Bobby is no exception. He unlocks the safe, which is definitely a vault, plenty big enough for the three of them to stand inside. The guns hang on the walls, easily fifty of them, mostly World War II and Cold War-era models, and Cass lets his eyes fall half-shut, adjusting to the energy of them.

The thing about guns is that they want to be fired. They're not evil, not by any means – Cass doesn't even believe in evil, really, but he does believe that everything that exists wants to become itself, has a will to live up to its potential. He's handled a lot of guns, and it's always – unbalancing. They're creatures of enormous will, and Cass knows exactly how crazy that sounds, but he feels what he feels. He can't see himself ever being a collector, but he does understand the fascination and the respect that weapons like these command. He even shares it, to an extent.

"This one's my real treasure," Bobby says, removing an antique revolver from a plexiglass case attached to the wall. "It's an 1836 Colt Paterson, one of the first handguns ever made that used cap-and-ball technology instead of flintlock. It's probably worth a fortune, but I'd sell every organ I had before I let it leave the family."

"Wow," Sam says, taking it into his hands and turning it over and over. "I can't believe this is almost two hundred years old. What's it say – this engraving? Is this Latin?"

"Non timebo mala," Bobby says.

"I fear no evil," Cass murmurs, and Bobby nods. Sam passes it along to Cass, and he weighs it carefully across both of his hands. He can feel the age of it, and the – purity. It's different from other guns Cass has handled. Most are deeply, profoundly amoral; they literally could not possibly care less how they're used, as long as they're used. This one feels...protective. Paternal, almost. Stern, but fundamentally honorable. "It's remarkable," Cass says honestly, handing it respectfully back to Bobby.

"They say it belonged to Samuel Colt himself," Bobby says. "I haven't been able to authenticate that for sure, though. I dunno. It's easy to believe, somehow. It's got personality."

Cass smiles a little. "I think they all do. Isn't that the point of collecting anything? How the smallest differences can make things so different. Like people, in a way...."

He's not sure what he's saying. He feels like he's – said it before – or heard it somewhere. He feels like....

He shouldn't stay down here much longer. It's messing with his head for some reason.

He makes a quarter-turn toward the door, ready to make up an excuse to go back upstairs, when his eye falls on an old friend, and he can't help reaching out to touch it. "That's an early Colt 9mm submachine gun," Bobby says. "It's an M16-style military rifle from the mid '80s."
“I know,” Cass says, unhooking it from the wall. God, it feels so strange in his hands. That's a good thing, right? “I like the closed bolt models. They're so much more accurate.” He notices both Sam and Bobby staring at him oddly, and for some reason it seems natural to shrug and say, “I handled a whole lot of these in my old job.”

“And you an EMT?” Sam says dubiously.

“I was, yeah, out of college. But then for a few years I smuggled weapons to Communist guerrillas in El Salvador.” Well, there's a thing he doesn't usually say out loud. Guess he's starting to feel plenty cozy around here.

“Jesus Christ,” Sam says.

That makes Cass smile. “Well, no, this was after I'd pretty much given up on the whole mission-from-God thing.” He hands the M16 back to Bobby and meets his eyes. Bobby is frowning, but it's a relief to see that he looks more worried than anything else. “I know that makes me sound like a radical,” Cass tells him, “but I'm honestly not. I supposed the war did – radicalize me, but I've never been interested in fighting about ideology. I don't know if you remember, but the military government, propped up by tens of millions in US money....” Probably they don't remember. Who cares now about a war that happened to other people, decades ago? Who back home really cared all that much about it at the time? “I lost so many friends. The death squads were everywhere, they had total impunity to raze the countryside. People – civilians would vanish – dozens at a time, constantly, it – never fucking ended, it was constant. And their bodies would reappear – most of their bodies, most of the time. Priests and nuns. Students. Union organizers. It had been going on for a decade by the time I got there, thousands of deaths, half the country displaced and gutted by these monsters who thought they had the right to do anything they wanted, for the sake of ideology....” Cass takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “I have my feelings about politics, I guess, like everyone does, but was never about politics for me. I just...saw the hell my country unleashed by propping up a regime that was morally indefensible under any standard of morality I'd ever heard of, and I felt like – if all that damage was being done in my name, it was on me to give them the means to protect themselves, at least.”

“It's not my place to judge you, son,” Bobby says quietly. “I wasn't there and you were. For what it's worth, I believe you were trying to do what's right.” Cass nods, not really trusting himself to speak. He doesn't know why he's said so much already. Bobby pats his shoulder and uses the pressure to steer him out of the vault.

Coming up to surface level, where the house smells like pine and pie and apple cider, feels like coming back to the world of the living. His eyes fall on his sweet-faced little daughter, with her hand tucked up under her cheek as she sleeps, and he breathes out, letting everything else fall away. She's good. She's safe.

“Hey,” Sam says gently, putting a hand on Cass' shoulder. “Thanks for-- I mean, it can't be easy to talk about stuff like that.”

“Well,” Cass says. “It was a long time ago.”

“How long? Sorry, I should probably know, but I was never any good at history.”

Cass smiles slightly, because of course to Sam, it's all history. “I went down in the summer of ’89,” Cass says. “Came back around Christmas ’91, just before the war finally ended.”

“Wow,” Sam says. “You must've been just a kid.”
“Yeah, I guess,” Cass says vaguely. “Hey, I'm gonna – go upstairs and lie down for a little bit. Don't bother Dean, but if he does ask, will you tell him--”

“Of course,” Sam says. “Rest up, man.”

He really was just a kid, he thinks as he starts up the stairs. He didn't think of himself that way at the time, of course, but looking back, he was really only....

Cass stops moving, frozen halfway up the stairs.

He was only twenty-three when he went – Jo's age, more or less. Except that can't....

His birthday is September 9, 1972. So if he left for El Salvador in June of '89, that would have made him – sixteen years old.

And he wasn't. From his perspective now, he was a kid, sure, but he'd already graduated college and worked for a year as an EMT, pouring all his free time into the refugee resettlement program that sponsored his original mission to San Salvador, so he had to have been – twenty-three, he thinks, and maybe that's off a little one way or the other, but he wasn't fucking sixteen years old.

Cass forces himself to take another step up the stairs on unsteady legs. His whole body feels ready to shake itself apart; he feels dizzy, like he's floating loose in a vacuum.

This can't be right. He's missing something.

When he gets to the top floor, instead of going to the guest room he lets himself into Dean's room and sits down at Dean's desk. There are pens in the narrow drawer, and he finds a spiral notebook that's already full of what looks like class notes and song lyrics, so he just flips it over and once he's made his shaking hands wrestle off the cap of the pen he writes directly on the cardboard back of the notebook.

2014 minus 1972 is 42. He had a birthday party, or at least a dinner with his friends, for himself and Claire, because her birthday is September 13 (lucky 13), 1998. He turned 42; she turned sixteen. That adds up. That's right.

1998 minus 1972 is 26. Was he twenty-six when she was born? Yeah, something like that; it wasn't long after he and Amelia came home, and if they'd done it on purpose they would've waited longer, but life happens. So, okay. That seems right.

1989 minus 1972 is.... Seventeen. On September 9th of 1989 he would have turned seventeen, but he didn't. He couldn't have. He didn't turn seventeen in El Salvador, he turned seventeen in fucking high school like a normal person.

A noise wrenches itself out of Cass' chest, and he grips the arm of the desk chair, forcing himself to breathe – breathe. He feels nauseous. He feels like he's falling infinitely, and some part of his brain knows that he needs help, but he doesn't know what kind or how to find it. He doesn't know what to do with any of this.

1972 plus 23 is 1995. Could he have gone to El Salvador in 1995? No, that's-- No, that was the Clinton administration, and he was definitely there when Bush was president – Poppa, not Dubya. He knows that. The war was over by the time Clinton took office.

1989 minus 24 – if he had his twenty-fourth birthday in El Salvador, that's – 1965. But he wasn't – he wasn't born in 1965, that's – he knows his own birthday. It doesn't make sense, none of it – adds up, none of it can possibly--
None of it can possibly be real. Not the way he remembers it.

“Cass?” He doesn't turn around at the sound of Dean's voice. He's still staring at his own equations, retracing the numbers, adding and subtracting over and over again in his head. Dean comes closer, bracing his hands on the back of the chair and leaning over him. “Baby – talk to me. You seem....”

“The math doesn't work out,” Cass says. “Look. Look at this. 1989 minus 1972....” He draws a circle around the numbers, draws it again and again in an endless repeating loop. “But I couldn't have been there when I was seventeen. I was out of college. But look, look here – if I was 23, that would've been 1995, and that's way too late, the war had been over for three years by then. Do you see, Dean? Something's wrong. I'm not crazy--”

“I know you're not,” Dean says firmly. “I never thought you were. You've just – made a mistake somewhere, you've – mixed something up.”

“Like what?” Cass demands, exasperated. “Are you saying I don't know what year I was born? Because it wasn't 19-fucking-65, Dean, I'm not seven goddamn years older than I think I am.”

“So you're wrong about what year you went--”

“I'm not wrong! Dean, I'm telling you, it's not me, I'm not the one who's--”

“What are you telling me, Cass? What? Because I honestly don't know what you want me to believe.” Cass shudders and puts his face down in his hands. What does he want Dean to believe? What does he believe? He's not sure anymore. He just knows that this – all of this – means something. How could it not? “Baby,” Dean says, putting his hands on Cass' shoulders and stroking over them, rubbing his thumbs up the back of Cass' neck. “I know. I know, okay? You can't always – trust what you think you remember. And if you let it get in your head, it-- I know it can be scary. But people remember things wrong sometimes. Or you think you know something, and you realize it can't be true, and-- You just have to remember, this happens to everyone. Half of what we remember never really happened like we think it did.”

“No,” Cass says, sounding weak and pitiful even to himself. “This is different.”

“Listen to me. Please,” Dean says. He reaches over Cass' shoulder and flips the notebook over so Cass can't see the numbers anymore. “Do you love me, Cass? Do you want to be here with me?”

Cass closes his eyes. “Of course I do.”

“Okay.” Dean leans down and kisses his hair. “Then just – don't look. Look at me instead. We're going to have a life together, Cass. It's all I want. It's all I care about now, and I think you feel the same way.”

“But what if it's not real?” Cass whispers.

Dean kisses his hair again and tightens his hands on Cass' shoulders. “I'm real,” he says. “Can you feel me, Cass? I'm here. I'm with you, and I'm going to take care of you. I know you think you want answers to all these questions, but I don't. I can't see how anything we find out makes anything better for us than it is right now.”

He's still spinning out in the emptiness with no way to orient himself, so it takes him more time than it should before he listens to what Dean is saying – before he hears it. “You know it too,” he says. He's not sure if he's angry or relieved. “You've seen it, just like I have.”

“I don't know anything,” Dean says stubbornly. “What am I supposed to know, Cass? So maybe I've
had – a few weird dreams, or a funny feeling about something, or a – a memory that doesn't line up
with reality. I don't know what any of that means and neither do you, but do you know what it
definitely doesn't mean? It doesn't mean that what we have isn't real. I've never believed in anything
in my whole life the way I believe in us.”

It sounds so easy when Dean says it. And Cass believes, too – in Dean. In him and Dean. He
believed almost from the beginning; when all reason and experience was telling him not to trust his
heart, he trusted Dean instead. He's never regretted it.

But he's believed in things that weren't real before. In a God who guides the course of history. In
rewards for the good and punishment for evil. That his love could save someone who didn't want to
be saved. That truth is fixed and eternal and, in the end, liberating.

Too much truth kills you, he reminds himself. A bullet in the mouth, a needle in the arm – if you can't
make yourself look away....

“Dean, I don't know if I can look away,” he says. “I want to be happy, I do want to be happy. I
know you would make me happy if I could just....”

He doesn't want to die. From nowhere, a jagged piece of memory knifes up – the smell of old
garbage, kneeling on wet blacktop, his hands skinned up and bloody, his shirt plastered to his body
by blood and something viscous and foul-smelling that oozes from his back. What am I, what's
happening to me? he begs. Am I going to die? Dean, am I going to die?

He wants to be happy, and alive, and Dean's. He just doesn't know if he can, now that he knows –
whatever it is that he knows.

“Come on,” Dean says gently. “Come lie down. I know you don't feel good. I want you to rest and
let me take care of everything, okay?”

Shh, it's okay, you're okay, Dean says. His arms reach under Cass', his hands looking for a grip on
Cass' wrists. He's pressed painfully to Cass' mutilated back, but it doesn't matter. Just calm down, I

“Okay,” Cass says.

He lies down on his stomach on Dean's bed, his arms wrapped around a pillow, and Dean sits beside
him, working his fingertips behind Cass' ear and up his scalp. The sky has been overcast all day, but
Cass can still feel the shift of the light as it dims toward its early winter dusk. “Are you afraid to
touch my back?” he asks at last.

“Maybe,” Dean admits. “Do you want me to?” Cass nods against the pillow, and so Dean does,
skimming his broad hand lightly from the nape of Cass' neck to the small of his back, again and
again. It doesn't hurt. Cass isn't sure why he thought it would – but then, he's not sure of a lot of
things right now.

“Will you do something for me?” he asks.

Dean hesitates a minute, which is fair; Cass has been acting so weird lately, there's no telling what he
might be about to ask for. But then Dean says, “Of course.”

“I want you to take a picture of my back,” Cass says. “I want to see what it looks like.”

He helps Cass get his shirt off, then shifts around to kneel with his phone between Cass' legs. Cass can hear the false sound of the shutter clicking on a camera with no shutter, twice. When Dean moves aside, Cass rolls over on his back and accepts the phone from Dean's hand. There are two identical scars on his back, eight or nine inches long apiece, parallel to the borders of his scapulae. He had no idea they were there, but at the same time he's not even slightly surprised. “Did I ever tell you how I got these?” he asks. He doubts it, but it's worth a try.

“No,” Dean says. “And I never asked. I know there are things you don't like talking about.”

“You must have wondered, though.”

“I don't know,” Dean says. “I figured.... They look like whip marks to me. Like a bullwhip. I don't know, I didn't ask.” Seems like a good guess. Cass doesn't think that's right, but he doesn't know, either. “Are they bothering you?”

“No,” Cass says. “Not right now.”

He puts his shirt back on and lies down curled on his side, facing the window. Dean spoons up behind him and drapes an arm over him, finding Cass' hand with his and tangling their fingers together. “I love you,” Dean says. Cass makes a soft, affirmative noise in response. “You want me to sing to you?”

“You did heavily imply last night that you planned to. Did you have something in mind?”

“There is something I've been working on learning.” Dean sounds unusually shy; Cass wonders if he's blushing. “I didn't really know the song when I picked it out – I mean, I'd heard it, but I didn't know it, and I've been having a little trouble getting it down. I don't really think it's ready, but – I don't know, if you promise not to expect too much and just take it in the spirit it's intended....”

“You have successfully lowered my expectations,” Cass says on a little yawn. “Let's hear it.”

Dean hums for a moment, looking for his starting note, and it's adorable. He pulls Cass a little closer and sings quietly, throatily into his ear, “Take me now, baby, here as I am, Pull me close, try and understand,” and Cass has to close his eyes, has to force his throat to tighten, has to remind himself that Dean will lose his grip if Cass starts to cry right now. But there's something that feels so strange, so mysterious about the whole moment – about lying here in the arms of the love of his life, about comfort and memory and ghosts and Patti Smith. He's been here a hundred times before. This is somewhere he's never been. He's headed toward someplace with Dean that he can't imagine.

“Come on, now, try and understand the way I feel when I'm in your hands,” Dean is singing, and Cass grips his hand so hard that his fingers ache, and Dean's must, too, but he doesn't object. “Take my hand, come undercover, They can't hurt you now, can't hurt--” He hits an off note and breaks off. It's harder in the sudden silence to pretend Cass isn't crying. Dean kisses his hair and behind his ear and the point of his jaw. “I told you it still needs work,” he says. “I'll work on it.”

“It's good,” Cass says. “Did you know Bruce Springsteen wrote that song?”


“You know we don't belong here, right?” Cass says.

Dean doesn't respond for a moment, and then he says, “But we are here.”
Valid point. “How did you figure it out?”

Dean chuckles darkly. “I would definitely not say that I have anything figured out. And mostly it’s not – anything I know for sure. Just feelings. You'll say something that it feels like I've heard you say before, or – I still think you’re wrong about the name thing, that's not your real name. Stuff like that. Easy to say, well, it's déjà vu, or it's like – how some people get completely convinced the Berenstain Bears used to be spelled differently. It's just one of those random little brain glitches, like when you dream. But it all kept...sticking in my head. Even the thing about your degree program--”

“My what?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Dean says wryly. “When we first met, you told me you were working on a master's degree. But then I mentioned it a few weeks later, and it seemed like you didn't know what I was talking about at all. So the easiest explanation was that you were lying to impress me or something, and then you forgot you’d said that. But I just... I knew it wasn't that. You've never lied to me. Something changed. So it's...stuff like that. No one thing, but a hundred little things that probably mean nothing, but there's just so many of them.”

“And you really don't want to know...?” That's unfathomable to Cass. He knows he and Dean are very different people, but that's unfathomable.

“No,” Dean says. “I really don't. I have everything I want, Cass. There's nothing else I need to know.”

It sounds really nice when he says it like that. Peaceful.

Dean turns on the bedside lamp when it's almost full dark, and a few minutes after that there’s a knock on the door. Dean rolls over on his back as the door opens and Cass hears Claire says, “Uh, your mom wanted to know if everybody's coming to dinner and church. I told her I'd ask.”

“We always get Chinese food on Christmas Eve before we go to the service,” Dean says. “I – really should be there.”

“Yeah,” Cass says. “Go with your family. Will it be okay if I skip it, though? I think I just need to be alone for a little bit.”

“Of course it'll be okay,” Dean says.

Dean, being Dean, has carefully hung up the garment bag with his suit in the closet so it doesn't wrinkle. Cass sits up against the headboard and watches Dean change clothes, gold lamplight and shadows chasing each other across his skin. Cass has seen the suit come off dozens of times, but he's rarely had a chance to see it going on, and it's such a delicate, elegant process – adjusting the creases and cuffs and suspenders and tie, everything in line, everything precisely where Dean wants it. By the time he sweeps on his jacket and it settles automatically across his shoulders like the perfect culmination of generations of secret tailoring wisdom, Cass feels like he's unlocked sole access to a cache of porn no one else knows about.

When Dean comes to the side of the bed to kiss Cass goodbye, he wraps his hand under the knot of Dean's tie. “Don't you dare,” Dean says, prying it off. “Cass, I swear to God, if you send me off to dinner with my parents and church like this--”

“Like what?” Cass asks innocently.

“Don't play dumb,” Dean says. “Dumb is a bad look on you.”
“You know what looks great on me?”

“I’m walking out the door,” Dean says firmly. “I’ll keep my phone on vibrate. If you need anything, absolutely anything, call me, and I promise I’ll call you right back.”

Cass turns off the lamp when Dean leaves. It’s nice to sit in the dark for a bit, just allowing himself not to know what to say next, or even what to think.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so difficult after all. To just – close his eyes and – have this. It’s such a hard world out there; people would kill – do kill – for nothing more than a chance at the kind of happiness that Cass gets to have every day of his life now, so who the fuck is he to question it?

The door that Dean left cracked swings half open. “Daddy?” Claire says softly.

He reaches automatically for the light to turn it on. “Yeah, kitten?”

“I know you don't feel well and you said you wanted to be alone,” she says. “But – is it okay if I stay here with you?”

“Oh, of course it’s okay. Come here.” Claire sits on the bed beside him and leans down against his shoulder when he puts his arm around her. “How are you holding up?” he asks.

“Okay,” she says. “I know things are – tense, but his parents actually – they've been really nice to me.”

“Well, you are adorable,” he reminds her.

She laughs a little, but then says, “You shouldn't remind me that I'm still mad at you for going through my room.”

“You think I go through your room?” he says, and no joke, it kind of hurts his feelings. “What am I, a Nazi? I wouldn't do that to you.”

“I don't see how else you'd even know that I bought a vibrator,” she grumbles.

He considers the route, but she'd just go on believing he searches her room, so instead he tells the truth. “You use my Amazon Prime account, genius.” She's stunned silent for a minute, then she starts to giggle helplessly.

When the moment passes, they're left in the evening quiet. Cass doesn't mind just floating in it; Claire pulls her knees up and props her phone on them to play that fancy-pants connect-the-dots game she likes. “So are you sick?” she asks after some time passes, very studiously adopting a tone of idle curiosity. She doesn't look up at him. “Or just – depressed, or what?”

He knows he's not sick. It's on the very short list of things he's pretty sure he knows about himself. “I guess...depressed, sort of,” he says. That seems like a suitably broad term. He surely fits under that umbrella somewhere.

He doesn't really think through the implications until Claire hunches over a little tighter on herself, her shoulders going tense under his arm, and oh, right. That's probably not something you should really say to a kid whose mother shot herself in the head.

“Hey,” he says. “Hey – Claire, look at me.” She does, reluctantly, and he shifts his arm so his hand cradles the back of her head. “I love you,” he says. “More than anything. And I will always be here for you. Maybe I'll be kind of a mess some days, but I'm not going anywhere.” She nods, and he
Cass leans down to kiss the top of her head. “I got you,” he whispers, closing his eyes.

Cass isn't keeping track of how long they stay there, but it must be close to an hour. He's starting to get a little hungry, and he wonders how that pie situation worked out. Maybe there's a specific day and time it's meant to be consumed, according to iron-clad family tradition.

He's right on the verge of soliciting Claire's input on the ethics of stealing pie on Christmas, when they both hear someone thudding quickly up the stairs, and they're already turned toward the door when Dean opens it and leans halfway in. “Get your coats,” he says, even though he's not only not wearing a coat, he seems to have lost his suit jacket somewhere, and his sleeves have come unbuttoned and been shoved up hastily and asymmetrically. “We're going to the hospital.”

“What's wrong?” Claire says, bolting upright.

Dean blinks as if he's just realized that he sounds a little alarmist. “Nothing's wrong,” he says. “Except my sister went into labor at the Imperial Garden. So – from their perspective, not great, I guess. Get up, let's go, indale. Shoes, coats.”

“On Christmas Eve?” Cass says as he stands up. “God, what a show-off.”

“Right?” Dean says.

Having a baby, Cass is aware, is a hurry-up-and-wait type situation, so he's not surprised when their wild flurry to get to the hospital turns into a long night of trying to get comfortable on scratchy waiting room couches and downing genuinely terrible coffee from a vending machine like their lives depend on it. He's not thrilled by it, but he's not surprised, either.

Bobby and Claire both manage to sleep – Bobby just by sticking his hat over his face like a parrot, and Claire because she's always been able to drop directly to sleep on any surface that isn't literally vertical (more evidence of feline Novak DNA, Dean claims). Cass and Ellen are restless, but they at least manage to behave themselves.

Dean has to be sent out for food to keep the nurses from slapping the shit out of him the twentieth time he makes them say not yet and there's no way to know.

It does get pretty boring when he's gone, which is good for the nurses but bad for Cass' nerves. Ellen appears to be engrossed in a three-month-old Newsweek, and the bone-deep Circadian chill that sets in after two in the morning is creeping up on Cass a little early, so he decides to go for a walk.

The hospital only has so many places that random assholes are allowed to be in at one a.m., so he ends up in the chapel. It's pleasantly, tamely non-denominational, of course, just a few rows of institutional-looking chairs and a lectern, with a bank of battery-powered candles at one end of the room and several abstract blue stained-glass panels on the other.

There's still an insufferable high-liturgical snob inside Cass and he hates those stupid battery candles, but it is what it is. He lights one (“lights” one) and sets it back in its niche. It's not even the fancy kind that tries to look like it's flickering, but then, Cass isn't trying very hard to look like he's praying, either, so he guesses they're even.

He wonders if Dean will want to get married in a church. Dean is, if anything, less of a believer than Cass is, but he also tends toward a love of tradition, and Cass can imagine him turning up his nose at anything that seems too casual or hippie, not enough of a real wedding. Cass is secretly sympathetic; for the rest of his life, he could carry a copy of his marriage license in his wallet everywhere he goes.
and there will still always be people who think he didn't have a real wedding and isn't in a real marriage. That's fine, that's life. But it makes him more indulgent than he might otherwise be toward the idea of crossing as many t's and dotting as many i's as they can manage.

There's definitely a “no food” sign outside the chapel, but Ellen brings him his share of the dinner haul anyway – a turkey club wrap sealed in plastic, the flatbread slightly damp, the kind you can get at an extremely bare-bones grocery store or a gas station putting on airs. “Thanks,” he says, unwrapping it. “No news, I guess?”

“No news,” she confirms. “You know, you and Claire don't have to stay here all night. I know it's not much fun.”

“Dean asked me to come,” he says, even though nothing Dean said really lives up to the definition of “asking.”

Ellen hums a little in acknowledgment. “I know you think I'm not happy about – you,” she says.

“No,” Cass says. “I don't think you give a damn about me one way or another. I think you're not happy about Dean and me.”

To her credit, she doesn't bother to deny it. “It's not for the reason you think,” she says.

“No?”

She shrugs. “I do know my son. And I've had a lot of years to get used to the idea that sooner or later he'd be bringing home...someone. Someone like you.”

Anger flashes up in Cass, and he can't stop himself from saying, “Then why the hell did you let him spend fifteen fucking years terrified of what you'd do when you found out?”

“Hey, I'm not perfect,” she snaps. “Fifteen years ago – everything was different. The world was different. All Dean ever wanted was to do well for himself and have a family of his own. I thought this would – take all those possibilities away from him, I guess. And Dean was only thirteen when they murdered that boy over in Wyoming.”

“Matthew Shepard?” Cass' sense of time is a huge clusterfuck at the moment, but that whole thing feels like ancient history to him. It drives home what Ellen means when she says the world was different.

She nods shortly. “It sounds stupid now. I know it does. But then it seemed like something that I should – that I could protect him from, somehow. Even then, I knew it wasn't something I could really – make go away. But I could make it clear that I didn't want to hear it, and for some godforsaken reason, that seemed like the next best thing, at the time. If I had it to do over again, I'd – well, I'd do a lot of things differently. But no one was there telling me how to do it right, back then. And then it went on so long, and.... He seemed happy. It was easy to put it out of my mind and be happy for him. It was hard as hell to – face the fact that he hadn't been happy at all. He'd just been telling me what I wanted to hear.”

“I think he's been happy,” Cass says. “He's a pretty happy person, overall.”

Ellen sighs and rubs the back of her neck. “I did my best with both my kids,” she says. “I know a lot of people would've done it better. I never really had – those instincts, I was never the mommyming type. But I love them. You can't put a single one of the mistakes I ever made down to not loving them enough.”
“I know,” Cass says. His gaze lingers on the wavy blue layers of the stained glass; he has no idea what it represents, but it's soothing.

“And that's the thing about you, Cass,” she says, and his eyes snap back to her face. She gives him a crooked smile and says, “I have eyes, so I realize that you two are in love. And love is – nice, it's a good thing. It's important. But it's not a marriage. There's going to be a time – maybe it's a year from now, maybe it's three or five or ten years – when it's been so long since there's been any romance in your life that you don't even remember what it looks like. You'll spend all your time wrangling kids, and he'll spend all his time working, and when you do see each other, you'll talk about money and the house and the kids. And it's hard, and it's – lonely. Other times it'll be better. But when the hard times come, it's not going to be romance that gets you through. It's commitment, and that means you have to have put the time into building a life you believe in. You seem like a good person, Cass; I can tell you're a good father, and that's worth a lot. But I see you, and I hear Dean talk about you, and I just can't help but think... Is this someone who's going to believe in the life Dean has all laid out for you? Because I'm going to be honest with you, it doesn't seem like it really suits you. And you can love him to death, and you can still break his heart, because wanting to do right by someone isn't the same as doing it. Take it from someone who learned that the hard way.”

She really is a little too much like Cass for his comfort. Maybe if he ever gets his existential nervous breakdown under control, he'll ask if his therapist has any tips for gracefully navigating Dean's extremely obvious Oedipal complex. “What can I tell you, Ellen?” he says. “You're absolutely right. I can sit here and swear up one side and down the other that I love him and I'll never hurt him, but isn't that what everyone says, in the beginning? And I can't even be mad, because what you're telling me is exactly what I told myself when I first met Dean: he was cute, he seemed sweet, but nothing about him or his life was what I was looking for. So I can tell you're a good judge of character, and I get what you're seeing when you look at me. I didn't want to be married again, I didn't want to start over having more kids, I didn't want to move to the damn suburbs and have a Prius and chickens and an espresso machine and a closet full of shit from Neiman Marcus. So why should you believe me when I say – that I want to be here at all? That I'll stay?”

It's a rhetorical question. Sort of.

_Tell me, do you like it here? Are you settling in, are you happy?_

He knows the answer. In a way.

_You're happy here, right, Cass? Here with me? Then everything's fine. Just close your pretty blue eyes...._

“Then just tell me what you told yourself,” Ellen says, as gently as he's ever had a chance to hear her speak. “When you said yes.”

When did he say yes? It seems like it happened so long ago, like the yes has just been there between him and Dean for as long as he can remember.

_You know we don't belong here, right?_

Cass looks over his shoulder at the half-dozen fake candles, fake-burning in petition for who knows what kind of fear and hope and human suffering has been through this room on Christmas Eve. Were they all left behind by believers, except for his? Or are there more people out there than just Cass who keep on praying and couldn't even say why?

“I guess it wasn't what I told myself,” Cass says. “It was what he told me. When I told him I didn't believe in trusting my heart anymore, he said...I should trust him instead. And I guess I just...did. I
do. So maybe I'm making the same mistake all over again – maybe I'm jumping in blind behind someone just because I feel something I don't want to let go of. I know – believe me, I know you're right when you say that no matter how hard you love someone, you can't always be what they need, and you don't always love where you end up with them. I don't know, Ellen. Honestly, I don't know. I'm as scared as you are. But Dean's not scared, and I guess at the end of the day, that's all I've got. I trust him.”

She reaches out and puts her hand lightly on his arm. “Fair enough,” she says. “Maybe that's what I'll try, too.”

It's almost five o'clock on Christmas morning and still black like the dead of night outside when Sam finally shuffles out to the waiting room in his hospital gown and says in a blank, shell-shocked kind of voice, “We're done. Everybody's – Jo and Robin – they're good. It's good. They said everyone can come in and see, but just for a minute.”

Cass wonders if he looked that much like he'd been clubbed like a baby seal in the first hour after they put a human being in his arms and told him, good luck with this. Probably.

Jo looks pretty stoned; Cass can't tell if that's the actual drugs, or if she's just sharing Sam's sense that life just got extremely real all of a sudden. Robin looks like a large piece of exotic fruit, but Cass is pretty sure that's normal at this stage. Robin Jane – named for both her grandfathers (“Smith, obviously,” Jo explained long ago. “We would've hyphenated, but Robin Smith-Wesson sounds like the name of a porn star working in an extremely niche market.”)

“You did good,” Ellen says, leaning down to kiss Jo's forehead. “You're going to do fine.” Jo smiles up at her with the heartbreaking purity of a little kid who got everything they ever wanted for Christmas.

Dean leans over Jo awkwardly to hug her, and then has to brace himself even more awkwardly with one hand on the wall when she latches around his shoulders and clings. “Thank you,” Cass can hear her say brokenly. “You're the reason – if you hadn't – “

“Hey, hey,” Dean says. “I told you. Anything you need, ever, all you have to do is ask. All I want is for you to be happy. That and your car,” he adds, and she laughs weakly and hits him in the arm with the heel of her hand.

“Jerk.”

“Brat,” he says fondly.

Cass is one of the first people who gets to hold Robin. “You realize you're going to be the only expert we have access to, right?” Sam tells him as he passes the baby over.

“Oh, Jesus,” Cass says. She feels lighter than he remembers in his arms. “It took me a decade of parenting to work my way up to don't shoot smack; you should probably buy a book or something.” Nobody else seems to be listening to him, which is good. This is why Cass encourages people not to listen very carefully to him.

She's a squinty, squirmy little thing, and not cute at all – newborns are not cute, no matter what well-meaning lies everyone tells their parents. But she smells amazing, and he's pretty sure he recognizes this disorienting ache in his chest as love, which is good; she's in his life now for the long haul, so things are going to go a lot more smoothly if he loves her.
He thinks that Ellen is right about life being more about commitment than about love. But, at least in Cass’ experience, love helps.

It's still well before dawn when Dean leads Cass upstairs by the hand and, without debate, into his bedroom, where he pushes Cass up against the door and kisses him a little desperately as he unzips Cass' sweatshirt. He only backs off long enough to pull the layers up over Cass' head, and then he pushes their foreheads together and strokes his palm down Cass' chest, gasping Cass' name.

“I want you,” Cass chokes out, spreading his hands out on either side of Dean's face. “I want to be with you.”

He doesn't really mean on this particular bed at this particular moment, but that's where he ends up, and that is also okay. Dean keeps kissing him while he's trying to unbutton Dean's shirt, but Cass has a hard time unfolding his legs from around Dean's hips when it's time to be done with pants, so neither of them is free of blame.

“Holy crap,” Dean says out of nowhere, lifting his head and looking at Cass with a starry smile that turns Cass' heart into cotton fucking candy. “A baby.”

“Mm,” Cass agrees. “You want one, too?”

Dean arches his eyebrows and says, “What, like right now? That feels like a long-shot.”

“How will we know if we don't try?” Cass says lightly, giddily. It's probably the sleep deprivation, but he feels stoned, too – he feels high as a kite and like he'll never fall.

“I didn't bring condoms,” Dean says. They don't always use them now, but Dean is a big fan of the tidiness factor, and Cass is a big fan of anything that convinces Dean to fuck on the spur of the moment.

“You may not fully understand how reproduction works....” Cass says.

“You may not fully understand how laundry works,” Dean says tartly.

“Don't act respectable with me,” Cass says, scratching his nails lightly up the back of Dean's thigh. “You can't pull it off.”

“You gonna fuck me?” Dean growls. “Or you just gonna talk about it all night, old man?”

Cass opts for that first one – slow and dirty on all fours (just like their first time), right there in Dean's childhood bedroom (just like Dean's first time, and Cass refuses to feel guilty for how filthy-hot that is) – but at the very end he pushes Dean down and rolls him over, then kneels up and starts jacking himself off. Dean's eyes widen in lust-glazed outrage, and he says, “You son of a bitch.”

“Easier clean-up,” Cass says, sweet as pie.

It's probably the truth, barely, but it isn't really the point. He just loves looking at Dean like this, all the muscles in his stomach and his arms flexing as he squirms against the sheets, his thick cock lying almost flat against his belly, velvety purple and glistening at the head with all the come that Dean leaks while Cass is inside him – come on, fuck, how can Cass not want to see that? His focus zeros in as his hand flies over his own dick, and the whole world is Dean to him – Dean naked and desperately horny, Dean's adorably squinched-shut eyes and Dean's hitching breath and Dean's soft, whimpery noises – Cass' prize and his darling and his future, the love of his goddamn life, all spread
out and willing and ready for whatever happens next.

If there's a way to make Dean's cock look better, it's to stripe it in ribbons of Cass' come, so that's what Cass does. He closes his fist around it, skin slipping noisily against skin, and Dean's back arches and he bunches up the bedding in both hands and under his heels and he says baby, I want – baby, please – like Cass has reached inside him and torn the words out by the ragged roots. “Shh, I know you do, it's all right,” Cass tells him, screwing his hand up and down Dean's cock with focused intent, both of them well past the point of holding back. “I'll get you there,” he promises. “Trust me, honey, just let go. Let go, I got you.” Dean comes with a low, agonized noise that cracks open Cass' bones and burrows inside.

There's nothing more beautiful in the world than Dean in the moments after orgasm, with his eyes closed and his chest heaving, struggling to come back down to earth. Cass strokes his slick thumb over Dean's lip, and when Dean licks both lip and thumb, Cass loses it entirely and begs with the only scrap of breath he still has in his lungs, “Tell me you love me.”

And Dean is a gentleman, so of course he doesn't turn it into a joke, which is probably what Cass would do. He just reaches up and strokes trembling fingers through Cass' hair and says, “Cass, I love you so much. Sweetheart – so much.”

Everything is still kind of a mess. They try to wipe up with yesterday's clothes – well, Cass' yesterday's clothes, because no part of Dean is going to consent to cleaning up come with a Hugo Boss suit – but they end up agreeing that the sheets need to be stripped off anyway. Dean wads it all up and shoves it between the bed and the wall to deal with later, and they put their underwear back on and spoon up together on the bare mattress under the bedspread. “Are we good?” Dean whispers in Cass' ear, tracing back and forth over his collarbone.

Cass shivers pleasantly. “Yeah,” he says. “You were right. We have everything we need.”

He lets Dean lace their fingers together, and then he closes his eyes.

He wakes up far too few hours later to the sound of a knock on the door. “Bobby and I are going back to the hospital,” Ellen calls while Cass is still trying to unstick his eyelids from each other. “You boys make yourselves and Claire whatever you want for breakfast.”

He can feel Dean nuzzle his cheek against Cass' hair as he calls back, “Will do, Mom, thanks.”

Cass squeezes Dean's hand and murmurs, “Knocked it out of the park.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, nestling closer to him. “Merry Christmas, by the way.”


It's their first Christmas together – unless it's not.

Cass doesn't give a fuck. This is the story he plans to tell.
He dreams that he is walking carefully, quietly down a dark, windowless hallway. He comes to a door that stands slightly ajar, and he hefts his heavy flashlight up, moving the beam across wooden letters painted in robin’s-egg blue. AINSLEY, they say. He puts his hand on the door and pushes it open, following the path of his flashlight inside.

The room is badly water-damaged. Faded pink wallpaper peels loose at the seams, and Cass can hear the startled skittering and chirping of rats retreating behind it. His feet feel unsteady as he walks across the rotting carpet. There is a window, but it looks out over an alley and the brick wall of the next apartment building, and anyway the sun hasn’t shone brightly in...months. He still needs the flashlight to see.

It’s a child’s room, he thinks. A stuffed penguin sits abandoned in a wooden rocking chair. A movie poster curls loose at one corner over the bed, white lines crossing it where it was once folded into quarters – Lord of the Rings. Cass frowns at it; he knows this is the title of a popular children's story, but he finds the photograph of, he supposes, the titular lord holding the titular ring in his palm, devastatingly sad. He looks so young, and so uncertain.

They are all so young, these humans, and there is no heroism in their ending. Cass watches them every day, struggling to make meaning of it, struggling to take pride in their losing fight, and he hates God and his angels with a burning, consuming fury that only opiates allow him to function through. Meaning is a lie; pride is a lie; the fight is nothing.

Cass turns away from the image. His anger, too, is nothing.

It’s a child’s room, and those are mostly useless. He’ll find nothing that matters here – no drugs, no food, no weapons. He should move on – Dean would tell him to move on – but he lingers.

He has never known a child, except from a distance. He finds them intriguing.

There is a small desk, and above it a corkboard filled with school papers and ticket stubs and photographs. Cass steps closer, casting his beam across the images; one face repeats, a blonde girl of, he thinks, eight or nine years. She smiles widely in a line of other girls in matching sports jerseys and caps, arms around one another's shoulders. She waves from the front porch of a log cabin. She sits beside a Christmas tree with an older female sitting behind her and leaning partially over her shoulder, helping her position her fingers on the strings of a guitar.

The guitar leans against the desk. It’s smaller than the one they have at the compound. For a moment Cass wonders why, and then he feels stupid. It's small because it's child-sized.

He unpins the picture from the cork and turns it over. The back says, Dani & Ainsley, 2012.

Another beam of light scans the wall by his side. “What the hell are you doing?” Dean asks from the doorway of the room.

“Just looking,” Cass says.

“This is a waste of time,” Dean says.
Cass shrugs. “It's the end of the fucking world,” he says. “What do we have but time?” There are a few items scattered across the desk; Cass recognizes the CDs and the colored pencils, but there is a small plastic oblong covered in writing that he can't make sense out of.

Dean comes to his side and takes the photograph out of his hand. He sighs a little when he sees it; Dean has a weakness for children, though it's been years since he allowed himself the luxury of reacting from his weaknesses. “Mother and daughter?” Cass says.


Cass picks up the strange item and holds it close to the bulb of his flashlight. GIRLS DO ROCK!!! it says, hand-lettered, and below it Cass reads a list of – names? Bands? So it's something to do with music.


Dean spares it one short glance. “Mixtape,” he says.

“Mixtape,” Cass repeats. “So it's – music?”

Dean gives him an incredulous look, then shakes his head with a little snort. “Yeah, Marvin the Martian,” he says, “it's music.”

“You don't have to be a dick about it,” Cass says. “I've just only seen – flat music. Records and CDs.”

“Well, this is like the shitty version of that,” Dean says. “Worse sound quality, less storage space.”

“Then I don't understand the point of it,” Cass says. He accidentally shifts something, and the plastic comes apart. It has a piece in the center with holes in it – the outside is only the case.

Dean takes it out of his hand, perhaps so he can't do further damage. “The point of it is that it takes more work to make than a CD, and you have to listen to it in the order it's recorded,” Dean says. “You make CDs for yourself. You make mixtapes as a gift.”

“Because it's shittier and less convenient,” Cass says dubiously.

“Because you put more of yourself into it,” Dean says. “They're for people you love.”

It still doesn't make sense to Cass, but what does, lately? He looks at the photograph that Dean has let fall on the desk – Ainsley's sister showing her how to hold a guitar. He wonders if the writing on the mixtape is the sister's. He wonders if Ainsley's older sister is the one who loved her. He wonders which of them outlived the other.

“How do you play it?” Cass asks.

“What do you care?” Dean says.

“I want to take it with me,” Cass says.

“Jesus,” Dean huffs. “You’d collect every piece of junk you get your hands on if I let you haul it all home.”

These pieces of junk are the remnants of a strange and glorious world. They'll be forgotten soon enough; Cass sees no reason to rush the process. “I want it,” Cass says stubbornly. “Show me how
Dean rolls his eyes and jerks open the first drawer of the desk, then the one below it, where he finds a black plastic square with earbuds attached. He shoves it into Cass' hands without instructions.

Fine. Cass is reasonably clever, and the machine doesn't look complicated. It has four buttons and a sliding compartment on the back; Cass recognizes that as a battery compartment, and he's pleased when he opens it and sees that it only requires two of the smaller cylindrical batteries. They have dozens of those lying around back home.

One of the buttons causes the machine's face to pop open, and there are spools inside that must fit the holes in the mixtape. This is simple. It only fits inside one way, with room to close, and when he braces the flashlight under his arm and inspects the buttons, he recognizes the symbols. Square for stop, large arrow for play. Small double arrows for rewind and fast-forward.

"You're not going to listen to it right now, are you?" Dean says as Cass puts the earbuds in. "Cass, come on, this is a supply run. Be fucking useful for once."

"I'm fucking useful all the time," Cass says serenely, and Dean can't object because it's true. Cass is a hot fucking mess, but he almost always finds a way to be useful. It's why Dean continues to tolerate him. "What do you wish you'd done before it was too late? Before the world ended?"

"Seen the ocean," Dean says without hesitation.

"I wanted to go dancing," Cass says. He pushes play.

"Really, that's your big dream?" Dean says. "You wanted to go to some shitty nightclub? Way to reach for the stars, pal."

Got a bottle, I'm gonna use it, the woman sings. Intention, I feel inventive – gonna make you, make you, make you notice....

"I just wanted to, that's all," Cass murmurs.

Why not? It's something that humans do for fun, isn't it? Cass waited til pretty damn late in the day to appreciate all the things that bodies can do – so yeah, he's got regrets. He's got a shitload of them, and he doesn't see why his are any less worthwhile than Dean's desire to get sand stuck under his toenails.

"Come on, let's go," Dean says impatiently. "You can bring it with you, whatever."

Yeah, he intended to do that anyway, but if it makes Dean feel better to grant his permission.... Cass pulls out one earbud and holds it out toward Dean, who looks at him incredulously. "Don't you want to hear it, too?"

"A bunch of chick rock?" Dean says. "Not really."

"I never understood what turned you into such a misogynist," Cass says. "Maternal abandonment, I assume?"

Dean narrows his eyes and gives Cass a thin smile. "Wouldn't say I am," he says. "I guess I just have all the bitch I need in my life already."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," Cass purrs, and when Dean opens his mouth to argue, Cass slots the earbud into Dean's ear and lets his fingers stroke from the point of Dean's jaw along to his
“Come on, honey,” Cass says. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Cass,” Dean protests faintly. “We don’t have time....”

“We have all the time in the world,” Cass says.

They lie down on the narrow bed in the dim light of a world without electricity and a darkening sun, and Cass slots his leg between Dean's so he can idly grind his hip against Dean's cock; he hates to pass up one of these increasingly rare chances to blow Dean, but the sentimental part of Cass – it's still around somewhere, and sometimes it makes itself known – is enjoying the intimacy of sharing the earbuds, their faces close together, Dean's eyes drifting shut to savor the music. Cass keeps his eyes open. He likes music, but he likes Dean's face more.

He regrets not dancing, but in spite of it all he can't regret saving Dean and throwing the world into the fire in his place. Cass knows that probably makes him a monster. He'd feel guilty, except that it doesn't matter. Nothing matters now.

They listen in silence until Dean murmurs, “Okay, this one's pretty cool,” and tries to sing along. “You'd have me down, down, down to my knees, now wouldn't you, barracuda? ”

The image is appealing, but nothing else about it is. Cass has only heard Dean sing when he's drunk; apparently it doesn't get better. “Please don't sing,” Cass says.

Dean smiles wryly. The curve of his mouth is breathtaking. The world is a wasteland, and Cass would die kissing that damn mouth, if the choice were his. “Can't help it. Got a song in my heart.”


Dean can't sing, but fuck, can he kiss. His hands find Cass' ass when Cass rolls on top of him and bites his mouth until Dean lets him in, and this sad room with all its mementos of a dead child falls away. Dean's tongue collides with his, always eager in spite of his incessant rejections and refusals and endless guilty self-denial. So maybe it hurts Cass' feelings a little that Dean hates wanting this so much. He still does want it, and that's what matters.

That's a lie. Nothing matters.

But it still feels as close to flying as Cass is ever going to get again.

The music plays and plays, and Cass turns in slow spirals in his mind, high above the twitching corpse of creation. He'll never dance, except like this. Is it enough?

Oh God I fell for you, a woman sings in a harsh, triumphant voice like a raven. The air catches her voice and lifts it – slow spirals – high above – is it enough?

Is it enough?

Even if Dean had loved him back, would it ever have been enough?

Oh God I fell for you--

Oh God I fell for you--

Cass wakes up, fully dressed and alone in a dark bedroom that he doesn't quite recognize, wrapped in a brown blanket that smells like home. He sits up, awkwardly tangled in it, and his eyes focus on a window without drapes, and a row of shrubbery outside. Ground floor?
It comes back to him in a series of clicks, like a dial being turned up slowly. Ground floor. Master bedroom. Dean's blanket – Dean's bed –

Their bed.

Moving day.

There's no clock in the room yet, but his phone is still in his pocket. It's almost one in the morning. Cass can't remember coming in here or falling asleep, and he has no idea where Dean is, which irks him a little. Their first night in the new house, and Cass is sleeping alone.

If anything, he's more disoriented when he leaves the bedroom. This house is fucking massive – to be fair, it has to be, but it still makes Cass uncomfortable. The master bedroom and guest room flank the front door on one side, mirroring the dining room and breakfast nook (there's a breakfast nook) on the other, and in between there's a hallway with a goddamn marble floor, and Cass doesn't belong here.

There's a spiral staircase with a gold bannister. Cass is a socialist.

His life has taken a very dark turn, but he guesses that's love for you.

If the main floor strikes him as very politically suspect, the second floor is just easy to get lost in, with all the interchangeable doors arranged around the horseshoe of the balcony. He thinks that if you stand at the railing looking down at the marble entryway floor, the second master is on the far left end, which means the doors just behind him and to his left are the nursery and Sam and Dean's office, and if he continues to follow around the curve, it's linen closet, linen closet, breezeway, and then the other two bedrooms on the right spur of the shoe. He thinks. He'd be more sure if the lighting were better, but it's pretty dark up here, except for the light flowing out from underneath one door. Nursery? Nursery. Cass suspects he can guess who's inside.

Cass pushes the door open, and his guess was half-right: Joanna is nursing Robin, but it's not Dean sitting up with her talking in low voices. It's Claire, and when she sees him she starts guiltily and tries to hide her phone inside the sleeve of her hoodie, which is what gives her away.

“No,” he says firmly, pointing his finger directly at her nose. “Bad kitten.”

“I was just--”

“She broke up with you four days ago,” Cass says. “You cannot spend the rest of your natural life managing Colette's feelings for her. Literally the only good thing about this is that now you get to stop caring about Colette's feelings. Especially in the middle of the night. And you,” he says to Jo, “you're encouraging this? You're an adult, what's your excuse?”

“Oxytocin?” Jo says, which in fairness is a really good one.

Claire hunches over a little more where she sits on boxes full of toys that Robin is a year or more away from possessing the motor skills to operate. The lamplight falls across her face in a way that makes her look older – or maybe this is just one of those aging experiences. Cass sighs and puts his hands on her shoulders. “Here's what we're going to do,” he says. “Put your phone on silent. Go to sleep. In the morning we'll go for a run, and then we'll go to Home Depot.” Oh, Jesus Christ, he's a guy who spend his Sundays at Home Depot now. That's worse than the gold bannister. “To pick out the paint you want for your room,” he says with a fatalistic sigh. “You can start organizing your friends to come out here next weekend and help you paint, okay? Team Claire only. People who are going to tell you what a mean girl she was and how much better you can do.”
“She's not—”

“I don't give a shit if it's true or not; I'm your father, I'll call her a mean girl if I want to.”

It gets a little smile out of Claire, anyway. “Fine,” she says, and stands up.

“You should think about inviting Krissy to help, too,” he says.

“Wouldn't that be weird for her?” Claire asks. “I mean, she doesn't know any of my friends.”

Cass shrugs. “First time for everything. You don't have to; it's just something to think about.” He puts one arm around Claire and hugs her gingerly, trying to avoid the appearance of pity.

“Sorry about that,” Jo says when she's gone.

“It's fine,” Cass says. “You'll learn as you go. Have you seen your brother?”

“Not since he said goodnight a few hours ago. Didn't he come to bed?”

“Yeah, bed,” Cass says vaguely. “I should try looking there.”

There aren't any other lights on upstairs, so unless Dean is huddled in a linen closet having a nervous breakdown, he must be in the game room.

Stately Smith Manor has a detached three-car garage, which is almost but not quite sufficient for their family's car needs, and just like the actual house, it's a two-story affair. The cobblestone walkway between garage and breakfast nook (breakfast nook) is open to the air, but the top floor of house and garage are connected by a windowed breezeway, which isn't wired for electricity, but does have clusters of solar lights at each end that still glow daintily even this deep into the night. Cass pauses as he crosses to look out over his gradually curved driveway and his manicured lawn and his koi pond.

He has a koi pond. He asked the real estate agent if they could knock a little off the price if they refused to take the koi, but apparently the previous owners didn't want to take a bag full of fish to Key West with them, and then Dean said, I think they look nice, and now Cass lives with Sam's dog and five fish that will, according to the internet, probably outlive Cass and everyone he knows.

The whole thing is total fucking insanity. He wanted all of this, he agreed to all of it, but it all happened so much faster than he expected, and it's just – so much. He's beginning to realize that it's not just him; everything that falls into Dean's orbit seems to escalate quickly, as if the universe is constantly bending under the sheer force of whatever Dean Smith decides he wants. Cass swears that some days it feels like reality itself is almost as in love with Dean as Cass is.

The game room looks more intact than any other room in the house so far, with Sam and Jo's games already hooked up to the big tv and Sam's sectional couch and recliner taking up the floor in front of it. There's still a lot of empty space on the other side of the room, even allowing for the fact that the pool table Dean bought off eBay hasn't been delivered yet. Dean must have noticed the same thing, because he's brought up a tape measure and a spool of masking tape and seems to be mapping something onto the carpet. “Honey,” Cass says carefully, “you realize what time it is, right?”

“I can't decide if there's room to build a bar in here,” Dean says, “or if that would just make the whole thing feel cluttered.”

“Liquor cabinet with built-in sideboard,” Cass suggests. “But at least wait until after we've passed all the social services home visits.”
Dean stands up and scowls at the floor. “We've passed four hundred and twelve. How the fuck many are there?”

“Hey.” Cass comes up behind him slowly. He doesn't know why it feels like Dean might startle and bolt, but it does. He puts his hand on Dean's arms and leans in just enough to make his body heat felt along Dean's back. “It's been such a long day. I think you're pretty tired, aren't you?” Dean nods. “You want to sit down for a minute?”

Whether or not Dean really wants to, he lets himself be steered to the couch. He does smile a little when Cass kneels up over his lap and wraps his arms around Dean's neck. Being this close, eye-to-eye, rings a little bell with Cass – something about the dream he had when he fell asleep downstairs? Lying in bed sharing a set of earbuds with Dean, he thinks. It was nice. He kisses a line of freckles along Dean's cheekbone and ends at Dean's lower lip. Dean sighs into it, hooking his thumbs into the back of Cass' jeans. “I was going to come to bed,” he murmurs. “I'm just – a little keyed up. Adrenaline, I guess.”

“We've been going and going for days,” Cass says. “But we're here now.”

“There's still so much to--”

“Shhh.” Cass strokes his fingers through Dean's hair and presses their foreheads together. He can feel the tension, smoldering waves of heat flowing from Dean's temples and the line of his eyebrows. He presses his fingers to Dean's temples and rubs soft circles there. “We're here now.”

Dean crosses his arms behind Cass' back and says, “Tell me where we stand with the girls.”

Cass' instinct is to deflect; Dean is still strung so tight, and Cass wishes he'd just let everything go for at least one night. One half of a night, now. But he knows Dean will never find it relaxing to be out of the loop on something this important, so he says, “Social services wants to see the new house – you know, to make sure our palatial fucking mansion is suitable,” he can't help adding, even though it makes Dean raise a suspicious eyebrow. “They won't be able to send anyone til Friday--”

“Friday?” Dean repeats with exactly as much outrage as Cass knew he would.

“That's when they have a social worker available. But on Friday they can verify that we have, I don't know, knives and forks and running water or whatever, and they'll send the final custody recommendation to the judge. They don't know if they can get a judge to sign off on it before close of business, so – it could be next Monday. I know,” he says to Dean's exasperated look. “I know. But they're doing okay in the group home right now. Another week isn't going to kill anybody. I'm picking them up on Tuesday; Sam and Jo will watch Emma, and Krissy and I have an appointment to meet with the principal at the high school out here to talk about how to get her back into regular classes.”

“And you're okay with that?” Dean asks. “I know you were worried about how she'd fit in at – kind of a --”

“Glorified country club?” Cass fills in. “I mean, I'm still worried about it. But it's a good school, and it's public.” It sounds like pretty weak logic when he says it out loud, but he doesn't know what else to say.

When Jody told them about the fifteen-year-old girl who'd been removed from a violent home with her six-month-old baby along for the ride, it sounded weirdly perfect. Cass likes teenagers; Dean likes babies; they have one of each already for them to play with. Maybe it's still weirdly perfect. They've been able to hang out with Krissy and Emma quite a few times – take them to the park and
the zoo and a few other awkward but successful prospective-parent dates – and its been – good. It feels good to Cass. Krissy is a little stiff and defensive, which isn't hard to understand, given everything she's been through, but she seems willing to trust them. She Skypes them every few days and mostly talks about Emma. Cass gets the feeling that Emma is just about the only thing she's ever allowed herself to want or care about, and he relates so deeply to that.

Like everything else, it's just gone so much faster than it was supposed to. They were going to move into the new house, then plan a wedding, then apply as foster parents, and then they immediately found the perfect house and got called up out of the blue with, *Hey, would you like to maybe adopt this extremely hard-to-place child, oh, and also help raise your granddaughter, right this minute? There's just a few forms...* At this rate, Cass figures they'll be on a plane that has to make an emergency landing in Las Vegas and wind up married by the time the breakfast buffets open.

He's terrified of the breakneck pace of literally everything that's happened to him in the past twelve months, but of course Dean thinks it's an offense against God and man that becoming a father might take him one more entire week.

He doesn't know what else to say. He's worried to death about the new house and the new school and the new babies, and really what isn't he worried about lately, but they all have to start somewhere. It might as well be with the tenth grade.

“We'll work it out,” he says, instead of that. “Quit worrying.”

“See?” Dean grumbles. “You don't say it empathetically at all.”

He strokes his palms down the front of Dean's henley and says something it's really way too late to say, but he didn't say it earlier because he trusted Dean, and now.... “Can we really afford all this?”

Dean looks into his eyes. “You want the truth?”

“Oh, sure,” Cass says, hoping he's disguising the spike of fear he feels. “Just this once.”

“Right now – yeah, basically. Barely. I mean, all the bills will get paid, but there's – honestly, there's zero room for error, and Sam cries every time he opens Excel. Now, if I get this promotion, yes. Then the answer is yes.”

Okay. That's not as bad as Cass' fears. “You should get the promotion,” he advises.

Dean smiles at him. “I'm seriously considering it. Hey, quick question: how much would you mind it if I slept with Crowley?”

Cass smiles and says sweetly, “I think that question is best answered with another question: how much would you mind sleeping with Crowley every night for the rest of your life?”

“Back to the drawing board,” Dean says with a sigh and a little smirk that Cass can't keep from kissing.

He cups his hand around the side of Dean's face and says, “Is that what you've been so stressed about? The promotion?”

“I guess,” Dean says. “I think I'll get it. I mean, unless for some reason they fall in love with an outside hire, I don't see any serious competition for it. It just means so much more work, at least for a while. And with the long commute now.... I don't know. You're already having to handle practically everything with social services--”
“They love me down there,” Cass assures him dryly. Dean ignores him, as he really should.

“We don't even have the girls yet, and I already don't have the time to be here for them. What kind of father does that make me, Cass?”

It takes Cass a second to swallow around the sharp pieces snapping off his heart, but then he slides his arm around Dean's neck and says, “I mean – the trustworthy kind, I guess? You think those grow on trees or what? You work and sacrifice and give everything you've got for your family; you think there's ever been anyone else in Krissy's life that she can count on that way? I know I get to do all the fun stuff. I know it's not fair to you, and you're going to wish you were able to get to know them better, faster. But honey, you're going to be the man they measure every other man against for the rest of their lives. If they're lucky, one or two will measure up.”

Dean hugs him back and says roughly against his shoulder, “Not to you, though. There's no one else like you. Knew it the first time I saw you.”


“No,” Dean says softly. “That was the first time you noticed me. It wasn't the first time I saw you.”

“What?” Cass says. He's never – how has he never heard this before?

Cass moves away just enough to see Dean's face. He looks shy; he hasn't blushed like that in front of Cass for ages. “When I first moved to Cleveland,” he says, “when I was first hired to the sales staff at Sandover, I really wanted to make an impression. And I knew a little bit about construction from my dad, and I thought – you know, that I'd stand out more if I went down to the sites, got to know the site managers and built up some credibility. So a couple of times a week, I'd leave the office and hang out at the building sites, trying to learn everything I could about the industry.”

Cass nods. “And that worked for you, I assume.”

“Seemed to, but that's not actually the story. The story is, for a few weeks there, I was going down to the 840 Page renovation every Thursday, mid-morning. You know where that is, right? Up that one-way street from the Health and Human Services building.” Cass nods, and Dean ducks his head a bit and mumbles, “And I started seeing you-- You came out of Health and Human Services about 11:30 every Thursday, and you walked across the street with this bum-- with this homeless guy, and you bought him lunch from the food truck across the street.”

“Sure,” Cass says. It's coming back to him now. “ZoomPita. They had an eggplant pita that was killer. And the guy was-- “ He flounders for a second; it's been years. “Elliot,” he finally recalls. “We were in group therapy together. He was having a really hard time.”

“Cass,” Dean says as if he's breaking bad news, “you were in court-mandated therapy for your heroin addiction. You were having a really hard time.”

It's all relative, he guesses. Cass shrugs. “But I could afford lunch, and Elliot couldn't always. Anyway, he was a good guy.”

“Well – I didn't know any of that,” Dean says. “Where you were coming from, or what your story was, or anything. I just knew that you showed up around the same time every Thursday, and you bought lunch for this scruffy old guy, and you sat under the bus shelter with him and ate and talked. I must've seen you do the same thing – I don't know, six or eight times. And I noticed you every time, and I thought... God, you were so handsome. And it seemed like you were – a really good guy. The way you bought him lunch, even though he didn't exactly look like anyone you'd be friends with,
“What stopped you?”

Dean shrugs a little. “I mean, all kinds of things. I figured you were probably straight, or taken, or both. It seemed a little creepy to let you know I'd been accidentally stalking you on Thursdays. I...hadn't been single all that long, and I guess if I'm being honest, I really wasn't ready to start dating yet. Anyway, then I got caught up in new work projects and I stopped going out there. I always kind of thought about you, though. Not in an obsessive way, just – you know. You remember those things, sometimes. Something you could've done but you didn't. You wonder, what if?”

“What if?” Cass muses thoughtfully. What if he’d met Dean six years ago, right in the middle of his divorce, of trying to win Claire back, of trying to get clean for good? He can't see any way that it would've worked out, can't remotely imagine himself spending one minute's worth of time and energy on anyone new who wanted into his life at that point.

Of course, he vaguely remembers telling himself something like that when he did meet Dean, for all the good it did him. Cass almost always comes down squarely against spending one minute's worth of time and energy on anyone but himself, but Dean rewrites the rule book, and Cass never really felt like he had much choice in the matter. When did he get okay with that? Because it happened somewhere along the line.

“I always did regret it,” Dean says softly. “I know, logically, it wasn't the best time for me – or for you, not that I realized that back then. But I just had this...feeling. Like I could've had something really special, and I lost it because I just wouldn't – even make a move. So when you showed up out of nowhere at The Blue Room and started hitting on me.... I don't know, I thought I'd better say yes to everything. Saying no hadn't gotten me anything but lonely for years. You were like...a sign.”

“Like a sign from the universe?” Cass says, barely able to contain his skepticism. He believes in signs from the universe – sort of, he guesses – but Cass feels like a distinctly unlikely candidate for the job. He was just at The Blue Room to get laid, after all, not to change anyone's life.

“Something like that,” Dean says. “A sign that it was finally time to start asking for things I wanted. So ever since then – that's what I've been trying to do. And I don't want to be too woo-woo or anything, but...it seems like I'm getting an awful lot of what I ask for.”

“You are kind of a walking, talking Law of Attraction,” Cass admits. “I've noticed that, too. Well. We finally got the timing right.” Dean nods, but his attention is turning inward again as his eyes fall shut. Cass sets his hands loosely around Dean's face, the heels of his hands just under Dean's jaw, his fingertips against Dean's temples. Cass breathes, slow and open, just giving the broiling pressure of Dean's energy permission to release and expand. He can feel a slight tingle in his fingers as Dean's breathing drops into his diaphragm, entraining with Cass'. “Tell me what you're thinking,” Cass murmurs. “I always want to know.”

Dean's eyes flutter open. “I'm so afraid that you're going to regret following me here,” he says low in his throat.

“What?” Cass is well-trained; he knows better than to argue with or invalidate Dean's emotions, but he can't entirely keep the disappointment out of his voice as he says, “Dean – why would I ever, ever regret being with you?”

Fears aren't rational; Cass knows this, he knows it's no one's fault, but he wants so badly for Dean to know him better than that. Cass is never going to be the poster child for self-disclosure, but still, Still,
this is Dean, and Dean is supposed to know.

Dean smiles a little shakily and says, “Because you-- this place-- You don't belong here, Cass. You're my cool downtown guy; I don't know if I can see you ever really liking Planet Country Club, let alone wanting to spend your life here. I know you just did it because it's what I wanted – because I pushed –“ He breathes in roughly and pushes his hands up Cass' back. “I can't stand being the reason you lose who you are. I can't forgive myself for it, Cass.”

Cass can feel the tilt, the sideways slide into this liminal place where they sometimes find themselves, especially when they're stoned or sleep-deprived or wobbling on a moment of choice that could change everything. A part of him still struggles against it every time, but he centers himself with his breathing and grounds himself into the weight of Dean's hands on his back, and he thinks he can – not for long, maybe, but – he thinks he can release control of the moment and let it speak through him. “That's not going to happen,” he hears himself say. “Not here. You know that, don't you, Dean? This place is different. It's safe. You're safe, and your family is here, and you can ask for whatever you want.”

“Nobody gets what they want.”

“You do. You do now.”

Dean lets his hand fall to Cass' hip, his fingers brushing along the outside of Cass' thigh. “I always – I always wanted more from you, and I never – a million times, I should've told you and I just-- “

Cass smiles at him. “So tell me now.”

“I love you,” Dean murmurs between delicate kisses that send chills over Cass' arms and down his spine. “I'm so selfish – I want you here so much – please be happy, I want to make you happy....”

“I love you, too,” Cass promises, scratching his nails lightly back and forth over the back of Dean's neck the way Dean likes. “You didn't push me into anything. I followed you here. I found you.”

_Find me when this is all over, _Dean said. So Cass did. Neither of them speak, but the words ring in the silence, filling the room.

“Cass, are we dead?” Dean whispers.

Cass strokes his cheek with a fingertip. “I think so,” he admits.

Dean frowns and shakes his head. “Then I don't – I don't understand why-- “

“You don't have to, remember?” Cass says. “It doesn't matter why. Dean, if you can't forgive yourself – if you can't take all this for yourself, then do it for me. I like you rich and happy and handsome, so let me have that. If you feel like you owe me anything at all, then that's what you can give me, and then it'll all be all right.” Dean shakes his head, ready to protest that it can't be all right, that what good things do happen to someone like him always come with a terrible price attached, which is unlike Dean – except that at this strange moment when they are both themselves and not themselves, Cass knows it's exactly like Dean. “I need you to trust me,” Cass implores, cradling Dean's cheek in his hand. “Believe in our life together; believe in me. Let everything else go. I swear it can be that easy if you want it to be.”

Dean nods and closes his eyes.
Cass wakes up in the deep hours before dawn, sprawled on top of Dean on the sectional couch. He doesn't feel foggy or confused or disoriented, but he does feel...off. He remembers a little less than he did when he fell asleep, but a little more than he remembers most days of his life.

He remembers enough to know that nothing is what it seems. He's not sure if that frightens him anymore or not. This band of tension around his chest, holding onto his heart like it might try to escape his body – is this fear?

He finds his footing in the dark, unfamiliar room and moves as quietly as he can toward the door. It isn't that he wants to be separated from Dean – far from it – but he does feel restless and jittery, his thoughts swarming and jockeying against each other for space in his head. It's all well and good to say it doesn't matter why, but – doesn't it? A little?

When he touches the doorknob, he almost expects his hand to pass uselessly through it. That doesn't happen. Cass is a ghost, but not that kind of ghost.

The solar lights in the breezeway have dimmed, illuminating everything in only a faint blueish glaze of light, and Cass is not alone. A man stands in the middle of the walkway, patient and unmoving, as if he's just been standing there waiting for Cass. He's short and bearded and his sneakers are a brilliant, unblemished white, and Cass almost, almost knows him, but he still says in a quiet voice, “Who are you?”

“A collector,” he says with a little smile. “Who are you?”

“Castiel,” he says. “My name is Castiel.” He can feel something vibrating, pulsing, just outside the reach of his senses, and something tells him that it has to be three times – that it's not too late, he can still put this all behind him if he chooses, but that after the third, the choice can't be unmade. He'll have to live with the consequences of knowing, whatever those might be.

Of course, there are consequences to not knowing, too, aren't there?

“Castiel,” he says, and the membrane of his aura splits open and blooms outward, and his memories begin to pour back in, as natural and inexorable as the rising tide – a year's worth of memories, then the year before – six years – forty years – one thousand and ten thousand and a hundred thousand and still more – the luminous and blood-drenched and chaotic and musical arc of time from the first cosmic light to the struggle and the strange freedom of the final days. He had no idea he could contain this much knowledge, and there's still so much he wants to know.

“How about now?” God asks him with a smile. “Settled in now?”

“Father-- “ he begins.

God waves both hands in the air between them. “I really prefer Chuck,” he says. “Can I call you Cass?”

Cass nods. He thinks – he's angry, he senses anger in this band of holding around his heart as well as fear, but he can't quite remember why. After all, he's in Heaven, isn't he? Isn't this his home, the place he's longed to return to? He grieved so bitterly because he believed he'd never see it again, and now he's here, so that's – good, right?

He looks up at the floundering solar lights. He looks out the window at the way the surface of the koi pond catches the starlight and glimmers.

Why is there a fucking koi pond?
Whose Heaven is this? Dean has no memory of anything remotely like this; Cass would stake his grace on it, if he still had one. And anyway, this isn't – this isn't how Heaven works. It's made of moments, of eternal spaces of tranquility – a kite here, a pie there, a sunset, a ski slope, a sheet fluttering on the line.

Heaven doesn't change, and everything here changes – changes with terrifying speed. Yes, there's a repetitive quality – wake up, shower, eat, run, pay bills – *why does he pay bills in Heaven?* – but the days vary from one to the next, sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically. People have birthdays and break-ups. People change houses. People are born and they.... Cass knows they die.

“Where are we?” Cass asks. “What is this place?”

“This?” Chuck says. “Oh, this is just something I like to try sometimes. Just to see what happens.”

*Just to see what happens?* Cass can feel anger slogging up through him, clawing its way laboriously toward the surface. “Is that what we are to you?” he growls. “Are we just – entertainment?”

Chuck frowns and tilts his head, as though he's never thought of it that way. “Well, I think of you more like art,” he says. “Whenever a timeline dissolves like yours, I end up with all this raw material. I like to save the best bits and try something new with them. How else do you keep your skills sharp? You always have to be improving, Cass. An infinity of multiverses is just not a hospitable environment for stagnation.”

“Is it real, then? Is any of it real?” He knows he was never Cass Novak – that if he thinks he remembers how he got a rash around his neck at his First Communion because the collar of his shirt was too tight, or how he wiped out in his best friend's driveway the first time he took his training wheels off his first bike and peeled all the skin off his right arm, or how they let him cut the umbilical cord in the delivery room when his daughter was born – he's wrong. But he's still grasping desperately for something – something to believe in. There must be something, even here, that's real.

“Well, what's real?” Chuck says with a shrug. “Things happen, things don't happen. Realities form and dissolve. You think I'm flaky? Try keeping up with that, tens of millions of times per second, forever. It's distracting. But I like creating these. They're like snow globes; they're so beautiful, when they come out right. So peaceful. It's meditative, really.”

*Meditative?* Cass shouts. He knows he should worry about waking Dean, but he can barely form the thought through his surge of fury, and he certainly can't act on it. “You – you gave Dean everything, you created this world where he's happy and everyone loves him and everything works out just because he wants it to, and look what you did to me. Maybe none of it really happened, but your fucking art project is my decades of death and disillusionment and guilt. You tell me it's not real, but it is to me, I live with those memories, every goddamned day – I live with Amelia – you invented all that pain and you told me to carry it, and now you tell me-- If none of it is real, why did you make me feel it at all?”

“Castiel,” he says, and Cass doesn't want to hear so much kindness in his voice, doesn't want to let go of this anger. He doesn't know where to send it if not toward God, and he can't, he can't bear to keep it for himself any longer. How long has Cass been here, holding all this anger inside himself? Days – years – forever? What's the difference? “Castiel, I didn't invent your pain. I tried to make you a world without it, but you resisted every attempt I made. You wanted to be a person who abandoned the God of your childhood. You wanted to be a person who chose free will over loyalty and paid the price. You had the choice to forget it all, just like Dean did, but you weren't willing to accept any story I tried to tell about you except rebellion. It's who you are now – Castiel, the renegade angel – cynical Castiel, who traded Heaven for love and ended up with neither. You're the one telling that story, and until you're willing to stop, there's just no room to replace it with a better
one. All I could do was give your pain names that would at least make some sense to you here: El Salvador. Amelia.”

Amelia. He tries to picture her face, and it slips away like he's closing his fingers around a bar of music. She has substance, but not form.

Not that form.

_Deber í as llamar a tu amiga. Ella tambien te extra ñ a..._

_They were young and self-righteous, they damaged each other and far more than just each other..._

_Here I go and I don't know why, I fell so ceaselessly..._

_They believed in so much, and then they believed in nothing, and in the end he knew where she was headed and he let her go..._

_Oh God I fell for you..._

...the first time Cass fell in love, when it all descended into blood and delusion and despair, and Cass never stopped loving him – her – his soulmate, the love of his life –_

It was always Dean. Of course it was. It could never have been anyone else.

“I wish I could have taken your guilt and your grief away,” Chuck says quietly. “But there were things – with both of you, there were things I couldn't take without taking you. I did what I could do, which was give you both a chance to do certain things over again. Dean took to it so easily; I think it's the spark of Michael in him – smart and fierce, always seizing an opportunity to get the high ground, to increase his advantage. A hard conversation with a parent he loved and feared – an apology to someone he was too afraid to love as well as he wanted to – a wide variety of little sisters he always wished he could save. Some of it comes from his own memories, some of it flows down the line from all the other timelines that yours touches – we call it a multiverse, but there's an underlying unity, none of them truly exist in isolation from the others. It turns out that if you give Dean half a chance to make things right, he'll find a way. He'll create one if he needs to. He even made himself younger than he was when he died – younger than I was going to make him; he definitely has his opinions on how things should be, just like you do. But what surprised me was that you turned out to be the harder nut to crack. You don't change things; you hold on, and the worse something makes you feel, the harder you hold onto it. I was worried about you from the beginning of this, Cass, I really was. I tried everything I could think of to convince you of a world where you were allowed not to choose pain, and you rejected almost all of it.”

Almost all of it.... “Claire,” he says. “That's why...there's a Claire.”

Chuck shrugs. “You seemed willing to be a father – more than that, willing to believe you could be a good father, when it was like pulling teeth to make you believe anything else good about yourself. That surprised me; I didn't realize that about you. There are always surprises. Can you imagine what eternity would feel like if there weren't? I shudder to think.”

“How long can this last?” Cass asks. If he looks out the breezeway windows far enough, he can see the line of gray low in the sky that means it'll be morning soon. A new day. Whatever this place is – this experimental Heaven, this universe in a snow globe – he knows that time passes here. “Will we get old? Will Robin-- all our children, will they ever – grow up? Or does it just go on like this forever?”

“Nothing goes on forever,” Chuck says. “Even I won't do that. But the answer to your question is, I
don't know. How could I know? It hasn't happened yet. I think you'll get old. I think the normalcy of that will appeal to Dean, and I think you'll follow where he goes. That seems to be the pattern.”

“What happens when we die? Does – the rest of it go on? Claire, and the others, do they – exist after we're gone? Or is the show just over?”

Chuck looks at him silently, sympathetically. Cass guesses it's more or less an answer. “This is difficult for you,” Chuck finally says. “I can see what a burden it's become, and I'm sorry for that. You both have stronger wills than I anticipated; the barriers between your old lives and this one didn't hold as securely as I thought they would. I can try again, if you want.”

“Try...to block out the memories – the world we came from?” Chuck nods. “I can't make that choice for Dean.”

“Of course not. Dean will make the choice for himself – I'm talking it over with him right now.”

Right. Of course. “But you can make it for yourself.”

It seems like it should be easy. The memories of his old life have been intrusive at best, and at their worst they've been excruciating. It wasn't much of a life, when Castiel looks back on it. He spent so long doing nothing in particular, just waiting and watching – just believing his superiors when they told him that waiting and watching was what Heaven was for. He wasted uncountable years, until it was too late to save a world he was far too late in loving.

Even at the end, when he was at least trying to live a life that mattered, he can't say that he did a very good job of it. He was adept enough at killing, but those aren't memories he has much desire to preserve now. He was a fairly thoroughgoing disaster when it came to love; he's done far better for himself here. He never even got to go dancing.

The only rational choice is....

Cass Novak doesn't have any need for Castiel-the-renegade-angel. The only choice....

He looks down at his left hand, where his future is possibly inscribed on his palm. Where his hope and defiance rest invisibly around his finger, occupying the space where someday soon he'll wear a ring that's a gift of love from a man named Dean Smith.

The only choice Castiel's heart will let him make....

“Leave them,” he says hoarsely. “The memories – I want them.”

“Castiel,” Chuck says sadly. “You are allowed to be happy.”

He shakes his head. It's not that. That's not why. “My world ended, didn't it?” he says. “We failed, and Lucifer....” Chuck nods. “Then...nobody else knows him now. Not – Dean Winchester. Not my Dean Winchester, at least. Everyone else is gone, and I know he'll choose not to remember. That's fine, I want him to be happy, but.... But he deserves more from me than that. Yeah, maybe he was a hot fucking mess by the end, but he was still my first love, and he deserves to be remembered. He was....”

He was Dean Winchester. That's always been, when you get right down to it, all Castiel needed to know.

“You're a good person, Cass,” his Father says. “You were never much of an angel, but then, I'm the one who made you that to start with. Maybe that was my mistake. Live and learn, right?”
The sun comes up. It has to, right? Whatever world Cass lives in, it's a world with laws and forces that don't just go away because you're still reeling from a face-to-face chat with God. It's a world that has food and fucking and time and taxes and all the other immutables. The sun comes up right on schedule.

Cass isn't quite sure what to do with himself – not just because of the chat-with-God thing, but also because it's his first morning in the new house and he doesn't have any routines here. The juicer isn't even unpacked yet. Sam's stupid dog (Cass should really start calling it Beau; Cass is a cat person, but he doesn't have anything against the pooch, he just thinks of it as Sam's Stupid Dog because that's what Dean calls it) wants desperately to go outside when it wakes up, so Cass makes himself useful and walks it around the block.

The state of the refrigerator is poor. Cass isn't sure if it's even worth trying to pull breakfast together; maybe they'd be smarter to get everyone together for a trip to the Whole Foods a couple miles up the road, where they can knock out grocery shopping and breakfast off the hot bar all at once.

He sighs a little at himself. Whole Foods and Home Depot in one day. This really is his life now.

This really is his real life. It wasn't once, but it is now.

He rubs the heels of his hands into his temples, trying to organize his thoughts. The separate sets of memories are competing with each other for his focus and it's fucking brutal; he can feel a headache forming deep behind his eyeballs. He isn't sure he made the right decision. It felt like loyalty at the time – it still does – but it's also, Cass knows, an empty gesture. Who does he benefit with this? A dead man? A man who, given the chance, rushed headlong into becoming someone different? What made him think that Dean Winchester would even want that kind of loyalty, if he were around to see it?

Cass really didn't think he still had such a sentimental streak. Surprise, surprise.

“Morning,” Dean says, and Cass quickly pretends he was opening up a box to unpack it, rather than just standing in the kitchen freaking out.


Dean snorts a little. “About like you’d expect, for passing out on Sam’s couch at two in the morning.”

When Cass turns toward him, he can see that Dean’s hair is wet from the shower, and he's wearing a button-down shirt and tying his tie. Dean's idea of weekend-casual has never been Cass' idea of weekend-casual, but this outfit isn't either one. Cass narrows his eyes. “Where are you going?”

“Um,” Dean says, looking down and pretending to fiddle with the button on the cuff of his sleeve. “The office. Just for a little bit.”

Cass knows it's not fair, but that kind of – gets to him. He's tired. He's freaked out. He's reeling under an influx of angelic memories that now add onto, but don't replace, the weight of the false but still visceral human memories that damn near brought him to his knees all by themselves, and oh, by the way, he just had a chat with God.

He's doing his best, but he could use a little help, and Dean is walking out the door.

“On Sunday?” Cass snaps, wrenching open the box so that the packing tape breaks open with a loud, semi-satisfying pop.
“Cass,” Dean sighs. “We talked about this. I took time off before the move, and this isn't a great time for--”


Dean stands there and watches while Cass leans on the sink and closes his eyes, practicing his breathing. When Cass opens his eyes, he notices that someone else has set the clock on the microwave, so that it correctly identifies the time as 6:34. He stares at that as though it’s interesting for some reason, just because he doesn’t know where else to look.

He doesn't know how to live his life. How is he supposed to go forward from here like this is all normal?

Dean comes up behind him and puts his hands on Cass’ back, then slides them up until his fingers are resting on Cass' shoulders and his palms cup Cass’ scars through the fabric of his t-shirt. Dean never touched him so intimately when Cass had wings; he only started after Cass was damaged and demoralized. Cass always wondered why that was. Was he too intimidating, too alien when he was an angel? Did Dean get off on his helplessness, or was it pity?

“I'm sorry,” Dean murmurs. “I shouldn't have let myself get so – anxious and weird last night. I wish we'd just had a nice night together in our new room.”

Cass leans to the side and turns his head, and he can get a kiss mostly on Dean's mouth. “Don't be sorry,” he says. “We'll have other nice nights. And you're allowed to be anxious and weird in your own home. That's the whole point of having a home.”

“Yeah,” Dean says. “Well...thanks for talking with me about it. I do feel better now.”

“Talking with you about...?” Cass isn't sure what Dean remembers – what he chose to remember, and how he chooses to remember it.

“About work, and the money thing and all that,” Dean says. “I really needed to hear that. You know, my folks worked most of the time from home, so I was – I was lucky, I had them both around a lot. Thank you for – telling me I'd be okay even if that's not my situation.”

“You'll be more than okay,” Cass says. After all, it seems that God really does love Dean best.

Dean slips his hands higher and gives Cass' shoulders a little squeeze, then starts to let him go and turn away. “Wait, wait, wait,” Cass says, turning with him, grabbing a handful of his shirt and dragging him back. Dean looks startled, but his hands automatically come up to hold Cass' hips. Cass puts his arm around Dean's shoulders and leans in. “Dance with me,” he murmurs.

“Cass--”

“Please. Just – please, here.” Cass uses his free hand to fumble with his phone, pulling up a playlist at random and scanning the list of half-familiar titles. He presses the first thing his eye falls on that has the word dance.

“Seriously?” Dean says. “Little early in the morning for Bowie, isn't it?”

“Shut up,” Cass says, praying that Dean doesn't notice or ask why his voice is shaking. “Just... Please.”

“Okay,” Dean says, slipping his arm around Cass' waist and taking his hand. “Shh. It's okay.”
Dean is right, it's not the best music for this kind of dancing, but everything Dean knows about
dancing is how to find the beat, and God was right about Dean Winchester: what he wants to find,
he finds. He makes it himself if he has to. Dean steers them into a mid-tempo box step, and it's not
perfect time, but it's enough. It's more than Cass ever thought....

It's enough. Isn't it?

“If you say run, I'll run with you ,” Dean sings along softly to the chorus. “ If you say hide, we'll hide,
Because my love for you would break my heart in two--”

“You're a good singer,” Cass says. He knew that, but for the first time, he knows enough to be
surprised by it. The real Dean– Cass' Dean-- The Dean that Dean used to be couldn't carry a tune to
save his life.

Dean gives him a dubious look, registering mild disapproval of the fact that Cass seems to be
noticing this for the first time. He ramps up the volume, broadly mimicking Bowie's accent, and
sings, “--into my arms and tremble like a floooowwwweeeeer,” louder and louder until Cass is
laughing, pressing his forehead against Dean's shoulder.

“You're an idiot,” he tells Dean.

“I don't worry about it,” Dean says. “I got you to keep me respectable.”

“Yeah,” Cass says softly against the crisp cotton of his shirt. “You got me.”

“Ugh, that's it,” he hears Claire's voice say, and Dean turns them so that Cass can see her bracing her
foot on the edge of the counter to tie her running shoes. “I'm not taking any more romantic advice
from you. I don't want to end up a big, gooey sap.”

“A fate worse than death,” Dean says.

“Get your shoe off the counter,” Cass says automatically. “Who raised you?”

It hits him all at once, and he stops moving, oblivious to the way Dean bumps into him.

He talks to her like a father, but he's not. He never was. She's not even a real person, she's – she's
Chuck's concept of a fucking therapy dog or something. All this time, he's believed he was raising
someone who'd go on and live an amazing life all on her own, and... she only ever existed to, what?
Give him self-confidence, make him feel good about himself?

It hurts more than any of the rest of it – more than all the rest combined. Of all the things he never
dreamed he'd have to give up his faith in.... Claire.

She frowns at him and cocks her head. “Are we – not going running?” she asks.

For a minute he's not even sure he can answer, not because he doesn't want to, but because his
mouth doesn't seem to work at all. But then he manages to say, “Yeah. Yeah, after I change clothes.”

Dean pulls away from him with a little kiss to his temple. “I'm going to go,” he says. “I'll see you this
afternoon.” Cass squeezes his arm before he lets him go.

Claire opens the mostly empty refrigerator and does find a bottle of water to claim. “We'll see if
everyone wants to go for breakfast and grocery shopping when we get back,” Cass says. He feels
awkward, and from the way she glances back at him, it shows. How can it not be awkward? He
knows things about the nature of reality that he can never tell her – that it would be cruel to tell her,
even if she could ever possibly believe the half of it. In his memory – in some of his memories – it's been him and Claire alone against the world for so long. What is he supposed to do about a future where he'll never be able to tell Claire anything but lies again?

“Okay,” she says. “Hey, are you – are you okay?”

“Just tired,” he says. The first of what's probably an infinite series of lies he's going to tell her from this moment forward, forever.

But the lies are a kindness, and he thinks they count as smart, too. So – two out of three. It'll have to do.

He reaches out to touch her, her hair under his hand, his thumb smoothing over her eyebrow. She looks at him, still obviously worried, but there's trust in her eyes that he guesses she's been programmed to feel – that Cass can't claim he's ever really earned. He wants to earn it, though. As best he can under the circumstances, at least, he wants to become the father that she believes he is. “I'm going to change clothes,” he says. “And then we'll go see if we can guess anything embarrassing about our new neighbors. Okay?”

Claire smiles at him with just a hint of relief in her expression and says, “Cool. Hey, I was thinking about it – can I paint my room black?”

“God,” Cass says, “do you have to be so extra this early in the morning?” She laughs, and she sounds just like she always has. This is the new normal, Cass tells himself, and maybe it won't be so far off from the old normal after all.

Cass doesn't even get lost on the way to his bedroom, so maybe he is finally...settling in. None of this was part of his plan, but it seems that there was a plan all along anyway. So now Cass doesn't need faith; he knows for sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it's not only accidents and wrong turns that make up a life. What a strange gift, if it is a gift – this knowledge.

*Find me when all this is over,* a man that Cass loved more than the entire world once told him, so he did, and as life experiences go – well, balls of twine don't get much bigger than that. Here he is now (cynical Castiel, who traded Heaven for love and ended up...somewhere new), arriving at the end of his big story about good and evil, about battle and glory and sacrifice and heartbreak – the story that made him who he is. The story he can never tell anyone.

Cass stands on the marble floor, at the foot of the spiral staircase, and tries to soothe Beau by rubbing behind his ears while the poor, confused guy barks suspiciously at the unfamiliar stairs that separate him from his best pal. He's really not the brightest dog, but he chooses his loyalties well, which Cass thinks probably gets you further in life than being smart does.

He thinks about loyalty, about commitment, about trust. He thinks about learning how to get around in strange new places, and he thinks about a new story that he's just now learning well enough to tell. It starts *I was at this bar and I wasn't going to give him my number, but then I did and he seemed like a really good guy* and becomes a mundane story about fish and dogs and babies, about pool tables and dance floors and gold bannisters and guitars, about a family and a future that they should never have had, except by the grace of God.

Is it true? Things happen, things don't happen. At least Cass thinks that it's, finally, a story he's willing to tell as if it were true, for as long as he's here to tell stories at all. It's the kind of story that makes people happy, whether it's true or not, and if that's the best Cass can do, it's – enough. He thinks it's enough.
“Go on, fella,” he tells Beau with a gentle shove to get him hopping up the first step. “You know he's up there. Go find him.” He looks over his shoulder at Cass with a highly dubious doggy expression, and Cass really relates so deeply. Change is hard. He wonders if there are therapists for dogs, but of course there are somewhere. Everything exists somewhere, right? And if you could live long enough....

God, who knows? Cass has lived a long damn time, and he doesn't know if any of it has made him more prepared for this particular future. All he has, all he's ever had, is enough hope and defiance to justify jumping in blind behind someone who makes him feel all the things he can't bear to lose. It's enough for Cass, but he wouldn't say that it makes him feel prepared.

He can't even begin to guess what happens next, except to say – life.

Chapter End Notes

There ended up being a lot of song lyrics in this story, for some reason. I think most of them are identified within the text, but the ones that aren't are "Sweater Weather" by The Neighbourhood, "Because the Night" by Patti Smith, "Brass in Pocket" by The Pretenders, "Barracuda" by Heart, and "Let's Dance" by David Bowie. My playlist for this story included most of what's in the story, and also a few that are just apropos for these guys: "Shut Up and Dance" by Walk the Moon, "Boots" by Kesha, "Love You Like That" by Dagny, and "I Know a Place" by MUNA, which is the source of the title.

Come find me.

End Notes

Te ves tan triste, lindo. ¿Porqué? = You look so sad, pretty. Why?
¿Sí? Debe ser mi vida amorosa. ¿Puedes arreglarlo para mí? = Yeah? It must be my love-life. Can you fix it for me?
Debe arreglarlo para las mujeres cuyos corazones rompen, creo. = I should fix it for the women whose hearts you break, I think.
Nunca, no me. = Never, not me.
Un alma tan vieja. ¿De dónde salió tu luz, ángel? = Such an old soul. Where did you lose your light, angel?

No sé. ¿Me veo oscuro? = I don't know. Do I look dark?

Te ves perdido. Deberías llamar a tu amiga. Ella tambien te extraña. = You look lost. You should call your friend. She misses you, too.
Dime que no eres un fantasma. Dime que eres real. = Tell me you're not a ghost. Tell me you're real.

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