Tangled Up In Blue

by Icanseenow

Summary

"Dean's good with these kind of things. Ignoring feelings, pushing things away."

A depressed Sam finds comfort in Cas, who's more than happy to be needed.

As their friendship deepens and things start to change, Dean is forced to confront his own feelings or lose everything.
At first, Dean thinks he's just imagining things.

It's probably the lack of sleep and the exhaustion that makes him see monsters.

He hasn't had a good lay in weeks, too. That can't help, either.

They've been so bogged down in work lately, he hasn't had a chance to go out and forget about everything. He'd probably be less paranoid if he could just drive over to the next bar, chat up some lucky lady and spend the night at her place.

They hardly talk about anything else but the current case, so he tries to concentrate on that and not to let his mind go to other places. Dean's good with these kind of things. Ignoring feelings, pushing things away. And it'd been working quite well, too.

All those years of not letting his mind go to places and only slipping up when he's too vulnerable and Castiel’s too close.

He knows that there've been countless times when he wished to step even closer when the angel's forgotten about the importance of personal space. But he hardly ever does.

There have been days where he misses him so much, when Castiel hasn't shown up for weeks, when he lets his mind wander. The absence somehow allows him not to explain all his feelings away as brotherly – his choice of words almost makes him laugh.

"You're like a brother to me."

Because if anything, his relationship with his actual brother is just as messed up. Complicated, unhealthy and full of feelings that aren’t all all necessarily sibling-appropriate.

But Dean makes it all work. He's always known how to: swallowing all the feelings until they're nothing but a faint taste on his lips.

It's only when Castiel is gone, that they become uncontrollable. It's these times he starts crying silently in his room at night, because fuck it, people you love always leave, they all leave. It's only
then, when he thinks that he will never see him again that he lets the love run through his veins and take control over his actions.

Because he needs him, damn it, and he'd do anything to get him back, even if it meant exploring his own scary feelings.

But then, whenever Castiel returns, it all goes back in. When Cas is there in the flesh right next to him, being his normal weirdo self, all of Dean's inhibitions are back on.

Of course, he stills knows their friendship isn't very conventional. Who’s to say he’s doing it wrong, though, when there’s no manual for angel-human relationships. There it is again, that sneaky r-word that makes him feel all weird inside. It's not a relationship, it's not. It's not. Not just because there's no physical intimacy to speak of – even just thinking about it feels all kinds of wrong.

He'll say things like "Destiny can't be changed, Dean" and regard him with this glance that seems all-knowing and curious at once. And all he can do is stare back until the moment passes.

He's always known that Castiel doesn't treat him like other people, that he's given up everything for him and that 'profound bond' that he likes to talk about? Of course, Dean feels it too. He's not an idiot.

But if you don't want to open Pandora’s box, it's best to just deny its existence in the first place.

It had never been a fool-proof system, but it had been working as long as everything stayed the same.

It doesn’t feel like it’s working now, Dean concludes. He tries to shift his focus on the task at hand, but the words in the book before him seem like nothing but esoteric-sounding mumbo jumbo. Nothing that will help them with their current case.

They're sitting around the round table in their shabby motel room. Sam keeps sighing while reading through his notes on his laptop.

"Are you feeling alright?" Castiel asks and looks up from his book, just as Dean is.

"I'm fine," Sam insists, his eyes peeled to the screen.

"You don't look fine."

Castiel is right. Sam really doesn't look too hot, his eyes heavy and red.

"Cas, I told you before, I'm fine!" He shoots Castiel a look, that Dean's never seen his brother give the angel before. One that tells him to shut up.

"Sam, I know you're not fine. These things don't become true just because you keep repeating them."

Sam shuts his laptop and gets up. "I just need some fresh air. I've been staring at this screen for too long."

Castiel gets up, too.

"I need some time alone, alright?"

"Alright." Castiel sits down again.

Dean watches his brother cross the room to the door.
"You sure you're alright, Sammy?"

"Yeah, yeah." He seems far away as his hands muss up his hair. "Just need some air." Then he’s out of the door.

"Yikes, what's up with him?"

There's a searching look in Castiel's eyes. "I have been asking myself the same question."

"What do you mean?" Dean asks, puzzled. "Since when?"

"Your brother has been behaving very strangely the past days."

"He has?"

Dean takes a gulp from the beer bottle that's been standing next to him. He hasn't noticed anything off about Sam. Sure, he's been brooding, but that's Sam for you. Always thinking about an apocalypse or hell or being an abomination. Jeez, he needs to live a little and let loose sometimes.

"Yes."

"Like how?"

Dean's fingers are nibbling away on the paper label on his bottle, trying not to look up. But eventually he does. Castiel is looking at him intently, clearly weighing his words. He takes everything so damn serious, just like he takes every question literally. Dean has always found it endearing and funny, when he's not annoyed by it.

"I don't know how to explain it," Castiel finally says. His forehead wrinkles, like he's not content with his own answer. "I have tried to talk to him about it, but he insists that he is fine."

When did they even have time to talk, Dean wonders. He's been with them the whole time.

"Yeah, that's what people do, Cas. They lie when they're uncomfortable."

There's an uncharacteristic bitter note in Castiel's voice now, as he says: "Oh I know, I've spent enough years with you, Dean."

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you angry with me?"

"No." Castiel's voice softens. "I'm not angry. I'm merely suggesting that I've seen Sam's behaviour mirrored in yours before. It's just..." He hesitates.

"Spit it out."

"It's just that I find you easier to read."

Dean's not sure why, but it sounds like an insult to him.

"Oh great, thanks."

"You misunderstand me, Dean. I share a deep bond with you that gains me an access to your feelings in a way that I lack in regards to Sam."

"Yeah, ok..." He drinks up the beer. This talk about feelings and the deep bond always make him uncomfortable, and it doesn't help when Castiel adds: "I've watched over you day and night for so
long, Dean, I feel I can read most of your expressions and behavior well. But yet even you confound me at times. Your actions sometimes contradict your feelings so much."

"Yeah." Dean gets up. "That's enough of that crap."

Castiel's eyes follow him across the room. "For example, I understand you're trying to escape this conversation but I don't understand why you'd run from me. I know your feelings and intents anyway."

"Not creepy at all, dude", Dean mumbles, turned towards the door. "Not creepy at all."

"Dean..."

He's heard him say his name in all kinds of ways, but this one is his least favorite. The chiding one that seems to be left over from his by-the-heavenly-rulebook-days. That sounds like he's talking to an unruly child.

The door opens. Sam's eyes look even redder than before. The thought that he's spent the past minutes outside crying crosses Dean's mind. It’s an image that’s hard to shake.

"Are you feeling better, Sam? Did the night air help ease the strain?" Castiel sounds concerned and so full of compassion that it makes something inside Dean squirm.

"Yeah, thanks." Sam quietly shuts the door behind him. "Think I'm just tired. I need some sleep, I guess."

"Of course."

Sam heaves himself into the bathroom and shuts the door behind him.

Dean looks at Castiel looking at the closed door and he finally understands what's off: Castiel cares, really cares about how Sam is doing. Not just as means to an end, but for his own sake.

Clearly, this is a good thing and nothing for anyone to get their panties into a twist.

Dean clenches his jaw. If Cas is so good at reading his feelings and knowing what he wants and needs, why is he just sitting there, not saying anything? He should stand up and get so close that the proximity makes Dean run away again. That's their thing, that's how it works, and it's what Dean craves - even if it’s just because he's not allowed himself to crave more.

"I'm sorry you're upset," Castiel says, as if he's been reading his mind. And maybe he has. Dean's never been sure how any of that crap works.
Stay Alive

Chapter Summary

Title taken from José González’ "Stay Alive"

Sam's heart is beating heavily against his ribcage, as he closes the bathroom door.
He washes his hands in the sink before splashing ice cold water onto his face.
There's dirt spots all over the mirror, but he can see enough of himself to recognize he looks like a mess.
He doesn't just look like a mess, he is a mess.
He thought he'd left the crying behind him by now. He's survived Lucifer, he's been through the worst pains imaginable, physical and mental - somehow he thought it could only get better.
Instead it's a pile-on.
Suffering doesn't make you stronger, he knows now, it just rips away everything until all you've got left is the raw flesh.
He's pretty sure Dean knows he's depressed. Hell, when hasn't Sam been depressed in the past years.
And yet he doesn't do anything. He doesn't offer help.
The only thing Dean does is keeping him from ending it all. Out of habit, maybe. And because he can't let go. Because he can't accept the fact that Sam would be happier if everything ended right now. Completely. For real. Finally.
But that's been taken away from him. Because, really, he could take his razor now and slash his wrists and that would get him, what? 10 months in hell?
Because there's no way he'd be going to heaven. He's not sure if that's even possible, with the demon part that's still running through him, that's always going to be in him.
So maybe he'll get a year in hell - which, as fucked up as it sounds, he'd still prefer to this. At least it would feel like he belonged there - and then Dean would somehow make him come back. He'd find a way, as he always did.
And surely life with Dean would be worse after an attempted suicide. He can't imagine how it wouldn't be.
There'd be even more anger, more resentment, more alienation.
No, it's not an option. Dean's taken away the last resort he's known, all in the name of family. Loyalty. Love.
Now there's nothing left for Sam to do but to go through the motions. He's fucked up either way. Nothing's going to get better for him, so maybe, maybe he can at least try not to make it worse for
Dean. Maybe he can make that his mission again: Dean’s well-being.

It takes Sam an enormous amount of energy to pick up his toothbrush. He brushes until his gums feel raw.

He spits out blood.

The only person he wants to see to right now is sitting outside the door, talking to his brother.

When Sam returns to the room, it feels icy somehow. Like there’s been a fight. He can’t help but worry that the topic has been him.

He glares at Castiel, who returns it with a sympathetic smile.

"You really want to go to bed now?" Dean asks incredulous, as Sam walks over to his mattress.

"I have a headache. Maybe I'm coming down with a cold or something."

"A cold," Dean snorts. "I thought you said your eyes hurt from looking at the screen for too long."

"They do." He hates how cornered his brother can make him feel with just one look. "It's both. I just need to lie down."

"Okay, well." Dean breathes heavily, as he gets up. "If we're not going to get any work done tonight, I might as well just go out."

"Where are you planning to go?" Castiel asks. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"Oh, no way," Dean shakes his head. "I really don't need an angel cramping my style right now."

Sam can see the disappointment in Cas' eyes every time anew, as if he hasn't been shoved away countless times before. He should be used to it by now.

Sam bites his lips, he hates watching these scenes. The hardened features on Dean's face, trying to not let any emotions show. Castiel's sunken shoulders, the neutral expression he tries to hold onto.

Dean thinks it would make him weak to show emotions at times when no one is about to die. He doesn't get that what makes him weak is the exact opposite: his inability to be honest with himself.

Sam can't really remember the first time he understood Dean's feelings for Cas. Unlike Cas' obvious pining for Dean, which was hard to miss for anyone, Dean's expressions of love were always more subdued. You could probably mistake them for friendship or even something less. Well, maybe you could if you weren't the person who knew him best.

Sam’s never really known how to feel about it. Dean's and Cas' whole... thing. And he's still not entirely sure what he makes of it. But he does know that when two people are in love, denying it the way Dean did is a recipe for disaster. It's just not fair to string someone along and then push them away, whenever they got too close.

It makes Sam angry to see Dean hurt Cas like this. And for some reason, it makes him angrier by the day.

"Have fun," Sam says. "Don't forget that we got to leave early tomorrow."

"Jesus..." Dean shakes his head. "Hope you feel better soon," he says and it sounds pretty sarcastic to Sam's ears.
Dean doesn't slam the door, but it's close enough.

"Is your brother going out to fornicate with strangers?"

"Probably. And he's definitely going to get smashed."

Sam gets undressed. It's unnerving to have Castiel watch, but it would be even stranger for him to tell him to turn around now. And anyway, he's seen him in boxers many times before, there's no need to feel self-conscious now.

"Yes, generally Dean's level of inebriation is always quite high when he copulates."

Sam doesn't want to ask how he knows this. Castiel is an angel, so the thought that he's watched Dean have sex before is not too outlandish.

The thought makes Sam feel squeamish and sad at the same time. No one wants to see the person they love have senseless sex with strangers. The only thing worse is watching them have meaningful sex with people they care about.

Or so Sam would imagine.

Castiel sits down on Dean’s bed, as Sam gets under the covers of his.

"I worry about your brother."

"Me too."

"I worry about you as well."

"Yeah well…” Sam doesn’t know what to reply. "I worry about you too."

"That’s a rather big amount of pointless worrying, it would seem."

"I agree."

Castiel turns the light off and returns to sitting on Dean’s bed, his trench coat still fast around his body.

"Don’t you feel hot in that thing?” Sam’s always wanted to ask this, but somehow they’d never had the kind of friendship where he felt he could before.

It feels strange when Sam realizes what’s changed. He’s given up on his life, again, but this time he’s not alone with this knowledge. Castiel knows too. It’s probably because both of them have more or less given up. It’s a strange bond to share, to be alive but by means of one man.

Sam wonders if Castiel would like Dean to let him go, the same way Sam sometimes wants his brother to let go of him. Or if he’s happy to live just for him.

Castiel’s voice shakes him out of his thoughts.

"I don’t feel temperature in the same way as you do."

"I know, but you do feel things. Like touch, sensation, heat…”

"I guess.” Castiel seems to mull this over for a moment. Then he starts unbuttoning the trench coat. "It’s but a mild discomfort. But I assume I’ll be waiting a while until Dean returns, so I might as
"You know…." Sam shifts in his bed to get a better look at Castiel. "You don’t have to wait around for him like this all the time."

"I know. It’s what I want to do."

"Yeah, okay, if you like sitting around by yourself for ages like that, that’s your prerogative."

"But Sam," Castiel sounds puzzled, "I’m not alone. I’ve got company."

Sam feels something tightening in his abdomen. It’s not a bad feeling per se, but he hates himself for it.
It doesn’t take long for Sam to fall asleep.

Castiel watches over him until he’s sure he’s deep in his dreams and nightmare-free. He feels that he should stay here and watch over him, to keep the metaphorical and the real demons at bay.

But no matter how much Sam is suffering and no matter how much Castiel wants to alleviate his pain, Sam isn’t his destiny. Dean is, and he has to remember this. Like he could ever forget.

Castiel is quite aware that Dean wouldn’t want him to follow him, stalk him.

That's what he'd call it: stalking.

"Dude, you're like that creepy Twilight guy," he'd once told him. Sam had laughed, but Castiel had been puzzled. Thanks to Metatron he'd understood the reference, to but the context had made no sense to him.

"I'm nothing like a sparkly vampire...?"

"Watching me sleep, always there in the shadows. Just, uh, stop stalking me, ok?"

He'd never gotten this out of his head. Stalking.

Of course, that hadn't stopped him from watching out for Dean, in all the ways. Dean's notion of privacy was a sham, but if Dean needed to feel like Castiel was not watching over him all the time, then he'd play the part and never talk about it.

Castiel gets up from the bed and walks towards the other, where Sam is sleeping uneasily. He puts a hand to Sam’s forehead, in the hope that it will calm him enough to last while Castiel is gone. He senses that Sam is both more receptive to him watching over them, as well as more aware of it. It is a strange feeling to be acknowledged in this way, and Castiel thinks it's the main reason why they've been seeking each other's company more and more. Honesty, a feature Dean is sadly lacking in a lot of ways.

When he finds Dean, he's still alone at the bar, but his level of intoxication is already quite high.

Of course Castiel doesn't show himself. He only watches as the drinks keep on coming and Dean eventually gets up to take his first shot.

The woman is past her prime, but her makeup is impeccably applied and her hair is soft and long. She has all the other qualities Dean enjoys in a woman too, as Castiel has learnt over the years.

As they start flirting, Castiel feels the urge to look away. He doesn't really need to be here. He knows now that Dean is safe.
But he stays and watches as they get closer to each other. Dean has his arm slung around the woman’s waist as he pulls her out of the bar through the backdoor.

Beside the trash cans, he shoves her against the wall, kissing her forcefully, while his hands find their way under her dress.

Her cowboy boots make an unnerving screeching sound as their metal caps scratch over the floor, as Dean turns her around.

He's got his eyes closed as if deep in thought as he takes her.

Thankfully, it doesn't take very long, until he unceremoniously slides out of her. He immediately pushes himself away from her and pulls his jeans up.

When she's asking for his number, slurring all the words, he's already walking away, not even taking a second look at her.

Castiel sits in the passenger seat of the car, next to Dean, who’s not turning the engine on, who’s not moving at all, who’s just staring ahead.

The stench of alcohol and semen fills the air.

It looks like Dean is about to cry, but he just bites down hard on his lower lip until all the color drains from it.

Castiel wishes he could make his presence known, reach out, and make it all go away.

Let them forget the smell and the memories, for both their sakes.

He's back in the motel room, back on the edge of Dean's bed, before the door opens.

"Get off," the words are slurred, "I need to sleep."

Castiel does as he's told, gets up from Dean’s bed and sits down next to Sam instead, who’s turned to the wall.

He’s glad to feel Sam’s regular breathing right behind him. Still, he feels he should have stayed here and looked out for the younger Winchester instead. He should have stayed where he’s wanted.

"Were you able to get your mind off of the case?" Castiel asks.

Dean glares at him, while unbuttoning his jeans for the second time in the past hour.

"Were you?" He asks back, and suddenly he doesn't seem so drunk anymore. He pulls his sweaty T-shirt over his head and lets it fall beside the bed.

"Yes," Castiel answers truthfully.

"You know it's creepy that you're just sitting around here all night while we sleep, right?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Just like Sam, Dean is only wearing a pair of boxer shorts, as he gets under the covers.

"I mean... You could at least pretend to sleep, you know? Lie down and close your eyes or something?"
"Would that make you feel better?"

Dean breathes out heavily and pushes his head deeper into his pillow.

When Castiel is sure that he’s not going to get a reply, he says: "Good night, Dean."

Soon, the room is filled with slight drunk snoring.

Castiel sits there, upright, waiting for the time to pass, his coat in his hands.

He knows he could be more useful and get some work done, but he prefers the silence and physical closeness to the two brothers.

Shortly before sunrise, Sam is tossing and turning, mumbling nervously. Castiel firmly puts his hand on Sam's forehead, until his body visibly calms down.

It makes him smile. It feels good to be needed.
He’s not imagining things, Dean decides a few weeks later, while accelerating the car.

He and Sam are on their way to the bunker.

Castiel fucked off the moment the case was over, without a word about where to.

Just thinking about it now makes Dean clench his teeth.

Castiel’s always too close or too far away, never providing any explanation for either mode of existence.

"Where do you think Cas is now?" Sam’s voice sounds tired as he asks, but most of all he sounds lonely. So fucking lonely that there’s an uncomfortable tug at Dean’s heart.

"The hell should I know?"

Sam shuts up and visibly pulls himself away from him and against the door.

Dean tries his best to soften his voice. "Actually, I’d thought he might have talked to you about it…"

"Me?" Sam laughs sadly. "Why would he have told me?"

"Look, Sammy, I’ve been meaning to ask…"

He speeds up the car to the max now, because there’s no way he can do this otherwise. He’d planned to be drunk for this, speeding is the next best thing.

He looks over at his brother, with his furrowed brows and his skin much too pale… and he chickens out. He can’t do it. He can’t ask directly. Sam’s not going to tell him anything he wants to hear anyway.

Instead he asks: "Doesn’t Cas also seem, I dunno, kinda off to you lately?"

Sam perks up a bit, sitting more upright in his seat now.

"Off? Like how?"

*Off like he doesn’t want me anymore. Like he’s over me.* "I don’t know. Just…"

"I mean," Sam shifts in his seat, "he’s always been kinda off somehow, right?"

"Yeah, I’m not talking about him being a weird-ass angel. I’m talking about…* About you and him, Sam. I’m talking about you two.*"

"I think he’s been a bit… depressed maybe," Sam finally says.
"Depressed? Why?"

Sam shrugs, but he looks like he has a pretty good idea.

Deans drums his fingers against the steering wheel. "Come on, man, you’re the one always going on about honesty and all that crap."

"Yeah, so why don’t you just ask him?"

"Like he’d tell me."

Sam scoffs. "Dude…"

"What?"

"Are you serious?" Sam shakes his head in disbelief. "Dean," he says earnestly. "I’m pretty sure he’d be thrilled if you asked him about, I don’t know, his feelings now and then."

Dean swats an imaginary fly away, not looking at his brother. "His feelings? I ask him how he is all the time!"

"No, you don’t. I don’t think I’ve heard you ask him that once?"

"Sure, I have! ‘Are you alright, Cas?’ I’ve definitely asked that before."

"Yeah, after a battle or something."

"So what?" What the hell is Sam playing at?

"Nothing, it’s just… It’s no wonder he doesn’t feel like he can talk to you. I mean, I get it. I feel the same way a lot of times."

Dean grits his teeth. "That’s bullshit," he finally says. "You can always talk to me and you know that."

"Sure."

With that, Sam pulls away again, his head pressed against the window. And while Dean is still thinking of a comeback, trying to calm that fuming inside, Sam’s already got his headphones out.

It’s a long and lonesome rest of a trip for Dean that leaves him entirely too much time to mull over Sam’s words.

They don’t talk when they arrive at the bunker. Not really. Sam mumbles something about not feeling hungry, as he heads straight to his room. As if that damn Green Smoothie he's had hours ago at a pitstop could last a guy Sam's size this long.

Dean feels tired from the drive, but despite the tiredness he can't will himself to go to sleep.

After a few shots of whiskey, he still has trouble falling asleep, but the thought of asking Castiel to come over seems more tempting by the minute.

Maybe Sam is right. Maybe this whole talking thing would help. He knows he's not the best communicator in the world. But shit, this is important, right? It kinda feels important.

He doesn't want to pray, so he gets his phone out and stares at it for what feels like ages, until he
decides to get another drink first.

What is even going to say? Sorry I never ask you how you feel?

Every and any way he can think of starting this conversation feels wrong and awkward. Maybe he doesn't even need to say sorry, he wonders, or say something specific. Maybe it's enough to let him know he wants him here.

Yeah, right.

Like he's ever asked him to come over just because.

Sam is right. He treats Castiel more like means to an end than a friend.

He puts his phone away and gets up from his bed. There's someone else he needs to talk to first. He can't stand this weird silence between Sam and him. It's worse than fighting.

He hears Sam laughing in his room and some background noise that sounds like TV, so it feels safe to enter without knocking.

It's such an innocent view that causes this wretched feeling inside him.

Sam and Cas are both sitting on the bed, their backs leaning against the headboard. Castiel's coat is thrown over the desk chair and he's not wearing shoes.

Dean stares at his besocked feet. There's something oddly private about it.

"Hey," Sam smiles up at him before grabbing the remote control and lowering the volume.

There's many things Dean wants to ask instead of the words that come out: "What are you watching?"

"Old Saturday Night Lights Clips from the 90s."

"Why?"

He knows his voice sounds hoarse and wrong. He finally looks at the screen to see that Sam’s telling the truth.

"Because they’re funny. And I thought Cas might enjoy them."

"Hello Dean," Castiel says and at least he has the audacity to look ashamed. He curls his toes downwards.

Dean suddenly feels very stupid for all the to-and-fro-ing about calling.

"Are you drunk?" Sam asks. He sounds worried.

"No."

Castiel climbs off the bed and now he looks even stranger without his shoes and his trench coat on. He stands awkwardly in front of Dean.

"Do you want to join us?" He gestures towards the TV. "It is, at times, quite humorous."

"No. It’s not really my thing."
"What are you talking about?" Sam asks. "We used to watch these all the time?"

Dean finds it difficult to peel his eyes off of Cas, who looks oddly small and vulnerable. Nothing like an angel with the power to smite you.

Sam's half sitting on the bed now, his dangling legs slowly inching towards the floor.

"Are you alright, Dean?" He asks. "I kinda thought you'd already gone to bed. Or I'd have told you Cas was here." Sam says it matter of factly and it still feels like such a huge fucking lie.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Dean asks.

Castiel blinks at him, before his eyes dart over to Sam. "I... I wanted to make sure you were both alright."

"Yeah, I'm really great, thanks dude. It's all just peachy." He turns around and walks towards the door.

"Dean..."

Sam is sighing. He can feel his brother following him into the kitchen.

Dean’s not really drunk yet, but that's definitely about to change now.

The fuck.

As if the missing trench coat wasn't weird enough, he can't get the image of Cas' surprisingly small feet out of his head.

"Dean, what's wrong?"

Sam sounds so tired again, the earlier laughter far gone. He leans against the door frame and eyes him wearily.

"Nothing's wrong." Dean opens the fridge and considers the beer, but that's definitely not going to cut it now.

"Dean..."

He feels Sam's warm hand on his shoulder and flinches. "Don't touch me." He turns around so swiftly that he almost knocks Sam over.

"What the hell, Dean? Are you still angry because of what I said in the car?"

"About a green smoothie being a nutritious yet tasty meal replacement? Hell yeah..."

Dean passes Sam and walks over to his dwindling stash of whiskey. He doesn't let himself think about it for too long, before taking one of the bottles. He doesn't have time for a glass.

"Dean, I don't want to fight with you."

"Then don't."

"Tell me what's wrong then?"

"I told you before, Sammy!"
"Don't tell me it's nothing again! I know that's not true!"

"Shit, Sam, you really want to know what's wrong?"

He finally gets the cap off the bottle, but not before almost dropping the whole thing and spilling 50 dollars of liquor spilling.

"Yes!" Sam steps closer again. "I really want to know. I always want to know."

"I'm so fucking tired of fighting," Dean eventually says. It comes out like a whisper. "I don't know what's up with us lately."

"We've always been like this," Sam argues, but Dean shakes his head.

"No, it's... It's like you're somewhere else again. Someone else." Dean feels sorry the moment the words escape his mouth.

"Is it because of what I said about Cas?" Sam asks, looking hurt.

"Forget about Cas!" Dean shouts. "I just wanted to apologize, ok? I meant to. I just didn't expect you to be all shacked up with him in there."

Sam is stunned for a second, as a look of understanding passes over his face.

"You're angry because I was watching TV with Cas? Or because he didn’t come running to you first?"

"What the fuck are you implying?"

"Nothing." Sam takes a step back. "Nothing." He shrugs. "Not sure why I thought for a second you were serious about wanting to talk."

As Dean watches his brother leave the room, he thinks of Cas’ words, about Sam being depressed.

Sam’s not depressed, Dean decides as he takes a long swig, he’s just angry with him. And who the fuck knows why, 'cause Dean’s pretty sure he’s the only one allowed to be pissed with his brother right now.
South of Heaven

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Slayer's "South of Heaven"

Chapter Notes

If it hasn't been painfully clear by now: I'm horrible Sam/Cas slow burn trash, a big fan of suffering, depressed!Sam, jealous!Dean, Dean/Cas as a semi-canon-fact, and a lot of miscommunication and drama. I guess I just felt the need to make sure to let you know this is not a happy story (although I guess that would be weird after the first four chapters anyway...), because... apparently I feel a bit bad about that? I swear I love these guys...

Cas is sitting on the bed, cross-legged. He's turned the TV off and doesn't seem to be doing anything.

Sam sends him an apologetic smile, as he closes the door. "Sorry about that."

"It's alright. You didn't do anything."

Sam goes back to join him on the bed but now it feels awkward. He can't help thinking of Dean getting drunk in his own room.

"No, I didn't. But Dean did."

"In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I've overheard your conversation."

"Oh jeez..." Sam looks up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry."

"Is he angry with me?"

"No, no way."

Sam isn't sure why he's saying that, given that there's high likelihood that Dean isn't just furious with him but with Cas as well. But it's such a childish anger and there's evident sadness in Cas' eyes, so he denies it.

"It wasn't about you. We just had a fight on our way here."

"Yes, I heard. Is there any way I can help?"

Sam shakes his head. He crosses his legs as well. They must look like a pair of overgrown 5-year-olds.

"Are you sure I can't help?" Castiel's eyes are searching his face. "It makes me feel so very pointless to just watch you suffer."
Sam laughs uneasily. "I'm not suffering."

Castiel cocks his head to the side. "Yes, you are."

There's a tentative hand on Sam's knee now.

"So what if I am," Sam mumbles. "It's not like you can do anything about it."

"I could try."

Sam doesn't say anything but he's also not pushing Castiel's hand away, still resting on his jeans.

It is warm and calming, more so than any touch he's known before.

Unsure, Sam looks up from his knee. "Are you... trying to heal me right now?"

"Is it working?" Castiel's eyes look hopeful, but Sam shakes his head.

"Not really."

"Oh." Castiel pulls away. "I'm sorry."

Sam curses himself once the warmth is gone. "I mean, it felt good. I could feel what you were trying to do and it felt... nice."

He's not seriously blushing now, that can't be right. "It just... I don't think there's anything technically wrong with me. Like... my body is fine. There's nothing to heal there. It's just my mind."

"Your soul has been healed and mended before, Sam."

Sam shakes his head. "It's not like that. I'm just... that's just me, Cas. You can't take away something if that's all I am."

Castiel gives him a puzzled look. "You think all you are is your suffering?"

"No, of course not." Sam looks away, towards the door.

That's exactly what he thinks.

"It has worked before," Castiel says. "In your dreams. I thought it might help when you're awake too."

"What do you mean, in my dreams?"

Now it's Castiel's turn to avert his eyes.

"Have you been meddling with my dreams?"

"I haven't been meddling. I was merely... The last nights you were having nightmares or visions, memories... and I wanted to take them away."

Images flash through Sam's mind, of Castiel next to him on the mattress, of his hands gingerly lying on his temple. Images he was sure he'd just dreamt up.

"I'm sorry, I should have probably asked for your permission first."

"No, of course not. It's fine. It's... Thank you."
Castiel beams at him. "We can try again, if you want. I mean now. While you're awake."

"Um..."

There's suddenly music coming from the other hallway. Dean's clearly still awake, drinking, angrily blasting Slayer.

Sam is pretty sure Dean doesn't even like "South of Heaven". Maybe he's trying to provide some clever meta commentary, but somehow Sam doubts it.

"It's okay", Castiel says. "It was just a suggestion. I should probably leave you be now."

"No." He turns his body towards the angel. "I'd like to try it, it's just... I don't want to drain your energy or power or whatever."

"It's fine. Really. It's there for me to use it and I can't think of a better way than making you better."

Castiel's smile is honest but Sam is pretty sure his words aren't true. He knows Castiel would prefer helping Dean instead of him, but something's holding him back and Sam is not about to mention it now.

"Okay, so..." Sam shifts his position, so they're sitting right across from each other. "Do I have to do anything?"

"There's no need to be nervous, it's really no different than when I'm healing a flesh wound. At least not for me."

Sam's smile is nervous anyway.

He's expecting a lit tap on his forehead, but instead Castiel reaches for his hands.

He can feel the warmth and energy streaming from them, flowing into Sam's hands, up through his arms and finally engulfing him completely.

"Does it feel good?"

Sam nods.

It feels different than when Castiel's healing a wound. Sam's always been too focused on the pain, the endorphins and the fear to notice anything else.

Now all he feels is Cas' pure energy flowing through him. It's strange and powerful and it feels like opening a window and letting all the light in for the first time after a long dark night.

The energy flow slowly ebbs away.

Castiel still holds his hands, eying him curiously.

"Did it work?"

It takes a moment until Sam can muster up a more or less coherent answer. "I think so... I don't know... How can you tell?"

"I don't know," he admits. "Do you feel better?"

"Yeah. I feel really good actually." Sam tries to think of way to explain how he feels, but struggles to
think of fitting words.

He feels good. Light. Calm. Content.

"It kinda feels like you drugged me, to be honest."

He laughs softly, but stops as Castiel throws him a worried look and pulls his hands away, folding them in his lap.

"Given your history of substance abuse, I'm not sure that's a very flattering comparison."

"That's not how I meant it at all. It’s nothing like that. It’s just… it’s nice to forget how broken I am for a moment, I guess. It’s similar in that respect."

"You’re not-"

"It’s okay, Cas. Really. I am. And I know I am. But thank you, really, you know, for trying to help."

"Of course."

It’s only now that Sam notices the music that is still coming through the closed door. Slayer has been replaced by Blind Faith’s "Do what you like". This time, Sam is pretty sure, Dean is trying to tell him something.

"I should try to get some sleep," Sam says.

"Yes, you should." Castiel nods but doesn't move.

"Are you... are you going to stay?" Sam asks with a nod towards the bed. He realizes his voice sounds dismissive, but it’s mostly confusion.

"I wanted to make sure you're okay, in the same way I have done the past nights," He blinks a few times before adding: "But of course, I don’t have to if you don’t require or desire my help."

Castiel gets up from the bed and reaches for his shoes.

"No, it's fine. It's just... I mean, the other nights I didn't know you were doing your," he moves his hand around in circles, "your thing before. It might be weird now, trying to fall asleep knowing you're there."

"I really don't have to be." Castiel is already tying his shoes now, not looking up. "If you change your mind, you know how to reach me."

It's a very strange scene to watch, as Castiel grabs his trenchcoat and hurries out of the room. He seems more than just a bit miffed.

"Cas..."

The door closes swiftly and Sam’s alone again.

He’s amazed by his ability to piss off both Dean and Cas the same night without meaning to. Or well, maybe he meant to edge on Dean a bit, but not like that. And he sure as hell didn't mean to upset Castiel. He isn't even sure what exactly has just happened.

He still feels the aftermath of Cas' energy through him but it's starting to wane and he's scared of the feelings that are going to surface any minute now.
He doesn't bother going to the bathroom. He pulls off his jeans and his shirt and slips underneath the covers. If he can fall asleep quickly enough, he won't have to feel all the shitty things that are just about to take over again.

As he presses his face into the pillow, he asks himself grimly why the hell he told Castiel to go away.

The bed feels too big and empty.

At least, the music's stopped.
Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Brigid Mae Power's "Don't Shut Me Up (Politely)"

»Really?« Dean laughs coldly. »Really? Are you fucking serious?«

Castiel stands in the doorframe, eying him carefully. He doesn't reply, he just closes the door, and looks at him with his fucking puppy eyes. Right now Dean would prefer the angry I'm-your-God-and-about-to-smite-you look, but tough luck.

Dean walks towards the record player and turns the music off. If Castiel's not with Sam anymore, there's no point in sending any subliminal messages.

He only realizes his hands are shaking when his fingers won't let him slide the record into the sheath. »Let me help you.«

Castiel stands closely behind him, as he takes the record out of his hand and slides it into the record sleeve like he's never done anything else before. »Huh, look at you. You're like a pro, a real natural.«

It's meant to come out sarcastically but it ends up sounding like he's in awe of Castiel. And fuck it, maybe he is - despite the anger, he almost always is.

»Thank you.« Castiel smiles at him genuinely, bright blue eyes staring into his. »You were asking if I was serious. What did you have in mind?«

Are you seriously going to come in here after the shit show that went down earlier?

Suddenly the words sound ridiculous to him. After all, what has Castiel done but watch TV with his friend? He can hardly blame him for taking his shoes off.

And yeah, maybe he's pissed that he could have gone the whole night without knowing Cas was even there, but it's not like he owns him. If wants to spend time with other people, then - Jesus! He has to stop his thoughts right there. He sounds insane.

»What do you want?« He turns away from Castiel, walking over to the other side of the room, just to get some space. »Did you watch enough bad TV?«

»Sam and I didn’t continue watching comedy clips after your fight«, Cas explains matter-of-factly. »We were otherwise occupied.«

»Right… I didn’t think Sam swung that way.«

He laughs hoarsely, immediately regretting his words. He’s thankful when Castiel doesn’t seem to understand.

»We didn’t… swing…?«
»No, of course you didn’t.«

He’s not sure if he wants to hear what they’d been up to instead.

»Dean«, Cas says all gravely as he’s stepping up to him again. »I’ve overheard the fight between you and your brother.«

»And?«

Dean tries to sound nonchalantly, but he can tell by looking at Cas' face that it's not working.

»Sam seemed to be under the impression that you were either upset because I didn't let my presence be known to you before him or because I was watching TV with your brother.«

He tilts his head slightly and stares.

»And?«, Dean repeats. »What's the question here, Cas? I'm fucking tired.«

»You're drunk. You won't sleep well either way«, Castiel says like the smart ass that he is. »My question is whether Sam is right. Are you upset with me and if so, why?«

Cas' hand is fumbling around in his coat pocket. At first Dean thinks that he's trying to retrieve something, a weapon maybe, but then it hits him: Cas is just acting nervously. Well, that's a plot twist.

»I remember you telling me you could always read me. Why don't you do some of that silent reading and just leave me the hell alone.«

Dean turns away and starts undressing. He has some trouble with his shoe laces and his socks seem quite intricate, too. Socks... Socks on Cas' feet on Sam’s bed. And that caught rabbit-in-the-headlights look on Cas’ face.

»You are upset with me«, Cas states the obvious. »Do you want me to always alert you first when I come by?«

»What?« A laugh gets caught in his dry throat. »No, of course not. That's ridiculous.«

His jeans get tangled up somewhere between his feet and his knees, and it takes ages to get them off completely.

»So you want me to abstain from watching TV? With Sam?«

»Cas, fucking seriously, do you ever listen to yourself speak?«, he spits out. »I couldn't care less about who you're watching TV with! And I definitely don't need to know where you are all the time. You do your thing. Whatever.«

Castiel steps forward and sits down on the bed next to him, making Dean wish he hadn't gotten down to his T-shirt and boxer shorts already.

»I don't understand what you want me to do.«

Castiel leans his leg against his so casually it makes Dean furious.

»I don't want you to do anything! I was having a fight with Sam, and as you're eavesdropping as usual you might have noticed I told him this wasn't about you at all. I don't know where Sam got this shit from, but certainly not from me.«
»Dean...« Castiel puts his hand on his shoulder and presses down lightly and - shit, this shouldn’t feel good. He can feel his body leaning into the touch involuntarily. »The last time we spoke you gave me the impression you didn’t want to see me for a while, so I thought it best-«

»Look, Cas«, Dean doesn’t manage to pull away just yet. »Everything’s fine, okay? I was just surprised to see you there, I guess, cozying up to Sam. It was just weird. That’s all. I’m not judging, man. You can watch all the shitty comedy shows you want. I mean, why the hell would you even think I’d care? That’s absurd.«

»You have noticed that I’ve grown closer to your brother.«

Welp, there it is. Dean stiffens, as Castiel cups his knee.

»You have nothing to worry about. My primary concern will always be your well-being.«

The sentence does exactly the opposite of calming him down, it freaks him out. Why would Cas even talk about it like that, if there wasn’t something to worry about?

»Your brother is experiencing a high amount of psychological discomfort and I’m merely trying to alleviate some symptoms.«

»Yup, he’s got some inner demons alright.«

»Do you not want me to help him?«

»Are you joking?«, Dean laughs. »Of course I want him to be well.«

»That’s not what I’ve asked. Do you want me to help him?«

Dean turns away. His head hurts and he feels mostly confused.

»What do you even mean, help? Like a psychologist? If he needs to vent he can talk to me, so...«

»Dean, I, if you don’t want me to-«

His hand just moves an inch upwards but it’s enough to almost make Dean jump. Thankfully, Castiel notices and retracts his fingers, and now they’re all Dean can think about. Fingers inching closer to his boxer shorts, and - fuck, he needs to get his shit together.

He tries to laugh and make it sound like their whole talk has been nothing but a joke.

»Cas, seriously, everything’s fine. As I said, I don’t get why Sam would even need help. He knows he’s got me. But sure, you’re his friend, you’re family, if you can stop him from moping all over the place by watching TV with him, go ahead. I’m happy if I get you out of my hair for a bit.«

»I see.« Castiel smiles at him sadly. »I’m glad you are not as upset with me as you seem to be.«

»I just... no more of these weird therapy sessions, alright.« He points at Cas and than at him. »There’s no need for that. And don’t, don’t... don’t fucking ask me for permission to hang out with Sam, ok? That’s weird.«

»I wasn’t asking permission«, Castiel corrects him. »I was trying to comprehend.«

»Yup, great, enough comprehension lessons for today, huh?«
Dean looks at the door pointedly.

Castiel stands up and opens his mouth, hesitating.

»Was there anything else?« Dean grunts.

Castiel doesn't say anything. He just looks at him intently, almost longingly.

Dean tries his best to hold his gaze.

»Look, everything's fine, I swear. Don't get your little wings in a twist about it.«

»You're unwell as well«, Castiel finally says.

It's unclear what he means by 'as well'. Unwell just like he is or like Sam?

Castiel takes a step forward, until he's right in front of him. His crotch is now much too close to Dean's face for his comfort.

Dean leans back a bit and holds up his hands to get some safe space between them.

»I'm peachy, Cas. It's just been a rough past weeks.«

»You don't need my help right now?«

Even in the dim light Cas' eyes are so fucking blue and piercing that it makes Dean squirm inside.

»No. I don't need your help«, he presses out. »Thanks though.«

»I understand.«

Castiel nods and turns to leave.

»Hey«, Dean blurts out, just as Castiel is opening the door. »Are you... are you staying?«

Castiel raises an eyebrow.

»Am I staying?«

»I mean, will you still be here tomorrow? Or are you off somewhere else? We could use your help here.« He realizes how oxymoronic his last sentences must sound together so he adds: »I mean, saving the world and all. Not me personally.«

He tries out a small smile that feels all kinds of wrong and doesn't reach his eyes, but Castiel returns it.

»Yes, if you want me here, of course I'll stay.«

»Alright.« Dean clears his throat, trying not to let the relief that's coming over him show in his voice.

»Night.«

»Good night, Dean.«
Black Coffee

When Sam wakes he's alone. It's early, just past 7 and he hasn't slept well.

He gets up, feeling groggy, hoping that a shower might make him feel better.

The shower doesn't help. Even the expensive organic shower gel that he hides from his brother doesn't manage to make him feel any cleaner.

He still feels grime all over.

His skin itches as he dries himself. He scratches his arms until they start turning red. His scalp feels tight around his skull. His whole body his telling him that something's all wrong, that he should get rid of it, cast it away completely.

He gets dressed. The cotton of his red and white checkered shirt feels rough against his skin.

He's scratching his neck repeatedly as he's walking into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

»Good morning, Sam.«

»Hey....«

A look at Castiel slouched in his seat at the kitchen table makes Sam feel worse. Memories of last night keep flooding in.

»You're still here«, he says, as he puts coffee powder into the machine. »That came out wrong, sorry.« He moves his thumb over his clavicle. »I'm just surprised. I thought you'd be gone.«

»Your brother asked me to stay.«

»Really?« He doesn't try to hide his surprise. »That's good.«

The coffee machine is spluttering and coughing.

»Can I have a cup as well?«

»You drink coffee?«

»I like the communal aspect of it.«

»Yeah, sure, I'll get you one.«

Sam moves to get two cups and puts them on the table.

»Black?«

»Whichever way you're having it.«

»Black then.«

They sit opposite each other now, drinking their coffee in silence for a few minutes.

Castiel clings to his mug, his fingers tightly wound around the writing that says "Smile - You're in Omaha!" in faded letters. He only takes small sips.
»Is it too strong?«, Sam asks as his hand wanders from neck to clavicle again. His skin is taunting him.

»I cannot appreciate the taste either way and I don't react to caffeine in these minuscule amounts.«

»Yeah, right, I should have guessed that«, Sam murmurs before taking a gulp himself.

»Is there something wrong with your skin?«

Sam stops his hand in its tracks and puts it firmly onto the table.

»Just an itch.«

»Should I-?«

»It's fine.«

»But it's really no problem.«

»It's fine.«

Castiel lowers his eyes to his mug and Sam can feel his bad conscience returning in full force.

»So«, he says. »You talked to Dean last night? That's great.«

»Yes«, Castiel nods but he doesn't look too happy. »He told me you could use my help. It sounded like he was talking about a case.«

»We don't have a new case yet. I would have told you about it if we had.«

»Of course.«

»Did he say anything else?«

Castiel squints his eyes, like he's trying really hard to remember the details.

»He told me that I didn't have to ask his permission to watch TV with you.«

Sam snorts.

»Wow, that's generous.«

»Yes, I thought so too.«

They share a pained smile. Then Sam finishes his coffee and gets up to get another cup.

»Look, man«, he starts, as he sits back down again. His eyes are on Cas' index finger, drawing circles around the 'O' in Omaha. »I'm sorry about last night. Sending you away like that… That was a dick move. No actually, that was a Dean-move.«

»What's the difference?«, Castiel asks.

Sam's taken aback for a minute. He forgets how direct Castiel can get when he's hurt or just emotional, mainly because it's such a rare thing for him to show.

»I didn't want to throw you out.«
»You had every right to.«

»Man, Cas, come on, you know this isn't about 'having a right'. I was just being selfish. I wasn't being a good friend.«

»I wanted to stay because of you«, Castiel says in earnest. »To help you. If you didn't want me there the whole undertaking would have been fruitless anyway.«

»It's not that I didn't want you to stay«, Sam blurts out before he can regret it. »It just felt... weird. I don't know. It's hard to explain.«

»I'm a celestial being with a vast amount of knowledge, as you know, I'm sure I could understand.«

»No«, Sam smiles. »It's less of a logical thing and more of an emotional one.«

»I know about emotions too«, Castiel says and Sam half dreads that he is going to talk about Dean, but instead he says: »God created us all and he himself has emotions more bountiful than you can imagine. It's not a foreign concept to me. Hatred, love, jealousy, heaven's stock full of those.«

»Yeah, I know, old testament and all that.«

»I mean, scripture is not-«

»I know, I know«, Sam stops him. »You've told me before about the fallibility of scripture. Back to the you not understanding me bit... It's not that I don't trust you to understand, it's that I don't fully get it myself. I'm not sure what happened yesterday. I regretted sending you away. And I'm glad you're still here.«

»I'm glad too.«

Castiel takes a small sip of coffee and turns his face in disgust. Sam laughs.

»You sure it's not too bitter?«

»Apparently Jimmy was never much of black coffee drinker«, Castiel says with a half-smile. Then his face gets serious again. »How did you sleep? After... after yesterday I didn't want to check on you without your permission.«

Sam considers lying for a moment, but what's the point.

»Honestly, I had a pretty rough night.«

»Did you have nightmares?«

»Does Lucifer skinning me alive count?«, he asks wryly. »Oh and clowns, lots of clowns. I'm honestly not sure what's worse.«

»You hide a lot of your pain behind humor«, Castiel notes. »You and your brother both.«

»What else should I do? Explain to you in excruciating detail how horrible it felt? I mean, the topic is kind of a give away.«

He hasn't noticed that his hand has wandered back to his clavicle, scratching.

»Is this where he cut you upon?« Cas nods towards his hand.
»No.« Sam closes his eyes, trying to forget the images. »It's where he kissed me.«

»I'm sorry.«

He reaches out towards Sam's other hand, that's still around the coffee mug.

»It's fine«, Sam knows he doesn't sound fine. His voice is shaking. »It was only a dream.«

»It was a memory, wasn't it?«

»Does it really matter?«

Sam is appreciative of the warmth in Castiel’s eyes and in the fingers that are gingerly touching his. Sam takes his other hand and wraps them around Castiel’s without thinking. There’s no grace flowing and yet it seems to help. Maybe it’s less the angel mojo that he needs to make him feel better than human touch.

There's a small cough coming from the entrance.

»Morning«, Dean says, as he walks towards them. »Coffee?«

»In the pot«, Sam says, pulling one hand away, the other still sandwiched between Cas and the mug. »Morning.«

»Good morning, Dean«, Castiel says, finally pulling his hand away. »You can have my cup. I won’t finish it. It’s rather bitter.«

»No thanks, I'll get my own.« Dean shrugs. »Mhm, didn't even know you drank coffee.«

»He says he does it for the communal aspect«, Sam explains, in a mocking voice, hoping to lighten the mood, but when Dean eyes him, he can tell it came out wrong.

Dean sits down next to him.

»So«, he says before taking a sip. »When you two have finished braiding each other's hair, we should start looking for a new case.«

»Are you well enough?«, Castiel asks.

It takes Sam a second to realize he's talking to him.

»Oh me?« He glances at Dean, trying to read his blank expression. »Yeah, sure, why wouldn’t I be?«

»Great«, Dean says mockingly. »Team Free Will then!«

Sam watches his brother gulp down the coffee, and then watches Castiel watching his brother do the very same.

There’s a look in Castiel’s eyes that Sam knows all to well, from when the angel is watching his brother. As if he’s in awe and deeply at home at the same time. As if he’s just content to be hanging around Dean, watching every move, absorbing everything he says.

Sam jumps up.

»I will just get my laptop then.«
Great", Dean says. »If you find anything we should probably just get breakfast on the way.« Then, in a lower voice not directed at him he adds: »What are you talking about? This isn’t strong at all, Cas. I could show you stronger coffee in any third-rate diner in Kansas alone.«

It’s a weird thing to feel sad about, Sam thinks, scratching over the back of his neck. It’s not even an insult per se. There’s nothing inherently good about making strong coffee and still… It makes him feel like a failure in his brother’s eyes. Yet again.

Suck it up, Sam Winchester. Don’t be such a baby.

He sits down on his bed with his laptop, reading through obscure blogs and local newspapers and trying not to think so much.

Jesus freaking Christ, why can’t he stop thinking for one minute. Why won’t his mind just stop racing and let him concentrate.

He wants to be back to the kitchen, but something won’t let him get up. His legs feel like lead and his head is heavy with all the buzzing inside.

The skin over his clavicle is red and almost scratched raw by now, but at least it feels like Lucifer’s kisses are slowly fading away.

There’s a knock on his door that he doesn’t even remember closing. Castiel pops his head in, his body still in the hallway.

»Have you found something?«

»Not yet. I don’t know. Maybe.«

»Dean is calling around. Why is he so desperate to find a new case already?«

Sam shrugs, but it’s a performative shrug. They both know Dean well. When he needs to get his mind off things, the best way to do it is to drink or kill.

Sam prefers the second mode of coping, it’s healthier. At least mentally, if not always physically.

Castiel leaves the door open as he walks across the room and sits down on the bed. He looks over Sam’s shoulder at the screen.

»A hanging?«

»Yes, apparently in Rushville, Nebraska, a woman hanged her neighbor.«

»That’s gruesome, but how does it pertain to you and Dean?«

He can feel Castiel’s breath on his shoulder through his t-shirt as he leans to take a closer look at the article.

»She said her neighbor was a witch.« Sam turns his head to meet Cas’ eyes and almost bumps heads with his him. »I don’t know, maybe it’s nothing but it sounds kinda fishy.«

»It can’t hurt to check«, Dean says, leaning against the doorframe, drinking his coffee. »Unless you’ve found something else that sounds more promising?«

»No.« Sam turns to the screen again, clicking through all his open tabs. »I mean, there was a guy in Pittsburgh who claims to have seen the devil last night, but he also says he’s seen Big Foot several
times, so…«

»Pittsburgh? No way. You’d make me go to that dumb museum again.«

»I went there once«, Sam protests. »And you didn’t have to come. I told you I’d go on my own.«

»Meh, whatever. Witch-hanging it is then.« Dean claps his hands together, a forced smile on his face. »Let’s go.«
Dean keeps flicking his tongue over his lips, the taste of bacon grease still lingering from breakfast. It's a nervous habit, and he's aware of it, but it's better than talking.

»So I tried to find out everything I could about the victim«, Sam says next to him, enlarging something on the tablet screen in his lap. »Lucinda Garson, 37, worked in an organic food co-op-«

»Definitely a witch then.«

Sam throws him one of his stern looks that Dean secretly always enjoys.

»There's really not much else about her... She was once picked up by cops for smoking pot and - ha! - jaywalking.«

»Jaywalking? Wow, a legit criminal mastermind. What about the neighbor who killed her? I mean, hanging, that's personal. And weird.«

»I couldn't really find out anything about her yet. We'll have to go to the station and ask her ourselves.«

Dean drums his fingers on the wheel.

»Hanging is really weird though? Wouldn't burning be more appropriate if she thought she was killing a witch?«

»Not necessarily. In the Salem witch trials the women and men who were found guilty were hanged, not burned. Burning witches at stakes was more of a European thing.«

»They weren't really witches«, Castiel interjects from the backseat.

»Well duh«, Dean rolls his eyes. »No shit, Sherlock.«

»Well you kept referring to them as witches when they were merely ordinary human beings.«

Cas crosses his arm and looks outside the window, like a five year old.

»Aw, you couldn't have known that we knew«, Sam says jokingly and reaches behind him to pat Castiel's knee. Which is fine. Which is something he could have always done. It's just that Castiel's actually uncrossing his arms and perking up as a reaction.

»Thank you, Sam. I really couldn't have.«

»Still three more hours to go«, Dean says out loud instead of just thinking it.

»Maybe we should play a game to pass the time«, Cas proposes. »Sam's just taught me something called 'The Alphabet Categories' and 'Word Association'.«

Dean groans.

»Pass. You two nerds go ahead.«

When they reach Rushville it's late in the afternoon. The lone police officer they can find is very confused by their FBI get up, but eventually informs them that the perpetrator is in a cell in another
town. So they head over there instead.

Sandra McCarthy is a broad and stocky woman around 40, whose fake red hair makes her puffy face look even paler than it already is. They’re alone with her in her cell.

They do their whole spiel.

»You'd never believe me«/»Try us, we’ve seen some weird shit.«/»Witches.«, etc.

And when they leave the station and walk towards the parking lot, Dean feels mostly confused.

»What are we thinking? Is that lady in there just a coo-coo killer, or is there something to her story?«

Sam stretches his arms backwards, folding in the muscles in his broad shoulder.

Dean catches Castiel staring. Or at least he thinks he does. Castiel is merely watching his brother, with a blank face.

»I don't know«, Sam says. »Honestly, it was probably just a stupid idea to drive up here in the first place.«

»We've went out on less than a hunch before«, Dean says. »So you don't believe her?«

»I definitely believe she didn't like her neighbor very much.« Sam sighs. »But her whole reasons for believing she was a witch was her collection of herbs? I mean...« He’s shaking his head. »It was a dumb idea to drive out here.«

»We're already here now, so might as well check out that dead witch/not-witch's house, right?«

Sam just shrugs, his head disappearing in his shirt like a tortoise in its shell.

»Don't be so hard on yourself«, Cas says. He puts a hand right between Sam's shoulder blades. »We all agreed to drive here.«

The whole thing is a bust. They search both women's houses and find nothing. No hex bags, no spell books, no nothing.

»We should go«, Dean says looking at his wristband. »I want to sleep in my own bed and we've got about six hours driving ahead of us. And when I say we, I mean myself.«

»It's already quite late«, Castiel interjects. »Maybe it would be better for you to rest before driving such a long route.«

»As I said: I want to sleep in my own bed. And I'm fine. We shouldn't be home later than 2.«

He can hardly explain that the main reason he wants to go home is because he doesn't want to share a room with Sam and Cas right now.

»Of course«, Castiel nods. »I was just worrying about you.«

»If I drive us into a ditch, you can use your angel mojo on us to save us anyway, right?«

Around midnight Sam dozes off in the passenger seat, his head leaning against the window.

»Sam feels very bad about today«, Castiel says.
»Because the case wasn't a real case? That's happened before.«

»He still feels bad about it.«

Dean shifts in his seat.

»... So?«, he finally asks. »He won't by tomorrow. It's no big deal.«

»It's a big deal to him. Disappointing you.«

»Disappointing me? What the hell are you even talking about? Why should I be disappointed in him because of something like this? Did he tell you this?«

»No. He didn't have to. I can tell.«

»Ok, great, then you can also tell how I feel about this whole conversation we're having right now? Cause it's dunzo.«

»Dean....«

»What?«, he snaps. »It's been a long day and I'm tired.«

»I could drive. I'm not going to fall asleep at the wheel.«

»No way....«

»Dean«, Castiel repeats, before leaning forward.

There’s a warm hand on his shoulder. It's almost absurd how good it feels.

Dean counts backwards from ten and when he reaches zero he takes his right hand off the wheel and clasps it around Cas’ fingers.

Maybe that's just a new thing Cas is doing. Maybe this whole touching-Sam-thing doesn't mean anything but friendly comfort. And if that's the case then he can do the same, right? If it doesn't mean anything, it's fine.

They don’t talk for the remainder of the trip but it’s a comforting silence.

He feels bad when he has to wake Sam upon arrival.

»Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep.«

The apologetic tone in Sam’s voice is unnerving.

»It’s fine. You can go on sleeping in a second, you just got to get your ass in your bed first.«

Sam pushes his hair out of his face - why did he ever let it get to so long?, Dean wonders for the umpteenth time, long hair on a hunter is just plain stupid - and groans.

Sam’s still sleepy when they’re inside the entrance hall of the bunker and keeps rubbing over his neck. Castiel steps closer to him.

»Can I help this time?«

Sam’s eyes wander between them.
»Yes«, he finally says, quietly. »If it’s no bother to you.«

»Of course not.«

Cas' lips curl upwards, not a full smile, but something approaching one.

»Good night, Dean«, Sam says, almost sheepishly. There's something in his posture that reminds Dean of the 10 year old little brother he once had. It softens his heart. His life mission had been so clear back then and for many years afterwards: protect Sam at all costs. It still is of course, and yet… Dean’s not sure what's changed - besides the obvious, of course. The copious amounts of dying and deal-making and saving one another against the other's will, etc. But that's not it and Dean knows it too.

»Night, Sammy«, he says, as his brother slouches to his room.

»Aren’t you, you know«, Dean says to Castiel, his hands vaguely pointing in the direction his brother's just taken »Going to help him? Whatever the fuck that means.«

»Yes, I will, in a minute.« Castiel moves his head to one side. »Unless you've changed your mind.«

»About what?«

»About accepting my help. Or the need to talk.«

»Oh, that, yeah, definitely not.«

Dean shakes his head and looks down at his own hands.

He needs a drink. It's been too long. Or maybe he just needs sleep. Who can tell the difference.

»Sam's had a very vivid dream about Lucifer last night.«

»Oh, so he's having nightmares? That's the big scary thing you’ve been tip-toeing around?« Castiel throws him a disapproving look.

»You know how bad reliving memories of hell can get.«

»Yeah, it sucks. I just... I mean, what are you going to do about it?«

»I've found that the presence of someone you care about can help ease the night terrors.«

»Really?«, Dean asks doubtfully.

»It's always helped you«, Cas says matter of factly.

»What the fuck is that supposed to mean?«

Castiel mulls the question over, before finally answering: »It's important to feel loved and secure in these moments.«

Which really doesn't clear anything up.

»You do feel my presence even when I don't show myself, don't you? I've always thought you did.«

»I...« Dean thinks back and... shit, these hadn’t just been wishes, hopes and hallucinating longings. Cas had actually been there. But why hadn’t he just shown himself? »Maybe.«
Cas does his weird half-smile again, but this time it's aimed at him and not his brother. It feels better this way.

Cas gets a hold of his hand and presses it for just a second, too short for Dean to react.

»Good night, Dean«, he says, searching his eyes for a sign of protest, before following Sam into his room.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Title Taken from the song "Undoing a Luciferian Towers" by Godspeed You! Black Emporer (excellent writing music, btw).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam is sitting on the edge of his bed in just his boxer shorts and his T-shirt, staring into the air, when Castiel opens the door.

»You really don't have to«, Sam starts protesting as he steps closer to the bed. »I feel fine, actually. I'm super tired and when I slept in the car it was fine, too. No nightmares, no visions, no nothing. It's okay.«

»You're not fine«, Castiel disagrees and sits down beside him. »Plus, might I remind you that it was you who threw me out yesterday, not the other way round. I want to be here.«

Sam turns his head, stares at him.

»Why?«, he asks, his mouth agape.

»I feel like you've asked me that question before and I've answered it. You're in pain and I want to help.«

»But why now? You used to... not care. When I called for you.«

It's a strange feeling that's churning around in Castiel's stomach now. He's not sure if he can make out what exactly it is. Regret, a bad conscience or just plain shame.

»It's not that I didn't care, I had other priorities.«

»And they're gone now?«, Sam asks.

»No, mostly my priorities have changed. You know that. I've chosen my friends over my family. Or rather I've chosen my own family.«

To Castiel's confusion, Sam cringes at these words.

»Don't say that. We're not family. I know Dean keeps saying that, but we're not.«

»Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply your perception of me was like mine was of yours.«

»No, no«, Sam shakes his head. »That's not what I meant at all. You're not family because it's... different. You're not just family to Dean either.«

»I'm not?«

»You've got to know this, right?« Sam laughs a hollow laugh. »I mean, you keep saying you know
him so well, so I'm sure you've figured that shit out long ago.«

»I really don't know what you're talking about.«

Sam gets up from the bed and puts his hands in the air.

»You know what? None of my business. I'm definitely not going to play matchmaker for Dean. He's
got to sort that shit out himself.« He goes towards the door. »Got to brush my teeth.«

As Castiel waits for his return, he takes off his coat. Sam feels more comfortable around him when
he's not wearing it, so he obliges. And frankly, he is starting to understand the appeal. As he undoes
his shoes, he thinks over Sam's words, and when he returns from the bathroom, the first thing he says
is: »Were you talking of the love your brother feels for me?« and when Sam just looks at him,
flabbergasted, he adds: »Because yes, I am aware. I just don't see how that is relevant to the topic at
hand.«

Sam opens and closes his mouth a few times, and if Castiel didn't know it any better, he'd say he
seems angry.

»You don’t see how it’s relevant?«, he finally asks, peeling the blanket from the bed site opposite of
from where Castiel is sitting.

»He loves you too and yet you're clearly family.«

»It's different«, Sam sits down on the bed, his long legs disappearing under the blanket. »It's different
because we actually are family.« He breathes out heavily. »And anyway, it's not the same kind of
thing.«

»What isn't?«

»It's not the same kind of love.«

Castiel shrugs, because, well, that's obvious.

»No two loves are ever exactly the same.«

Sam rolls his eyes.

»That's not what I mean. It's not, you know«, he motions shooting an arrow. »Amor and destiny and
all that. Dean and I, we're brothers. It's a different.«

»I don't see how.«

»I'm sorry for testing your patience in this way«, Castiel says, »But I really struggle to understand
what you're trying to say. You and your brother, you hardly have anything resembling a normal
relationship between brethren.«

»All I know is«, Sam says, pulling the blanket up to his torso, »that it's not the same. Ok?«

»Your brother cares for you more deeply than for me, that is true«, Castiel nods solemnly. »But it's a
question of quantity not quality.«

»You just don't get it«, Sam mumbles. »And I don't feel like explaining it to you any more. Cause it
feels pretty shitty, to be honest.«
»I've noticed.« Castiel crawls over the blanket, to close some of the space between them. »That wasn't my intention in the slightest.«

»You talk of these things like they’re so obvious, when they're really really not. Not to me anyway.«, Sam shakes his head. »I mean, listen to me. What the fuck am I even talking about? Dean’s always said... I mean, I know I always want to talk shit out, get it all out in the open, but lately when I hear my own voice...« He puts his hands to his ears. »It's just all so grating. I'd prefer white noise to my inane babbling.«

»You're not babbling. You're just confused. That's a very human thing.«

»Human?« Sam laughs. »Cas, you walk around with that super confused look on your face most of the time and you're trying to tell me that's a human thing?«

»It is. I've only ever been confused since meeting humankind, since meeting Dean.«

Sam closes his eyes and presses them together, in the same way he does when he's in pain.

Castiel reaches out to touch his furrowed brow but instead of relaxing the creases in his forehead deepen. He lets his finger linger there.

»You're so weird, Cas« Sam's voice is breathy. »You really are.«

»I've been told.«

Castiel gets up and turns off the light.

»What are you doing?«, Sam asks, as he slips under the covers next to him.

»You said you wanted my help.«

»Yes, but that... I mean, you don't normally share a bed with me.«

»Well...«

»Seriously?« It's too dark to see but Castiel can just imagine the upset face Sam is making right now.

»This thing requires physical proximity.«

»Does Dean know?«

»Does he know what?«

It feels slightly uncomfortable and warm under the covers fully closed in his trousers and his shirt, but Castiel has the feeling that undressing would only unnerve Sam further. This is still such a bizarre concept to Castiel, the whole eating an apple and suddenly you're in need of fig leave idea. No one in heaven owns clothing. They'd laugh at the idea of disfiguring their true forms in such a way, besides the physical impossibility of it all.

Castiel feels a certain sadness at the thought that Sam will never be able to see his true form. He'd instantly feel better at the sight of such angelic beauty. But then again, he'd also go blind.

»Does Dean know that you've slept in his bed all the times you've helped him? I mean, that's what you're saying right?«

»He knows how close I’ve been to him in all the way that really matter.«
»Vague as fuck«, Sam mumbles. »Super helpful.«

He pulls at the blanket but it doesn't seem to have any real purpose. He seems upset.

Castiel takes ahold of his two hands, that are still pulling on the blanket, and brings them down under the cover, between their bodies.

»You know I have never done this with Dean, right? I’ve helped him keep the nightmares at bay and I’ve watched over him but I haven’t actively… done this.«

»I thought you had«, Sam says uncertainly. »I don’t know how to feel about this. It's weird.«

Castiel feels a slight annoyance with his indecisiveness. He really wants to help, but Sam doesn't make it easy.

»There's nothing weird about a fallen angel helping out a hunter in the bedroom«, he says dryly.

»You've spent too much time with Dean. All that sarcasm… I’m really not sure if I like it.«

»You're one to talk about humor. Now hold still.«

»I wasn't even moving.«

»Good. Then shut up. Your grating voice isn’t helping.«

»Wha-?«, Sam starts to complain but Castiel lets go of one of his hands and puts two fingers to Sam's lips.

He's lied the first time. It is not the same as healing a flesh wound. He's not so much healing anything right now, as he's taking away something bad and replacing it with something better. It takes more strength and concentration to do it properly than he wants to admit to Sam. Because he probably wouldn't let him if he knew.

Maybe it's because of how emotionally drained he feels from talking to Dean - And who in heaven's name has he become to talk of something "emotional draining" him? He used to be so much stronger than this. Before Dean. - but as much as he tries to concentrate on Sam's hands between his, it doesn't seem to work.

»Are you blocking me off?«

Sam sounds intrigued.

»I can do that?«

»I honestly don’t know.«

»It's not working?«

»Shh!«

Frustrated Castiel lets go of Sam's hand and instead instinctually grabs his face and puts their foreheads together. This time Sam doesn't say anything, but Castiel can feel his sped up breathing on his face.

He closes his eyes and tries to focus on the touch. It would help if there was even more physical contact still, but this has to suffice for now.
The pain and confusion of Sam's day, all the depressing thoughts come flooding in and it physically hurts Castiel to have them crushing down on him all at once. A part of him wants to pull away, but he forces himself to stay just as they are.

He doesn't linger on the specifics, he doesn't examine the thoughts, but it's impossible to ignore everything. The self-hatred and frustration dominate, but there's a lot of feelings that aren't as clean cut. There's a lot of very contradicting turmoil in regards to Dean. So many feelings for Dean. And there's him, too. And these are probably the most uncomfortable feeling to receive.

Castiel tries to not look too close, but it doesn't work, because he instantly feels them without a filter. There's jealousy and confusion and something else that he's not sure about, which means, Sam can't be sure about it either. But it hurts him or else he wouldn't want it gone.

It doesn't take too long, in minutes on earth at least. But what is time on earth but a silly measurement to catalogue events into an order to ease humans minds. It's eons for Castiel.

It's not just recent things, he can feel bad experience from back when he didn't even know Sam. He can see, no, feel faces, people, who've hurt him, who Castiel will never even know. Maybe Sam doesn't remember their names himself anymore, but they're all stowed there in his sub-conscious.

Castiel isn't sure how helpful this whole ordeal is, in the end. He's not taking away Sam's memories for good, he just makes him feel better for now. So that for a short brief period in time he won't want to leave.

Maybe Sam is right. This is more like quick fix drug than a real long term treatment.

When Castiel pulls his forehead away, his hands still clutching Sam's face, his breathing is shallow and he feels his human body intensely, hurting. His muscles ache and there's an itch on his skin, but mostly he just feels miserable deep down. A sadness penetrating his very being.

»Are you feeling better?«, he asks quietly.

Sam's voice is just as soft.

»Yes. I feel...« He puts a hand on Castiel’s and clasps it tightly to his own cheek. »I feel amazing.«

»That's good.«

And is is good, Castiel thinks. Hearing Sam's blissed out voice, knowing he won't be having any nightmares tonight, makes it all worthwhile. Although maybe he's overdone it today, just a little bit. Maybe he was trying to prove something to himself.

The bad feelings subside quickly and all he's left with is an overwhelming exhaustion.

He feels tired and closes his eyes.

»Are you okay?«, Sam asks, just a hint of worry in his dreamy voice.

»Yes. I'm fine« He opens his eyes again. »I'm glad I could help.«

»Thank you«, Sam says and pulls him into a hug so tight, that it knocks the air out of Castiel's lungs.

Eventually Sam lets him go and falls back into his pillow, his eyes closed.

»Good night, Sam«, he says, as he's pushing the blanket off his body.
»Are you leaving?« He sounds alarmed. »Please don’t. Stay.«

He can't see the smile on his face, but he can sense it.

»I won't leave if you don’t want me to.«

»I never do«, Sam murmurs, already half way drifting to sleep.

Castiel wonders if Sam will remember this in the next morning and if so, how it will make him feel.

The exhaustion makes him close his eyes again. Angels don't need sleep, but his body needs rest right now. He needs time to heal.

It's a scary thought, to know that he's only taken on a small part of Sam's pain and already feels so terrible. Maybe, he thinks grimly, it's because he's not the most upbeat person himself.

It doesn't matter. Unlike Sam he’s sure he can take it. He can carry both their suffering.

Chapter End Notes

I really appreciate the kudos & the comments. Thanks guys <3

And sorry for any potential mistakes/forgotten words, etc. Despite multiple proof-reading I have a knack for missing them & no beta reader at hand. I hope it's not too bad.
Chapter Summary

All this time, witness to the changing tides
All the while, finding ways how to make sense of all the lights

With The Ink Of A Ghost - José Gonzaléz

It's torture.

It's not really torture, because Dean remembers real torture and it's different than this.

But it comes close.

There's no one ripping his limbs out one by one. He’s not being strangled and no one’s filled his lungs with blood to watch him slowly suffocate. There’s nobody lying on a table for him to slice up slowly. The last memory certainly was torture, only he was the one administering it.

This is different to both. He’s the torturer and the tortured at same time. It’s his own head that's doing the torturing.

Then again, it’s not really just inside his head.

His very own brother and his very own angel literally just went into the same bedroom to spend the night together and „help each other out“.

It can’t be what he's thinking, because then they wouldn't be so fucking nonchalant about it. On the other hand, what were they doing exactly? In all honesty, Dean's not too sure if he wouldn't prefer the thought of them having sex (which is absurd, so very absurd, because Sam's not even gay or anything and also he just wouldn't do it) to the alternatives.

Because what could that even be, like, angel mojo and hand-holding? That does sound even worse, even more intimate. Just in a way that would make it impossible to complain about.

You couldn't complain anyway, you idiot. They could be fucking each others brain's out and your feelings about it wouldn’t matter one bit. Because you don't own them.

But they wouldn’t, right? They couldn't?

Dean kicks the blanket off and tries to suppress the urge to check on them. He knows it won’t help, but maybe it would stop all this speculating that’s driving him crazy.

There's an easy solution. He could just tell Cas he needs him there. He’s pretty sure Cas would come to him right away. But he doesn't want him to come because he's asking him to, he wants him to do it out of his own volition. Just like he’s always used to.

If spending time with Sam - helping him - is what he prefers now, than that's what he's supposed to be doing. Clearly.
He wonders if he'd feel different, if this wouldn't be such a clusterfuck, if there were other people in his life he still cared about. They're all dead (like his parents) or they don't remember him (like Lisa). There's really only Sam and Cas. It's a frightening thought.

He gets up and walks towards the door quietly, opening it as carefully as he does when he's breaking in somewhere, expecting a monster or machine gun on the other side. There's only the dark corridor in front of him, quiet and almost peaceful.

He walks into the kitchen to get a bottle of water, something he never does, but he needs a pretend reason why he's out there. Even if it's just an excuse he can tell himself.

But there's really no good excuse for why he stops in front of Sam's room and presses his ear to the door. He tries to make something up anyway. Sam and Cas have been acting weird, so maybe something else is going on. Maybe they're in danger and they actually need him to figure out what is. They need his help. He's doing this for their sake, not his own.

He can just about make about their voices, but not what they're saying. It's just a low mumble and for once he curses Castiel's suave deep voice. He can understand a few of Sam's words, but no full sentence. He imagines hearing his own name a few times.

Then there's only silence.

Dean tries to think of good reasons why two people would suddenly stop their conversation like that.

Maybe Sam has fallen asleep. (Right, and Cas is just sitting there... doing what, watching him?)

Or maybe he hasn't.

Dean doesn't believe his own bad excuses for still standing here. He feels a light breeze around his naked feet (which: impossible. They’re in a bunker). But he can't go yet, he has to be sure.

Then he hears them again. And there's a low rumble like someone's getting off the bed.

Shit, shit, he has to go. Now.

Some of the water is spilling out of the glass onto the floor as he hurries to his room.

He puts the glass onto his nightstand, before quickly slipping under the cover. His ears are ringing, his blood thumping loudly.

He doesn't remember ever falling asleep when he's woken up by his phone.

His head hurts like he's got a massive hang over, but he didn’t even drink anything besides a few beers all day yesterday.

»Hello?«, he groans into the phone.

»Dean Winchester?«, a hoarse female voice he's never heard before replies.

He massages his forehead.

»Yeah, who's asking?«

»Jennifer Porter. I've got your number from Bobby... a long time ago.«

»Uh, sure.«
»I think I could use your help.«

It sounds like a very simple ghost situation. Should be a straightforward thing. Despite his headache, he’s happy about the call. He needs to do something. And he needs a win after yesterday’s failure, a purpose.

After writing down Porter’s address and promising her they’ll be at her house in a few hours, he sees the time on his phone screen.

»Fuck me.« It’s half past 6. »Who calls this early?«, he asks into the void of his room.

He knocks at Sam’s door instead of just barging in. And he waits longer than he usually would.

Castiel opens.

»Dean«, he smiles brightly. »Good morning.«

»Cas.«

His dark brown hair stands up weirdly into the air, inviting hands to flatten it.

Besides the bed-head, Dean can’t help but also notice the blanket next to Sam that’s been pushed away, like someone’s just slipped out from under it.

»Cas?«, Sam asks sleepily, as he’s opening his eyes. And then the motherfucker has the gall to feel around the empty side of the bed, before he realizes Cas and Dean standing the doorway.

His brother throws him a sheepish look.

»Oh, Dean. What are you doing here?«

»I’ve got us a case.«

»Already?«

Sam doesn’t sound too happy about it.

»You’re fast«, Cas says.

It’s such a mundane statement, it’s bizarre that it still manages to make him feel a tiny bit better. Castiel is praising him for landing a new case quickly. Like that’s an actual achievement. As if it actually means anything.

»How late is it?«, Sam asks, while throwing his legs over the edge of the bed and heaving himself up.

»Early.«

»Did you even get any kind of sleep?«

Sam walks towards them. His hair almost as messy as Cas’.

»Did you?«

Dean’s eyes wander down his brother’s body and his crinkled boxer shorts and T-Shirt.

»Yeah. I had a good night.«
»I bet you did.«

There’s a look of confusion on Sam’s face, his forehead as wrinkled as his clothes, but he doesn’t say anything.

»What kind of case did you procure?«, Castle asks.

»Ghost«, he answers curtly. »Wichita.«

He can’t help but stare at Cas’ feet.

»Can I take a shower first?«, Sam wheezes.

»Hurry up.«

Sam looks a bit annoyed, as he shoves his way through Cas and him and through the door.

Cas blinks at Dean.

»You look tired.«

»So do you«, he realizes as he inspects the fine lines on Cas’ face and the soft rings under his eyes. »Which doesn’t really make sense, since you don’t need sleep.«

»I’m fine«, he says, lowering his gaze onto the floor.

Dean tears his eyes from Castiel’s face and looks back at Sam’s messy bed. His throat feels dry.

»I sure hope so«, he finally manages to get out. »Your angel powers could come in handy today.«

—

»So, it seems like a pretty simple deal«, Dean starts explaining, just as Sam's stifling a yawn in the passenger's seat. »The woman who’s called us is being haunted by her friend who died recently. So all we got to do is find her grave, burn her bones, make sure there’s no physical object that might still keep her around.«

»Why is she being haunted?«, Sam asks, this time he can't help a yawn escaping his lips.

»She said she had no idea. They were best friends apparently.«

»Weird«, Sam says.

In the back seat Castiel isn’t speaking, just looking ahead.

Dean's eyes keep traveling from the street up to the rear mirror.

Castiel’s still got a serious bed head going on, but apart from that he just looks normal, even got his coat on and everything. Not like he’s just had a night full of hot and steamy sex.

Except of course Dean has no idea what Castiel would look like after a night like that.

He tries to push the thought out of his head. Cas’ wiry body, dripping with sweat, in his brother’s broad arms. Their lips locked, their tongues entwined, as a deep moan escapes both their throats.

»Dean«, Sam yawns.
»What?«, Dean snaps and looks at his brother's tired face.

»I said, how did she even know to call us?«

»She said Bobby gave her our name years ago.«

»Mhm.« Sam seems to be content with that answer, because the next thing he says is: »I really need a coffee.«

»Yeah, I heard they've got those in Wichita.«

When they pull up to a coffee shop, Sam jumps out like it's a real urgent, before putting his head through the open window into the car again.

»You want one?«

»Yeah, thanks«, Dean nods. »Just a regular coffee. Black.«

»Sure, you got it.« His head turns to the backseat. »Cas? Coffee?«

»Yes, thank you.«

»What kind?«

»Whatever you're having.«

Sam gives him the thumps up and then he's gone.

»You've got to be careful there, Cas, caffeine addiction can be a bitch. Just look at Sammy.«

Castiel just gives him a quizzical look.

»There's got to be more to the story«, he says and it takes Dean a second to realize he's talking about the case. »Ghosts don't just haunt old friends for no reason.«

»They sure don't. Maybe we'll figure it out. But really, we don't even need to know. We just need to kill that thing and we're done.«

»Where is she now?«

»Don't worry«, Dean turns around, »she's got a lot of salt with her.«

»Dean-«

»I'm kidding, relax. She said the ghost only appears at midnight.«

Sam's carrying a paper tray with three cups, as he returns to the car.

He hands one to Dean and another one to Castiel, who carefully sniffs at the slit in the plastic lid.

»What is it?«, he asks.

»Coffee«, Sam says in a voice Dean recognizes from when they used to play tricks on each other. But he doubts that that's what he's doing to Cas right now. »Try it.«

Cas half-shrugs before taking a sip.
»It's sweet«, he says.

»Good or bad?«

»I'm undecided, but it's interesting.«

»It's a dirty chai«, Sam explains. »They kind of overdid it with the syrup, I guess. I thought it might be less harsh than the straight black coffee.«

»It reminds me of when I was on earth in India in the 18th century once.«

»Dude, when was that?«, Dean shakes his head, takes a long sip of his coffee and puts it back into the tray Sam's still holding.

»In the 18th century.«

Dean starts the car.

»Sorry, if you don't like it«, Sam says, taking a first sip from his cup. It's silly to feel disappointed. It's just coffee, or tea with coffee, whatever. »It is quite sweet, you're right.«

Castiel smiles.

»No need to apologize. I asked for whatever you were having. It isn't bad.« He takes another sip. »Saying India is quite misleading, actually. It was the Sikh Empire.«

Sam returns the smile.

»That's so cool. I can't wrap my head around how old you actually are sometimes.«

»I can't wrap my head around the fact that you will both be dead eventually«, Cas replies, before sensing the change in atmosphere in the car and adding: »I mean, it's just your vessels that will die. Hopefully we will eventually all spend eternity together in heaven.«

»Great«, Dean says. »An eternity with you two and the same old same old. Just what I've always hoped for.«

He's not fooling anyone, they both know despite his sarcastic tone that this is exactly what he wants. No changes to the setup. Ever. Except he's pretty sure it's already a bit too late for that.
Time is like a fuse, short and burning fast

Chapter Summary

Title taken from Metallica's "Fight Fire With Fire".

»She was having an affair with her husband.«
Castiel is sitting on the big armchair next to his, bending over to Sam, tucking on his sleeve.

»What?«, Sam asks, slightly irritated. He turns his gaze away from Dean and Jennifer Porter, standing out of earshot in the kitchen, to focus on Cas. »Where are you getting that from?«
Cas points at a framed picture on the table next to them.

»Look at the three of them.«

»Yeah, they were all friends, so what?«

»Jennifer was Carole’s best friend and yet she was sleeping with her husband.«
Castiel nods several times, like he’s proud of having solved the case so quickly.

»Are you being serious right now?«

»I’m serious. Look.« He touches Sam’s hand briefly and then points at another framed picture above the fireplace. »They went skiing together.«

»I-« Sam isn’t sure whether to laugh or investigate Castiel’s suspicion further, but he doesn’t have to take a decision. Dean’s striding towards them.

»So Jennifer’s going to show us where the grave is. She said she’d wanted to be with us while we burn the bones, but I told her that’s not a good idea.«
Sam nods.

»Yeah.«

»But she’s afraid to stay at home alone at night and we can hardly go into the cemetery and dig up the grave when it’s still light. So I told her Cas would stay with her here.«

»Me?«

»Yeah, one angel should be enough to take care of her. Besides, I doubt the ghost will show, we’ll be finished before midnight. And I’ll leave you a salt gun.«

»I’ll hardly need a salt gun, Dean.«

Castiel doesn’t sound too happy about staying here. Sam isn’t happy about the set-up either, but he’s not entirely sure why. And anyways, he can hardly ask Dean to stay instead.
»Did you manage to get a real answer out of Jennifer, about why Carole would be haunting her?«, he asks.

»She says they didn't part on the greatest terms, but she didn't want to talk about it.«

»But you made her anyway, right?«

Dean shrugs.

»I just really don't care right now. But I'm sure Cas can use his God-given charms later to find something out. «

Castiel doesn't say anything, so Sam doesn't either.

Before leaving for the cemetery, they're going through all of Carole's things. Just to make sure.

»Why didn't her husband keep all that stuff. Jack, was it?«, Dean asks, flipping through some papers.

»They got separated a few months before her death«, she answers solemnly, tucking a hair behind her ear.

»Because of the affair you were having with him?«, Castiel asks in a weirdly friendly tone.

»Cas!« Sam jabs him in his side.

Jennifer hesitates.

»They were having problems long before that.«

»Really, lady?« Dean rolls his eyes. »Justus Christ... Are you still seeing him?«

»No...«

Sam just stares as Cas. He leans over his shoulder.

»How did you know?«, he whispers, but he just gets a self-congratulating grin in return.

It's getting dark. Sam und Dean are preparing to leave for the cemetery.

Dean is showing Cas how to use the salt gun, but he still insists he won't need it.

»I'm a celestial being, I don't need salt to keep mundane spirits away.«

He sounds a bit cocky. It's strange how he can go from seemingly shy to almost arrogant in seconds, especially when he's around Dean.

»Just be careful«, Dean says, sounding genuinely worried.

»I always am.«

That's clearly not true. Dean eyes him carefully, but then seemingly decides to let it slide. He pats Cas on the shoulder, and for a second Cas puts his hand on top of Dean's an holds it there.

»There is no need to worry, Dean.«

Dean turns to Jennifer.
»You're in good hands here«, he promises and then starts explaining the salt gun to her as well.

»Sam.« Cas is suddenly standing very close. »I think I have come to a final conclusion now.«

»About what?«

»About the coffee. I liked it. It was a lot less acidy than the last one.«

»That's good. But we'll find you a better one yet. Promise.«

»Thank you.«

Cas squeezes his hand.

»It's just coffee, Cas...«, he says, but it doesn't really feel true.

As Jennifer walks him and Dean both to their car, she throws a look back at the house, shakes her head and turns to Sam.

»You're boyfriend is pretty rude.«

»Oh.« He can feel his ears getting hotter. »He's not my boyfriend. We're not - I'm not-«

»He can be pretty rude«, Dean agrees, before slipping into the car and closing the door with a loud thump.

Sam smiles nervously at Jennifer. When he slides into his seat, he's careful to avoid his brother’s eyes.

»So that was a first.« Dean starts the car. »Normally they think I am your boyfriend.«

Sam laughs, but Dean doesn't. He clenches and unclenches his jaw.

»Look, dude, what do you want me to say? You're upset someone else mistook me and Cas for a couple?«

»Who said anything about anyone being upset?«

»Your nutcracker-jaw did.«

Dean licks his lips and breathes in sharply through his nose.

»If you've got something to say, now is your chance.«

Sam is sounding a lot more easy-going than he feels right now.

»Are you sleeping with him?«

The question is so unexpected, it actually gives Sam a pause.

»What?«, he finally laughs. »Are you being serious right now?«

»Look, it's a simple question, you can just-«

»No! No, Dean. Of course I'm not sleeping with Cas! I can't believe you're even asking that.«

»Then what the fuck is going on between you two?«
»Going on? There's nothing going on.«

»Yeah?« Dean raises his eyebrows. »You sure about that? Because I definitely don't remember you two sneaking off together all the time and spending the night huddled in your bed and shit. And what the fuck is Cas talking about when he says, he's been helping you? I mean, what am I supposed to think?«

»That's so fucking typical....« Sam shakes his head irritatedly. »Why didn't you just ask, if you were so worried?«

»I wasn't worried. And I'm asking now, right?«

»Right.« Sam breathes out slowly. »And I'm telling you, I'm not... sleeping with Cas.« It feels weird even saying it out loud. »He's literally just been helping me.«

»Helping you with what?«, Dean spits out.

»Stuff.«

»Stuff«, Dean huffs. »Great.«

»He's just being a good friend.«

»Look, he's told me that you've two have grown closer or ... that he likes you better now than he used to or whatever.«

Something in Sam's chest tightens.

»He did?«

»Not in so many words, but yeah. So, you can just be straight with me.«

He can suddenly feel Cas' forehead pressed to his again, the tickling of his breath grazing his upper lip. How good it felt to have his grace flooding through his every pore. Yesterday was different than the first time, much more intense, better.

»I am«, Sam says. »There's no need to be jealous.«

»Fuck off.«

»Oh, so you want to talk about your paranoid ideas but your own stuff is off limits?«

»There's no stuff.«

They've reached the cemetery and Dean's killing the engine. He turns to Sam, stern-faced.

»I don't want you to get any wrong ideas about this. I wasn't asking because I'm jealous or whatever. You two can do whatever the fuck you want. I just... I think I deserve to know. I have to live with you two after all.«

»Seriously?« Sam waits a second. »You really want to keep playing the whole dumb game? Suit yourself but I think it's idiotic.«

»What are you saying?«, Dean asks aggressively.

»I'm saying you don't get to dictate Cas' life like that if you can't just be open with him and
yourself.«

»Okay. I’m going to tell you one last time, because you just won’t let that shit slide, and I’m being very serious here. Listen to me carefully: I don’t like your insinuations. I’m not jealous. I’m not suppressing anything. I just wanted to know if my little brother and my best friend were fucking. Now is that such a weird question?«

»I mean yeah«, Sam huffs. »It kinda is when it comes out of nowhere. And I know you. I’ve watched you dance around Cas for years now! You pull this kinda macho-jealousy-crap to self-sabotage, when you could just start examine your own feelings instead. I know you’ve got a problem with your sexuality but maybe, you know, maybe consider how Cas feels in all of this.«

»Shut the fuck up«, Dean drawls in a low and dangerous voice. »I don’t have a problem with my sexuality. I know what I like and it sure ain’t dick. Maybe you need to stop projecting your own shit on to me.«

Dean storms out of the car.

For once, Sam thinks, he might just have gone too far.
Ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn't have?

Chapter Summary

You disturb my natural emotions
You make me feel like dirt and I'm hurt
And if I start a commotion
I'll only end up losing you and that's worse

Buzzcocks - Ever Fallen In Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've?)

Chapter Notes

I changed the warnings to Rape/Non-Con and rated the story "Explicit" now. It's just to make sure/be on the safe side and doesn't apply to this chapter. I'll add chapter warnings when it does apply.

Dean's standing in front of the grave, the shovel in his hands.

He halts only for a second to wipe the sweat from his forehead and eyebrows, that keep rolling into his eyes, stinging and obstructing his view.

Against his ribcage his heart is beating fast from the overexertion.

He wants to keep going. The burning in his muscles helps with the anger.

There's no need to think when your whole body is screaming.

»Let me take over for a bit«, Sam says lamely, for the third time.

He's standing next to the grave, a lamp in his heads.

»I'm almost there«, Dean groans. And then, after another minute or so, the shovel is hitting on wood.

After they've uncovered the casket from the soil, Dean opens it.

She hasn't been dead for very long, which means there's more to her remains than just clothed bones.

The stench doesn't bother him.

It penetrates everything, he feels it sinking into all his pores. He thinks he'll taste death for days, but he prefers it this way.

He pours the salt over her. Then he grabs the gas canister that's standing right next to Sam's feet and pours it over the body, as well. The remaining clothes will burn easily.

This will be over in a second, he knows.
He hates that he has to take Sam's offered head to get out of the grave and makes sure not to look him in the eye, when his brother pulls him upwards.

Sam gets matches from his back pocket and lights one of them, two, three, and lets them fall down into the casket.

They stand over the grave and watch the body burn, until only ashes remain.

They don't bother cleaning up. They leave the casket and the grave open, the ground butchered.

Tomorrow in the news they'll speak of the desecrating of a grave.

The grass under Dean's boots is rustling, as he's striding back to the car.

»Dean«, Sam says, right behind him, in this pleading voice of his. »Dean, look, I'm sorry.«

He doesn't reply until they're back in the car and Sam repeats his apology.

»What are you sorry for?«

»I didn't mean to upset you, alright?«

»You didn't upset me.«

Dean rolls his eyes, as he's starting the car and it purrs to life.

When they're almost there, Sam says: »I'm sorry, I really am. I hate when other people make decisions for me or try to push me into things I don't want. I hate it. And then I go and do the same thing to you.«

Dean purses his lips.

»What do you mean?«

»I was convinced there was something between - I thought you were into Cas. I really did. But when you say you aren't, I should respect that. I didn't before but I got it now, ok? No more jokes and innuendos. Promise.«

»Alright.«

Sam gives him a small smile that's so full of a bad conscience, that Dean can't help himself.

»Apology accepted«, he grunts.

»Thank you.«

He can hear his brother breathing out a lot of pent up air.

-  

Dean knows something's wrong the moment they're ringing the doorbell and there's no immediate reply.

»Jennifer?«, he shouts through the door.

Sam's ringing the bell again, as he joins the shouting.
»Cas? Are you there?«

It’s Dean’s sheer force of muscle and negligence of his own well-being that gets them into the house.

He holds his shoulder in pain, looking around. There’s no one in the doorway.

»Cas?«

Sam runs towards the living room, and Dean hobbles behind, hissing with each step.

He almost stumbles over Jennifer’s body on the floor.

He goes to his knees to check her pulse and injuries.

»She’s fine«, he hears from one of the armchairs. Castiel is half slouched over the armrest, blinking.

»I got the ghost away from her, but she stumbled. She’s just out for a bit. She’ll wake up soon enough.«

Sam is already next to Cas, one hand on his shoulder and the other touching his face.

Checking his reactions, Dean knows. And still.

»What happened, Cas?«, Sam asks, all wide-eyed.

»Yeah«, Dean nods, as he heaves himself into the other armchair. »What happened to the salt circles?«

Cas groans.

»I’m sorry I messed up. I don’t understand it myself. It was a measly ghost. It should have been very easy to fight. I was just taken by surprise, and she was just-«

»It’s fine«, Sam promises and shuts him up at the same time.

»When was that?« Dean’s eyes wander to the body on the floor, her chest is moving slightly.

»Because we’d burnt the body by midnight.«

»It was shortly after you left.«

»What?«, Dean groans.

»She said her ghost always came around at midnight«, Sam says puzzled. Cas looks eyes with him.

»She was just as surprised as I was. I was just in the kitchen, when I’d heard her shriek.«

»What were you doing in the kitchen?«, Dean demands to know. »You were supposed to look out for her.«

»I’d offered to make a cup of tea for her.«

Dean shakes his head, huffing.

»It doesn’t matter now«, Sam says. »But what happened to you? Are you fine?«

»I’m fine.«

It’s in this moment, when Dean watches his brother fussing over Cas, that he realizes two things:
No matter which way he turns it, he’s lied to Sam and even given the opportunity to take it back he had lied again. All the reasons for that big and finite »no, not interested« seem silly and small and unimportant now, but it’s not that kind of lie that you can just take back.

2. He’s practically given Sam the go-ahead. And there’s no reason why Sam wouldn’t.

»I’m really ok, Sam«, Cas says again, almost embarrassed now.

Sam takes a step back from the armchairs. He doesn’t look relieved, he looks miserable.

»So«, Dean says, »we get her to bed and then we leave, right? We’re done here.«

»You want her to wake up and be all alone?«

»What, you want to sit around and hold her hand until she does?«, he snaps back. »You take her upstairs. I can’t, I had to bust open the door. Oh by the way«, now he glares at Castiel. »Why didn’t you just open the door like a normal person when we rang and called?«

»I-«

»Leave him be«, Sam is heaving Jennifer’s body upwards now, slinging her over her shoulder like it’s nothing to him. »Can’t you tell he’s in shock?«

»What’s he got to be in shock about. An angel spooked by a ghost?«

Sam throws him a dispraising look. Then he carries her outside the living room. Then the stairs are creaking.

»Dean, I’m sorry.« Castiel is still slouching in his armchair, but he looks a bit more alive. »I’m really not sure what happened.«

»What happened to the salt gun?«

»I didn’t have it with me in the kitchen.«

Castiel’s hand is grappling Dean’s.

»I am sorry to have disappointed you.«

»I don’t care about that.« Dean’s brow furrows. »I told you to be careful. You were literally doing the opposite of that.«

»I know. I can’t explain what happened.«

»Forget it.«

Castiel’s hand is still on his. Dean has no intention of pulling away.

»Maybe you’re just still thinking too much like an angel, not enough like a hunter.«

Castiel smiles.

»I’m sorry you had to break the door open like that. It wasn’t my intention.«

»It’s fine.« Dean finds his own lips curling upwards. »You know I secretly like doing that Rambo-shit.«
That’s not a secret to anyone«, Cas laughs.

Yeah, maybe not.«

He’s stroking Cas’ hand before he’s realizing what he’s doing.

Cas’ smile is faltering, but when Dean wants to pull away, he catches his hand.

I feel a bit weak, but I’m well enough to heal your shoulder and your leg.«

Ok.«

Castiel grabs his shoulder, just between where the collar of his shirt ends and his neck. He touches the exposed skin. Dean closes his eyes, while he heals him. It’s over in a second.

But Cas’ hand lingers.

I’m thankful that you still want me here.«

Of course I do.«

There’s a few creaking noises from the stairs before Sam bursts in.

Hey, so, she woke up, when I put her to bed, and I explained everything. She’s gone back to sleep now, but she should be fine.«

Thank you, Sam.« Castiel gets up. I’m really sorry I messed up tonight.«

There’s a line of concern above Sam’s eyes, but he just smiles and says: Don’t worry.«

I just healed your brother.«

It’s a weird thing for him to point out, and Sam seems to think so too.

Yeah, ok, that’s great…?«

He looks at Dean quizzingly, who just shrugs and gets up.

Let’s go, kids.«

Ok, but«, Sam holds up a hand to him, this time we’re not driving to the bunker in the middle of the night. Not again. I need a bed. Now.«

Dean groans.

Fine. Whatever.«
Sam is glad he managed to convince Dean to stay in Wichita for the night. But it now seems a strange thought to share a room with both him and Castiel.

He feels bad about the things he told his brother. His apology was sincere, but that doesn't mean that he suddenly believes Dean. He is just trying to respect his decision. Which means he needs to act like Dean's jealousy and uneasiness around Cas isn't palpable.

The room is different to the rancid motel rooms they normally stay in. It's more of a Mom-and-pop Bed and Breakfast, that they chose because it's conveniently located just down the street.

Dean and Sam ask for one room with two separate beds, whilst Cas waits in the car.

»If you think about it«, Dean says, throwing his jacket on one of the beds with a flowery throw. »It's absurd that we have to pay for the room ourselves. We should be compensated for that bullshit ghost hunt.«

»It's not like we're actually paying with our own money.«

»Yeah, but she doesn't know that. And we wouldn't have to use fake credit cards, if we actually got payed.«

Sam sits down on the other bed. The mattress is incredibly soft and he already knows he'll have a hard time sleeping on it.

»Where is this coming from? You never complained about not being payed for hunting before.«

»I’m not complaining, I just-« Dean shrugs and walks over to the small fridge that's buzzing softly. His face lights up when he takes out a bottle of cheap beer. »It's not the ghost hunting that I want to be compensated for. Just the whole bullshit back there... We're putting our lives on the line for trivial shit. I mean, the thing with Cas back there, what was that? «

»I don't know.«

Dean opens the bottle with his teeth and spits the crown cap across the room. It narrowly misses the trash can.

»And what was that thing about the affair? How did he know?«

Sam shrugs.

He watches Dean's face scrunch up in worry.

»And where is he? I told him to come right up.«

He takes a big sip of the beer and nearly spits it out again, when Cas appears just inches away from
him.

»Sorry«, Cas says, but doesn't move away. »I didn't know if you were both hungry or if you wanted to go to bed right away.« He holds up a brown paper bag. »I just got something across the street just in case.«

He puts the bag down on the table near the door.

»I'm sorry if I startled you.«

»It's fine«, Dean grunts and opens the paper bag.

»There's a cheeseburger, a small cherry pie and a Caesar salad.«

»Thanks, Cas«. Sam is not hungry, but he doesn't want to appear ungrateful. He sits down at the table, grabbing the plastic container from the bag.

Castiel watches them eat. Sam considers offering him some of the salad. But it doesn't taste very good. It's very oily and the parmesan has a funky taste to it. It would probably be weird to ask anyway.

Dean goes to bed almost immediately after they've eaten.

After politely finishing half of the salad, Sam excuses himself to the bathroom. When he comes back, the cherry pie is gone. There's just a lonely burger wrapper and an empty beer bottle on the table.

Dean's only bothered getting rid of his shoes. He's lying otherwise fully closed on the covers, the pillow sandwiched between his arms, snoring lightly.

»How are you?«, Cas asks, appearing out of nowhere again.

Sam doesn't ask where he'd just been.

»I'm fine.«

He kicks off his shoes, and sits down on the bed, facing Dean's sleeping body.

Castiel copies him, takes off his own shoes, his coat and even loosens up his tie a bit.

It makes Sam chuckle.

Castiel looks up.

»What's wrong?«

»Nothing. Just... you«.

The reading light throws soft shadows onto Castiel's face.

»Me?«

»You just looked so human, that's all.«

»I'm never sure if I'm supposed to take this as a compliment or an insult.«

»It's both.«
He decides to lie down on the narrow bed and he's not surprised when Cas follows him, his shoulder pressing into his'.

Sam turns his back to the wall, so there's enough room for both of them.

Cas turns on his side as well, facing him. He doesn't even blinking.

»What happened today?«, Sam asks, quietly.

»I don't know.«

»I was really worried for you when we came in.«

»I could tell.«

»It was just a normal ghost«, Sam tries to understand. »Even if she tripped and even if you weren't in the room when she attacked, why didn't you just-«

»Please«, Cas sounds pained. »I just made a mistake, Sam. I don't want to dwell on it. I will make sure that it won't happen again.«

Sam doesn't want to argue. But it's not just the mistake that worries him. Cas looks different, exhausted and tired and even paler than usual.

»Are you sure you're fine?« Cas asks.

»I was just going to ask you the same thing.«

»Do you want me to-?«

»No. I feel fine today. I mean, not fine, but... you know.«

»I think I do.«

»Considering the baseline.« Sam manages a wry smile. »I only thought of hell twice. And only longed to be there once. That’s got to be a record.«

»Oh, Sam…«

It's weird. The way Cas says his name.

Castiel doesn’t freak out, no matter what, he never seems to.

»In a way it was easier, you know. I was struggling for a long time, of course, but once you give up… It’s easier when you know why you feel so bad. He was literally torturing me and I knew it. He had complete control over me. And now? Now everything that’s wrong in my life is my own choice, my own actions. I can’t blame it on Lucifer anymore. I can’t blame anyone but myself.«

Castiel cups his face. He doesn’t smile.

Sam reciprocates the touch.

Cas’ cheek feels soft under his hand.

»Does it help when I tell you, you still don’t have complete control over the course of your life?«, Cas asks after a while.
»I’m not sure if I can believe that.«
»You overestimate your own powers.«

»Thanks…«
Castiel smiles softly, before pulling him close.

»Your suffering isn’t your fault, Sam. It’s pre-destined.«

»What kind of asshole would do that? Predestinate this?« He breathes into Cas’ shirt. »What’s the point? Why should I keep trying, why should I-«

»Your brother needs you.«

Sam pulls back, scoffing.

»That’s your answer? Dean? Dean’s the point of my life?«

He’s starting to feel physically sick, the salad is trying to make its way back up.

»You know what a fucked up thing to say that is?«

»He needs you to keep going, you need him. It’s always been this way, hasn’t it?«

»No.« Sam presses his eyes shut. »No, I managed without him before.«

»Maybe you have. But he certainly never has.«

»He doesn’t need me. He just needs someone. Something. A purpose. Something he can cling to. It doesn’t have to be me.«

Castiel watches him for a while.

»It does. I know your brother. He’s spent his whole life taking care of you. He doesn’t know life any other way.«

»I never asked him to.«

Sam knows he’s being unfair, but he can’t help it. He’s trying to explain how utterly pointless his life feels, and Castiel tells him to keep it together because - what? The fact that Dean’s already spent so much time on trying to fix him that he can’t admit defeat now, is not enough reason to keep on living.

It’s not Sam’s fault his brother keeps trying to tape him together like a shattered teacup. As if it’s possible to somehow make him magically less broken, less fundamentally flawed.

Just like Cas says, he’s predestined for this. There’s nothing else.

Lucifer was right.

And really, Sam thinks, as he closes his eyes tightly, trying to keep the tears from coming, wasn’t that the worst about the time in the cage? Not Lucifer’s lying, not the manipulation, not even the physical torture in all its aspects (he tries to avoid the r-word). It’s Lucifer’s bluntness in pointing out the facts of Sam’s life that haunt him the most.
He knew him, knows him still, and Sam doubts anyone will ever know him as well.

Not that he wants anyone else to look into the gaping black hole that is his soul.

»Sam.« Cas brushes a strand of hair from his forehead. »Don't go there.«

»Where?«

»Wherever you are right now. Don't go there.«

Sam opens his eyes reluctantly.

»I miss him sometimes.«

»Who?«

»Lucifer.«

»I understand. You spent a long time with him.«

Sam laughs without making a sound.

»You understand? I just told you I miss the guy who's tortured me! That I miss the freaking devil? You know how fucked up that is?«

»It's okay. What is wrong with missing him, if you don't act on it?«

Sam stares at Cas, trying to think of an answer.

»I don't know. It just is. It's not normal.«

»You aren't normal, Sam.« He smiles sympathetically. »You never were, you are right. Maybe you would feel better if you stopped trying to pretend to be something you are not. You've got no one to impress.«

»I'm not pretending anything. I know what I am, who I am.«

It takes a while until Cas answers in a slow and steady voice.

»You are a good person, Sam Winchester.«

Sam wants to believe, he really does.

But it’s not working. All can see right now is the first time he met Castiel.

How excited he'd been. His hands sweaty. Tongue-tied. Meeting a real life angel. The one who’d saved his brother even. What an honor, what a magical moment.

»Sam Winchester. The boy with the demon blood. Glad to hear you've... ceased your extracurricular activities.«

»What kind of life is this?«, Sam asks, not even trying to keep the tears from forming now. »Where the only people alive that I still care about think I'm a freak and something that needs to be taken care of only out of duty. I could set Dean free. You know how strong is he… And he’s got you. You’d stay with him and make sure he’d be fine.« His voice sounds like someone’s put tissues up his nose. »Why should I go on?«
»I don’t know«, Castiel says in earnest. Then there’s warm hands holding his. »I just know that I really want you to. I really do. Maybe that can be reason enough for now? That people want you to stay? Dean is strong, but it would still break him. You misunderstand my importance in his life if you think I could keep him together when you’re gone. No one could.«

Sam doesn’t say anything anymore. He’s worried that Cas is right. He can’t do anything without dragging Dean into it. And Dean would rather have him like this, their relationship strained, than not have him at all.

There’s no emergency brake, no way out at all. There’s only this. Him and his messed up brain. And a fallen angel with a worried expression on his face beside him, watching him cry. And Dean so close in the next bed, that he can hear him breathe in and out, no longer snoring at all. He presses his palms tighter into Cas’, who doesn’t object.

There’s only this.
Dean takes a long shower in the tiny bathroom.

A part of him is trying to make sense of the past days, of his feelings, of the weird conversations, this tangible strange vibe. The taste of immediate danger on his tongue.

But another part is trying to scrub it all away and to decidedly not think.

Sam had laughed in his face at his suggestion. As if sex with Cas was the most absurd notion he'd ever heard, and it had sounded genuine (that'd make one of them at least, whose thoughts had never went there). He'd been adamant that there was nothing between the two of them.

But he hadn't said that he wasn't interested.

Really, he hadn't explained shit, and just shifted the conversation, so that Dean had been the one to explain himself.

This generic flowery shower gel is shit. He has to use a lot of it and it doesn't get foamy at all. He squirts the bottle that's fastened to the bathroom wall for a third time now, rubbing the gel into his hair and face, the sweet smell overpowering all his senses.

He wonders if Sam's awake by now. Or if he's still sprawled out on his bed next to Cas.

When Dean had gotten up and seen them - Sam's arm so casually yet possessively dragged over Cas - he'd tried to ignore the sting.

But he'd still expected Cas to lift his head, to greet him. He'd longed to hear his own name in that dark serene voice. To hear one of the many ways Cas would say »Hello, Dean«, many of which had already kept him awake at night over the years. When his hands would wander, when his mind strayed from generic face-less name-less women to the same intense blue-eyed stare and he’d hear Cas softly moaning his name. The shame always intensifying the arousal, egging him on, hastening his hand. Afterwards he always tried to forget it happened.

Castiel hadn’t lifted his head, he’d kept his eyes closed.

Dean had stood over them, watching for what felt like an eternity. If he hadn’t known any better, he’d have thought they had both been sleeping.

Dean gets into his old clothes. There’s soil crumbs all over his shirt.

He’s tempted to slam the bathroom door, but instead he decides to sit down on his bed again. He takes out his phone, just to hold something, while he's waiting for them to wake up.

He feels like a creep watching them so intently, but something about their pose makes it impossible to look away.

They look… right.

When Sam finally groans and moves his head, it takes Dean all his strength to get a jovial tone in his voice.

»Morning, Sam.«
»Dean, hey… Morning.« He slowly pulls his arm away from Cas’ side, softly shaking at his shoulder instead. »Hey, Cas, you alright?«

Castiel’s eyes flutter open.

»Yes, of course.«

»Were you asleep?«

»Don’t be ridiculous, Sam. I do not require sleep.«

Castiel sits up and turns to Dean, straightening his tie, before he lets a hand slide through his mussed up hair.

He looks better than he did yesterday, fresher. Behind him in the bed Sam is yawning and stretching. His arms in the air, his legs a straight line, a strip of skin showing between his trousers and his shirt.

Sometimes it is still, after all these years, difficult to fuse this ripped and muscled torso with the image of Sam in his mind.

How can a strong body like this require so much protection and care.

Sam shoves himself of the bed. Castiel doesn’t even flinch when he puts both his hands on his shoulders as support.

»Does the shower work ok?«, Sam asks, cocking his head in the direction of the bathroom door.

»It’s fine.«

Dean looks down at his phone, at the blank screen. He can hear the water heater, then the water itself.

»Maybe you should go in, you know, help him.«

It doesn’t come out teasing, it comes out jealous and just the way he felt it.

»What do you mean?«

»It was a joke«, Dean sighs. »I know, angels and humor, not the greatest combination.«

»I have a great sense of humor and comedic timing.«

Dean snorts.

»You sure do.«

When he looks up. Cas is staring at him and he can’t turn away. He finds himself saying even more things he doesn’t want to say.

»Yesterday was a weird day, man. You know, I asked Sam if you were sleeping together.«

He wants Castiel to laugh, but his face remains stern and serious.

»Which is absurd, of course, because you’re both into women, so.«

»Gender or sexual orientation is of no import to me, as I do not require reproduction.«
»Humanity is weird that way, but some people actually have sex for other reasons than popping out kids, you know.«

»Yes, I know. Human contact, physical release, emotional bonding «

»Or fun«, he adds. »So you’re into dudes, huh?«

Castiel throws him a puzzled look.

»You know my sexual experience is limited.«

This conversation is absurd, but Dean doesn’t feel like backpedaling now.

»But you’d be into that kinda thing? I mean, I don’t have how the whole angel sex thing works…. if you guys are just wave lengths and shit.«

The water’s stopped running. The boiler is quiet again.

»That’s not how it works, Dean.«

»How exactly does it work?«

He finds himself on the edge of his bed, his body shoved forward into Cas’ space, until their knees are touching.

Cas is looking up at him, wide-eyed.

»I'm not sure what you are asking of me.«

»I'm not asking anything of you. I'm just curious about how this all works for you.«

»You know, I have had only had sexual intercourse in this vessel once.«

»How would I know this?«, Dean asks. »I don't know what you’re doing when you're not with me.« With us, is what he'd meant to say. »It’s not like you’re telling me everything that’s happening in your life.«

»I have more important business to attend to than fornicating with strangers.«

There's a mild tone of anger in Cas' voice.

»So you've only ever been with a woman«, Dean nods.

»As have you.«

It's true and yet the fact that Castiel is so sure of it annoys Dean.

»How do you know?«

»You've made your heterosexuality loud in clear in several instances. I remember you saying, you were not ”into that kind of thing” numerous times.«

Dean raises an eyebrow.

»I've never said it to you.«

»No, but you have said it.«
»Well, it's true.« Dean moves even further, until he's barely sitting on the bed anymore, one of his knees nestling between Cas' now. »But I wasn't asking about me. I was asking about you. Because whatever you're doing with Sam, it's... I mean, you should at least be aware of the implications. Two straight men normally don't spend their nights like this.«

He nods at the unmade bed behind Cas.

»I am no man.«

The way Castiel looks at him now, stern and powerful, Dean is sure that he knows exactly what he's being asked.

Cas demands a straight-forward question that Dean finds impossible to give.

*Do you like Sam that way or am I imagining things?*

He wants to hear Castiel laugh at his questions like Sam has. Not to take them seriously and ponder for way too long.

He wants to hear him say: »Of course I would never sleep with a man.« Or: »Of course I would never sleep with a man that isn't you.«

Dean can't even say which version he’d prefer, but either would be better than this.

»Were you ever curious?«, Cas asks, his eyes still wide and concentrated.

Dean's mouth is dry. He's pretty sure not answering is answer enough, but he can’t manage a lie. Cas seems to understand either way.

He curses Sam when he steps out of the bathroom.

He's wearing his trousers, but he's shirtless, drying his hair with a small towel.

He squeezes water out of his hair, some of which runs down his face over his chest, down to the thin trail of hair on his lower abdomen.

Dean tears his eyes away and settles on watching Cas.

Cas, whose eyes are now completely fixated onto Sam.

He wonders if he's watching the same water trail or if he's seeing something else. If he's admiring the perfect soft curves of statuesque muscles. Or if he's above these mundane physical needs. If he's merely turning all his attention to Sam the person, not Sam the body.

»Everything alright?«, Sam asks, sounding unnerved.

Dean turns his eyes back on his little brother and allows himself to look into his fearful eyes.

It's difficult to look at Sam when he's like this. The muscles in his face moving uneasily, his mouth twitching. He looks fucking miserable and Dean can't stand it.

»Yeah, sure«, he says. »You guys ready to head back?«

»Don't you want to get breakfast?«, Sam asks. He takes the towel away from his hair and walks back into the bathroom for a second, returning with his shirt on.
»No. I want to eat at home.«

»At home«, Sam repeats, like the whole notion of them having a real home is still absurd to him. 
»Okay, but I need to go for a coffee run first.«

»Yeah, sure, whatever.«

»I'd like to join you«, Cas pipes up.

»Sure.«

The tenseness in Sam's face eases up, a firm smile appears, and his eyes... fucking hell, Dean can't look at all this pining.

Cas gets up from the bed and walks towards him.

»Right now?«, Sam asks.

»Of course. Dean requires us to leave swiftly. The quicker we return with the coffee, the sooner we can do so.«

»Yeah, right, sure.«

Sam feels his back pockets until he finds a wad of money, some 20s clipped together.

»Yesterday, when I got your dinner, I saw a coffee shop just down the street«, Cas explains. »Their window dressing promised exquisite quality above any competitor's.«

Sam laughs.

»We'll see.«

»Let's hope it's better than dinner«, Dean mumbles.

Sam's and Cas' bodies move differently together now, he thinks, as he watches them walk towards the door. Their legs seem to be more in sync, their movements tuned into each other's like they're doing a choreography. Like some really fucked up artsy dance performance, where Dean gets to be the spectator just by fucking chance.

»Black coffee?«, Sam asks, his hand on the door handle.

Dean shakes his head.

»I don't want any.«

»Uh, okay...« Sam throws him a nervous look. »Well, we'll just get you a black one, in case you change your mind. If you really don't want it, I'm sure I can stomach another one.«

»You do ingest a surprisingly large amount of caffeine on a daily basis«, Cas says, almost admiringly. He's got his hand on Sam's shoulder, as they leave, gently pushing him through the door, away from Dean.

He doesn't particularly enjoy coffee runs. But they could have at least asked him to join them.
Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Spiritualized's "I Think I'm In Love"

It’s just a five minute walk back to the bed and breakfast, but Sam finds himself purposefully walking a bit slower.

The two cups of coffee in his hands offer a pleasant tingling of heat against his skin, as do the sparse rays of sunshine on his face.

Next to him Castiel is holding his own cup tightly. He insisted on trying the Americano, despite Sam adamantly explaining it was nothing but a watered down espresso. Really not the best bang for your buck.

He’s glad his hands are full, because the weird ecstatic feeling inside his chest keeps making him want to grab Cas’ hand.

He’s told Dean there was nothing going on, and there wasn’t, was there? Sleeping in the same bed when you’re literally trying to get rid of the devil inside, that’s one thing. That’s desperation and friendship and maybe some age-old magic healing mojo thing. The supernatural was weird like this sometimes. It could make outlandish things seem extremely logical. Normal even.

But this, holding hands on a coffee run. You couldn’t explain that away by circumstances and external needs.

There’s birds chirping and the sun shining and the soft cool air blowing softly against his face - and it makes him want to grab another guy’s hand like an infatuated teenager.

He wasn’t lying to Dean. He doesn’t see Cas that way, has never seen him this way before.

But he also knows things can quickly change, they already have before.

He’s gone from being afraid of Castiel to thinking of him as his best friend (but never a brother, because how would that even a work? The word brother exists as synonym for Dean only).

He’s not oblivious to his own feelings.

Jessica once told him that it had been one of the things she’d immediately noticed when they’d started dating, how in tune he was with his feelings. How introspective and unaflraid to talk, really talk. Where had he learnt to do so? A warranted question, because it clearly hadn’t been home. John even gave Dean a good run for their money when it came to avoiding this kind of thing, talking, expressing emotions. They’d both always been better at just watching and dissecting instead.

Maybe this time Dean’s just seeing things more clearly, earlier, better than Sam.

»Maybe you need to stop projecting your own shit on to me!«

Maybe Dean is right and he’s not letting himself explore whatever the hell it is he wants right now,
needs right now.

They’re almost back at the B&B, when Castiel abruptly stops.

Sam turns to him.

»What’s wrong?«

»I had a very strange conversation with Dean, when you were in the shower.«

He cocks his head to the side, like he’s asking for Sam’s confirmation.

»Yeah?«

Cas starts walking again, taking slow and deliberate steps.

»He asked me whether I was interested in homosexual activities.«

There’s a rush of blood to Sam’s ears, that lets him hear his own heart beat clearly for just a short moment.

»Oh?«

»And he told me that he asked you if you and I were partaking in any sexual activity.«

»Yeah.« Sam speeds up just a little bit. »He did, it was weird.«

»What did you say?«

A weird noise escapes his throat, before the words come tumbling out.

»Nothing, I mean, the truth. I told him we weren’t, of course.« The cups in his hands start feeling less hot and more lukewarm. »What about you? What did you say?«

There’s a hard thump in Sam’s chest that he knows shouldn’t be there. But he also knows they shouldn’t be having this conversation at all, not here, not now, not ever.

»I don’t think I gave him a satisfactory answer«, Cas muses, looking up at the sky.

He doesn’t say anything else.

Throughout the ride home Sam feels trapped - in the car, in this traitorous body of his, and between all the unspoken.

»You are right«, Cas says from the back seat. »It really tastes like watered down coffee. I enjoy it nonetheless.«

-

A few days later Cas and Sam are sitting on the couch, watching a documentary about the beginnings of world war I. Cas’ pick.

Dean is out doing groceries, a concept that is still very strange to Sam. His brother buying actual food. To cook. Well, that and copious amounts of alcohol.

Cas sits there, his knees drawn to his chest, his arms hugging his legs.
»Are you cold?«, Sam asks.

»No, I'm fine.«

As they are watching the Balkan Wars unfold, Sam wonders what exactly it is Cas gets out of watching this. It can’t be the factual knowledge, because he could pick that up in a second in much easier ways, if he doesn’t already know it.

Cas keeps sighing. His hands are holding his feet now, his fingers wrapped around his toes.

Sam gets up to get a blanket, drapes it over his friend and pulls it around his shoulders, so that only Cas’ head remains uncovered.

»Thank you«, he says and then turns his attention back to the screen.

It can’t have been the cold. Castiel is still fidgeting. Sam keeps throwing him looks, inviting him to talk, but there’s nothing.

They're watching in silence, until Castiel finally - and apropos nothing - says: »I keep having shameful thoughts.«

Which is not what Sam's been expecting him to say.

But shit, yeah, you and me both.

»Like what?«

He wants to turn the volume down, he’s not interesting in war right now. But he doesn't move a muscle and keeps his eyes on the screen.

»Do you think Dean would have been more welcoming to me if I had had another vessel?«

»What?« This time Sam can't help but turn around. Cas has got his arms outside of the blanket again, his hands back on his toes peeking out under the woolen throw. »What do you mean, more welcoming?«

»Do think if I had not chosen Jimmy's vessel but perhaps a more physically appealing body, he would think differently of me? Say, if I had acquired the body of a young busty Asian woman?«

»I don't know.« Sam throats tightens uncomfortably. »I mean, yeah, probably.«

»Mhm.«

Castiel looks up into the air, thinking.

»Why?«

»I thought about it a lot in the beginning, when we first met. He always seemed interested in my company yet put off by my body.«

»What? He's not put off by you. And you...«

He’s trying to think of the right words but his thoughts keep getting interrupted by the voice over.

Russia wanted access to the "warm waters" of the Mediterranean from the Black Sea
"Your body, I mean. Your vessel. Well, you --"

*Habsburg-ruled Austria-Hungary wished for a continuation of the existence of the Ottoman Empire*

> You chose a very attractive vessel«, is what he settles on. And right after he’s said it, he knows it’s the worst possible option he could have chosen. He tries to save it - »I mean, you’ve seen how women look at you, right?« - but it falls flat.

> It is comforting to know you consider this body appealing.«

> Dean’s not put off by you.«

> But if I’d chosen a female vessel…«, Cas muses.

> Yeah, you two would have been riding off into the sunset together ages ago«, Sam says sarcastically. Even though he thinks it might be true. »Why didn’t you then? Change into another vessel?«

> You know it’s not that easy. I needed a vessel strong enough to contain me. Besides, changing into another vessel after the fact would have been strange for you and Dean.« He puts his chin to his chest, looking down. »And I have grown accustomed to this as well. Being inside Claire, it didn’t feel right.«

The thought of Castiel-as-Claire and Dean entangled creeps into Sam’s head. He pushes it away, but the thoughts replacing the image aren’t much better.

> Ruby once said --«

Sam stops himself. He doesn’t want to do this. Bring up old anecdotes of Ruby, like she’s just any other ex-girlfriend and not the bane of his existence. Well, one of the many banes of his existence.

> What did she say, Sam?«

Castiel is smiling meekly at him.

> She said it was weird, being in a new body. Learning how it all functioned differently. For example, she said her feet had always been cold in her old vessel, which I didn’t even know could happen as a demon.«

He thinks back of when she’d told him. Them lying in a motel bed, post-coital, her feet in his lap. He’d bent down to kiss her toes.

> And you? How did the change make you feel?«

> It was a bit weird at first. To really understand that she was the same. But then again, I didn’t really feel a strong connection to her in her first body. I only fell in love with her when she was in a new vessel.«

Sam is pretty sure it’s the first time he’s admitted his love for her out loud to anyone but her. And even then, he’d only said it in the heat of the moment, drunk on her blood, in hazy memories.

> I’m sorry.«

Castiel lets go of his foot and takes Sam’s hand instead.

> Anyway«, Sam says. »I’m pretty sure Dean would freak out if you suddenly changed«
»Well, it’s too late for that anyway. This body is all mine now. And for the most part I don’t mind it.«

»Yeah, me neither.«

They watch the rest of the documentary in silence, hand in hand.

Dean doesn’t say much when he returns. He mumbles something about potatoes being a sale before heading straight to the kitchen.

»You want to watch something else?«, Sam asks, when the credits roll. »Apparently there’s another world war.«

»No. Turn the TV off.«

Sam obliges. Then they sit there, still holding hands, until Dean shouts that dinner’s ready.

Sam rolls his eyes.

»I’ll never get over that weird domestic streak he’s got going on sometimes.«

»He has always been as domestic around you as possible, as much as the situation allowed.«

»Yeah, but back then he was taking care of me as a child, now it’s more like this bizarre old married couple thing.«

He cough-chuckles because he’s tripped over his own words again.

He’s making a mental note of all the regrettable sentences he’d said today and the list is getting very long.

Dean appears from the kitchen, a grim look on his face.

»Are you coming or what?«

They’re eating steak and roasted potatoes at the kitchen table. The steak is good, the tender fingerling potatoes are even better.

Sam looks up from his plate at Castiel, who’s nestled closely against Dean’s side on the other side of the table.

»Do you want to try some?«, Sam asks. »It’s really good.«

»I’d very much like that.«

Sam halves one of the potatoes, swirls it around in the rosemary butter and holds the fork in front of Castiel, who contemplates it like a foreign animal that might bite.

It makes Sam smile, the way Cas carefully puts his lips on the fork, slowly pulling the potato off. He chews and swallows just as slowly, before turning his head to Dean.

»How did you learn to cook so well?«, he asks, his voice full of admiration.

»I’ve been wondering the same thing myself«, Sam says. »When I was a kid he only ever made boxed Mac’n’cheese.«
»There were a few years you missed«, Dean says, with gritted teeth. The whole atmosphere changes instantly. »I had some free time between the demon hunting while you were at college. I thought since I don’t have any academic skills whatsoever, learning how to feed myself and Dad might be a good alternative.«

»That’s not what I meant«

»And you know, we were lucky we had Mac’n’Cheese. Asshole.«

Dean gets up and turns to Castiel.

»I could have just given you your own plate, you know.«

Dean leaves his plate half-eaten behind, grabs one of the newly bought bottles of a cheap-looking brand of whiskey and leaves the room.

Sam doesn’t feel hungry anymore.

»Should I not have complimented his cooking?«, Castiel asks.

There’s an oil stain on his lower lip, giving it an inviting sheen.

»You didn’t do anything wrong«, Sam assures him. »He’s just…«

He lets the sentence hang in the air.
Just hand me down, give me a place to be

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Nick Drake's "Place To Be"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hand-holding thing is definitely weird, Dean decides.

It's also hard to ignore. Just like all the other things between Cas and Sam.

Especially now when it seems there's more times they are touching than when they're not. They don't even seem to be conscious of it anymore, which drives Dean especially crazy.

They don't jump apart, when he enters the room. They don't flinch, when he walks in on them mid-hug. They seem utterly comfortable in their closeness.

He hates how much he hates how inseparable they have become in such a short time. It's difficult to get alone time with either of them, unless he's specifically asking.

Of course, Dean doesn't ask.

They don't tell him to leave when he joins them on the couch, when they're watching one of their horribly dry documentaries (the history ones are okay sometimes, the nature ones make him fall asleep almost instantly) or worse some French Art House flick.

They don't ask him to leave. They talk to him and act normal around him. In fact they haven't really changed anything about their interaction with Dean. But their weird intimacy with each other is excluding by definition.

For the past two weeks they've been working a confusing case. Dean's pretty sure they're after a rather clever group of shape shifters, but Cas insists that despite their ability to change their bodies, it's something else. Whoever is right, they all have no freaking clue how to catch them anyway.

He's been out all day, at a freaking library of all places, miles away, to get a book that Sam insisted might help, while him and Cas have stayed in the bunker to do more research.

Dean feels enormously tired when he returns home. He schlepps himself down the stairs. He needs food. And a drink. And possible more food and drink.

He finds Sam and Cas on the green leather couches in the home library, absorbed in their research.

Castiel sits upright, with a monster of a book on the armrest beside him. He's reading intently and doesn't seem to register Dean's presence right away.

Neither does Sam who's lying down, his head on the other armrest, his feet nestled in Cas' lap. He's got his laptop on his chest.
They're both quiet and calm. It's like looking at fucking still life or an ad for Ikea. Pure domestic bliss. Well, as long as you ignored the whole researching-to-fight-monsters-thing.

Dean decides to break the silence.

»I've got the damned book.«

He steps closer and thumps it down on the table next to the couch.

»Oh great«, Sam smiles, closing his laptop. »Was it difficult to get?«

»Not with my FBI patch it wasn't. I think I might have scarred the old lady at the counter for life, though. What about you, any progress?«

Sam pulls the corners of the mouth down.

»Not really.«

Castiel sighs.

»I don't think continuing with this particular book is going to be very fruitful«, he says, shutting it close. He softly shoves Sam's feet off his lap and gets up. »This is highly frustrating.«

He puts the book into the empty space on the shelf.

»Yeah«, Dean agrees. He sits down in one of the armchairs. »We've asked everyone I could think of, but maybe...«

Castiel eyes him curiously.

»Maybe what?«

»I know it's not a really that big of a case, not apocalypse-big, but two people have already died so far and I don't really want to see another innocent human down.«

»What are you proposing?«, Cas asks, sitting down in the armchair besides him.

»Aren't you still in contact with some angels? Maybe someone upstairs knows something we don't.« Before Cas can protest he says: »I know things between you and everyone else have been… weird. I just... it couldn't hurt to ask, right?«

Castiel doesn't reply right away, which is a hopeful sign.

»Is there someone you can think of who you could ask?«

»Dean, I'm not sure if it's a good idea.«

»Sure, yeah, in the end it's your call. If you think it's not a good idea, we don't do it. I just... If we could save someone else from dying, you know? There's always some risk involved in hunting.«

»Yes, I know.« Cas nods solemnly. »I will try... to think of a way I can be more helpful.«

Dean smiles at him and gets an equally genuine smile back in return.

»Thanks, Cas.« He closes his eyes and lets his head fall back. »God, I'm hungry!«

»Sam mentioned a desire for pizza earlier.«
Dean opens his eyes and finds Cas staring at him.

»I could go for pizza, yeah. I think there's some in the freezer.«

»You prefer fresh pizza. I will go and acquire some.«

And with that Cas is gone. Dean is looking at an empty armchair.

»Did you just really send Cas on a pizza run?«

Sam's sitting upright now, the laptop next to him on the couch. The book Dean's brought is still untouched.

»No. He offered. And I'm not the one who suggested pizza, that was apparently you.«

Sam groans and puts his face in his hands.

»What?«, Dean snaps. »What the hell did I do wrong now?«

»Nothing.«

Sam groans again, pulling his hands away from his face and through the long strands of his hair.

»It's not like getting pizza is difficult for him. He just zaps himself back and forth. I'm not even sure if he’s paying.«

His brother glares at him.

»It's not about the god damn pizza, okay?«

»What is it then? What could I have possibly have done wrong? I was away the whole day and I got your book, didn't I?«

Sam’s shoulders are drawn upwards, tensing.

»Why did you tell Cas to get in contact with another angel? You know, you just know, that's not a good idea!«

»Do I? Cause I think we're pretty stuck here. And I have literally no clue what's been happening in heaven or with the other angels or anything else lately, because Cas won't ever talk about it!«

»Have you tried asking him?«

»I just did, didn't I?«

»You didn't. You tried to guilt-trip him!«

»This is ridiculous«, Dean says, getting up.

»So fucking typical«, Sam mumbles.

»What is? Huh?«

Dean steps closer to his brother, until he's right in front of the couch.

At first Sam seems to cower under his gaze, but then he straightens his back and gets up himself.
"Stop using him like that. He's not a tool to solve cases, he's our friend."

Our friend, right. Is that what you’re still telling yourself?

"Me? Using Cas?" Dean laughs. "I’m not using him. It’s not like I’m even getting many chances to talk to him in the first place, let alone use him."

"And what is that supposed to mean exactly?"

They glare at each other. There are many things Dean wants to say, most of which he knows he would regret.

Sam pulls himself together, his face softens.

He breathes out slowly and shakes his head.

"Look, forget it, Dean. I don't want to fight. I know we're all feeling a bit pressured here. I just meant... be careful what you say to him, okay? You know he'd do pretty much anything you asked him to."

Dean is about to open his mouth to protest, when Castiel re-appears, two pizza boxes in his hands.

"This took longer than expected. I had to queue at the piazza."

Dean turns around.

"The what?"

"In Rome", Cas says matter-of-factly and then walks away, heading for the kitchen.

"Dean...", Sam says in this horribly sincere and pleading way, but doesn’t add anything else.

Dean follows Cas into the kitchen.

The pizza tastes fantastic.

Dean’s already finished half of the Capricciosa, while Sam’s still on his second slice of his Marinara.

Cas' sits closely to his side and tries a slice of each. Thankfully, he's not being fed by Sam this time - an image Dean’s still trying to erase from his mind.

Cas’ shoulder feels warm against his’ and for a second Dean allows himself to just enjoy the proximity.

After dinner they sit down to watch a movie together. Sam clearly feels bad about their fight and tells Dean to choose the entertainment for the evening.

"I don’t really care."

Sam rolls his eyes.

"So, I’m going to get some popcorn. And when I return you’ve decided on something or I’ll make you watch Metropolis again."

"God, no..."

Cas, sitting beside him on the couch, watches Sam leave, before speaking.
»Dean.«

»Yeah?«

»I’ll find a way to help.« He looks at him with a heavy, promise-filled eyes. »I will.«

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the comments and the kudos. Your feedback really means a lot to me.
And am I beast or am I human? Am I just like you?

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Bonnie Prince Billy's version of Danzig's "Am I Demon?"

TW for this chapter: memories of rape

I probably won't include trigger warnings again after this. I figure if you read on now, you've been sufficiently warned (I also feel like I'm making it sound a lot worse than it is right now...)

Sam keeps falling in and out of sleep.

He opens his eyes, blinks, sees a familiar sleeping figure next to him in the bed, and goes right back to dreaming again. He feels safe.

It's five minutes or two hours later, just between two tosses and turns, when he re-opens his eyes.

He shoves the blanket off and turns to the figure beside him. Somewhere deep down he knows he’s still dreaming when he looks into Jessica’s eyes, but he can't bring himself to care.

Her radiant smile makes everything better, as long as he doesn't think about the impossibility of it all.

Sam pulls her in to kiss her. She smells of vanilla and freshly-mown grass.

Her hair falls over his face, tickling his cheeks, as she returns his kiss.

He can still feel her smile on his lips, as their movements take on a different turn.

»I love you«, she murmurs into his ear, her hands moving down his body.

He pulls off her top in a swift and practiced motion.

He kisses her neck playfully. He knows how much she likes to be kissed on that particular delicate part of skin right there. He loves the sound that always, without fail, escapes her mouth when he does it, somewhere between a rumbling laugh and a moan.

They are fully naked, as he moves his head lower, until he's settled between her legs.

He gets so lost in her moaning, he can't tell when the voice changes.

»I love you«, he answers belatedly, as he moves upwards, kissing over different skin than before. His hand squeezes one of her breasts, provoking a much lower moan. The pale-white beneath him turns into shimmery olive, as he licks his way over a hip bone and upwards. He's kissing her again, as he moves into her now, but it’s much more forceful and urgent.

Ruby's legs are around his hips, pulling him closer.

»God, Sam... You're so good at this.«
He turns her around, moves into her from behind. He bites her shoulder hard. He doesn't draw blood just yet, but he wants to and he knows she wants him to.

»You're so good at this«, she repeats. Their movements become faster, fitful, almost violent.

Suddenly it's him lying on his stomach, naked and exposed. The words are still the same. But they're taunting now.

»You're good at this«, Lucifer laughs. »You're so good at this and no one even knows. What a waste, Sam, such a talent.«

He struggles to get up, to move, but he's held down not by hands but by pure will alone.

»Relax.« There's rough proprietorial hands all over his body. Prying, stretching. »You might as well try to enjoy it, you know. It's going to hurt either way.«

He screams, half out of pain, half out of shame of his treacherous body for reacting to the touch.

He grits his teeth, trying to get the words out.

_He hates it, he hates him, he hates everything about this._

But all that escapes his lips is a low painful moan.

»You're good at this«, Lucifer says, moving in him now. »You were born for this, born for me.«

When Sam wakes up again, he prays he's finally really awake this time.

He's panting and half-hard inside his boxer shorts. The sweat on his forehead is cold.

Next to him, Castiel eyes him curiously.

»You were having nightmares again«, he finally says.

Sam doesn't reply. He's glad he's lying on his stomach and that there's some physical distance between them.

»You haven't had nightmares the past two weeks«, Cas says, cocking his head to the side, exposing the smooth neck that's emerging from under the collar of his shirt.

He's taken to wearing Sam's T-Shirts while they sleep.

_While I sleep_, Sam corrects himself.

They haven’t mentioned it. A week ago when Sam had returned from the bathroom, Cas had been sitting on the bed in his a pair of boxer shorts and one of Sam’s shirts, that had looked very much oversized on him.

Sam hadn't thought much of it, but now it feels bizarre to see him like this.

»You're real, right?«

»Is that some kind of philosophical conundrum?«

»No. You are really you, right? Cas?«

It's a pointless question. If he was still dreaming, if Castiel wasn't himself, there would be no way to
»Of course I'm me.« Castiel furrows his brows. »Are you worrying that you're hallucinating? I can assure you, you are not. But I’m very sorry about your dream.«

He moves his hand and is about to put it on Sam's forehead.

»Don't«, Sam flinches.

Castiel lowers his hand, looking hurt.

»What's wrong?«

»Nothing.«

He tries out a smile, but it doesn't work. His dream is still much too vivid.

He closes his eyes and he's half-afraid that when he opens them, they'll all be there. Lucifer owning him, Ruby mocking him and Jessica turning away in disgust. Shocked by seeing who he truly is for the first time.

It's the only reason their relationship worked so well, he's certain. She never got to really know him.

»You're hurting«, Castiel says with a sad smile. »I could tell. But I didn't want to invade your privacy again without your consent.«

If he didn't feel so horrible, Sam would laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

»You're still hurting.«

Sam shifts uncomfortable.

»It's fine. Really.«

He wants to escape, get out of the bed, but he can't, not with his erection still so clearly visible.

»Why don't you want my help?«

»It's just some stuff I'd rather not... you know... share.«

»There's nothing you can't share with me.«

»Yeah, uh, thanks«. Sam turns his head to the other side. »Still. There’s just some things I'd rather keep to myself.«

»Why?« Castiel asks in earnest. »There's nothing that I haven't seen.«

»You just... It's personal, ok?«

Castiel seems to consider this for a moment, before answering.

»Are you afraid I might think differently of you?«, he asks. »There is nothing you could have done or thought, that would turn me away from you, Sam. I have seen your brother kill and torture the lives of many innocent people, and yet I am still by his side.«

»I'm not him.«
No, you're not.

Sam feels a hand on the back of neck. It's soft and not callous at all, but it makes him quiver nonetheless. He half-expects to have his face be pushed into the pillow, to be held down until his breathing becomes labored.

All Cas does is softly stroke from between his shoulder blade to the back of his neck.

There's a part of him that feels disappointment at the gentleness of the touch. He grits his teeth.

What the fuck is wrong with you?

Are you sure, you don't want me to help?, Cas asks, his fingers now entangling and detangling in his hair.

You're already helping, Sam answers truthfully.

Castiel gives him a puzzled look.

I'm not doing anything.

Sam gives off a small, almost inaudible laugh and looks away again.

You're here, he says into the mattress.

Of course I'm here.

So you're already helping. After a moment of hesitation he adds: I don't want you to go away.

You say that like it's a bad thing. I do not plan on going away. I enjoy your company.

There's a weird yellowish stain on the white sheets that Sam doesn't remember ever having seen before. A blob of color, fizzling out around the edges.

Castiel shifts on the mattress and moves closer, until Sam can feel their legs and hips pressing together at the side.

Castiel still got one hand on the back of his neck. He drapes his other arm over Sam's middle, waiting.

You wouldn't be here if you truly knew me. Sam says. You'd be disgusted.

No, Cas says, inching his head towards him. I would not. I do know you. Let me prove it to you.

Sam thinks about this a moment.

Of course, Castiel already knows the cornerstones of his life, the technicalities, he knows about Lucifer, about his purpose, how none of his relationships in life were anything but mere tools to heaven. But there's something about this dream right here, that feels different, expository in a more crucial way.

The thought of anyone holding a magnifier over his inner life terrifies him, but he does want someone to truly see him for what he really is.

Castiel will revert back to being disgusted, to keeping a distance from Sam, as far away as possible
as staying close to Dean will allow him.

But maybe that won’t be so bad after all, going back to how they used to be a long time ago. Because Sam isn’t entirely sure if this thing here is a good idea at all. He’s coming to depend on it. If Castiel wants to take it all away after knowing the truth about Sam, about how truly wretched he is - then possibly that’s just the way it’s supposed to be.

Better sooner than later, this way it will hurt less.

»Okay«, he says defiantly and turns his body towards Castiel, who hasn’t let go of him. He shoots closer still, bridging the last gap between their bodies. He puts his hands on Sam’s face and presses their noses and foreheads together, as he’s done many times by now.

Sam’s grown used to this and the thought of losing it almost makes him pull away again.

The relief is instant. The feeling of guilt slipping away, the thoughts of Lucifer gone, the memories of Jessica cleared.

Only happiness remains when Castiel pulls his forehead away.

Sam reaches out, to touch his delicate and distraught face, to smooth out the lines of irritation around his lips.

He pulls him to his chest in a swift motion, pressing their torsos together. He throws a leg over Cas’, drawing him even closer, not caring that there’s only thin cloth between their bodies. He’s grateful and full of love. He doesn’t want to ever let go.

Castiel doesn’t object but he hardly moves a muscle himself.

They lie there for a few minutes, when Sam’s brain slowly starts functioning again.

He still feels good, when he remembers why he didn’t want to do this today.

»Do you hate me now?«

He doesn’t feel angry or upset, but he’s certain he knows what kind of answer he will get. He accepts it.

He’s been alone for a long time and he’s always managed. More or less.

»Of course I don’t.« Castiel’s voice is coarse and close to his ear. It sounds like every word is a struggle. »I feel sorry for you.«
»It’s not like I want you gone«, Dean says, slowly moving a hand through his hair.

»No, I know you don’t.« Castiel is standing right in front of his bed in full gear, which means he probably hasn’t come straight from Sam’s room. »But you were right. I was not giving the case my full attention. I was thinking in human hunter terms and not of my angelic abilities.«

»It’s okay, Cas.«

He’d startled Dean, when he’d woken up five minutes minutes ago to a figure looming over his bed. Dean sits upright now, unsure whether to leave the bed or not under Castiel’s watchful eye.

»I should have been keeping the greater picture in mind. Instead I was preoccupied with your brother’s well-being.«

Dean winces at the words.

»It’s fine.« He keeps looking at what seems to be grains of sand on Castiel’s left shoulder. »So what exactly is your plan? You gonna go up there and take some angel hostage until they spill the beans?«

»The less you know the better.«

»If you say so.«

Dean shoves himself off the bed and walks over to the dresser. He expects Castiel to leave, while he picks out a new pair of boxer shorts and a T-Shirt (his jeans will have to last another few days), but Cas is still in the exact same spot, when Dean turns around again.

»I thought you said the less I know the better?«

»Yes. For your own safety.«

»Right.« Dean tries not to snort. »Because us keeping things from each other has always turned out so well.«

Castiel’s lips twitch.

»I am not lying to you or keeping things from you because I don’t trust you. It is only you and your brother’s safety that I have in mind. As you know, things in heaven are still-«

»Damn, Cas. Things in heaven are always shit. Just like they are down here. And if you worry about some stupid angels torturing us, don’t. It’s no big deal. We can take care of ourselves.«
»Your hubris is unbecoming.«
»Well, yeah, your… your everything is unbecoming.«

They glare at each other for a moment.

Dean’s missed this.

This was their thing. The urgent fighting, the friction.

»What do you still want?«

He doesn’t move away when Castiel steps closer.

»I don’t know for how long I will be gone. I will try to make haste, of course.«

»I’m sure the victims will appreciate your ’haste’.«

»Dean.« Castiel grabs both of his hands tightly. »While I’m gone…«

He looks torn, deeply uncomfortable.

»Yeah?«

Castiel searches in his eyes.

»Promise me you’ll look out for your brother.«

Of course…

Dean slips his hands out of Cas’.

»You mean, not like the rest of the time?«

»I know you always try to protect Sam from outward harm. But I expect he’ll feel worse when I’m gone. Just promise me you’ll be there for him.«

Dean shakes his head slowly.

»You won’t?«

»Of course I will«, he hisses.

»You were shaking your head, which is usually a sign for-«

»Dude, stop. I know what shaking your head means. This is just bizarre. I don’t need lessons from you on how to look out for Sam. You’re having a lot of gall, talking about hubris! You think you know him better now because you two are holding hands like schoolgirls now? Bull-fucking-shit!«

»I am sorry. I did not mean to imply a familiarity with your brother beyond yours.«

Dean steps closer and cocks his head to the side.

»Why do you keeping referring to him as my brother?«

Castiel looks genuinely confused.
»Because he is.«

»Sam will be fine«, Dean finally says. »We always end up fine.«

»Yes«, Cas nods. »Of course.«

»Alright…« Dean pushes past him towards the door. »I need to take a shower.«

—

Sam’s in a weirdly good mood when Dean finds him in the kitchen.

He’s wearing an old Bruce Springsteen T-shirt that Dad bought him when he was 18, shortly before he went to college. Dean’s not sure if he’s ever seen him wear it, but there’s a hole on its’ right side under Sam’s arm and it looks generally worn-out, so he must have.

Sam’s whistling. It takes Dean a moment to identify it as Johnny Cash’s version of „Hurt“ but even that can’t take away from the cheeriness radiating from his brother.

»Good night?«, Dean asks, eyebrows raised, as he sits down opposite from him.

»Not really.« Sam smiles brightly. »But it’s fine now.«

»You’re alright, Sammy?«

»I’m great!«

Sam jumps up and gets a second cup of coffee, putting it down in front of Dean.

»You sure about that?«

This doesn’t feel right.

When Castiel shuffles into the room, Sam’s smile grows even brighter. He walks towards him.

»Where have you been?«

Castiel throws Dean a furtive glance.

»Nowhere. I was just working the case.«

»So early?«

Sam turns to Dean, but he just shrugs.

»I don’t understand what the hour of the day has to do with my ability to help«, Cas says.

»Nothing, I guess. It was just weird when I woke up and you weren’t there. But you’re here now, so it’s all good.«

Sam doesn’t just sound naturally cheery-happy, Dean realizes. He sounds high.

»Hey, man«, Dean barks. »Are you tripping?«

»What?« Sam laughs, but it’s a second too late, off-beat. »What are you talking about?«

Castiel grips him by the shoulders.
»I did not mean to startle you with my absence. But when you fell asleep again, I thought it best to let you rest.«

»It’s fine.« Sam has a blissed smile on his face. »Hey…« He brushes the sand from Cas’ shoulder in amazement. »Where were you? The Caribbean?«

»Something like that.«

Castiel’s smile is strained. He lets go of Sam.

»I meant to…« Cas halts and looks down at his shoes, avoiding Sam’s eyes. »I have some business to attend to.«

Sam blinks, confused.

»Oh? Okay. For the case?«

»Yes.«

Castiel’s gaze is unreadable but when Sam grabs his hand, he visibly flinches. Even Sam notices.

»Is something wrong?«

»No, of course not.«

He stiffens when Sam puts his arms around his shoulders, pulls him close and lays his head on his shoulder.

Dean averts his eyes for a split second, but he’s too curious.

They’re both acting so strange, stranger than usual even, that it’s hard to look away.

Sam pets Cas’s hair and starts humming again.

Castiel slowly shoves his brother away, but Sam just puts his hand on Cas’ face and strokes over his cheek. He’s got a look in his eyes, like Castiel’s the best thing he’s ever seen. Dean feels embarrassed for the both of them.

Castiel puts his hand on Sam’s and firmly shoves

»I have to go now, but I will be back soon.«

»Great«, Sam smiles. »Hurry, I want to show you something.«

Castiel tucks his coat close around himself. He clears his throat.

»Yes. I will. Goodbye.«

He doesn’t zap away, instead he moves towards into the corridor and up the stairs.

Dean jogs after him.

»Cas. Wait up.«

They walk outside the bunker and towards Castiel’s car.

»You’re going to heaven by car?«
Castiel's lips are drawn out into a thin line. He leans against the driver's door, looking entirely too human.

He looks weak.

»I'm not going to heaven.«

»You're not?«

»I told you, the less you know--«

»Yes, the better. Gotcha.«

Dean licks his lips and nods in the direction of the bunker's entrance.

»You want to tell me what the hell you did to Sam?«

»I didn't do anything.«

»Bullshit. He's worse than that one time that bitchy witch tricked us into taking buttloads of LSD. He's high as a kite. I thought he was going to lick your face and fondle your feathers there for a minute, right in front of me.«

»He's not high.« Castiel looks at him grimly. »Don't exaggerate.«

»And what about you? Anything I need to know about? You kept avoiding him. Trouble in paradise?«

He's entirely taken by surprise when Castiel steps forward, puts his hands onto Dean's chest and pushes hard. Dean stumbles but gets ahold of the other's shoulders. They tumble, clutching at each other, and almost fall down, but manage to regain their balance in the last second.

Dean stares at him.

»What the hell, Cas?«

»Don't, Dean.« He steps back and leans against the car again. »Just don't.«

»Don't what?«

Castiel's eyelids flutter, as if it's hard for him to keep them open.

»What the hell is going on?«, Dean demands to know. »You don't want to tell me where you're going or what you're doing, fine. But you can't just leave me with Sam like this and not explain what the fuck he is on!«

»He's not on anything, Dean. He's just happy.«

Dean scoffs.

»Alright«, he cocks his head. »Tell me why he's so happy then. And how long is it going to last?«

»Not long.« Castiel's head dips forward until his chin rests onto his own chest. He closes his eyes. »He probably won't feel too bad again until tomorrow morning.«

»I don't get it.«
Dean looks at the angel. At his angel. Slumped against the ugly car of his like a beat-down salesman after a long day of unsatisfying work.

Some part of him feels bad for Cas, but mostly it's just upsetting to see him like this. It's wrong.

»What did you do?«

»I helped him«, Cas sighs, slowly looking up again.

»Jesus! Will you stop saying that like it explains anything? What does that mean, you helped him?«

Castiel's lower lip is quivering slightly. He's unsure whether to talk or not, but Dean needs him to.

»Look, we said no more unnecessary lying, alright?« He steps closer, speaking softly. He can feel Cas' shoulder trembling as he gets ahold of it. »Just tell me what's going on, okay? What do you mean when you say you help him?«

He puts the last two words into quotation marks.

»I... I heal him. I try to heal Sam.«

»You heal him?«, he asked puzzled. »He's not injured.«

»I heal him temporarily. I take on some of his painful thoughts away and replace them with my grace. It's not exactly how the mechanism works, and I assume it's not a long-term solution but --« He searches Dean's eyes, clearly expecting some form of anger in them. »It makes it more bearable for him. For now.«

Dean doesn't speak.

»I did it twice this morning. Once after he woke up from a nightmare and then while he was sleeping again. It's why he's acting so strangely. It was... too much, I think. But I wanted him to - « His voice falters. »I thought it could make it last longer. Give him some more time. I try to hurry but I don't know how long it will take until I'll be back.«

»You didn't tell him, did you?«, Dean understands. »You didn't tell him you were actually going to try and get help from other angels.«

»I just told him«, Castiel disagrees. »I told him I'd be gone for the case and didn't know how long it would take.«

»Come on, you can't be serious. You know he thought you meant you’d be gone a few hours not days!«

»What do you want from me?«, Castiel asks, tired. »I am not being factious, I really mean it: What would you have me do here, Dean?«

As Castiel's eyes search his face, Dean feels suddenly very aware of their proximity. He knows it's not what Castiel is asking, but what he wants him to do, is jank him down by the collar and kiss him until their lips become sore.

»You asked me to go«, Castiel says. »So I go. I do as you tell me to.«

»That's not...«

*That's not what I want at all.*
»Have you changed your mind?« Castiel blinks. Hopefulness in his eyes. »Do you want me to stay?«

Dean swallows hard. He takes a step backwards.

»No«, he finally says. »Nothing’s changed. We’re stuck and we need some outside help.«

Castiel nods.

»Of course.«

He pushes himself into motion and opens the car door.

He looks at Dean long and hard.

»Pray if you need me. My phone might not be working.«

Chapter End Notes

Weird chapter is weird. Sorry. I tried to change it around and then it seemed to work even less. So... that's that.

But I'm currently doing nanowrimo and so far I've written 15k of weird novel mess in a language that isn't English, and it's kind of driving me crazy, so my ability to sensibly judge my own writing has currently flown out of the window anyway. So consider this a preemptive defense mechanism. (Also: nanowrimo sucks. Why would I ever write something that's not fanfiction? It's insane.)
I Get Along Without You Very Well

It takes them just another week to solve the case by themselves.

Dean comes across an explanation in the lore by sheer luck.

By that time, Sam’s stopped researching altogether. He can’t bring himself to care.

When they catch the creatures in St. Louis, he mostly watches from the sidelines as Dean kills the lot of them.

When one of them lunges at Sam, he lets it get close until he can feel its fingers around his neck, trying to crush his windpipes.

His lungs are gasping for air, when he finally moves. He shoots the shapeshifter-hybrid-thing clean in the head.

Sam’s eyes are red and the hands have left their mark on his neck, but it’s the way Dean looks at him, as they leave the not-so-abandoned warehouse and the corpses behind, that gives him pause.

Dean doesn’t ask but he knows he’s seen him.

»So, Cas was right after all, huh?«, Dean says, attempting to sound offhand, when they’re back in the car. »Not normal shapeshifters after all. No wonder we couldn’t track them before. I mean, who would have guessed rose water as an achilles’ heel.«

»That’s not what an Achilles’ heel is«, Sam says.

»Oh wow, it speaks.«

Sam turns away from his brother.

He rubs his right thumb over the splatter of blood on the left hand.

»Come on, cheer up«, Dean says. »We just saved a bunch of people from their imminent death. That's got to be worth a smile, Sammy.«

Sam leans back in his seat and looks out of the window.

His eye lids are heavy but he doesn't want to close them. He knows what happens every time he lets himself drift off. He hasn't slept more than 10 hours in total in the past six nights. But that's still plenty of time for dreaming.

It's probably pointless to try and avoid the nightmares, as they stay with him throughout the day anyway. When he's awake they make him feel crazier than at night, because it’s then that he tries to fight them. At night he just rolls with it, he can't do anything to change them anyway.

It feels like Lucifer is still with him, will always be with him. It would be wise to try to just accept the fact. At least Lucifer really cared about him in a way, even though he certainly didn’t care for him. If nothing else, Sam’s pretty sure that no one in his life has gone to such great lengths to make a lasting impression on him.

Then again, he tries to remind himself, right now, everything, all of this, it’s only in his head. It feels real, but it’s a remix of memories and dreaded could-have-beens.
He wonders what that says about him. Is he really so attention-starved that he'd rather have the devil torture him than face his normal albeit bleak existence.

Lucifer is gone, Jessica is gone, Ruby is gone, everyone he's ever cared about is gone, except for his brother in the seat next to him, who's trying - Sam can tell - who's really trying to say the right thing. Do the right thing. But at the moment Sam can't muster up any feelings but disdain. If only Dean could let go, if only he could let him escape this madhouse.

He picks at the half-dried blood.

Right before he shot the monster-playing-businessman, he'd felt the urge to turn the gun in his hand around and put the barrel to his own temple.

But it had seemed like such overwhelming work and in the end, his reflexes had kicked in. There'd only been another monster in the long line of things to kill. Just another day at the office.

He looks at the door handle beside him. If he pulled it now, the door would fly open. He could let his body fall out of the speeding car.

There is a good chance he'd survive and he doesn't want to end up in a wheelchair. He doesn't want to be more of a nuisance to others than he already is.

»Are you still mad about Cas?«

Sam slowly turns his eyes towards Dean.

»I'm not mad at all«, he replies quietly.

Dean tenses his shoulders and then relaxes them.

»Look.« He licks his lips. »I'm sure he'll be back soon.«

»Yes.«

Sam's eyes turn back to the door handle and then out of the window.

It would hurt. His body crashing into the pavement, his bones breaking. If he fell just right, with all the pressure on his head maybe, it could be a quick death.

But it wouldn't be wise.

Who knows where he'd end up. Heaven, hell, nowhere.

»I already tried his cell«, Dean explains. »But he said he might not have reception wherever he was, so I guess we should try to pray to him.«

A small, cynical smile appears on Sam's lips, the first of any kind in days.

»You try it. Maybe he'll come when you do it.«

Just like it always used to be. Sam praying himself senseless, while it only took a quick mumble from Dean’s side for Castiel to appear.

Still, he never really stopped. The praying happens automatically to Sam.

He doesn’t mean to, but the first thing he’s been doing the past days upon waking, even before
opening is eyes, is to extend his arms and feel around for another body. Each time he forgets, and each time anew it feels like something is crushing his lungs.

Now, he doesn’t so much pray as strongly think of him. But he’s certain, that if it’s physically (and metaphysically?) possible for Castiel in any way to hear him, then he’d understand.

Dean purses his lips.

»The case is solved, so there's no reason for him to still be out there.«

»Right. The Case. That's why you sent him away.«

»What do you mean? Of course he left because of the case.« Dean gives him a strange look. »Why else would I have suggested a meet-up with his feathery friends?«

Sam presses his lips together, just like he'd done last night when Lucifer had tried to kiss him the first time of many. Like he'd always done in hell before he'd eventually stopped fighting altogether.

»You tell me.«

The fields on the side of the road blur together with the sky. It makes Sam think of that one big famous expressionist painting Jessica had liked. He can’t remember the name or the artist, he just remembers the framed print above the headboard.

»We didn't know how to solve the case, Cas offered to help and so-«

Sam's head spins around.

»He didn't offer. You told him to and he did it.«

»We agreed to -«

»And this case? This case meant nothing. So what, there were a few lives at stake? Big deal! There’s always tons of lives at stake that we don’t get to save. It's not like we're going out and calculating the best way to save the largest amount of people possible. It was one measly case. There was no need to send him away. There was no need, there -«

He stops abruptly. His throat itches. He hasn't had anything to drink all day. Not to speak of food.

»I didn't force him to go, ok? And he’s just been gone a few days, he’ll be back soon.«

»You don't know that. You don't know where he is, you don't know if he's in danger.«

»Cas can look out for himself, alright?« Dean huffs. »Is this really all about him? You almost letting yourself get killed by that psycho because you, you what, miss Cas so much?«

Sam doesn't miss the slight edge in his brother's voice.

»It's not about him.« And then: »And I'm fine, Dean.«

»So, the strangling thing was just you living out one of your kinks, is that what you want me to believe?«

»I was just tired. And it's fine. Nothing happened. They're all dead, we're all okay.«

»Right. You sure sound like everything’s honky-dory. Is this cause he didn’t say goodbye to you? I
already told you--«

»No«, Sam says firmly. »It’s not because of that. I don’t care about that.«

And he doesn’t. Not really. Castiel will have had his reasons for not telling him. Even though it might sting a little, that he felt he could tell Dean but not him.

»What is it then?«

»There’s nothing.«

When he closes his eyes, he can sense them right next to him. And if concentrates hard, for moments at a time, he manages to see only the beautiful scenes, those dipped in the light of late summer days and through a Gaussian filter.

Jessica in the driver’s seat of her crappy old Mini, smiling at his fruitless attempt to bat a fly away from his head. The smell of dust and heat and her perfume fills his nose.

Cas is sitting in backseat, leaning forward as he takes a cup of coffee from his hands. Their fingers touch slightly, before Castiel pulls away and his head dips down to get a good whiff of the coffee aroma.

He should probably be bothered by the fact that it’s the both of them, and only the both of them, he thinks of, when he tries to fish for happiness in the sea of dreck inside his mind.

He knows somewhere deep down, there’s scenes revolving around Dean that are autumn-colored and soft-edged, too. There are many but they’re all tucked away.

Dean cleaning the Impala with verve, whistling, a soap-soaked sponge in his hand.

Them lying together in the grass at night, as the crickets chirp in the background.

All the days Dean’s genuine laugh filled his ears and made everything better, made it alright.

Those memories don’t work anymore, anyway. Not as long as Dean’s right here, next to him, making Sam feel miserable, making him so aware of all his failings and shortcomings.

»I’m fine«, he says again, he doesn’t know if Dean’s still been talking or reacting at all. If he has, Sam’s successfully tuned him out.

His gaze wanders back to the street, where it stays for the remainder of the drive.
You have no idea how bad it will feel until it happens for real

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Gravenhurst's "Trust"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He always feels weird doing this. Praying.

For one, he never used to do it before he'd met Cas. There had been no point back when it had seemed so obvious that there was no God, no angels, no greater scheme of things.

When it turned out that he'd been mistaken, surprisingly little had changed at first.

So there was a God after all, but he’d turned out to be an egomaniacal idiot, hiding somewhere, earth his abandoned playground.

There’s still no greater point to anything, maybe even less so, now that he knows even free will is an illusion.

And the angels? Why would he pray to any of these dicks? Personality-void soldiers with their own damn agendas. No better or worse than anyone other non-human creatures, just a bit higher up the chain of command.

As far as he's concerned, none of them deserve his prayers.

But he had prayed.

The prayers to Castiel over the years had mostly come unpremeditated.

When he’d felt close to giving up, his eyes would turn upwards, the angel’s name on his lips before he’d even had a chance to consider what he was doing.

»Cas, man. I hope you got your ears on, cause we really need you here. I need you here.«

There’d be a moment of hesitant expectancy, followed either by intense relief when Castiel did turn up, or a crushing feeling of abandonment when he did not.

It feels different now.

He doesn't expect Castiel to hear him, but he prays anyway, deliberately. He wants Sam to be wrong.

He wants to prove his brother wrong.

He’s speaking mechanically, quietly, acutely aware that he’s most likely just talking to himself. He’s saying pretty much the same thing he’s already left on Cas’ mailbox anyway.

When he’s finished - »So, um, you can come back now. We’ve dealt with it.« - he takes a look
around his empty room.

Nothing happens. Of course it doesn’t.

He leans back against the wall, looking up at the ceiling as if that's where Cas might be hiding.

He hasn't forgotten the promise Cas made him give, to take care of Sam.

After a while he drags himself out his room into the kitchen and puts on a pot of water. He watches it as it slowly starts to boil.

He still can’t let go of the hope that maybe Cas will turn up right about... now.

But of course nothing happens.

He knocks at Sam's door then, later, a plate of pasta in his hands, that he's sure won't be eaten by anyone.

As expected, there’s no reply.

The room is dark, but Dean can still make out that Sam is lying on his stomach on the bed.

He turns on the light.

Sam groans and pushes his his face deep into the pillow.

»Dinner's ready.«

Sam only lifts his head slightly.

»Not hungry.«

»Tough luck, I don't care. You've got to eat.«

»I don't.«

»Yeah, you do.«

»I'm not five. You can't make me.«

Dean puts the plate down on Sam's desk, and sits down in the chair.

»Look, I'm sure Cas will be back soon«, he finally says, because what else is there to say.

Sam's voice is muffled.

»This isn't about Cas.«

Dean raises his eyebrows, glad that his brother can't see him right now.

»Yeah, sure it's not.«

He leans back into the chair and lets his knees fall to the sides.

He's tired of watching Sam like this. He's even more tired of feeling sorry for him. And he's not ready to accept that this is what Sam is going to be like without Cas around.
Dean knows he can fix things for Sam. He always has. He just doesn’t know how yet.

»It's not«, Sam repeats.

Of course Dean wants Cas back, too. More than anything really. But he can't say that he necessarily misses them.

It hurts to see Sam like this, but it doesn't hurt more than to see his eyes light up when Castiel is around. Whether Sam hasn't noticed it himself or just doesn't feel comfortable with it, Dean’s not sure yet.

»Is it the nightmares?«

There's a long pause before Sam answers.

»Not really.«

»Not really? What else is it? Everything else is fine. We don't have any big thing hanging over our heads, we don't even have a case right now. We're all fine.«

Sam turns his head around to face him.

»We're fine?«, he asks incredulously, his voice cracking. »When have we ever been fine?«

Dean feels the anger bubbling up inside him, but he decides to swallow it down.

»Just tell me what it is that's messing you up so bad and we'll deal with it, alright? Like we always do.«

»There's just no point«, Sam says.

»You don’t think I'm being serious about this?«

»I do actually.« Sam shifts on the mattress, curling up his big body in a U-shape. »You think you can fix me if you just try hard enough.«

»Damn straight.«

»No one can fix me.« Dean sighs, about to protest, but Sam goes on. »You think this is some kind of self-pitying thing, do you? It's not. I’m damaged goods and I’ve accepted it. And if you really wanted to help me, you’d just have accepted that by now.«

»You’re not damaged goods. How can you even say that?«

Sam is sitting up on the bed now.

»You can’t even look at me when I tell you the truth.«

Dean forces himself to look, really look at his brother’s face.

»Life is tough sometimes, that doesn’t mean-«

»Life is tough?« Sam chuckles like a crazy person in a horror movie, which is a pretty apt description for what this feels like to Dean. »That’s your great advice? Pretty sure I’ve had enough of that sentence for my whole life. At least when Dad used to say it… No, you know what. It’s not different at all, actually. You both are exactly the same. The whole tough love bullshit when you’re both so
screwed up yourself. He went crazy when Mom died, not that I can blame him for that. But you….«

He pauses. »At least I’m being honest with myself. I’m not ashamed to say what it’s really like.«

»And what’s that? What is it really like? You think talking about self-loathing is gonna help you out of this?«

»It’s what normal people do.«

»Well, guess what, we’re not normal.« He points at himself and then at Sam. »You’re not normal. If you were you wouldn’t be crying into your pillow because your favorite angel’s fucked off for a while and isn’t there to hold your hand.«

Well, shit.

That’s not what he’d meant to say.

Sam doesn’t reply. He just looks back at him. He seems almost content to have broken down Dean’s resolve to keep this civil. It’s like he believes if they fight enough Dean will eventually let this go. Be okay with this version of Sam and just let him be.

Never gonna happen.

»Look«, Dean says, bending forward in the chair, putting his hands on his knees. »If i could help you like Cas does, I would, ok? But I can’t. I don’t have any angel mojo on me. And you’re right, I’m obviously shit at this, this here, this talking thing. But if you think for one minute you can wear me down by being a little bitch about everything, you’re wrong.« He bites his lip and shakes his head. »You’re my brother, Sam. I wouldn’t ever give up on you. So stop asking me to!«

»I’m not… That’s not…«, is all Sam says for a while.

»Yeah, you are. I don’t care if you think of me only as you’re dumb overprotective inept brother-«

»I don’t. You know I don’t.«

»- I don’t care if you want to wallow in your own misery. Go ahead. But I won’t let you do it on your own. Because it’s not right. And you know how I know that? Because you’d never just leave me be if it were me.«

»It’s not the same.«

»You know damn well, that it’s exactly the same.«

After a while, Sam sighs.

»Fine.«

»Fine?«

»Fine. I know you’re right. There’s no point in trying to get you off my back. But I’m not going to pretend that I’m okay, when I’m not.«

»That would be a first.« Dean breathes out. »Anyway, I’m sure Cas will be back soon and help you with your… thing.«

»That’s not why I want him back.« Sam’s words and the look in his eyes sting. »I’m just worried about him.«
»Yeah, me too.«

»I’m not using him.«

»Never said you were.« Dean blinks a few times, and gets up. He understand the implication. »Well, your food oughtta be cold by now. But I’ll leave it just in case.«

He hesitates a moment before leaving the room. There’s a lot of things he wants to know. But maybe he’s better off asking Castiel, when he returns. Which he will. Because he always does. Because he can’t not come back when Dean’s sent him away himself.

It’s only been a week.

It turns into two weeks, three weeks and then into a whole month.

Dean prays every day. He asks him to come back. He needs to prove Sam wrong.

There’s not one reply.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I don't want to get all emotional on you, but really, it makes me so happy that there's people out there enjoying this story. The feedback makes me so happy! If you hate it, let me know too. (Can you tell Nano is still getting to me? 30.000 words done and my novel already went off the rails completely, from political activism story to cheesy bisexual ménage à trois, and I'm just trying to roll with it... because...assertiveness or something?)

Anyway, just a quick shout out to my dream without which this story would never have been possible. Sorry brain, but I don't think I'll be able to get the boys to do indoor climbing, it just doesn't make sense.

And I'm learning, I clearly should not write these end notes sleep-deprived. Or ever really. But it's a bit like end credits and Netflix shows. No one really sees them, but it's still too tempting to just put nothing.
Love Burns

Castiel opens his eyes to complete darkness.

He breathes in deeply and starts coughing immediately. The air is full of dust and finely ground stone particles that sting in his throat and lungs.

He heaves himself up from the hard floor and tumbles forward into the direction where he senses the door.

He shoves himself against the hard metal, hoping that there's no magical warding and no guard waiting for him on the outside.

The hinges creak.

The door closes with a loud thud.

The only sound that remains that isn't him is the soft wind rattling through the surrounding corn fields.

The sun rays shine incredibly bright. He shields his eyes, still coughing, as he tries to figure out where he is.

He remembers meeting Armisael in a town in Kentucky and driving out into a field, which - at the time - had seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. He'd needed information and one of the few friends he'd still had left, had tried to help him find it.

There had been no reason not to trust.

He knows that's a fault of his. There's always reason for mistrust, with humans and angels alike.

He turns around, blinking at the abandoned warehouse, where three of his brethren lie slain. He does not desire to go back in and see what he's done to them. He knows it all too well.

He walks towards the road. There's no cars anywhere. Nor any human being for as far as his eyes can see.

There's only field upon field of corn.

He's too weak to fly, that much is evident as he feels around in his vessel.

He takes one look back at the flat concrete building.

He tries to blink away the image of Armisael's eyes in the moment of his death. He can still feel his hand pushing his brother's own blade into his pliable body.

He needs time to heal. But even more importantly he needs to get back to Dean and Sam. The human way.

It is their pleas and their begging he hears in his head, as he pushes himself to walk down the road, further and further.

He longs to be with them so much that it aches.
That’s not right.

He knows. If only he hadn’t listened to Dean, this could have been avoided.

If only he could stop putting this one human being before everything else. It may once have been a heavenly order to take care of him, but it had soon ceased to be. It’s become an obsession of his own making.

»The Winchesters, your raison d’être«, one of the angels he’d never met before had aptly commented. He had grinned at him, holding his angel blade close to the soft skin on Castiel’s neck, while he’d hung, suspended from the air. »Tell me about them.«

»No.«

It was merely excruciating pain they could give him. They would not kill them, they clearly needed him for something.

»You’re weak«.

His wrist hurt where the handcuffs pulled his body up in the air. He tried to move, his feet barely scraping the floor. It did nothing to alleviate the pain or get him into a more advantageous position.

»I’m not weak«, he claimed, feeling quite the opposite.

»You’re weak in many ways, Castiel. Your grace is…« The blade cut deep into his skin, right under his collarbone. There was a curious look on his face. »It is diminished. Who took it?«

Castiel averted his eyes. The wound burnt like his skin had been set on fire.

»No one took it?« The angel cocked his head to one side. »You gave it away? Voluntarily?« He laughed. »Oh, that is just perfect! Who? Dean Winchester?«

Castiel was weak, yes, but it was only temporary problem. He wasn’t going to tell them anything. If he played his cards right and managed hold out long enough to get his strength back. Which, seeing as he was getting weaker each time the blade drew blood, seemed more unlikely by the minute.

»What do you want from me? Where is Armisael?«

»Armisael is of no import. He was merely bait. When you reached out to us… Oh, Castiel…« He grinned and stepped forward, so close that Castiel could see every pore on his vessel’s face. »You really thought there were still angels left who’d want to help you? You? When you’re the one who’s brought most misfortune on our race than anyone else before?«

»That’s not true.«

He shuddered, as a warm mouth came close to his ear: »You disgust me. You reek of humanity. If it were up to me, I’d just kill you right now. But…« He pulled away and pointed his blade at the ceiling. »Orders.«

»What orders?«

»Wouldn’t you want to know?«

He did want to know, he still does. It angers him that he didn’t get a chance to find out what any of it meant.
He’s lost track of time. How many days have passed since he’d left Sam in Dean’s care?

The endless tortuous questioning, in which he hadn’t revealed anything, day in day out. As they’d started to lose their patience, their rigor and carefulness waned too.

It’s angelic hubris that saved him.

Of course the accidental explosion had only worked as an diversion, but it had been enough to buy him time.

The second his fingers had found the angel blade on the floor, he knew he would make it. Human foolishness maybe, but he thinks it’s exactly the kind of illogical certainty he’d needed to make it out of there alive.

Castiel looks down at his hands. They feel like a real extension of himself now, after all the things he’s made them do.

Killing had always come naturally to him, if it’d came as an order. He’d killed brothers before, if they’d deserved it, if it’d been needed to keep heavenly order. But killing other angels had always hurt. He suspects it never ceases to hurt.

How many more would he kill for him? How many lives were finally too many?

(There’s no number great enough)

How strange love is, he muses, as the drags his feet over the tar. He’d known about the follies of it for all his existence, what they made people do. And yet now, confronted with his own inane feelings, all that knowledge means nothing.

He thinks that even right now, if Dean were to ask him again, he’d still say yes. At least he knows it’s wrong.

He regrets the killing of his brothers and not having been able to help Dean as he’d hoped to. But it’s leaving Sam the way he did that grieves him the most.

He walks for many miles until he sees the first car. He tries to get the driver to stop, waving frantically, but he passes him by. The car raises a cloud of dust, that throws him into another fit of coughing.

He watches the car disappear down the road, until it’s completely out of view. Then he starts walking again.
Dean is on his laptop at their big table, looking for strange patterns in the news. Either heaven and hell have been especially quiet or he’s just not in the right frame of mind for this kind of thing. Knowing the fucked up state of the word, it's probably the latter.

The more he reads through mundane news articles, the more his stomach clenches. He’s always half expecting to stumble upon something that would indicate what has happened to Castiel. Which is a dumb fear, because how would he even be able to tell? *Handsome, perpetually startled-looking man with piercing blue eyes found dead* wasn’t a headline likely to appear in the Omaha World-Herald.

He keeps glancing over the top of his laptop to the hallway, whenever he thinks he hears something. Sam doesn't come out of his room much, except when Dean explicitly asks him to.

He tagged along to a hunt last week. It should have been a simple enough affair. He’d thought hunting a wendigo might bring his brother out of his shell a little, but afterwards Dean had wished he hadn't asked Sam to come at all.

Turns out it’s harder to catch and kill a fast human flesh-eating monster when your hunting partner just randomly freezes in motion in the worst of moments.

»Sorry«, Sam had mumbled, after he'd narrowly escaped a bloody ending. At least Sam's presence had distracted the wendigo long enough for it not to notice Dean right behind him. It had been a quick death.

In the car Sam hadn't apologized again and Dean hadn't commented, because really, he'd said everything there was to say the last time already.

Dean opens and closes his laptop, and opens and closes it once more, before getting up.

He gets two cold beers from the fridge, knowing Sam won’t want one, but he’ll understand the gesture.

The past weeks have taught him not to turn on the lamp, if he doesn’t want to cause a full-blown fight. Most days he still turns the switch, out of principle. Now he just leaves the door open wide, so the light from the hallway lets him see enough to not run into any furniture again.

At first he’s merely irritated when he sees that Sam’s not here, then his instincts kick in. He quickly scans the room, looking for any signs of foul play. There aren’t any.

He gets back into the hallway, his fingers around his knife.

»Sam?«

He checks the kitchen and his own room. It's probably nothing, but with Sam's recent behavior he's less worried about an intruder than whatever Sam’s brain might have cooked up.

»Sammy?«

His heart is beating uncomfortably in his chest, when he pushes the door open to Cas’ room. Or more precisely, the room that had been supposed to be his, before he’d practically moved into Sam’s.

»What are you doing here?«, Dean asks.
Sam is lying on the made bed. He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday, the day before and the rest of the week. His stringy hair looks like it hasn't seen water for years. The blood-shot eyes, the much too pale skin, the expressionless face... It hurts to see him like this.

Dean bites down hard on his lower lip, as he puts the knife away.

It's a surprise to him that Sam even answers, although it's just a »Nothing.«

»I can see that.«

Dean turns on the bright light, even though he can see enough as it is.

Sam flinches but doesn't complain.

»When's the last time you've taken a shower?«

He can see his brother think, actually think hard about that question and that's just wrong. It's nothing you're supposed to be able to forget.

»I don't remember.«

»Jesus...«

Dean puts a hand over his mouth and lets it slide down.

He walks over to Sam and grabs him by the arm.

»Come on.«

»What are you doing?«

Sam doesn't budge from the bed.

»You're going to take a shower now.«

»No.«

»Yeah, you most definitely are, because you don't want to see me when you don't.«

»I really don't want to take a shower right now.«

»Yeah? Well, good for you. Thing is, I don't care.«

He grabs Sam under the arms and drags him out of the bed. His brother's body falls to the floor with a loud clank. He sits there, his legs sprawled out, like a turtle on its back or something.

»What the fuck, Dean?«

It's the most verve he's heard in that voice for days.

»Are you going to stand up yourself or are you going to make me literally carry you to the bathroom?«

»I'm not going.«

Dean stands there for a second, contemplating his options. They are limited.
»Fuck this shit.«

He bends down towards Sam, grips him tightly around his chest and heaves him up.

»You know. This would be a whole lot easier, if you helped just the tiniest bit«, he says, but Sam stays slumped against his shoulder like a bag of potatoes. He doesn't even struggle to get free. Instead he just stays quiet while Dean, spewing curse word after curse word, carries and shoves and pushes his body through the hall and into the bathroom, where he lets him slide down the tiles onto the floor.

»Damn, you’re heavy.«

Sam blinks a few times, not at him, but just into space.

»What are you trying to do?«

He sounds tired.

»I'm trying to get you to take a shower.«

When Sam doesn't move, Dean goes onto his knees on the cold tiles.

He starts unbuttoning Sam’s shirt because there’s no way that Sam is going to get out of his stupor now by himself. And there’s no way Dean will just leave him like this.

Sam looks at him, confused, as Dean pulls the shirt off. As he starts to remove Sam’s T-shirt, grabbing the hemline to pull it over his head, Sam flinches.

»What are you doing?«, he asks again, not so much tired now but rather incredulous.

The T-shirt reeks. Dean throws it into the corner of the bathroom.

»Look«, he says and when Sam doesn’t look, he grabs his chin and moves it upwards, until he faces him directly. »We’re going to get you showered, and we’re going to get you new clothes, and then you’ll eat a full meal and you’ll finish a whole bottle of beer - and none of that bullshitty two sips and that’s it-nonsense. You got two choices in all of that, you’re either going to do all of that on your own or I’m going to make you. Believe me, if I have to force-feed you, I will. And this here«, he points between himself and his brother’s naked chest. »It’s nothing I haven’t done before. Who do you think bathed you as child?«

There’s a fleeting expression on Sam’s face that he identifies as shame.

He moves forward to Sam’s belt.

Sam slaps his hand away.

»You gonna do it yourself?«

They glare at each other.

»Yes«, Sam finally says.

Dean nods.

»Good.«

»Dude, you’re not going to watch are you?«, Sam says, his breathing shallow.
»What?«

»Then will you please leave now?«

»Yeah«, Dean clears his throat. »Of course.« He gets up and walks towards the door. »But if you’re not clean and in new clothes by the time I see you again«

»You’re going to throw me back into the pit of doom and fire yourself. Yeah, Dean, I got it.«

It’s strange, how normal he sounds now. Even though he’s still slumped half-dressed on the bathroom floor, and doesn’t look like he’s about to get up.

»And I’ll drink your stupid beer and eat your food. Promise.«

»Okay…«

Dean waits outside the bathroom, until he can hear the shower being turned on. Then he gets the beer bottles he’s left in Sam’s room and heads to the kitchen to put them in the fridge again.

He puts two frozen pizzas into the oven.

When Sam enters the kitchen 15 minutes later his hair is still wet and he’s barefoot, but he’s wearing a new pair of jeans and a red lumberjack shirt.

He looks up at Dean somewhat sheepishly, as he sits down at the table.

Dean gets the beers from the fridge, opens them and puts one of them in front of Sam.

»Thanks«, he mumbles before taking a quick sip.

They eat the pizza in silence, but it’s a different kind of silence than before. Not quite comfortable but bearable.

»It’s a good pizza«, Sam says, after having eaten half of his slices.

Dean looks down at the limp slice of pepperoni pizza in his hand and snorts.

»Not really. But you’re still going to finish it.«

And Sam does. He finishes the pizza and afterwards gulps down his beer dutifully, his shoulders slumping forward.

»Do you want to watch some TV?«, Dean dares to ask, his mouth full.

»No«, Sam shrugs.

»Alright…«

»But maybe we can, I don’t know, look for a case maybe?« He eyes Dean hopefully, like he’s asking for a favor and not saying exactly what Dean has wanted to hear from him for weeks.

»Maybe I could use the distraction.«

Dean’s said the same thing to no avail many times, but he’s not about to complain now.

»Sure, yeah, sure.«

Just like that they end up sitting across from each other, reading through online newspapers and other
assorted websites. Dean gets them another beer and Sam drinks this one too.

His sudden change in attitude feels a bit bizarre to Dean's. If he'd known that all it took to get his brother sorta back again, was to drag him into the shower, he'd have done it ages ago.

They work like this for two hours, when Dean gets up again to get another drink.

He almost bumps into Castiel, when he appears just inches in front of him.

»Hello, Dean.«

All he can do is stare.

Castiel looks rough, like he's just been in a street fight. His hair is a mess of dark brown.

»Cas«, he finally says, incredulous.

Castiel reaches out, grips his shoulders and pulls him close.

»Where the hell have you been?«, Dean asks breathlessly, into his hair, as he tightens his arms around his back.

He can smell gasoline and hay.

»I will explain everything later.«

Castiel pulls away slightly, still holding onto his shoulders. His eyes are scanning Dean’s face.

»Are you alright?«, Dean asks.

»Yes. I am fine.«

Dean notices the big gash on Castiel’s shoulder. His shirt is ripped and there’s dried blood on a wound that looks deep.

Dean’s fingers brush over it.

»I haven’t had time to heal myself completely yet«, Castiel admits, looking abashed.

»I can tell.«

They are back to staring at each other.

There’s many things Dean wants to say, even more things he wants to convey wordlessly. He knows he’s messed up, he’ll make it alright again, once he knows how to.

Castiel turns away from him and walks towards the table.

»Sam«, he says, a new softness in his voice.

Sam looks up at him, not saying a word.

»I have heard all your prayers. I am sorry, I wish I could have returned earlier.«

Sam stands up, his hands flat on the table.

His lower lip is trembling slightly and it seems like he’s about to say something. Then he hurries
away, not looking back.

»Sam?«, Cas asks confused.

He wants to follow, but Dean puts a hand on his shoulder and makes him turn around.

»I think he just needs a moment. He’s been having somewhat of a rough time.«

Reluctantly Cas lets himself be dragged over to the couch.

Dean reaches for his wounded shoulder wound.

Castiel winces in pain.

»I’m sorry«, Dean says, turning his gaze from the wound into Cas’ eyes.

He’s not sure who he’s more angry with, with himself for making him go or with Cas for getting hurt.

»I know you are«, Cas says. He doesn’t say it’s okay, and he shouldn’t, because it’s not. Still, Dean wishes he could be absolved so easily.

Het lets his hand wander from Cas’ shoulders to his elbow, lets it stay there and wills the touch to say what he can’t.
I have never failed to fail

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Nirvana's "You Know You're Right"

»Sam.«

It’s been a strange long hour, lying in bed, knowing that Castiel is back. That he’s alive and seemingly alright.

He knows he should be happy and not sick to his stomach.

He knows that nothing’s really happened that he hasn’t seen before.

Castiel disappearing for ages and turning up again without a warning isn’t new.

»Sam«, Castiel repeats, before he closes the door and walks toward the bed.

He sits down at the end of it and puts his hand on Sam’s lower leg.

»I’m sorry I wasn’t able to return earlier.«

A look in Castiel’s face tells Sam he’s genuinely sorry.

He wonders if he’d feel different, better, if the resurfacing had taken a different route. If he hadn’t just watched Dean and Cas do that thing they do, where they act like there’s no one else in the world but the two of them. Sam’s pretty sure that’s how they feel too, when they’re like this, entranced in each other’s presence.

He’d been surprised actually, when Castiel had eventually switched his tunnel vision off and turned around to him as an afterthought.

It’s childish kind of jealousy, which he’s not willing to accept as part of himself just yet.

»Sam.«

He says his name like it’s an apology in itself.

Sam forces himself to look at the returnee.

»You’re hurt«, Sam notices.

Castiel just blinks.

»Who did that to you?«

»Angels.«

»Fuck«, Sam breathes, sitting up half-way. »I knew it.«
»I’m fine.«

»What happened?«

He shoves himself fully up and comes to sit next to Castiel, who doesn’t look fine at all.

»It’s a long story,« he sighs. »I’ve just told it to Dean in its entirety. I’d rather not waste both our time repeating it right now. I am exhausted, but if you wish for me to—«

»Yeah, no, it’s fine.« Sam looks down at the small space on the mattress between them. »Sure, I can ask Dean later, no problem.«

Castiel puts his head to one side and consider him closely.

»Sam, I’m puzzled by your behavior. I’ve heard your prayers. I know you’ve missed me. I’d thought you’d be happy to see me again.«

»I am happy,« Sam says in a voice that sounds anything but. »I’m glad you’re alive.«

»Then are you angry with me?«

»No.«

»I am glad to hear it.« Castiel puts his palm on top of Sam’s hand. »I was very much looking forward to seeing you. Your reaction to my arrival confounded me.«

He doesn’t look at him the same way he looks at Dean, he never has, but it’s still too much. Too earnest.

»I have missed you too, Sam.«

Sam swallows hard.

All these weird desperate prayers and longing thoughts… Castiel heard them all, and yet here he is.

»You have?«

»Of course. If it'd just been up to me, I probably wouldn't have left in the first place. But Dean—« Castiel sighs. »He seemed so sure that I could help. I could not. I failed. I merely got myself into a dangerous situation. And the both of you by extension.«

When Sam doesn't reply, he continues: »Dean told me that you managed to solve the case without my help.«

»I didn't do anything. He did.«

Castiel looks puzzled.

»He solved it by himself? Why?«

Sam slowly pulls his hand out of under Castiel’s.

»Didn't he tell you? I was pretty much useless all the way through. I almost sabotaged the whole thing.« When he sees the concerned look on Castiel's face, he adds: »By accident, I mean.«

»Were you so unwell?«
Sam turns his head towards the wall. Unlike Dean's room, there's no form of decoration. Nothing but enchanted concrete.

»I wasn't too great«, he finally says.

»Did Dean look out for you, as I'd asked him to?«

There's a burning sensation dribbling down his esophagus.

He’s never appreciated being treated like a child.

»You asked him to take care of me?«

»I couldn't leave you without making sure you'd be fine. Did he make sure you were well-fed and getting enough sleep?«

»He tried to.«

Dean's overeagerness to get him out of bed, to cook him food and act like an all-around mother hen suddenly makes a lot more sense.

»How are you feeling now?«

Castiel puts his palm on Sam's face and makes him turn back to him.

»I honestly don't know.«

»Are you happy to see me or do you wish me to leave?«

»I don't want you to leave«, Sam quickly says.

»Then I won't.«

When Castiel strokes his thumb over his cheek, Sam immediately leans into the touch.

He’d become to think he wouldn’t get to feel this again.

He pulls away abruptly.

»What’s wrong?« Castiel furrows his brow. »You still don’t seem happy to see me.«

»I am«, Sam nods. »I’m just… I was afraid you weren’t coming back. I thought you might be dead.«

Which sounds really silly, as he says it.

Castiel’s hand slides down and comes to rest against Sam’s shoulder.

»As you can see, I’m not.«

»No, but you might have been. You’re injured. Something really bad clearly happened to you, if you can’t even heal yourself.«

»I am sorry that I won’t be able to ease your pain for as long as I’m still healing myself.«

»I don’t care about that.«

Sam shakes his head.
It’s not completely true. He’d do a lot of things to get his head out of this cloud of blackness, to let go of the feeling of complete and utter inaptitude for just a second.

»You don’t care about that? But I heard your calls. You were asking me –«

»To return, yeah.«

»I don’t understand. I just told you I cannot help you right now. I’ve not just disappointed your brother by failing my mission, I’m failing you. I have nothing to offer you. I walked away from you as a coward and I return weak, unable to give you the help you’ve been missing.«

Sam shut his eyes tightly, shaking his head.

»I am sorry«, Castiel says meekly.

»Stop saying you’re sorry. You’re not supposed to be sorry for being hurt. Is that what you think of me? That that’s what I was worried about? I hate that you’re hurt and unwell, but I hate it for you, not because you can’t help me.« He shakes his head again. »They only things you did wrong was not telling me you were leaving - and I don't care about that now, water under the bridge - and you going on that stupid mission in the first place.«

»Dean said that -«

»You don’t have to do everything Dean says!«, he spits out. »Dean was wrong. Dean is wrong a lot. And you knew it wasn’t a good idea to leave, you said yourself, if it had been up to you, you wouldn’t have left.«

Castiel's lips are just a thin line now.

»Is that why you didn't tell me? Because you knew I'd tell you not to go?«

»No«, Castiel says. »I am not certain I know why I did it. There was a strange tugging feeling inside my chest when I contemplated telling you, as if I were catching a pulmonary disease of sorts. I did not wish to strengthen this sensation and hoped to suffocate it altogether by avoiding this sort of confrontation with you. I did not mean to stay away for so long.«

»Did you tell Dean that you didn't want to go?«

»Yes.«

Sam grinds his teeth.

»And he still made you go.«

It’s not a question.

»Sam... Don’t be angry with your brother for the choices I make.«

Sam takes a deep breath.

»Let's just forget about it and move on, okay?«

»I would very much like that.«

Castiel nods.

»Do you want to go outside, discuss things with Dean?« Sam shrugs helplessly. »I don't know.«
»Is that what you wish, for him to join our conversation?«

Sam's pretty sure that's not what he wants, but he still feels overwhelmed by Castiel's sudden reappearance, so he nods.

»Yeah, sure.«

He watches Castiel get up from the bed and walk towards the door.

»Are you not coming?«

He really does not want to see Dean right now.

»Yeah, sure«, he repeats.

As he joins Castiel, he expects him to open the door. Instead he embraces him and presses his face into his chest.

It takes a second for Sam to react, before he can put his arms around Castiel's warm torso. He lets his nose dive into his sweaty, messy hair.

»I have missed your scent«, Castiel says matter-of-factly, as he lets go and turns around to leave the room.

Sam spends the remainder of the day tense and confused.

Dean treats Cas like he hasn’t spent the last month leaving frantic messages on his voice mail, but at least he doesn’t act like everything’s fine either.

He’s pacing the space in front of the couch where Castiel and Sam are seated.

»How long did you have to walk from that place?«, Dean asks.

»I walked for a day and a half until I managed to hitch a ride to Lexington, from where I then took a bus.«

»Why didn’t you call?«

»They took my phone.«

»You could have used another one.«

»I did not have the money to do so. If a very kind lady had not taken pity on me, I would not have been able to pay for the bus ride either.«

»What did they do to your car?«

»I don’t know.«

»You should have sent a message somehow.«

»Dean«, Castiel says with a stern face, »don’t you think I would have done so if I’d thought I could have?«

»So what are you saying? Your grace is gone? Again?«

»No. It’s not gone, I’m just weak at the moment.«
»But you were already weak when they got you, right? That’s what you said anyway.« They way he moves through the room, interrogating Castiel, reminds Sam of some old school detective. It’s not the way Dean normally acts. »Because if you hadn’t been weak before, they couldn’t have underestimated how fast you’d restrengthen.«

»Yes«, Castiel agrees with a solemn nod.

»Why were you so weak in the first place?«

Castiel hesitates.

»I think I might have taken on too much of Sam’s pain. It must have weakened me more than I’d hoped it would.«

»Why?« Dean eyes Sam curiously, before turning back to Castiel. »Did you give him your grace?«

Sam wishes he’d never left his room.

He sinks back into the couch as far as possible.

»No. I don’t think so.« Castiel shakes his head. »Not that I’m aware of.«

»Why would it weaken you then?«

»It seems to make me more human.«

»Is this like Crowley and his human blood thing?«

Sam cringes at the comparison.

Cas’ hand appears on his knee. It’s supposed to be reassuring, he can tell, but it just makes him tense.

»No, it is not like that. It just weakens me and as I take on parts of his I seem to become more human, temporarily.«

»Well, that’s a problem«, Dean says. »We can’t have you walking around like an easy target. You could have died.«

It’s not Dean who almost got Castiel killed, Sam realizes. It’s him.

»It doesn’t matter anymore«, he says, his voice rough.

»It doesn’t matter? Are you insane?«, Dean asks.

»Of course Cas’ well-being matters«, Sam clarifies. »But don’t worry. It’s not going to be a problem anymore. It won’t happen again.«

»But Sam«, Castiel doesn’t sound content. »I want to continue helping you.«

»No. Definitely not.«

There’s an approving curt nod from Dean.

Castiel squeezes his knee.

»Sam, are you sure-«
»Of course I’m sure.« He forces himself to smile. »Don’t worry about me.«
Isn't that the way? Everybody's got their dues in life to pay

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Aerosmith's "Dream On".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

»Jesus Christ!«

Dean shoots up in his bed. His fingers are already around his gun when he realizes it’s Cas sitting next to him.

»What are you doing here?« He puts the gun back under his pillow. »How long have been sitting there?«

»I’ve been here for about an hour.«

»Why?«

»Because I’ve been brought down onto this earth to look out for you.« He pauses. »Also, I got into an argument with Sam and I felt he wanted me to leave.«

»I doubt that.«

»Well.« Castiel gives a small shrug, a gesture that just doesn’t look right to Dean. »He told me as much.«

»How are you feeling? How is your shoulder?«

»It stings quite a bit, but in a few days time I should be able to heal myself again.«

»Right.« Dean nods. »Did you let someone take a look at it?«

»No, I did not see the need.«

»Of course you didn’t.« Dean sighs, pushing his legs out of the bed. »Come on.«

»Where are we going?«

»To the bathroom.« He stands in front of Castiel, waiting for him to get up. »I’m sure you’re right and you’ll be able to mend this thing soon, but until then you should disinfect the wound… and maybe take some painkillers. You really look like shit.«

In the bathroom Castiel sits down on the rim of the bathtub and watches him intently as he takes the disinfectant and the gauze out of the cupboard.

»Dean, is that all really necessary? I don’t think I need medical attention.«

»Just humor me«, he says.
»Of course.«

Castiel's eyes follow Dean's hands as he starts unbuttoning Cas' shirt.

It's the second time he's doing this today, undressing someone else, and it couldn't feel more different.

When he pushes the shirt over Castiel's shoulders, he pauses.

»Cas... what the hell did they do to you?«

He points at the sea of scars on Castiel's chest.

»There is no need to worry. I will be able to heal these wounds soon.«

It's not really an answer to his question.

»Yeah, I know you will.«

He disinfects all the cuts, just to make sure. The one on Castiel's shoulder thankfully seems to remain the worst. After dressing the wound, he nods at Castiel's jeans.

»Are there any more?«

»No.«

»Good. That's good.«

He wants to go and get the strong painkillers from his room, but he finds himself immobile. He can't tear his eyes from the red stripes all over Castiel's chest and the bumpy scars, and imagine how they got there.

»Dean, what's wrong?«

Cas puts a hand against Dean's chest, the warmth radiating through the cotton T-shirt.

Is this how Sam felt when he helped him, he wonders.

No, that can't be it. Castiel doesn't heal him, he's almost powerless right now. Still, the simple touch alone feels enormous and meaningful. Dean lean forward, into the touch.

»I'm sorry«, he says. »I shouldn't have made you go.«

»You already apologized. You couldn't have known what would happen.«

»Of course I could have known. You told me it wasn't safe.«

He can still see Sam's scrunched up face, when he'd come down from his weird trip and Dean had told him Castiel would be gone for, well, a few days maybe, who knows.

»You made him go? What the hell is wrong with you, Dean?«

»Dean«, Castiel gets up and picks up his shirt from the floor. »It's okay. I'm just glad to back with you and Sam.«

»Okay.« Dean shrugs. »But it won't happen again. I swear.«
Castiel smiles in a way that makes clear he doesn’t believe him but appreciates him saying it.

He follows Dean back to his room, without being asked to.

He sits down on the bed and looks at the wrecked shirt in his hands.

“I’d like to get a clean shirt but I don’t want to jeopardize Sam’s sleep by walking into his room and making too much noise.”

Dean has his doubts about Sam’s deep sleep, but he doesn’t voice it.

Besides, they both know Castiel can be just as creepily quiet as he wants to be. No one is going to wake if he doesn’t want them to.

“Don’t worry about it, I can give you one of mine.”

He walks towards the wardrobe, grabs a faded black T-shirt and then goes to look for his stash of painkillers. There’s quite an assortment of bottles and tubes. Some he’s got from hospital visits, others from cases. It never hurt to check the medicine cabinet, monster or not.

“Tilidine”, he says, pressing a small orange tube into one of Cas’ hands and the T-shirt into the other. “You can’t get that stuff legally around here, but... it works. It should kick in about 10 minutes or so.”

“Thank you”, Castiel smiles weakly. “But I don’t know if this will do anything to me. I might be weak at the moment but I’m still an angel.”

Dean knows his attempt at helping is pretty clumsy, but he figures it has to be better than nothing. Not that Castiel lets on anything.

“Yeah. I doubt I could forget. But your meatsuit’s still human and you said you were feeling a bit more humansy that usual anyway, so just give it a try, huh?”

“Of course.”

Castiel takes out a handful of pills and swallows them without any water. He starts coughing.

Dean sits down next to him and pats him on the back hard.

“You alright?”

“Ye”, Cas stops coughing but still looks tense. “I’m fine.”

“Liquid generally helps to get them down.”

Dean bends down and grabs the bottle of whiskey next to his bed that he left there last night and had forgotten about until now. Castiel readily accepts it and drinks the remainder.

It’s good whiskey and a bit too expensive for someone who can’t really appreciate the taste and who doesn’t get drunk by anything less than a whole liquor store, but it’s not the right time for Dean to complain.

“How many did you take?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t count. Ten maybe?”
»Yikes... You owe me.«

»I can always provide you with opioids, if you wish, Dean«, Castiel says bemused. »But why would you need them when I’m around?«

»Well for one you're not always around«, Dean says, fully aware that that's nothing he can fully blame Castiel for. »And then even if you're here... I don't want to have to rely on you.«

Besides, of course, it’s not always just about relieving physical pain.

»Because I'm not reliable?«

Castiel looks at him with big eyes, he seems sad but not surprised.

»No, not because you're not reliable.«

He looks at Castiel's wounded chest and suppresses the urge to trace the scars.

»I just need to be fine by myself, you know.«

Castiel makes a head gesture that is somewhere between a shake and a nod. He somehow manages to make it look both hilarious and endearing.

»Yes, I understand«, he says.

His chest heaves upwards with each intake of breath.

»You should get dressed«, Dean says, averting his eyes.

»Am I making you uncomfortable again?«

»No.«

He knows Castiel would much rather be with Sam right now. Hell, the only reason he's here is because he was kicked out. But he didn’t have to come to him, he could have gone anywhere.

Castiel's here because he wants to be. It’s important to Dean that it’s true.

He looks back at Cas, as he pulls his shirt over his head and over his surprisingly toned torso. The T-shirt suits him well.

Cas gazes up at him with searching eyes, looking for approval, and it takes all the strength Dean has not to show him just how much he approves.

Dean wonders whenever he started being so weirdly okay with feeling like this.

Okay is too big a word.

When it’d stopped freaking him out as much then. When he’d gotten used to the feeling of wanting Castiel physically close, closer than they are right now.

He won't act on any of the impulses, of course, but somewhere between sending Cas' away and now he's stopped denying their existence to himself. It changes surprisingly little about his self perception.

There's not even a particular relief in accepting that he wants to bend forward and press his lips to Castiel's.
The thing is, Cas would probably even let him, even if he didn’t want to. He’d be nice about it, too. Worse he might feel obliged to engage, because he thinks it’s his duty.

Castiel is big on free will when it’s all talk and big gestures, but Dean is pretty sure he’s still most comfortable when there’s order and clear rules. When he can just obey commands without having to question them.

And while, sure, that’s kinda tempting, this isn't what Dean wants.

He’s still trying to figure out what exactly it is he does want. He understand sexual longing just fine, and that’s not quite it. Not all of it, at least.

Of course, it weirded him out the first time the thought crossed his mind, but there’s so much weird shit suppressed inside him, he wasn’t that surprised when it popped up.

It’d helped that Castiel was keen to remind everyone he wasn’t human, wasn’t a man at all. Dean’s not sure why it matters, but it feels like it does.

“How’s the pain?” he asks, as he realizes they’ve been staring at each other quietly for a long time.

“Nothing’s changed.”

Well, that’s not true.

“Let me know if you feel something.”

“I feel a lot of things right now.”

“What?”

“I feel glad to be back beside you. And I worry about how many more of my brethren I will have to kill who wish to see me dead - and how few of us might be left in the end. I am conscious of the soft cotton of your shirt on my skin and the burning sensation of the disinfection doing its work. I can hear your heart beating fast, faster than it should, much above your resting pulse rate. I can sense the tenseness of your muscles.” He touches Dean’s neck. “Especially here.” And slides his hand over his shoulder blades. “And here.”

“Right,” Dean nods, swallowing hard.

“And I feel a very strange sadness and confusion relating to your brother.”

Yeah, *this*, he doesn’t really want to listen to.

“He missed me while I was gone and yet he’s rather unwelcoming now.”

“Right… I was thinking more along the lines of: let me know when you feel the meds kick in.”

“Right.” He touches Dean’s neck. “Especially here.” And slides his hand over his shoulder blades. “And here.”

“He looks Dean up and down.
»You are cold. You've got goosebumps on your arm.«

Dean tugs at the sleeve of his shirt. It springs right back into place.

»I'm fine.«

»You should get back under the covers. I should not keep you from your sleep for so long. Thank you for all your help.«

He stands up and walks towards the door. His hand linger on the doorknob for a moment. He's either waiting for Dean to say something or he's trying to decide if he wants so add something himself.

»Don't worry about it«, Dean says. »I'm always here for... wound-cleaning, fresh shirts and drugs.«

»I know«, Castiel nods, a way too solemn look on his face. »It means a lot to me. Good night, Dean.«

Chapter End Notes

Since it was asked in the comments: This story doesn't contain any Wincest or Wincestiel as far as sexual or explicitly romantic relationships go. I probably shouldn't have put "Implied Dean Winchester/Sam Winchester" as a tag, since the story implies it about as much as the show itself... depending on how you see it.
Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Wilco's "I'm the Man Who Loves you".

I can't remember which amazing fan fiction it was that had Sam telling Cas about Wilco, but when I read that I thought "well, yes, obviously Sam listens to Wilco, how did I not realize this before?". This is now simply a fact to me.

A funny thing happens to people when they miss too much.

Although, to be fair, Sam's not sure if it happens to everyone.

A funny thing happens to him then, when he misses too much. When he really wants something and can't get it. It's been this way for as long as he can remember. He notices it happening to himself when it does, but it doesn't seem to make a difference.

He starts to resent the things he misses, even if it's just a little. Bit by bit. At the same time, another part of him is trying to work overtime to convince him that, really, he doesn't even care.

He starts telling himself he's fine without it. That he's never even wanted it in the first place. It's not that good.

It doesn't feel that great to have someone care about you like that. To have someone hold you. It doesn't feel that much better.

There's also this weird misplaced anger at the missing thing, person, angel, whatever, that he knows he shouldn't be feeling. Which in turn makes him feel guilty, so he turns the anger towards himself instead.

It's not something he thinks he's able to articulate to anyone, even though he knows he probably should. Especially now, when it's so clearly what he's been doing.

He feels terrible about last night. The fight with Castiel was ridiculous, and yet when he starts thinking about it, the anger resurfaces.

How could Castiel not have told him beforehand what helping him had involved? He should have known better than that. Sam's never felt comfortable with Dean unsolicitedly sacrificing himself for him; he certainly doesn't want anyone else he loves to do the same.

Castiel is sleeping on the couch when Sam enters the room. At least, it looks like he's asleep. He's got his eyes closed, lying on his side, a blanket thrown over his body.

Sam squats down next to him, contemplating whether to touch him or not, to say something or not.

He doesn't have to decide. Castiel opens his eyes.

»Sam.«
»Hey… How are you feeling?«

Castiel sits up with an uncharacteristic groan.

»I have a headache.«

Now that the blanket’s fallen off, Sam notices Castiel’s bandaged shoulder and Dean's T-Shirt. He’s not sure why he’s surprised.

»I'm sorry.« He gestures to his shoulder. »I didn’t even consider that you might need medical help.«

»I did not. But Dean insisted. I think it's his way of apologizing.«

»Yeah, that sounds like him.«

Castiel sits up and shoots aside, patting the place on the couch beside him.

Sam sits down reluctantly.

They're quiet, while they examine each other carefully.

Castiel moves his hand until their fingers on the couch are just barely touching.

»I'm sorry about last night«, Sam says. The words already feel inadequate. »I didn’t want to fight. But you should have told me you were getting weaker because of me.«

»Would you have told me to cease our activities if I'd told you?«

»Yeah, of course I would have.«

»Then I can't feel sorry about not telling you. It made you feel better.«

»It wasn't your call to make.« Sam pulls his hand away, but he's trying to keep a friendly face. He doesn't want to guilt-trip Cas. He just needs him to understand. »It's not exactly a great feeling knowing that you almost died because of me.«

Castiel seems puzzled.

»I didn't almost die because of you. I almost died because I wreaked havoc in heaven, because I was acting obstreperously and because angels find it easier to kill their own kind than to think for themselves. Most of them still think insubordination is the greatest sin, as if the past years hadn't happened. As if they couldn't just open their eyes and see for themselves.«

He sounds unusually bitter. He normally doesn't talk like this about heaven or other angels. Sam's heard him defend them before, even when they were after him. He wonders what's different now.

»Would they have gotten you if you hadn't been so weak?«, he asks. »And wouldn't you have been stronger if we hadn't-« He gestures between them two.

»What use is it to speculate on these things?«

Sam knows that's about as much as a conformation as he's going to get.

»Once I'm fully recovered-«, Castiel begins.

Sam stops him.
»No. Definitely not. This is not going to happen again. I won't let you.«

Castiel looks hurt.

»I want to.«

»Great. And I don’t want you to.«

»But you do«, Castiel disagrees. »I heard you. And I saw how much better you felt.«

»Look, I’m fine. Really.«

»Your nightmares«

»Lots of people have nightmares. And none of them have angels taking care of it. It’s just… I’ve dealt with it on my own before and I’ll deal with it again.«

Castiel turns his face away.

»You really don’t have to lie to me be about such things. I am not your brother. It does not make me uncomfortable to hear about your pain. But if you truly wish to no longer accept my help when I’m able to give it again, I understand. Well…« He pauses. »I’m not sure if I understand so much as I’m willing to not understand and no longer pry.«

»You don’t have to worry about me.«

Sam wonders if Dean’s told Castiel about his behavior the past month. He dreads to think what he might have said.

»I will miss our close contact«, Castiel says quietly.

»What?«

Sam blinks hard.

»I have grown somewhat accustomed to your close presence.«

»Right…« Sam swallows. »Me too. Yours, I mean.«

Sam is sure something is going to happen now, something that is out of his hands.

Castiel will unceremoniously get up to leave again.

Dean will burst in and announce that he’s going to make a stack of pancakes.

They’ll fall into another useless case in about five minutes, an easy kill, a complicated one, many victims, a victorious saving of the world. It doesn’t really matter.

There’s very little in life that he cares about right now. If he were the person to read self-help books - and he kind of is, as long as they come in a serious enough packaging - he’d now take one of their tacky life advices to heart.

Seize the day.

Live every day like it could be your last.

*(Which, yeah, it definitely always could. Until it’s time for the reboot and Sam9.0’s turn.)*
If everything feels hopeless, try to focus on the few good things that make you feel better, no matter how small they might seem. Watch a movie that makes you laugh, eat some food you enjoy, spend time with the people you care about.

»We don’t have to stop spending time together.«

He hates how that sounds. Of course they’re still going to spend time together, as long as Castiel’s here. How could they not when he’s helping them hunt.

Castiel seems to know what he’s trying to say anyway, but his answer startles Sam.

»Why?«, he asks.

»Why what?«

»If I have no comfort to offer you any longer, why would you wish to do so?«

Wow.

There’s something that feels very absurd about an insecure angel. Castiel not understanding why Sam would want to spend time him is such a strange notion, that he needs a moment to let it sink it.

»Well.« Sam runs his hand through his hair. »I thought that would be clear. I like you.«

That doesn’t really clear up anything.

Liking.

He likes oatmeal, egg white omelettes and protein bars.

He likes cold beers, clean sheets, NPR podcasts and cheesy high fantasy novels, that he always feels kinda guilty for enjoying.

He likes a lot of things.

»I like you too, Sam.«

Castiel’s voice is hard to interpret at the best of times, and still, this time, Sam’s sure Castiel knows what he meant.

»That’s pretty much all the reason people need to spend their time together. Also…« He can’t help but smile a little. »There’s so many shows and movies you still need to catch up on. We haven’t even started on the Sci-Fi. And your perfect coffee’s still out there somewhere, I’m sure of it.«

Castiel is now smiling too.

»I would very much like to find it.«
I should start over but you know I'd rather not

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Fred Neil's "That's The Bag I'm In"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It should probably hurt more than it does, how quickly Sam's mood picks up after Castiel returns.

And it does hurt, to a degree, to know that there was nothing he could have said or done to really get Sam out of this depression slump, or whatever that was. Meanwhile, all Cas had to do was to turn up alive.

Okay, so the two of them did get into a fight. But that lasted like, what, 5 minutes tops? And that was it. Now Sam's all smiles again.

Well, not all smiles, of course. He's still Sam. At the best of times, he's still an annoying know-it-all with an aptitude for noticing all the wrong-doings in the world, with an eye for the weak and oppressed that makes it close to impossible to stay cheery for too long. But there’s also this odd hopefulness in him. The need to see the best in everyone, to assess people by their best days rather than by their flaws. That’s the kind of baseline-Sam Dean’s always aiming for. Displeased but with a vaguely sanguine outlook.

Point is, Dean does feel a bit annoyed that he's got nothing to do with Sam’s mood improving, but in doesn’t really matter all that much to him. The important thing is that he’s feeling better at all, regardless of the reasons. Bonus points for him being able to shower all by himself again.

Besides, he can't really blame his little brother. He might not have shown it in the same way as Sam, but Cas being back is more than just a breather to him. It feels like someone's darned a hole which's existence he'd tried very hard to ignore in the first place.

Castiel is still feeling weak and isn't quite himself. But truth be told, he's always had a thing for the humanized version of the angel. Well, he kind of has a thing for most versions of him, but there's something about his more human vulnerability that speaks to Dean. It feels familiar. He knows how to take care of people who need help with clearly defined things. Not sure how to eating works? Boom, done. Just follow my lead with these burgers and you'll be fine. Never had a girl before? There's a great place I know, where they'll let you do anything. Physical human needs he understands, he can work with those. He can help purposefully.

Except of course this time Castiel's not that human. He's just a weak full-blown angel. And Dean’s not the only one taking care of him, not by a long shot.

»I am fine«, Castiel keeps insisting, when he's still clearly anything but.

»As long as you're nodding off in the middle of the day, I wouldn’t take your word for it.«

»I'm not 'nodding off', Dean.«
»You are. And you're definitely overusing these air quotes… Where did you pick that up?«

»I don't sleep. I just...« Castiel's eyes shift. »I rest my eyes. And my body.«

»Yeah, we call that sleeping.«

»It is not the same. For one, I don't dream.«

»That stuff’s overrated anyway. Most of the times. Well, I guess, it depends.«

»What kind of dreams do you enjoy, Dean?«

It’s an earnest question that takes him aback. That's definitely not something he's comfortable with answering truthfully.

»Oh.« He wills himself to smirk. »That’s not really appropriate for breakfast conversation.«

Sam smacks a cup of coffee onto the table in front of Dean.

»Like that’s ever stopped you before.« Sam slips into the seat next to Castiel, smiling. »Come on, Dean, tell us, what kind of dreams do you enjoy?«

No one can claim that Dean doesn’t try to be fine with all of this. He really is doing his best. But the way Sam smirks at Cas while handing him his coffee, gleeful in this almost conspiratory teasing, it’s just not right.

Dean’s pretty sure that’s supposed to be his.

He’s supposed to be part of this two-man show across from him, although he finds himself incapable of saying which part is his.

At least if Sam is trying to banter, Dean tells himself, then that’s a good sign that he’s really doing better.

He wants to reply something light-hearted, but instead it’s a curt »Shut up«, that leaves Sam blinking at him confusedly.

»Okay.« He glances at Cas quickly, before turning back to Dean. »Did you sleep alright?«

Of course. He’s being an asshole, and Sam’s still trying to be friendly. It’s infuriating in its own way.

»I slept just fine.« He grabs his cup of black coffee and takes a sip. It’s a damn good cup of coffee. Sam knows his coffee. »What about you?«

»Me too. Thanks.«

»You didn’t sleep well.« Castiel shakes his head. He looks at Dean, like he’s asking for confirmation.

Dean shrugs in a “How the hell would I know?”-way.

»Sam, you didn’t sleep well«, Castiel repeats, looking more confused by the minute. »You hardly slept at all.«

Sam clears his throat.
»What?«, Cas asks, looking back and forth between them. »Was that supposed to be a secret? How should I have known?«

»It’s not a secret«, Sam says, looking up at Cas. »It’s just… You know when someone asks if they’re alright but they’re not actually asking if they’re alright? It’s just a courtesy.«

»So you weren’t really inquiring about Dean’s night?«

»Yeah, I was«, Sam insists.

»And he did the same.«

»No, he was just being polite.«

»The fuck?« Dean puts his cup down. »I wasn’t just being polite. When am I ever just being polite for the sake of it? I was asking you because I wanted to know.«

»Well, now you know.«

»Yeah, don’t worry.« Maybe this coffee does taste a tad too bitter after all. »I’ll make sure to ask Cas next time, if I want to hear how you’re really doing.«

Sam rolls his eyes.

»You wanna know whether I’m fine, I get that. I’m fine. I just had a rough night.«

»Yeah, I bet.«

»What’s that supposed to mean?«

Sam glares at him now, all the try-hard friendliness gone from his face.

»I might have found a case«, Cas says. They both turn their heads.

»You found a case?«, Dean asks. »When? How?«

»Well, despite your insistence, I did not spend the majority of my night asleep.«

Sam puts his hand on Cas’ arm, his brows furrowed.

»Why did you go looking for a case? You just got back and you’re still recovering.«

»Dean tends to get restless very quickly. You know that.«

»I do, but your grace -«

»Let him tell us about the case«, Dean says, brushing Sam’s worries aside. »What did you find?«

»Thank you, Dean«, Castiel says.

Sam pulls his hand away and curls it around his cup of coffee.

»There’s a town in Oregon that has caught my intention. At first I wasn’t sure, it didn’t seem like any supernatural events were taking place, but it’s the amount of occurrences that made me decide to research it further.«

»What kind of occurrences?«
There was a couple who got into a fight. The husband told his wife that he did not enjoy her cooking, despite having claimed to do so for many years before.

How’s that—

Well, it got quite heated. In the end she chopped his head off. At the same time there’s an usually high amount of incoming requests for divorce. There’s quite a few cheap houses on the market now, people seem desperate to sell and move.

That’s it?, Dean sighs. »Look, I appreciate what you’re doing. But I’m fine staying here until we find an actual case.«

Dean, Sam says disapprovingly.

A chopped off head is as good a reason as any to drive out, really. Dean knows that he’s not acting completely rational.

What? You want to go to Oregon because some some people are breaking up? That’s not just not a case for us, that’s not a case for anyone. And it’s over 20 hours in the car.

You love driving—

I don’t like Oregon.

Since when?

Never liked it, Dean insists.

You never mentioned that. You don’t like the whole state? What about it don’t you like?

Hey man, listen, you were the one who didn’t even want to hear Cas out, and now you’re totally eager just because I don’t think there’s anything?

No. I didn’t say I necessarily wanted to go, I just thought maybe there’s more to the story.

He turns to Castiel, who shakes his head.

I have no further evidence of foul play.

Well, Dean says. »There you go. My spider senses aren’t tingling, what about yours? If you two want to go to Oregon, house-shopping while it’s cheap, I’m fine with that. Knock yourselves out. But I wouldn’t want to drive out there for just that.

It’s fine, Cas says. »Maybe I was mistaken.

Yeah, Dean huffs. »Maybe you were.

Chapter End Notes

It's weird. When I started writing this story I didn't even realize how badly Dean comes off for the most part, and now while I was editing this chapter I kept thinking "Oh, I get it now...". I feel quite bad about it now, actually. So, um, apologies to Dean for the way he's portrayed here, but also, I don't think the story would make sense otherwise. So
there's that.

My text editing program kept changing "foul play" to "fowl play" (which I've now learnt is among other things "a fast casual chicken concept specializing in fresh, high-quality buttermilk fried and rotisserie-roasted chicken"), so I hope it didn't do other weird stuff like that. Sorry in case it did.

Thanks so much again for the kudos & comments. I kinda love this dumb story.
Sam’s just taken a shower. Which is a thing he now does again. Every day. He returns to his room in a fresh pair of boxers and a shirt. He feels clean, as clean as he hasn’t in a long time.

Castiel is lying on his bed watching TV. His head is bent slightly, as it often is when he’s confused or trying to make sense of something.

»What are you watching?« Sam asks, nodding at the screen. He starts laughing when he realizes what it is. »Dancing with the Stars? Is this a leftover from when you had your trash TV phase?«

»No.« Castiel shakes his head. »I was mainly watching talk shows then, to get a better understanding of human communication.«

»Oh wow. Not sure if that’s the best place to take your cues from when it comes to social interactions.«

»I’ve never seen this show before.« Castiel points at the screen. »I’m not sure I understand the concept. Am I supposed to be entertained by the dancing?«

»No. You’re supposed to judge the performances and be angry when the real judges get it wrong. At least, I think that’s the point. I haven’t really watched it. It’s not really my thing.«

»Do you not enjoy dancing?«

Sam blinks, taken aback.

»I, uh, not particularly. I’m not very good at it. I guess maybe I’m too tall?«

Castiel looks back at the screen. There’s an actress Sam vaguely recalls having seen in a soap opera Dean claims to not watch, dancing the rumba with a broad-shouldered man.

Castiel turns off the TV.

»So you never dance?«

»I have danced. In the past. But not like that.« He points his thumb at the black screen. »And I was mostly drunk when I did.«

»Which might not have helped elevate your skill set.«

»Yeah, maybe… But as I said I never really enjoyed it anyway. I kinda used to do it with Jess sometimes when we were out, at a party or whatever. I mean, I knew it made her happy. God knows why. I really sucked at it.«

»You keep saying that.« Castiel blinks. »But I’m not sure what that even means.«
»What what means?«

»Who decides who’s bad at dancing and who isn’t?«

»Besides judges on tv shows? Uh, I guess, we all do, collectively.«

»How does one dance badly? It’s just random motion sequences set to rhythmic noise.«

»There’s rules to it, like with anything really.«

Sam looks at the turned off TV. Surely Castiel knows this already.

Sam suddenly realizes in the midst of their musings on dancing that he’s not fully dressed yet. He gives Castiel an apologetic smile, before heading to the chair near the desk, where he’s laid out his fresh clothes.

»Can you show me?«

»Uh, what?« Sam laughs. »You want me to show you how to dance?«

»Yes.«

»Look, there’s a lot of things I’d do for you but teaching you to dance is not of them. Least of all because, as I said, I’m not good at all.«

He picks up his jeans from the chair and turns around to find Castiel standing awfully close.

»I don’t mind. I won’t be able to tell the difference.«

»I’m sure there’s someone who’s better-equipped for the job than me.«

»Who?« Castiel asks, frowning. »I am quite certain Dean would react even less enthusiastically than you. Who else would I ask?«

Sam returns his jeans to the back of the chair.

He doesn’t understand why Castiel is suddenly so hell-bent on learning how to dance, but the thought of him asking Dean pulls some sort of trigger inside him.

When Castiel awkwardly puts his hands on his hips, he doesn’t have the heart to push them away.

»I’ve never danced a rumba in my life«, he says instead. »So you can forget about that one.«

»I have seen you dance«, Castiel insists. »In your memories. I think you were working a case. You were wearing a tuxedo at least. Do that one.«

Sam has no idea what memory he’s referring to, but he clasps his left hand around Castiel’s and puts his right hand on the angel’s shoulder.

»So, this is a bit unusual for me. It’s not really customary for two men to dance like this.«

He knows what Castiel is about to say before he does.

»I’m no man.«

»Well, you are, a bit at least.« He starts shuffling his feet. Castiel follows his lead easily. »You’re not a woman, I guess that’s more what I meant.«
»And that matters to you why?«

»It doesn’t matter really, but I have only ever danced with women before. So this here feels weird. I’m just not used to it. I don’t even know where to put my hands.«

»You’re doing fine«, Castiel says in authoritative voice, like he’s the one teaching Sam.

They wouldn’t win any prices for their slow-dancing but once they find a groove it doesn’t feel nearly as strange as it should.

It’s only when Castiel pulls the hand on his hip into a fist and inches his head closer, that the reality of what’s happening hits him.

He’s in his underwear, dancing with another man in the middle of his bedroom, next to the bed they’ve just spent the night in.

He lets go off Cas and stumbles backwards, before he hurries off to get dressed.

He fumbles with the button of jeans, as the guilt seeps in.

He’s been low-key angry with Dean for all his passive aggressive comments that have only seemed to increase since Castiel’s return. But really, can he blame Dean? If the roles were reversed he’d probably be annoyed too. But he’d also be happy for him.

The fact that he’d be happy for Dean if this thing right here, whatever this is, were to happen to him, unsettles him somehow.

It’s an irrelevant thought, because even if Dean was interested in Castiel (which he claims he’s not, Sam reminds himself, and he’s trying to take his word for it) he wouldn’t let himself be this vulnerable. Not like this. Sam is sure of it.

»What’s wrong?«, Castiel asks.

Sam turns around, finally fully dressed and with enough space between them that he can breathe freely.

»Nothing.« He avoids Castiel’s eyes. »I just don’t like dancing, that’s all.«

- 

Dean’s knuckles around the wheel are white.

Sam watches, waiting for him to unclench his fists and for the blood to flow back into his fingers.

»Have you heard anything yet?«, Dean asks, looking straight ahead at the road.

Sam opens his mouth, to ask what the hell he’s talking about.

»No«, Castiel replies from the backseat, a slight edge in his voice. »I told you, I would inform you if I did.«

»I know, you did, but this feels all kinds of wrong. We still have no idea what these idiots wanted from you. For all we know they could still be after you.«

Sam understand now that they’re jumping right back into a discussion they must have started when he wasn’t around. Maybe this morning before they’d left, maybe while he was in the shower or still
asleep.

»They’re not after me, Dean«, Castiel snaps. »They weren’t after me in the first place. They just saw an opportunity when I was foolish enough to seek out their help.«

»I didn’t know they’d go after you«, Dean laments, his voice strained. »I didn’t think anything would happen to you. I wouldn’t have told you you go, if I’d thought…«

It’s an absurd thing to say, Sam thinks. How could Dean not have known, even if Castiel hadn’t warned them. It was always a danger to part, to send someone away.

»I know«, Castiel says. »I know you didn’t mean for anything to happen.«

They’re quiet for a while. It’s an uncomfortable silence.

Sam wonders what else they talk about when he’s not there.

Did Dean tell him how messed up he was was while Castiel was gone. How Dean literally dragged him to the bathroom. The thought makes him uneasy, not because Castiel isn’t allowed to know, but because it’s not Dean’s story to tell.

Even though it probably doesn’t really matter. It’s not like he’s been hiding much from Cas anymore. He’s surely aware of all Sam’s intricate feelings towards him, as much as he is himself, anyway.

Castiel’s not run off screaming so far, so Sam counts that as win.

If he were still 21, this might scare him, but it doesn’t now, not really. There’s little that feels as clear to him in this very moment as his need to be in close to Castiel. What good could possibly come out of questioning that. So what if it only came about because he managed to make Sam feel better by Angelic means. He’s not doing it now, and this need to be with him still persists.

Whatever it is Sam is feeling, it’s real, and that’s more than he can say about a lot of things in his life.

»Are you alright?«, Castiel asks, lightly squeezing his shoulder.

It does take some courage still, when he can feel Dean’s eyes on them, but he puts his hand on top of Cas’.

»Yeah, thanks. You?«

»Thank you, Sam. I’m well, too.«

There’s a faint smile on Sam’s lips as he settles back into his seat and watches Castiel in the rear mirror.
Dean eyes the remaining pancakes on his plate. He’s full but he knows once they’re be on the road again he’ll regret not having finished his meal.

A shrink would probably tell him it’s something to do with the way they were brought up. Food being scarce sometimes and all. The same way people growing up in war times never get over hoarding food until their death.

But it’s not that. He just really likes good food. And where’s the problem with that? He’s not going to give up the few comforting things in life that he knows are a constant, that won’t ever disappoint him or leave.

Okay, so maybe the shrink would have a point. Maybe he uses food in a similar way to how he uses alcohol, sex, shooting things - as physical vertexes to remind himself that he’s still alive.

But at least, he’s enjoying food. He’d take this any day over Sam’s issues with eating, he thinks, as he eyes the half-eaten plate of egg whites across the table.

Sam’s *weird* around food.

»I’m getting a coffee«, Sam says, sliding his chair back. He looks at him, waiting.

Dean points to his cup filled to the brim with black coffee.

»I still got plenty, thanks.«

Sam walks off towards the counter.

Castiel watches him leave, before slowly turns his gaze towards Dean.

»So, just one last time«, Dean says, trying to ignore the tugging in his abdomen. »You’re sure you’re safe? No angels on your heels?«

»I have no reason to believe I’m any less safe than I was before.«

»What about your grace? Are you still feeling weak?«

Dean uses his fork to cut the last pancake into big pieces, it’s easier to get them all down that way.

»I feel fine.«

»I would have felt better if you’d stayed in the bunker. Just to make sure.«

He’s not sure if that’s entirely true. He wants Castiel to be safe, yes, but who knows whether he’s safer here with him or on his own down in the bunker.

»I’m fine«, Castiel repeats. »I don’t sleep at all anymore.«

A smile creeps onto Dean’s face.
»You said you never did in the first place.«

Castiel looks equally amused, as he watches Dean shove doughy and syrupy goodness into his mouth.

They both lean back into their respective seats. It feels unusually relaxed.

Sam is back without a warning. He plops down onto his chair and puts a big glass onto the table, its content more reminiscent of a dessert than a coffee.

»What have you got there, Sammy?«

»It’s just an iced coffee«, he answers, more into Cas’ than Dean’s direction. »I guess we’ll have to hit up another place for a more frothy variation.«

»A more frothy variation?«, Dean asks in a mock copy of his brother’s voice.

Sam does that half-annoyed half-defiant frown of his, that he perfected when he was five.

»What’s up with you trying to get Cas hooked on coffee?«

Castiel pulls the glass towards him and carefully positions the striped plastic straw between his lips. He drinks like it’s a serious business. He’s bowed highly concentrated over the glass, his Adam’s apple moving while he swallows.

Dean watches, completely transfixed as Castiel’s lips part and release the straw.

The abrupt cessation of suction leaves a dent in the plastic.

He shoves the coffee towards Sam.

»You don’t like it?«, Sam asks, clearly disappointed, before putting two fingers on the straw and taking a sip himself. »I think it’s okay«, he says apologetically.

»I enjoyed it. It’s very cold«, Cas says matter-of-factly. »I like the way it felt sliding down my throat.«

Jesus.

Sam ducks ever so slightly, letting his hair fall over his eyes, while he slurps up the remainder of the coffee, leaving only the ice cubes in the glass. When he sits up and pushes the strands of hair out of his eyes, Dean immediately notices the conspicuous pink blotches on his cheeks.

Sam gets up.

»Let’s go«, he mumbles, shoves his hands in his pockets and moves towards the door.

Dean swirls his index finger through the syrup on his plate. He gets up, sucking on his finger, while Sam’s hurrying off to the parked Impala.

It tastes almost too sweet on it’s own. Something’s missing.

Cas holds the door upon, eying him in that mixture of curiosity and confusion.

That can’t be right, Dean thinks, as they walk too close for comfort, each bump of shoulder against shoulder like an electric bolt through his body. How could Cas possibly not understand what he’s
just put them through.

»Is Sam okay?«

Dean can’t help but snort.

»He’ll be fine. He just needs a cold shower.«

He smiles at Castiel and enters the car.

Despite Dean’s own uneasiness, there’s still something highly amusing about Sam’s ever so subtly draping his jacket over his lap.

So yeah, they probably should talk about this.

But Dean’s damn sure he’s not the one who’s supposed to broach the subject again.

He starts the car and glances back at Sam, who seems like he wants to disappear into the car seat.

His amusement slowly turns to anger, as Sam’s denial of everything plays back in his head.

»I can’t believe you’re even asking that…There’s no need to be jealous…«

He turns on the music, automatically adjusting the volume.

»Only way to feel the noise is when it’s good and loud«, he shouts rather than sings alongside Lemmy.

He knows Sam hates this, long before he makes a move to lower the volume ever so slightly.

»Overkill, Overkill, Overkill - Da da da da da.«

Sam throws him a tired look that involves no muscles at all.

»What? It’s a classic.«

»You say that about every Motörhead song.«

He’s pretty sure that’s not true, definitely not every song. He doesn’t even really listen to any of their output past 1991, not after that travesty that was March ör Die. But Sam’s never been one to appreciate the intricacies of good music.

»Well, we’ll listen to your stuff when it’s your turn to drive.«

It’s a long drive to Alabama. Long enough that he agrees to stop two hours before they’re due to arrive.

It’s strange, Dean thinks, as he parks the Impala under the blue lights of the motel sign, that he kind of misses having a really big case to crack. One of those enormous ones that feel like they actually matter.

It’s absurd because when he’s right there, just barely hanging on, one or another sort of apocalypse hanging over them, he hates it. The feeling that everyone’s just slipping out of his hands and he’s barely holding on. Like the stuff is really not up to him but to chance. To sheer fucking luck and nothing else.
Then again, maybe that’s just the thing: it feels pretty similar to how he’s been feeling lately too. Only there’s no actual apocalypse looming this time, no immediate threat of Sam or Cas dying (or himself, if he still cared about that). He shouldn’t be feeling so freaking useless and up in the air right now.

The girl behind the counter is cute in a small town way and smiles at him like he’s the most interesting thing she’s seen all day.

She curls her blonde hair around her finger and unnecessarily touches his hand when she slips him the sign-in paper.

He decides to pay in cash, just in case.

He feels tired when he opens the door to their room. He falls onto the bed closest to the door.

Sam heads straight to the bathroom.

Castiel sits down on Sam’s bed, looking at him, waiting.

Dean pulls his head up from the pillow.

»How are you holding up?«, he asks.

»I’m well. But you appear to be very tired.«

»It’s alright. I’m not really tired. It’s more like exhaustion from not moving all day.«

»Maybe it would help if you’d-«

Castiel doesn’t finish his sentence. There’s a knock on the door.

They look at each other warily. Dean gets up. Through the keyhole he sees the girl from the desk and opens.

»Hey«, she says, a hand on her hip and a bright smile on her face. »I just wanted to make sure you guys were alright.«

She glances inside the room. If she’s surprised to see Castiel there instead of Sam she doesn’t let it on.

»We’re fine«, he nods. »Standard room service, huh? Making sure all your guests are alright?«

»Yeah, definitely. So…« Her smile is almost shy now. »You don’t need anything? Extra towels or another pillow?«

He shakes his head.

»No, I’m fine.«

»What about your friend there?«

Castiel steps up to him and puts his hand on his shoulder.

»I don’t need a pillow, either.« After a moment he adds: »But thank you.«

»Okay.« She shrugs, pouting, clearly disappointed. »Well, have a great night then, you two.«
It’s obvious what she’s thinking of them, how she’s interpreting both Dean’s rejection of her and the way Castiel is standing so close behind him, that he can hear the rhythm of his breathing.

Dean feels a very contradictory mixture of shame and something akin to pride, that doesn’t make a lot of sense to him.

Cas’ fingers feel warm through the cotton of Dean’s shirt. In the background he can hear water running in the bathroom.

As she turns to go, her gaze already drawn away from him to the floor, Dean suddenly finds himself speaking.

»Wait, is there a soda machine somewhere?«

»Uh, yeah. In the foyer. You walked past it.«

»Can you show it to me again? I’m kinda thirsty.«

Her eyes wander from him to Castiel and back, surprised.

»Sure«, she smiles. »Yeah, definitely.«

It’s a flight response, Dean knows. He’s just not entirely sure what he’s running from.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the comments and kudos, they really make my day. Grad school, work and general end-of-year/christmas-panic are all kicking my ass, but hopefully I'll have another chapter up before christmas.

And yup, it says slow burn in the tags, but I think I might be overdoing it a bit. This was originally supposed to be a OS and now it's almost novel-length, but I guess the heart wants what it wants. Selena Gomez out.
Spurn the sin of giving in

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Silver Jews' "The Wild Kindness"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sam steps out of the bathroom, Castiel is looking through the dirty glass window, his eyes glued to the night sky.

He seems to be in a pensive mood, but Sam still finds it hard to tell with him sometimes.

»Where’s Dean?«

Castiel turns to him only slowly.

»He asked the girl from the counter to show him the whereabouts of the soda machine.«

Sam raises an eyebrow.

»The teenage girl who checked us in?«

»She knocked at the door and asked if we needed anything.«

»Great.« Sam sighs and sits down on his bed. »Is it me or is Dean’s suddenly taking this hunt at lot less seriously? He was was the one hell-bent on coming here.«

Castiel takes off his coat and carefully folds it over the back of the lone chair near the wall.

»I don’t think he really expects to find much out here.«

»You don’t think we’ll find a nest?«

»I don’t know.«

Castiel goes back to staring out of the window.

Sam steps closer and awkwardly put an arm around his shoulder.

»I’m sure Dean won’t be long.«

Castiel turns to face him.

»Oh, I see«, he says after a moment of puzzlement. »You’re under the impression I’m mourning Dean’s absence.«

»Well, I wouldn’t say mourning. I just thought…« It’s difficult to directly look at Castiel, standing so close and with an arm around him, so he pulls away. »You seemed sad. Sorry. I must have gotten it wrong.«
»There’s no need to be sorry. You are right. I do feel rather contemplative. But it’s not because of Dean’s whereabouts. He’s close and safe. I don’t have to worry about his well-being right now.«

That’s not what Sam meant, but he’s not sure if Castiel isn’t aware or just doesn’t want to talk about it. He’s not going to probe. After all, who enjoys talking about seemingly unrequited love.

»What is it then?«

»It’s something Dean said today in the diner, when you were getting coffee.«

Sam definitely remembers coming back to the table and feeling like he’d interrupted something. He also remembers the feeling of jealousy at their shared smiles, and that feeling turning into something completely different when he’d watched Castiel drink the iced coffee.

It shouldn’t have been such a turn-on, it really shouldn’t have.

»Yeah?« Sam can’t help but notice his voice sounding huskier than before. »What did he say?«

»Your brother seems to be under the impression that I would fare better in the bunker than out here with you. He’s suggested, multiply times now, that others angels are trying to hunt me down.«

Dean’s said as much to Sam in private. It’s not an absurd notion.

»But you’re sure they’re not?«

»I very much doubt that I’m of primary concern to any of the angels at this particular moment.«

The light of a car driving over the parking lot shines through the window and dances across Castiel’s face.

»They tortured you, Cas. You said yourself that they operated under orders. They put a lot of effort into capturing you. Whatever their reasons, why would they stop now after your escape? Don’t you think the angels would want revenge at least?«

»Sam.« Castiel’s face is dark as he turns to him. »There is no such thing as the angels anymore. There is not one united front. There’s so few of us left, and those who are left have separated into groups fighting each other. Everyone is trying to gain the upper hand. Why should I be afraid of one small splinter group, when surely they will be wiped out soon by another anyway?«

»I don’t think you should be afraid.« When has fear ever helped them. »But aren’t you at all curious to know what they wanted from you? If it was just revenge, surely they would have tried to kill you?«

»Of course I’m curious.« It sounds like he’s taking the word for a test spin. »But who should I even ask for help? And what good would it do?«

»We can help you. We would help you, you know that, right? That’s what’s Dean’s nagging is all about. He’s worried about you and wants to make sure you’re safe.«

Castiel squints.

»You know. Your brother seems to operate under the false assumption that this is where I still belong. In heaven. With the other angels. With my family. As if I had not consciously chosen otherwise myself. No amount of talking will ever take away from the fact that I have abandoned them, all of them, for him.«
Sam swallows hard.

»I don’t think Dean likes to be reminded of that fact. It’s kind of… a lot of pressure to put on one person.«

»Are you saying I put pressure on him by choosing him?«

Sam can’t blame him for the incredulous tone in his voice.

»In a way. I just don’t think he’s comfortable with someone putting so much trust in him. I mean, if he’d recognize the grandness of your gesture…«

He doesn’t want to finish his train of thought.

He puts a hand against the window, leaving a print when he pulls away again.

»I guess I might as well try to get some sleep now. There’s really no telling when Dean will be back.«

»It does not seem very fair.« Castiel hasn’t moved. »I don’t think Dean would have preferred me siding with heaven.«

There’s fury in Castiel eyes.

He looks beautiful.

»No, he wouldn’t have.« Sam shifts so they’re fully facing each other and he’s leaning against the window. »And no, it’s not fair. I don’t think these things ever are.«

»What do you mean?«

»I mean, not to sound whiny or anything, but my advice would be not to expect fairness when it comes to stuff like this.«

»Stuff?«, Castiel repeats.

»Well, love. Feelings. Just life in general. I don’t think any of it is fair. I thought you’d already figured this out. God being an absent father and all that…« He touches Castiel’s shoulder. »Sorry. That’s just the way I see these things anyway. You probably shouldn’t listen to me. I don’t mean to be such a downer.«

»You are no such thing. It is only natural you would not consider your life fair. You were only created to serve as a vessel for Lucifer after all.«

Sam tries not to let the words affect him, but it’s hard not to.

»I am sorry«, Castiel says. »I should not have said that.«

»It’s fine. It’s true.«

»It is partially true.« He considers Sam for a while. »It may have been heaven’s intention in bringing your parents together, but that doesn’t mean that’s all you are now. Is that not what Dean and you have taught me? That we can overcome what someone else thinks we are meant to be and make choices for ourselves instead? Isn’t that the whole point of free will?«

Free will. Sam is not sure if he even believes such a thing exists. But he knows he want Castiel’s
words to be true.

»Yeah«, he says.

»When I look at you, Sam, I do not see heaven’s intent for you. I see someone who is unafraid of unabashedly being himself.«

Sam wants to laugh. There are a lot of words he’d use to describe himself, unafraid is not one of them.

He doesn’t laugh.

Instead he finds himself gazing back at Castiel and moving further into his space.

He leans into the touch as Castiel puts his hands on both sides of his face.

»You have seen all the evil this world has to offer, and yet here you remain, fighting the good fight.«

»I don’t, I’m not…«

Sam wants him to understand how wrong he is. He’s not fighting for anything, he’s just being strung along. He’s not making conscious choices to do good.

And even if he were, it would never be enough to atone for all his wrongdoings.

Castiel is so far off.

»I know you, Sam«, Castiel says, all gravel-voiced, not allowing for any contradiction. »I know your soul.«

When Dean barges in, Sam’s first thought is to wonder what would have happened if he hadn’t. And if it’s as irrelevant a thought as he tells himself.

Dean eyes them coldly, as he closes the door. He’s got two cans of soda with him.

Castiel slowly takes his hands from Sam’s face.

Dean kicks off his shoes and sits down on his bed.

He puts one of the cans next to him on the duvet and opens the other one.

Castiel walks over to the bed. It looks like he wants to sit down next to Dean but thinks better of it at the last moment.

»You evidently found the soda machine«, he says.

»I brought one back for you too, Sammy. You never drink enough.«

There’s something icy on the tip of his tongue.

_No such thing as a minimum amount of soda… patronizing bullshit… way too much sugar…_

Sam picks up the brightly orange can. He studies the label and sits down on his own bed, facing Dean.

Castiel has his back to him.
There’s something about off-brand sodas, Sam thinks, as he’s reading the nutritional information. He doesn’t fully trust them. He’s aware that’s probably a bit nuts.

He looks up. Dean’s eyes are focused on him.

Sam quickly opens the can and takes a sip.

»So I talked to Lauren for a bit«, Dean says.

»That’s the girl who works here?«

»Yeah. I asked her if she’d heard anything about the deaths. It was a long shot, but you know how vamps are when they’re traveling.« He looks up at the ceiling, an almost-eye roll. »Honestly, the poor girl just seemed happy to talk to someone besides creepy salesmen trying to get into her pants. Man, I’d hate working here. I’d probably go crazy from boredom in a week.«

»You did not sleep with her?«, Castiel asks, surprised.

»What?« Dean pulls a face. »Of course not.« He shakes his head at the very idea. »I don’t think she’s even legal. She kept talking about college applications.« He narrows his eyes at Castiel. »Why did you think I was having sex with a teenage girl?« Castiel opens his mouth but Dean interrupts.

»On second thought, don’t answer that.«

»So«, Sam says after taking a tentative second sip and putting the can on the ground. »Did she tell you anything useful?«

»Oh yeah, she said there’s a great burger place just around the corner that also serves breakfast.«

»About the deaths, Dean.«

»As a matter of fact, she did.« He smiles at Castiel. »If we find the nest tomorrow, you owe me, Cas.«

»I remember not agreeing to that bet.«

»You still owe me.«

Sam feels very tired all of a sudden.

He gets up to go to the bathroom, to brush his teeth and get rid of the taste of soda.

»I do not owe you«, he hears Castiel argue behind him. »And I did not voice any doubt about the existence of a nest, I was merely stating my objection to«

Sam pulls the door behind him shut. He turns on the tap.

He’s thankful for the water drowning out their voices.

Chapter End Notes

I was focusing on another story for a bit (set around christmas, which is why I prioritized it, but of course I only managed to edit and upload the first chapters so far. But I'm sure I'll get it done in time christmas 2019...). I was so relieved when I finished
it and could get back to this one instead. Is that a good sign? I'll take it as good sign. (Unless it just means I didn't actually like the other one, in which case.... boo?) Anyway, Happy Holidays/Merry Christmas if that's still what's happening when you're reading this. Otherwise, just thanks for reading.
I'm not living this life without you, I'm selfish and clear

Chapter Summary

Chapter Title taken from Pearl Jam's "Save You"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam is angry with him.

Dean doesn’t really have any time to be thinking about it right now, but he is.

Sam’s not just mildly irritated, he’s pissed and he has been all day.

That’s kind of weird. Normally Sam doesn’t do pissed. He probably thinks being openly pissed at someone is beneath him or some bullshit like that. But now, he’s not being coy about showing his anger.

The way Sam looked at him this morning alone would have been enough to convince Dean. Like he’d just spit in his coffee.

Dean’s standing in the lobby of a closed-down cinema in Bessemer, waiting for his eyes to adjust in this dimly lit foyer. It’s so not the right time to think about Sam’s damn feelings.

There’s a soft thought in the background of his brain.

Just talk it out.

And yeah, maybe they should. Maybe they will. But definitely not right now. Not when they’re hopefully about to slaughter a dozen bloodsuckers or so.

Dean edges forward, towards the swing door, the machete in his firm grip.

When he passes the counter, he notices there’s still some popcorn in the machine. He wonders if that can tell him anything about when the cinema closed doors. But for all knows the popcorn’s been in there for years. He wrinkles up his nose.

He’s pretty sure they’re sleeping in the old screening room. That’s where he would go if he had to sleep in an old cinema. In fact, it is where he has slept before. If the seats are cushioned well enough, it’s not too bad. There’s lots of space and it’s warm and cozy. Although he’s not really sure how vampires feel about the whole warmth thing, since they’re cold anyway.

He signals Sam and Cas to follow him.

Sam nods, the gun close to his chest, loaded with bullets soaked in dead men’s blood.

He doesn’t seem angry now, just focused on the task ahead.

Dean can hear his blood pumping in his own ears, just like he knows they can. Probably thinking they’re just dreaming of prey.
There’s a small slit between the two parts of the swing door. He leans in as close as possible without touching them.

He steps into old sticky popcorn locked into the carpet.

He freezes at the soft crunching sound.

Inside the screening room it’s too dark to see much from where he stands, but there’s some shadows in the seats and he thinks he can make out a pair of shoes on top of a backrest.

He turns around to find Castiel and Sam surprisingly close behind. With a wave of his hand he begs them to follow him inside.

He can only make out ten of them. Maybe the information they got is wrong, or two of them are missing. Or already dead.

Ten. They can do ten easy.

The lack of a victim is more troubling, but he decides if she’s here somewhere they will find her after they’ve killed the vamps.

They spread out. Sam moves over to where the emergency exit is. Dean scans the room and the ceiling for another escape route.

When he doesn’t find anything, he locks eyes with Sam and nods.

It all goes fast from there.

Dean approaches a couple entangled in one the chairs. The girl has flowers weaved into her long brown hair. She looks peaceful, asleep in the guy’s lap with her arms draped around his neck.

His head sticks out over the backseat, it’s easiest to kill him first.

Decapitating with a machete is more difficult than it looks. Dean has to go in a second time. By then, the vamp hippie girl’s face is full of blood. She screams, probably morning the death of her decade-long lover, Dean imagines.

They are all awake by now.

He kills her next.

He can hear Sam fighting, grunting. It’s are weirdly comforting sound.

Castiel makes almost no sounds, but when Dean looks up from the dead lovers at his feet, he sees him killing two vampires simultaneously just by putting his hands to their foreheads.

*Efficient.*

An angry face, teeth bared, runs towards Dean.

Sam shoots him before he gets to attack. He falls down, squealing in anguish until Dean takes his head off.

The last two try their luck at overpowering Sam. The gun falls out of his hand onto the floor.

Dean and Castiel run towards him from the other sides of the room.
One of the vampires, a big guy, has his arm around Sam’s neck, exposing a cheap ass looking sleeve tattoo. His teeth are scraping Sam’s neck when Castiel reaches them.

The vampire looks puzzled for a moment when Cas stretches out his arm and puts his hand to its forehead in an almost sanctifying motion.

White light. A short deep scream and another one goes down.

Sam holds his neck, breathing heavily.

»Thanks, Cas.«

There’s only one of them left now. Castiel reaches out to kill again, but Dean stops him.

»Wait!«

Instead, Dean pins the last vampire to the wall.

»Where are you keeping her?«

»What? Who?«

»Come on man.« Dean pushes harder. »Don’t bullshit me. The girl, where are you keeping her? And what about the other two of you bloodsuckers? Where are they?«

»Look man, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What girl?«

»Who were you all getting your blood from then?«

»No one. Fallon and Gary were meant to bring someone today, but they never got back… « He says the names like they’re meant to ring a bell. »We all wanted to leave tonight.«

Dean softens his grip a bit.

»So you really have no idea who I’m talking about, huh?«

»I swear, man!«

Dean lets go.

The relieved look is still on the vampire’s face when Dean brings the machete down on him.

He’s standing too close. The blood ends up all over his front.

»Urgh.« Dean wipes a hand over his face. »I liked this shirt.«

Sam doesn’t react. He just looks at him blankly.

*That fast, huh?*

All the vampires dead and Sam’s immediately back to being pissed.

Dean puts his arm around Castiel’s shoulder and pulls him close.

»So, Cas, about that bet… «

Sam walks out of the screening room.
Dean lets go of Castiel and goes to pick up Sam’s gun.

Like they can afford to leave their weapons in the middle of Bumfuck, Alabama.

»Dean, are you okay?«

He finds himself face to face with Castiel.

There’s some blood on Cas’ collar. On his temple too.

Dean reaches out, trying to wipe it away but only manages to smudge it.

»I’m good.«

He puts a hand on Cas’ back to get him to move.

Through the swing door they’re alone in the foyer.

»Where is Sam?«, Castiel asks.

»I don’t know«, he answers quietly.

»Maybe he’s waiting outside.«

»Yeah, maybe.« Dean pulls out the gun. »You can go and check for him there. I’ll just make sure we got everyone.«

He thinks he can smell burnt caramel on the sole of his shoe, as he moves through the remainder of the cinema.

The bathrooms are clear, same as the equipment cabinet and the worker’s area.

He finds Sam in the projection booth.

Dean scrunches up his face as he steps into the cramped space.

»What are you doing here?«

»I just wanted to make sure we got everyone.«

Which, yeah, makes sense, because that’s what Dean’s been doing too. But still.

»Found anything?«

»Nope. Was just about to leave.«

They way Sam is standing next to the projector makes him look like an unruly child getting caught red-handed. The way he’s looking at him too.

It’s the way he used to look at Dad a lot, before and after fights.

»Okay. Whatever.« Dean sighs and rubs his forehead. »Let’s go then. I need a new, significantly less blood-drenched shirt.«

»Whatever? What do you mean, whatever?«

»What? What are you are talking about Sammy? Let’s go.«
Dean doesn’t feel up to this right now. He sighs again, just to garner some strength but apparently that’s also pissing Sam off.

“Why are you whatevering me?” Sam asks. “What in God’s name could I have possible done wrong now?”

“We don’t have time for this.”

“We have nothing but time. We don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Yeah? So let’s go get something to eat and talk there. I need to get changed and I’m exhausted. Aren’t you exhausted, Sam?”

Sam’s chest is heaving, but he doesn’t answer.

Dean breathes in the dusty air.

“Look. If you wanna tell me why you’re pissed off. I’m all ears. I don’t know why we need to do it in here, but whatever. Go ahead.”

He’s a little bit surprised when Sam does start talking.

“I’m not pissed off”, he says, his voice softer now. “I’m just… I didn’t want to do this in front of Cas.”

“Okay.”

This. This doesn’t feel good.

“Don’t get mad at me, okay?”, Sam asks, big deer eyes and all.

“That’s always a promising start.”

Swallowing is hard with all that dust in the air.

“I’m serious, Dean.”

“Yeah, okay. I know. I promise. Now shoot.”

“I know you said you’re not, you know… This way Sam is right now, so quiet and careful, is really unsettling. That you’re not into Cas.”

He tries to say “Yeah”, but the word is not really coming out of his throat.

“I know you said you didn’t want to talk about it. But… I think Cas is a bit confused by your behavior, you know. Sam’s voice sounds tight as well. And to be honest, so am I.”

Dean looks up at his brother’s face.

“What do you mean, confused? By what? Did Cas say that he’s confused?”

“No. Thank God, small mercies. He doesn’t have to say it. I can tell.”

“Yeah, sorry”, he mock-apologizes. “I forget you’re the expert on him now.”

“Dean…”
»No, seriously. What about my behavior is confusing to you? I’m always an open fucking book.«

Sam is acting all shy now, like he’s not the one who started this whole thing in the first place.

»You’re sending mixed signals«, Sam says, looking down at his hands. »The flirting and everything else… It’s bound to be confusing and hurtful.«

»Flirting?« Dean snorts. »I’m not flirting. I’m acting like I always have.«

Sam looks up.

»So maybe you’ve always been doing it.«

»What can I say? I’m just a nice guy, Sammy.«

Sam shakes his head, disappointed.

»What do you want me to say? I really doubt Cas’ is misunderstanding anything. I mean«, he clenches and unclenches his jaw, »not more than he always has anyway. What is it to you?«

»I care about him.«

»Yeah, I know, but…« Dean halts and studies his brother’s face. »Oh right«, he eventually says. »You don’t want me flirting with your boyfriend, I got it now. Noted.«

»Dean.« Again, he says his name like it’s painful to even get the word out. »That’s not what I meant. I don’t care about that. I just want us to all be on the same page, you know.«

»And what page is that?«

Sam runs his fingers through his hair in a helpless motion.

»Look«, Dean says. »You got the hots for him. You said you didn’t, but you do. That’s fine. And I didn’t call dibs if that’s what you’re asking.«

»That’s not what I’m asking.«

»I’m serious, Sam.« He pats his brother’s shoulder. »Do what you gotta do. Just don’t get all crazy like this and start telling me how my friendship with Cas works, ok? I’ve been on this particular rodeo for a while now.«

Weird choice of expression there.

»That’s not what I wanted to say at all.« Sam looks miserable. »Look, I’m only - I understand if you’re not comfortable with this. I swear, I’d also prefer not have this discussion at all. But you know, what you said, about you deserving to know the truth, I think you were right.«

The truth? What is this? Jerry Springer?

He doesn’t say anything.

Sam’s so clearly struggling to get the words out, and Dean does want to hear them. He’s 90% sure he does anyway.

»God.« Sam presses his eyes together. »That all sounds so stupid.«
»No, it doesn’t. Just tell me what you want to say.« When Sam still hesitates Dean firmly puts his hand on his shoulder. »I’m serious. What are you afraid of? What am I going to do?«

»I don’t know«, Sam says. »Make me feel bad? But I already feel bad, so…«

A short and bleak intro to Sam’s soul.

»Look, I wasn’t lying to you when I said I wasn’t interested in Cas. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t then, anyway. And maybe you’re right. Maybe I was projecting things onto you, hell maybe I’m still doing that? This is all new to me and really confusing.«

»Right.« Dean says. »So all you wanted to tell me is that you’re into Cas?«

»Yeah… No… I’m not sure. I don’t even know what’s that supposed to mean.«

»I appreciate the update, Sam. I really do, but that’s definitely not news to me. I’m living with you two 24/7.« He forces out a smile. »Have you guys, like, talked about it?«

»No.« Sam shakes his head. »No, it’s not like that at all. Nothing’s happening between us, it’s just… I guess I wouldn’t necessarily mind if it did, you know? And that’s weird.«

God. The way Sam is looking at him now, all earnest and hopeful and scared at once.

He’d be the worst person ever if he told him the truth now.

It wouldn’t help. All it would do is break Sam’s heart.

Sam’s that much of a absurdly good person that he’d rather sidestep and not go after Castiel, than upset Dean.

Sam needs to learn to be more selfish.

»Uh-huh.« Dean reaches for the handle on the open door. »Good luck. I’m not going to give you any pointers. You know I’m more of a love em and leave em kind of guy.«

»A commitment-phobe, yeah. You can just say it, Dean.«

»Who am I going to commit to when we’re always on the road and working cases anyway? We don’t have the greatest dating pool.«

He nods towards the door. Sam follows him outside.

In the foyer when they’ve almost reached the entrance, Sam pinches his back.

»Hey.« Dean turns around. »What now?«

It’s amazing just how small a guy of Sam’s size can make himself look.

»You really okay with this?«

»Even if I wasn’t, what would you expect me to do? Beat the gay out of you?«

Sam doesn’t roll his eyes or shake his head or say anything at all.

He demands a real answer.

Dean sighs. He’s been doing a lot of sighing today.
»It’s all good. I swear. Now let’s go. I’m still drenched in disgusting vamp blood and I need a new shirt from the trunk, cause I don’t want to pay for another deep-cleaning of the car.«

Sam nods curtly.

He doesn’t look happy per se, but he does look relieved.

Dean feels like shit, watching him push the door upon and walk outside, to the car where Castiel is waiting.

He hates lying to him. It feels wrong in a way that little else does.

But hurting him, really hurting him, crushing him, taking away the one thing that seems to keep him going lately? That would be worse.

He’s going to protect Sam. Always. And if that means protecting him from his own feelings, he’s going to do just that.

He’s already done a lot more difficult things for him.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies to Bessemer, Alabama and all the other places I mention but know nothing about that google maps or wikipedia won’t tell me. Excuse my ignorance, I’m just a simple European girl who's only ever been to San Francisco (which, coincidently, is one the greatest places on earth). Anyway, I'm sure there's gotta be an abandoned cinema somewhere.
The Only Moment We Were Alone

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Explosions In The Sky's "The Only Moment We Were Alone".

Happy New Year and thanks for reading!

»Cas?«

Sam circles the car, as if he expects Castiel to be hiding around here somewhere in broad daylight.

It’s still pre-noon.

The best time to catch vampires is the early-morning haze. That’s what Dean always says. Because Dad said so.

It doesn’t really make much sense to Sam. That’s not how sleep cycles work.

»I thought he’d be waiting by the car«, Dean says, nonplussed.

He shrugs and turns from the car to the entrance of the cinema and back.

Sam can tell that he’s unnerved too.

»Did he say he would be waiting here?«

»No, I told him to go outside and look for you.«

»Cas?« Sam first says and then shouts. »Cas!«

The whole area seems deserted. He doubts there’s anyone around who could hear him by accident.

Whoever thought of putting a cinema here back in the day must have been a hell of an optimist. No wonder it’s closed down now.

Abandoned places always make him feel melancholic. Somehow a cinema is even worse.

»Maybe he just took off«, Dean says. »You know he likes to do that sometimes.«

»Just like that? He hasn’t been doing that much lately.«

He hasn’t been doing that at all. Not since he’s been back from the trip Dean’s sent him on.

»Right.« Dean says. »Maybe he got antsy and went inside to look for us. We took quite a long time in there. I’ll go back and check.«

Before Sam can protest, Dean has run back inside.

He considers following him, but decides to check the parking lot instead.

Of course Castiel isn’t here.
The white lines on the grey stony ground are almost completely faded.

He slowly walks through the dead leaves shed from the surrounding trees.

They’re all full of witches’ broom. Sam wonders if it’s fungi or a virus brought on by humans that’s slowly killing the trees.

It feels strange. Something seemingly so sturdy, almost eternal, obliterated by a mundane infection.

He turns his face away.

He shouldn’t be staring at dying trees when he’s supposed to be pretend-looking for Castiel.

He decides to go back inside, when he sees the door opening in the distance.

Castiel is leaning into his brother. He seems to be able to walk just fine.

Sam jogs over to them and realizes it’s not Castiel who’s limping, it’s Dean.

»What happened?«

»Oh, you know.« Dean coughs and spits blood. »Just your usual lying piece of shit monsters. Fuck! I should have seen it coming!«

»Dean«, Castiel says softly. »It’s not your fault.«

Dean and Castiel exchange a meaningful look.

»What happened?«, Sam asks again.

Dean entangles himself from Castiel.

»There were two more of them. They must have been hiding. I don’t really know… The girl was with them.«

»Where is she now?«

»I was too slow. I guess they’d rather have her die with them than us saving her.«

Dean looks devastated.

»It’s not your fault«, Castiel repeats soothingly, trying to make it more true.

It hits Sam. If he’d just followed Dean inside instead of taking a stroll, the girl would still be alive now.

»Of course it’s my fault«, Dean says.

Castiel takes a hold of Dean’s shoulder with one hand and cups his face with the other.

Dean is about to protest, but when the white light appears he halts and closes his mouth.

»It is not your fault«, Castiel repeats.

Dean pulls his shoulders up.

»Let’s go«, he mumbles, trying to put on a hard face.
He isn’t limping anymore.

Sam looks up at Castiel who eyes him curiously.

He expects a more thorough explanation of what happened inside. He’s disappointed when it doesn’t come.

They follow Dean to the car.

Dean opens the trunk and grabs a T-Shirt that Sam’s pretty sure has been in there for years. It’s definitely not been washed. It’s blood-free if not stain-free.

Dean takes the blood-soaked one off and throws it over to Sam.

»What am I supposed to do with it?«

»There’s a trashcan over there somewhere«, Dean says, trying to decide if the shirt still in his hands is inside out or not.

Sam walks past the disease-ridden trees towards the trashcan. He doubts anyone still empties it, but he throws it in there anyway. He has no desire to keep it.

They stop at a café. It’s not Dean’s normal kind of place. It’s small and cozy and clean. But a sign outside claims they have the best pie in town. Magic words to his brother.

They’re the only customers.

They sit down in the corner at a small round table that is so low that Sam’s knees keep bumping into it whenever he moves.

A look at the menu confirms Sam’s suspicion about this being more of crunchy 70s health café. He’s surprised Dean doesn’t want to leave. He has a low tolerance level for these kind of things.

Sam orders buckwheat-pea waffles. They don’t sound that enticing, but the rest of the savory food sounds even worse.

The pie turns out to be whole-wheat. Dean orders it anyway.

»It’s not that bad«, he shrugs, after quickly polishing off the plate. He orders a second one. »It’s still pie.«

Sam tries his waffles. They’re okay, somewhat dry. He eats some of it. He’s not really feeling hungry.

They don’t speak throughout the meal. The silence is of the uncomfortable type.

Sam shoves his plate away.

He stretches out his cramped legs. Trying not to hit the table in the process, he ends up shoving his feet against Castiel’s.

Castiel looks up at him, somewhat surprised.

»Sorry«, he mumbles, pulling his legs in quickly. He bumps against the metal feet of the table.

»Were you just playing footsie?« Dean’s mouth is full of food. It’s difficult to tell if he’s amused or
angry. »Maybe you should wait until we’re back in the bunker. You’ve got to pace yourself for another 15 hours or so.«

Sam swallows down the feeling of shame. It shouldn’t even be there in the first place.

»You don’t seriously want to drive all the way in one go?«

»Why not?«

»Because it’s 15 hours.«

»We’re short on cash and all our cards are maxed out.«

»Since when?«

»Since last night.« Dean gets up. »I’m going to pay and take a leak before we leave.«

He watches Dean walk up the counter, watches him talk to the cashier, watches him walk to the bathroom.

»Are you okay, Sam?«, Castiel asks.

»Yeah, I’m fine. Why?«

»You are being very quiet.«

»Really?«

»Yes. You are much more reserved than usual. And you are avoiding eye contact. Did something happen?«

»No. No, I’m good. I’m not avoiding you.«

Castiel looks doubtful.

»I’m good. It’s just… the dead girl, you know.«

»Yes. It upsets your brother as well.«

»It doesn’t upset you?«

»It is sad that we failed to save her«, Castiel says matter of factly. »But mostly it is upsetting to see you both affected by it. Dean does not seem capable of accepting that this is not his fault.«

»Yeah…« Sam sees Dean leaving the bathroom and gets up. »I should have been with him.«

Castiel looks puzzled.

»Ready?«, Dean asks.

The bell above the door rings as he pushes it open. Sam doesn’t remember hearing it when they entered.

»Sam«, Castiel says, once they’re outside. »You don’t think this is your fault, do you?«

When he doesn’t answer, he’s surprised by Castiel’s anger.
»This is nobody’s fault! How is it possible that you are both so keen on taking on responsibility for all the wrong-doings in this world?!«

Dean eyes them both for an excruciatingly long moment.

»It’s probably something to do with hell and atonement«, he finally says. »Anyway. I need a coffee before we can leave. You guys want anything?«

»No«, Sam says.

»Yes«, Castiel says.

»Okay, what do you want? I doubt they have anything fancy though.«

»I take whatever you deem to be a good choice.«

Dean takes off.

They wait by the car.

Castiel is leaning against the Impala. It looks like he’s waiting for something.

A resumption of their discussion, maybe, which Sam is not keen on.

It feels awkward being left alone with Castiel.

His company has had such a calming effect on him over the past months, but now it stresses him out.

He feels like he’s expected to do something different. Hold a speech or make some grand gesture after he’s more or less been been giving the ok by Dean to do so.

No. He can’t think of it like that.

It’s not like Dean literally dictates what he can and can’t do. Talking to him was more of a curtesy to him. It was making sure, just one last time, that Dean wasn’t… well… what exactly? Interested?

Dean loves Castiel.

Dean’s possessive and jealous by nature.

He is both narcissistic and self-sacrificing, a combination which is not as contradictory as it sounds at first.

He has a surprisingly low self esteem.

_There’s no way Dean is okay with any of this._

Sam knows it. He just needed to make sure it’s the “my best friend and my brother aren’t giving me their undivided attention anymore”-not okay, and not the other kind.

Frankly, he’s still not entirely sure it’s really the former. But he has asked, and asked again, and if asks another time Dean’s probably going to smack him.

»Sam, are you sure everything is fine?«

He notices a smudge of blood on Castiel’s temple.
He steps closer, cups his face and slowly runs a thumb over his skin.

He rubs it over Castiel’s temple. The blood is dry and crumbly. It takes some effort to get off.

Castiel pulls a face like he’s not sure what he’s supposed to think.

»If you want me to get rid of blood stains on my body or yours, or from any of our garments, all you have to do is ask.«

He cocks his head to the side, into Sam’s hand, and looks up at him.

It feels like a really weird open invitation.

Sam closes the space between them.

He scans the face below.

Castiel’s eyes are blue in a way he’s never seen on a human being. On a dog maybe. As a description for the color of the sea or the sky or something else that’s actually deep blue. Blue Blue.

He’s still contemplating the color of Castiel’s eyes when he closes his own. He bends his head and brushes their lips together.

It’s a rather chaste kiss but it gets his heart racing.

It’s been so damn long that he’s kissed anyone - voluntarily and not just in his dreams.

The tight feeling in his chest has probably more to do with the fact that it’s Castiel he’s kissing. He’s imagined this a lot more often than he’s comfortable admitting even to himself.

Castiel doesn’t really react.

Sam pulls away, takes a step back.

Castiel’s facial expression is turned to unreadably angelic, which is not really the one Sam was hoping to see.

Sam puts his hands in his pockets.

»I hope Dean changes his mind«, he says. »15 hours on the road is a bit insane.«

He goes to lean against the car.

He makes sure to leave enough space between their bodies.
The Way We Get By

A mere cup of coffee isn’t enough for such a long ride.

Dean feels more worn out than he has any right to be.

He should feel fine after being zapped back to health by Cas.

Instead, he feels a dull ache throughout his whole body. A tiredness has taken hold of him that has nothing to do with physical exertion.

Anger is not a strong enough word to describe the way he feels when they’re too late to save a victim. Especially when it’s his fault. It makes him feel almost numb. There’s already so little point to any of this - lately hunting feels more like aimlessly poking around in an anthill with a stick than actively doing good. He’s not sure if there’d be any more evil in the world if they stopped hunting. If they’d never started. If you tallied up everything, from starting the apocalypse to ending it and everything in between, would they still come out as the good guys? It’s unlikely.

But when he gets to save someone, for the moment it seems that there’s still some sense to it all. It’s what keeps him going, when he wavers. An actual human life. Saved. It’s simple concept to grasp. Easy to imagine he’s doing the right thing then.

He wishes the girl would have looked a bit older and had a less innocent face.

He wishes she hadn’t worn a ponytail quite so high.

He wishes they’d have turned her before he’d arrived so he could have just killed her. It wouldn’t have been quite so clear then, that this is on him and him only.

Sam keeps nagging him to stop the car.

»Seriously? You need to pee again already?«

»Shut up«, Sam mumbles before going back to his reticent role.

Dean can’t blame monsters for being monsters. It’s on him to kill them, not for them to let him.

He’s only ever met one vampire who was different. But it doesn’t feel good to think about it him, either. He always tries to push the memories of Benny away. The longing for the camaraderie and feeling understood and accepted are equally as tormenting as his bad conscience.

Dean throws a furtive look at his brother. He thinks of all the things and all the people he’s given up for Sam. People he’s cared about, people he’s loved.

What’s another one, right?

He knows why he messed up in there, why he wasn’t concentrated.

It was only a second really. One second he’d looked at Castiel and contemplated Sam’s words.

He looks in the rear mirror.

He watches Cas watching Sam for a long time.
Castiel turns his head and catches his gaze. He smiles at him, a full and proper smile across his face.

Dean returns the favor without thinking.

»We’re about to pass a gas station«, Castiel says. »Maybe we could stop there, they might have a lavatory.«

»Alright. Might as well gas up while we’re there.«

Sam burst out of the car the second it stops.

»Maybe there was something wrong with his waffles«, Dean muses. He has his hand on the car door, about to push it open when Castiel disagrees.

»I don’t think there was anything wrong with his food. I suspect he’s acting this way because of me.«

»What do you mean?«

Castiel shifts in his seat. He looks uncomfortable, which in turn makes Dean feel even worse.

»What do you mean?« Dean turns in his seat and stares at him. A long time passes. »Cas. Come on. What the hell are you talking about?«

»I have limited knowledge of these things. I don’t know if Sam would like me to share these things with you.«

It takes him a second to recover from the blow.

»Fine. Alright.«

He shoves the door open. He has one leg out of the car.

Castiel’s hand around his shoulder is firm.

»I did not mean to offend you. And I have no interest in not being truthful. I am just uncertain if is my place to share.«

»You’re my best friend«, Dean says in a soft voice, uncertain where the words are coming from. »You’re one of the two people I trust. Just... let’s not go down the road again, where we keep stuff from each other because we think it might be better for each other. It’s always for some bullshit reason too.« He doesn’t want to turn around in case Castiel will let go of him. »I already know Sam is into you, in case that helps...«

Cas pulls away anyway and leans into the backseat. He folds his hands in his lap.

»You are my best friend«, he agrees. It sounds somewhat like a lament. »Friends do talk about emotional turmoil.«

»Yeah, they do.«

Cas' folded hands almost make it look like he’s praying.

»I am unsure how to navigate certain changes in my relationship with Sam.«

*Relationship.*
»Like what?«

»I am unsure if your brother is interested in a fortification of our relationship. I think he is, but I do not wish to overstep any boundaries that I might fail to see, as you know I’m prone to. I have, largely thanks to you, gotten better at understand human customs and restrictions and so forth, but…« He looks up from his hands. »Your brother still confounds me at times.«

He’s never heard Cas talk like this. He’s seen him act insecure around Claire, but this is a whole other level.

»You’re not sure if Sam wants you?«, Dean asks, incredulous.

»Wants me to what?«

Of course this is the moment when Sam decides to return from the bathroom.

This is what their lives have become now. A constant stop-and-go. Conversations always interrupted and shifted around, whenever two people turn into three.

Three never used to be a crowd. It used to be comfort.

»All done?«, Dean asks when Sam ducks into the car and slams the door.

»Yeah.«

He brings Baby back to life.

»Did you already fill up the tank?«, Sam asks.

»No. It’s fine. We’re not going that much further anyway.«

»We’re not?«

»No. We’re looking for a moderately decent motel, so I can take a nice long shower. And then I’m gonna need something real to eat, none of that hippie BS.«

Frankly, the pie was decent. But the café had made him feel weird and out of place.

»What happened to being out of money?«, Sam asks.

»I thought maybe we could find a place with a nice pool table afterwards.«

»Of course you did.«

»You got any better ideas in that college brain of yours?«

He knows he needs to stop saying this. It’s been so many years.

»No.« Sam turns around to him. »No, hustling pool is fine. You want me to join you?«

»I don’t know. If you guys want to tag along, sure, be my guest.«

It’s a dumb idea.

He’s certain of it in the car, and he’s still certain of it later at night, when they enter the run-down bar. It’s near empty. The three of them stand out like a sore thumb. Cas’ get-up alone would be enough to
get everyone to stare. Dean should have gotten him to wear some of his clothes instead.

He’s pretty sure this is not going to work. He orders a round of beers and sits down near the pool table.

Sam drinks up fast and stands up.

»You getting another round already?«

»I was thinking shots.«

Sam’s jaw is tight, the muscles in his neck stand out.

Dean watches him walk over to the bar.

He always gets uneasy when Sam’s like this. He’s got that cold and determined look in his eyes that reminds him of soulless Sam.

Sam’s a happy drunk most of the time, he tells himself. Maybe this helps him loosen up a bit.

Dean inches his chair towards Castiel’s.

»What happened between you two?«

»I think I reacted inadequately to his advances.«

»His advances«, Dean repeats.

»Yes.«

Castiel takes a first sip of his beer.

Cas doesn’t really like the taste of beer, Dean knows. He suspects he drinks it out of camaraderie. Because of him.

»You know I can get you something else, if you want.«

Castiel is surprised.

Dean finds that it hurts.

»Thank you, Dean. This is fine.«

»How did you react?«, he asks. »To Sam’s... advances.«

»I didn’t.«

He’s not sure if that’s a good thing, but it sure feels good to hear.

Two guys, in their mid-40s maybe, enter the bar and head straight towards the pool table.

Dean keeps an eye on them. He decides to wait a bit longer.

Tonight drinking doesn’t make Sam any happier. As annoying as it can get to be around, Dean would give a lot for the mouthy hyper version of his brother right now. Instead he is slouched in his chair, and only talks when absolutely necessary, in the curtest of responses. In a way, it’s like being with a moody pre-teen Sam. Except drunk. Dean is pretty sure he remembers when Sam had his first
drink, because he remembers handing it to him. Figured it was better if he tried it in a safe surrounding than on his own. Because Sam’d definitely been the kind of kid to get drunk on his own.

»I think I’ll try my luck with those guys«, Dean says.

He pats Castiel on the back as he gets up, and yeah, Sam’s look right there - that’s pure green venom.

It all feels so ridiculous, he wants to laugh.

Dean walks up the men and introduces himself. He has done all of this so many times. It doesn’t always work. He’s ended up with a broken rib or two before, but these guys don’t look the type. Plus, he’s got Cas with him, so what’s the worst than can happen?

This time it works like clockwork.

Whenever he glances up over his queue towards their table, it’s the same.

Sam is steadily getting more drunk. He and Castiel aren’t talking.

Dean doesn’t know how to feel about it. He’s already imagined so many happy endings, figuratively and literally, for Cas und Sam. The possibility of nothing coming out of this it all feels novel.

It doesn’t really make sense. He’s seen them together in ways that made it crystal clear. Holding hands. Castiel’s body draped over Sam’s like a blanket while he slept. The careful doting words and hushed voices at night. Most of all, the way Castiel looks at Sam, just as he does right now. Dean’s only ever seen him look at one other person this way, himself.

Advances. That can mean a lot.

It’s time to leave the pool table when raised eyebrows turn into accusations.

»My Dad always used to tell me what a quick learner I was«, he excuses himself.

He knows he’s lucky if they just let him leave now. Hanging around any longer is out of question.

He feels for the wad of money in the pocket of his jeans.

»Have a good night, fellas.«

He walks away under watchful eyes and with their angry muttering in his back.

»Come on, let’s go.«

It’s difficult to get Sam out of his chair. When he tries to help Sam shrugs him off and swats him away.

»Jesus. Sorry.« Dean rolls his eyes. »No need to get so prissy.«

»I can do it myself.«

Sam is shit-faced but he does indeed manage to get off their chair and walk out the bar.

»How much did you have, Sammy? I didn’t even take that long.«
»Fuck off…«

Outside Sam marches ahead, and over to the car.

»At least he’s still walking in a straight line.«

»Are you satisfied with your pool endeavor?«, Cas asks.

»Yeah, we got more than enough till Kansas.«

Castiel looks spooked.

»You okay?«

»Yes. It’s still just Sam. He’s-«

»He’s shitfaced, yeah but don’t worry about it. He’ll be fine.«

He pats Cas’ shoulder and lets his hand linger.

It makes him stop and think for a moment. Maybe - yeah, maybe Sam is right. Maybe he’s been doing this more lately. The touching and the joking. The trying to be there for Cas, to make him feel better. But it’s not like he’s doing anything.

Castiel smiles.

»Yes, you are right.«

Dean’s not absolutely sure what he’s agreeing with, but he’s taking encouragement and smiles whichever way he can get them right now.

Sam is slouched against the car.

»Don’t even think about throwing up in there.«

»Fuck you.«

Dean laughs as he opens the car.

»Look at you and all your 10 dollar words.«

In the motel Sam falls asleep almost instantly.

»It’d be kind of ironic if he went the drummers’ way«, he tells Cas as they pull off Sam’s shoes and throw the blanket over him. »You know, choking on his own vomit in the night.«

»That won’t happen«, Castiel says gravely. »I will watch over him.«

»Yeah.« Dean walks over to the other bed. »I almost forgot.«

Cas considers Sam sprawled figure on the bed and shoves his legs to the side, so he can sit beside him.

Dean runs a hand over his forehead.

It’s not been a very good day. He feels exhausted and confused.
»Dean,« Cas looks at him apprehensively. »Are you worried?«

»Yes.«

He’s not sure why he’s telling the truth.

He’s just so goddamn tired of it all.

»What are you worried about?«

Dean glances towards Sam. His mouth is hanging open, even though from the sounds he’s making it’s clear he’s breathing through his nose.

»You are worried about Sam?«

Dean shrugs and then nods.

He supposes that’s close enough to the truth.

It’s never a lie at least.
Sam wakes up with one of the worst hangovers of his life. His head is pounding and he feels like throwing up. At least he didn’t dream last night. He remembers his head hitting the pillow and nothing after that. Small mercies.

He drags the blanket over his eyes and tries to escape the unnecessary brightness of the room.

Even under here and with his eyes closed it’s not dark enough.

The air is stale and dusty.

He wonders how he ever managed to sleep like this.

He hears voices outside the door. It takes him a second to recognize them. He only catches the last words of Castiel’s sentence. Dean laughs in response, as he opens the door and lets more sunshine in.

The blanket is thin and lets the light through to hit Sam’s face.

He groans in response.

»Looks like he's already awake anyway.«

Dean walks over and pulls the blanket off his face.

»Morning, sunshine.«

Sam grunts.

»I brought you coffee and an angel who can work magic with his hands.«

Sam open his eyes.

Dean is grinning. The innuendo was on purpose. Of course it was.

Sam looks around the room until he can make out Castiel against the backdrop of the dark green wallpaper.

Dean pushes a paper cup into Sam's hand before he can protest. He tries to sit up but a dizziness sets in and he abandons the plan.
»Come on, Cas«, Dean orders. »Do your thing.«

Castiel walks over to him, kneels down beside the bed and puts two fingers to Sam's forehead.

He has a serious expression on his face.

Sam feels uncomfortable, even after Castiel has pulled his hand away and taken the dizziness along with it.

The room doesn't feel half as bright anymore and the sickness is gone, but he still feels just as confused.

The cup in his hands is too hot.

»How come you can get drunk too?« He says the first thing that comes to his mind. »Shouldn’t your grace automatically sober you up?«

It’s not great, but it’s less embarrassing than a lot of things he could have said instead.

Castiel smiles the faintest of smiles and gets up. He doesn’t answer.

»You shouldn’t waste your grace on me like that. It’s just a hangover.«

»Yeah«, Dean says. »But we have to spend the day with you in the car. And it was a real close call with you last night. You don’t have my stomach of steel.« He takes a sip of coffee and hands the cup to Castiel, who drinks from it too. »Besides, you’re in a terrible mood when you’re hungover.«

*Everyone is in a terrible mood when they’re hungover.*

He can’t be bothered to talk back.

Castiel hands the cup back to Dean.

*Shouldn’t have kissed him.*

It’s probably no big deal for Castiel.

It’s probably fine.

Except it’s really, really not. Not for Sam anyway.

There had been moments where he’d been so sure. Moments in which it had seemed like Castiel would have kissed him, if Sam hadn’t put a stop to it. If he hadn’t pulled away, said something to shift the mood, mentioned Dean… Now he wonders if he’d just misinterpreted all the signs.

He feels embarrassed just being here in the room with the both of them.

He wishes he could go back to that dream-less sleep state from before, the one he so rarely gets to experience.

»Are you gonna get up any time soon?«, Dean asks. »You slept for ages.«

Sam scrambles out of bed and into the bathroom. He’s glad that he apparently didn’t get undressed last night.

The car ride back to Lebanon is long and feels even longer thanks to how uncomfortableness he
He listens to Dean lecturing bout music. Castiel asks the right questions to keep Dean going for a while.

Sam doubts Castiel’s that interested in how to easily tell a Jefferson Airplane song from a Jefferson Starship one - »If it’s shit, it’s always Starship.«

Castiel just really likes to listen to Dean talk.

Or maybe he is really into in music now, even though he’s never shown any interest before.

Still, it’s feasible.

Clearly Sam doesn’t know him as well as he thought he did.

He’s annoyed by their talk and by how left out he is. He knows he could amend that by simply speaking himself, but he doesn’t feel like he has anything to add to their conversation. It doesn’t seem like they expect him to, either.

»Remember that one?«, Dean asks, turning up the volume.

»Yes, I do recognize Led Zeppelin by now.«

Castiel perks up, happy to get it right.

»Yeah, I’d have been doing something very wrong if you didn’t.«

Dean grins. He hums along and then - just as Sam dreaded - starts singing along.

»It only goes to show that you will be mine by takin' our time.«

Sam doesn’t think he’s showing any kind of reaction but apparently he is.

»Hey! Don’t sigh and roll your eyes like that, Sam, when we’re in the presence of music royalty.«

»I wasn’t.«

Sam looks down at his hands. They’re big and almost paw-like. These are hands that weren’t made for subtleness or finesse. They were made for rough strength and manual labor.

It’s difficult to get blood out from under the nails, even when they’re cut very short.

He can still remember a time when his hands didn’t look so weathered and permanently dirty. When they were only ever soiled by dusty textbooks and coffee stains.

He scrubs at them hard, most nights. It makes no difference. After almost every hunt he’s back to square one.

»Your hands are so soft.«

It’s a real memory of Jess. He’s fairly certain at least. But he can never be sure. There’s no one to ask who could confirm or deny it. It was only him and her. His hand gliding over the pink glow of her cheeks.

Sometimes he almost feels like calling up Lucifer and asking him if a particular memory actually
happened or if it’s just him playing tricks.

*Calling him up. Asking about old times.*

Like they’re former roommates and not whatever you’d call what they were. He tends to shy away from the words his mind offers up. Abuser. Victim. It doesn’t sound right. It doesn’t seem to correspond to what he knows happened, what he felt and still feels.

Dean’s still singing along loudly.

Sam has never been a big of his brother’s singing, but it’s different since the cage. He’d never tell Dean how much it reminds of him hell. He wouldn’t take that joy away from him. Besides, even to his own ears it sounds slightly absurd in its harmlessness. Singing Black Sabbath was hardly one of the worst things Lucifer did to him.

He can see him so clearly.

»*Now I have you with me under my power.*

*Our love grows stronger now with every hour* 

*Look into my eyes you’ll see who I am* 

*My name is Lucifer please take my hand*’ «

He’s playing air drums and he’s bored, keeps rolling his eyes while he sings the same lines over and over. He knows it drives Sam crazy.

»*Come on, Sam, don’t be such a party pooper. Sing along.*«

He moves his hands like he’s conducting a choir. Sam is both the lone audience and the only partaker.

»*You are the first to have this love of mine*« Lucifer puts his index finger to his lips. »*Forever with me ’till the end of time - You’d think that song was written about us. I mean, it is written about me, I guess. You’re not worth a footnote in music history of course. Hey - you know they’ve written whole rock operas about me? It’s not really my kind of thing, though, human music is so fucking banal. But it’s a nice gesture.*«

It must be the early years, because he’s still talking back. If only timidly.

»*Shut up.*«

»*You know I love it when you talk back. Why don’t you try tackling me again? That worked out so well for you last time. Always fun for me, though.*«
»Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!«

»Sam! You okay?«

Sam wills his eyes away from his hands. Tries to forget everything these hands ever did, who they touched.

»I’m fine.«

Dean’s unsettled voice makes him feel worse.

»You sure? Because you just told us to shut up.«

He shares a worried look with Cas.

The car noticeably slows down, until it eventually comes to a halt near the curb.

»Sorry«, Sam says. »I must have - nodded off, or something.«

Dean’s hands are around the wheel, his body is turned towards Sam. He doesn’t believe him. Of course he knows he’s not been sleeping, knows that he’s lying.

»Are you sure you’re okay, because -«

Sam’s not thinking when he opens the door and exits the car. He just can’t -

He simply can’t right now.

He’s breathing heavily, while he takes big strides away from the car.
He’s not hallucinating. He knows it’s just him here on this bleak street with its potholes and the nothingness surrounding it. He tries to remember what state they’re in and tries to clue himself in by going backwards through his memories.

Him freaking out. The music. Dean singing. The gas station. Cas’ warm fingers. Waking up. Falling asleep to Dean’s and Cas' intimate murmuring. The bar and the jealousy. That goddamn kiss.

He went back too far. There must have been more that happened today. If there isn’t any more, if he can’t come up with more detail to this and he doesn’t know what state he even is, how can he be sure this is real? How can he prove to himself this timeline makes sense?

He turns his head to the left and the right, and there’s nothing but curb and field.

Lucifer’s voice and his touch. Just in his head. But it’s so freaking loud.

»Sam-Sam-Sam-Sam, you know how much I lurve you. Like high-school-sweetheart-always-and-forever-love-you. Why are being such a tease? I mean, you brought me here to be with me for eternity - really cute gesture, by the way, appreciate it - and now you don’t even want to put out?«

The thought of not the projection of his vessel, but of actual Lucifer enters his mind. It’s so much worse still.

Sam’s vision gets blurry. The painful sound of Lucifer’s real voice reverberates in his skull. He puts his hands over his ears. Of course it makes no difference.

He only notices he’s down on the ground, curled up into a ball, when he feels Castiel’s hand on his shoulder, shaking him firmly.

»Sam… Sam… It’s not real…«

He opens is eyes. He hadn’t realized he’d closed them.
Castiel is crouched down on his knees next to him.

His trousers are getting all dirty, he thinks.

»Sam, whatever you’re seeing - it’s not real.«

His voice is pleading and soft.

»I know it’s not real.«

Castiel wraps his arms around him and pulls him into his lap. Sam’s face is half-pressed against Cas’ leg. With his jacket around them both, it’s almost like being under a blanket.

»He’s singing.«

He turns his gaze up towards the grey sky and Castiel’s worried face.

»Lucifer is singing. He’s got a whole playlist with our songs. I mean… he had one.«

Castiel doesn’t tell him that it’s all going to fine. He looks almost scared.

»I’m not having visions. I don’t think he’s really here.«

Somehow that’s important.

That he’s not going crazy, not again, no matter what this looks like. He’s curled up on the ground on a street in a state he can’t remember and he’s got the literal devil breathing down his neck and an angel trying to shake him out of it. But he’s not going crazy again.

Castiel's hand is cold as it comes to lie on his cheek. Then Sam realizes it's just him. He's burning up, so Castiel feels cold by comparison.
»Are you still hearing him?«

Sam listens. Nothing.

»No.«

Castiel nods.

»You know, he cannot harm you here. You are safe.«

Sam shakes his hand lightly.

»I know he can't. But the memories are so… so vivid... It feels like I'm about to wake up and be back with him. I mean… It’s all true. All the things I did there, I really did them, Cas.«

Sam takes ahold of Castiel's collar, grips it tightly.

He remembers when he stopped fighting, even though it’s so long ago. It feels childish now that he ever tried.

It’s not so much the memory of Lucifer that he can’t take. It’s the memory of himself in hell, of who he became down there.

All Lucifer ever did is peel all the outer layers away, until only the real Sam remained. The Sam he’s trying so hard to hide from everyone else. If they knew, if only they really understood who he is... if Dean knew, he’d not be able to look him in the eyes.

»This here feels more absurd than anything he's ever done«, Sam says out loud. »What am I even doing here?«

In your arms.
What am I doing here, acting like you and I make any sense together?

»You left the car and then you collapsed, and now I'm trying to help you regain stability.«

Sam smiles softly.

»You're always being so literal.«

He feels warm and safe in Castiel's arms. For a second he's forgotten about his embarrassment and shame.

»This is just as real as your memories.«

Sam presses Cas' cold hand closer to his cheek, unravels the fingers one by one until they’re starfished over his face.

He's half-way between there and here. In a way, he enjoys the twilight.

Lucifer can't hurt him here, but he's allowed to be just as unhinged as he really is.

»Do you want to go back to the car?«, Castiel asks.

He really, really doesn't.

»Yeah.«

Once they're untangled, he feels pretty silly sitting on his butt on the dirty road.

The twilight’s gone.
Castiel looks unfazed.

He offers his hand to help him up.

Sam hesitates for a second before taking it. They don't immediately let go when he stands.

»Thanks«, Sam says. »And sorry for the freak out.«

»You have nothing to feel sorry for.«

»Well...«

He slips his hand out of Cas' and turns away.

They're much closer to the car than anticipated. He'd felt like he'd walked a while but the Impala is just a few feet away.

Dean is leaning against the side, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Sam avoids looking into his face as he enters the car.

»Everything okay?«, Dean asks Castiel.

Sam doesn't hear his reply.
now. ... While I'm writing this note already: Thank you so much for the comments and the kudos. It warms my writer's heart so much. I appreciate it so much <3
My Favourite Things

Lebanon, Kansas is not the best place for stargazing. But it's also not the worst on earth when it comes to light pollution.

He could be anywhere right now, if all he wanted was a different view.

He remembers a particularly perfect skyline on the top of the Swiss mountains years ago. Maybe he'll take Sam and Dean there one day.

He does not wish to stray far tonight.

Castiel sits outside the bunker. He's been here for a few hours.

After some deliberation he'd offered to keep Sam company for the night. Sam had shaken his head and shoved his hair out of his face, in what Castiel had recognized as a nervous gesture.

»Thanks, but I think that would be a bit weird right now.«

Before he'd had any chance to argue, Sam had disappeared into his room, the door closed.

Castiel sits on the ground, near a patch of grass, as he's seen Sam do before.

It feels different than standing while staring into the sky. Somehow he’s closer to the skies even though he’s further away.

He stretches out his legs. A root sticks out of the ground and presses into his calve. It is not unpleasant to feel his body in such a way. It is not pain, just a punctured, concentrated sensation in one bundle of nerves.

When he’s not marveling the wonders of sensory neurons, he’s thinking about Sam.

He feels rather helpless. He tries to go over all the aspects of their situation one by one, the ones he understands as well as the one that leave him baffled. He doesn’t enjoy these feelings of confusion. In moments like these he wishes life could be as clear-cut as it once was.

He hears the footsteps and recognizes the movements immediately, long before he sees him.

»Dean.«

»What are you doing here?«

Dean sounds tired.

»I’m not doing anything.« Castiel shifts slightly, offering up the space beside him. »What are you doing here?«

»I was just looking for you.«

»Why?«, he asks surprised.

Dean snorts in reply.

But he does sit down, just a few inches away.
»Bad dreams. When I woke up, I had this fucked up feeling…«

Castiel tries to interpret the look on Dean’s face. There’s guilt in his eyes.

»You weren’t in the bunker, so… You know.«

He’s not in the bunker a lot of times, but he does understand.

»I was afraid maybe something happened to you.«

»No. Nothing happened. I am just waiting until the morning comes and you and Sam get up.«

»Well, I’m up now«, Dean grimaces at him.

»You can’t have slept much yet.«

Dean shrugs.

»It’s fine.« He looks around, pulls at the collar of his T-Shirt. »It’s colder out here than I expected.«

Castiel takes his trench coat off. When he offers it to Dean, he stares at him dismissively for a second. Then he takes it and wraps it around his shoulders.

It feels odd to see Dean in a clothing that Castiel associates so closely with himself. It feels good.

»I wouldn’t just up and leave without saying goodbye, Dean. Not again.«

»Not after the way you left last time when I made you?«

He finds his own pain mirrored in Dean’s eyes.

»It was not fair to Sam. I thought I was doing it to spare him, but I was simply being spineless.«

Dean lowers his gaze, makes his hand into a fist and puts it on his knee.

»Is that what you think you’re doing now, too? Sparing him?«

»What do you mean?«

Dean rubs two fingers over his forehead.

»I swear this is literally the last thing I want to be doing right now… Or ever.«

Castiel cannot remember ever seeing this expression on Dean’s face before. He’s fighting to keep the sadness out of his expressions, but it’s not working.

»You like Sam.«

It’s a statement of fact but Dean makes a pause that feels significant, so Castiel nods.

»I do.«

»Did he do something you didn’t like?«

The question makes Castiel frown.

»Sam has done no such thing.«
“Right…« A strangled sound escapes Dean’s throat that makes Castiel want to comfort him. He doesn’t. »But you said you rebuffed him.«

»Yes.«

»You’ve seen how Sam’s been the last two days.«

»He is angry with me«, Castiel knows. »He talks to me, but reluctantly. He will not let me touch him, he avoids me.« Talking about it stirs a yearning deep inside him.

»He’s not angry with you.« Dean laughs hollowly. »He’s angry with himself. He’s pissed off and sad.«

»He’s so unwell.« Castiel puts his hand flat on the ground, the gravel dents the skin. »I want to help, but I’m not sure if he’ll let me. Or if it wise… In the past he’s trusted me before and I have broken that trust.«

He looks at Dean, wills him to return the gesture.

»We’ve all done that. We’ve all done shitty things.«

»Not the way I have… I’d hoped after the wall… after I’d taken on his pain. I’d hoped he would not suffer anymore. But I see now that it’s impossible. For that to happen, he’d have to forget everything.«

»He talks to you about his time in hell?«

Confusingly, Dean sounds envious.

»Not much. Some. But I’ve seen some more of it, felt his pain and his memories.« He shakes his head. »It is too much for one person to bear.«

»Hell sucks.«

It is poignant and true.

Castiel laughs. It feels good to do so amidst everything.

He smiles at Dean softly. There are many things he loves about this man, his humor is amongst them.

»That is true. But as painful as your experience in hell was, and I know it was, Lucifer is-«

»I know it’s not the same. He never tortured anyone, did he?«

»Dean-«

He stops, when Dean turns towards him and shifts a bit closer.

»You make him feel better.« He sounds sad but resolute. »I don’t know when that happened, but… I think he needs you.«

I need him too, Castiel thinks. He is unsure why he can’t say it.

»I can’t get through to him anymore, but you can.« Dean halts, wavers, before asking: »What happened yesterday?«
»We kissed.«

It does not surprise Dean.

»And? What else?«

»Nothing.«

»What do you mean, nothing? That’s it? Was it super sloppy? Did you wipe your mouth afterwards and offended him or something?«

Dean is anxious, so Castiel reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, until he can feel him calming.

»Nothing of the sort. It was all perfectly fine from his side.«

Dean shrugs his hand off.

»I don’t need to know the specifics«, he says, a sudden harshness in his voice. It’s a confusing emotional whiplash.

»You just asked me to-«

»I know. Fuck.« Dean bites his lip. »I know I did.« He rubs over his temple, fervently, until the skin turns pink. When Castiel takes his hand away and leaves it in his, Dean lets him.

»Listen, Cas«, he finally says. »This all feels really strange to me, to be honest. Like I’m just having a really fucked up dream where I’m supposed to get my brother to hook up with my - « He shakes his head again. »I want you both to be happy«, he says gravely. »Hell, I’d settle for alive and sane…«

Dean’s hand feels cold and rough.

»You should talk. I mean, what is wrong with the two of you, that you need me to tell you that? I know Sam always makes everything a lot more complicated than it really is, but you? I don’t get it with you. Is that some weird angel thing?«

He pulls his hand away.

»If two people want each other, it’s really simple.«

Nothing about the way he feels for Sam seems simple to Castiel, but he’s willing to listen. He’s always willing to listen to Dean.

»You really think so?«

»Yeah, you just…« Dean makes some vague gesture with his hand. »… you go for it. Life is bad enough without needlessly overcomplicating everything. He wants you, you want him. I might not want to think about the mechanics of it but - you’ll figure it out.«

Castiel nods.

He pushes himself up.

»You’re gonna talk to him? Now?«
Dean seems surprised.

»You’re very persuasive.«

Dean’s face is contoured with pain, as he looks up to him.

»Yeah, I guess I am.«

Castiel puts his hand on Dean’s shoulder. Dean squeezes it.

»Thank you.«

»Good luck, man«, Dean croaks. »I’m gonna«, he nods towards the sky, »watch the sunset or something. Can’t really make it much worse of a chick flick moment that it already is.«

Castiel considers knocking at Sam’s door. If he sleeps, he does not want to wake him.

He quietly enters the room and walks up to the end of the bed, where he halts.

He considers Dean’s advice. He feels quite incompetent and not up to the task of talking things out.

Sam wakes up with a start. He shoots into an upright sitting position.

»Cas?«, he asks, catching his breath.

»Sam.«

»What are you doing here?« His confused voice turns angry. »Were you here all night?«

»No«, Castiel hurries to say. »No, I was outside with Dean. He advised me to talk to you.«

»He did, huh?«

It’s a rhetorical question of which he does not understand the intent.

»Yes.«

Sam gets out of bed, crosses his arms in front of his chest.

He towers over Castiel. His posture isn’t intimidating - humans will never not seem tiny - but his anger is.

»Well yeah, you can go and tell me I don’t appreciate him meddling.«

»Sam.« Castiel gets a hold of his arm, doesn’t let him retreat backwards. »Why are you so upset?«

He looks at the bed. »Did you have a nightmare, did Lucifer-«

»I’m not upset!«, Sam says firmly. »And this has nothing to do with whatever I’m dreaming or not dreaming. Just… Leave it, okay?«

Sam is breathing heavily.

»Why can’t you just leave it alone?«

The pained expression on his face looks awfully similar to Dean’s. He fears he’s caused both.

»I don’t want to«, Castiel eventually says. »Do you really want me to?«
He draws Sam closer by his arm. He thinks of Dean’s words and his advice to talk. But this doesn’t seem like something that can be solved by words.

Sam’s lower lip is quivering slightly. Castiel lets go of his arm.

Sam can easily move away, if he wishes to do so. He doesn’t.

»I am sorry if I have hurt you«, Castiel says. »It was the furthest thing from my intentions.«

Sam says nothing.

Not when Castiel lets his fingers slide into his neck. Not when he pulls him down and kisses him.

Sam’s lips are just as soft as the first time, but now he has more time to appreciate them, as neither of them pulls away quickly.

Sam opens his mouth. Castiel wonders if he’s about to protest. Instead a tongue tentatively slides forward, and presses against his lower lip. He welcomes it, just as he welcomes Sam’s fingers almost aggressively curling up in his hair.

They kiss for what seems a long time, but in reality is not even a full minute.

Time isn’t linear, it’s bendable. Castiel wishes to bend it so this moment doesn’t pass as quickly. He feels more content than he has in a long time. He feels approximately at home.

Sam’s eyes flutter open.

Their noses touch.

»Cas….«

Sam sounds much too confused.

Castiel states his intent as clearly as he can.

»I wish to have this«, he says and moves in for another kiss.

Maybe Dean is right. Maybe this is simple.
The first thing Sam sees when he wakes are Castiel's eyes up close, right in front of his face.

The light on the bedside table is turned on. A subdued white overcasts the room.

»Good morning, Sam«, Castiel says, shattering most of the doubts about whether he's still dreaming or awake.

»Morning.«

The proximity is daunting. They've woken up many times together by now. But it's not the same after last night, after Castiel’s made his intents so clear. This feels fragile, new and very easy to mess up.

Sam moves his hand to Castiel's cheek slowly. Slow enough to check for a response, which comes almost instantly.

Castiel kisses differently than he'd have thought. Mostly because it’s not fundamentally different to other people he's loved. It feels human, not otherworldly or celestial (decidedly *nothing* like the kisses he’s come to associate with fallen angels).

Kissing Cas is *good*. It's very real.

They bump noses as they both move their faces to the same direction at the same time. Sam's laugh is muffled, their mouths still pressed together.

Castiel pulls away, a slight upcurl of lips, almost a smile on his face.

»So...«, Sam says, which is a stupid, needless thing to say, but somehow it really doesn't matter. He feels surprisingly at peace with his inadequacy.

Castiel strokes through Sam's hair, pushes a strand behind his ear, and again, his motions seem
surprisingly un-angel-like.

Sam wonders for a second if maybe he broke Castiel, brought him down to full humanness again. An insane thought. He knows he's not capable of defeating an angel just like this.

»Were you here all night?«, Sam asks.

»Yes.« Castiel furrows his brows. »Would you have wanted me to leave?«

»No.«

»When you fell asleep you seemed content with my presence, but I know you also said you felt it would be awkward if I stayed.«

»That was before.« Before, when the rejection had felt final and sure. »It’s not awkward now.«

He runs his thumb over Castiel's cheek.

It really isn’t awkward, but it does seem strange.

Sam doesn’t think it’s just the novelty that makes it feel so surreal that he gets to do this. That he gets to pull his face close and part his lips with his tongue, intruding Cas’ body with his permission like this.

He still doesn’t really understand how this happened.

It’s uncomfortable to ask, but if he wants this to work (and he really, really does), he knows he needs to make an effort. Try to be honest, try not to wallow in his insecurities and fears.

»Not that I’m not happy you changed your mind«, he says, his hand still on Castiel’s cheek. »But… why?«
With every second Castiel doesn’t reply and just looks at him calmly, Sam can feel himself becoming more nervous.

»When I kissed you first, you didn’t seem into it. So I thought I’d misread the signs.«

»You didn’t misread any signs.«

»If you’d told me that a bit earlier you could have spared me a few really bad hours.«

He doesn’t mean to actually say it, but it’s probably a good thing to have the dispensed anger of the past days out in the open.

»I had no intention of hurting you«, Castiel promises, just as he did yesterday, as if that’s the same as offering a real explanation.

»I know.«

»I was confused.«

Sam cocks an eyebrow.

»And you’re not anymore?«

»No, I’m still confused.«

It’s not really the answer he wanted to hear.

Sam shares the sentiment of confusion in general, but not about naming his feelings.

But just because he isn’t confused about what he feels for Castiel anymore doesn’t mean he can expect it to be the same for him.
»You wanted me to kiss you.« The words fill Sam with dread. That this is all there is to it. Castiel wanting to help and wanting to please. »And I wanted to kiss you as well. I just wasn’t sure if that was enough. Is it?«

»Enough for what?«

»I know that this kind of shared physical intimacy often means more than just pleasure and companionship.«

»And that’s all you want?« Sam asks, slowly curling his fingers away from Castiel’s face.

If Castiel is talking about a friends with benefits situation, Sam isn’t sure how he feels about it. Somewhere between better than nothing and a feeling of deep embarrassment for wanting much more.

»No«, Castiel answers. »I was simply unsure what you were asking of me, when you kissed me.«

This honest one-on-one is not going as well as he’d hoped it would.

»I wasn’t asking anything. I honestly have no idea what I’m doing half the time, anyway. And now you…«

He swallows hard.

It’s not true, of course, that the kiss wasn’t a question, even though he’d not consciously intended it to be one.

*I want you. Do you you want me, too?*

*You were never mine before, not at all, but it feels like you kind of are now. Tell me that I’m not crazy.*
I’m in love with you. You know that, right?

For all intents and purposes, Castiel still hasn’t answered. Not really.

Castiel takes Sam’s hand and brings it up to his chin. He looks at their entangled hands for a moment.

Sam feels a brush of lips against his skin.

Castiel looks at him, clearly expecting him to go on.

»Can you just be brutally honest with me«, Sam finally says. »All of this… The taking care of me and trying to help me, spending all this time with me and… everything else. Are you just feeling sorry for me?«

Castiel wrinkles his forehead.

»I do feel sorry for you.« He talks deliberately slowly, as if speaking to a young child. »I want you to feel better and if I can bring you some comfort with my company, I welcome that. But I would not spend so much time and energy on you out of selflessness or duty.«

He puts his hand, the one that isn’t still holding Sam’s, on his shoulder.

»I do it because I enjoy being close to you. It is, in fact, mostly selfishness that has led me to you in that way. Despite how unwell you are and knowing that is only your fragile state of mind, loneliness and desperation that has led you to accepting my help, I am glad you did. When you wouldn’t let me help you anymore, I was afraid you wouldn’t want to spend as much time with me either.«

»That’s stupid«, Sam says, harsher than he intends to. »You really thought that?«

»Why wouldn’t I have?«

»Because I was clearly into you… Am… Because I am into you. You know that, right?« Castiel still
seems a bit lost. Sam wonders if his words are still too ambiguous. »I want us to be more than friends.«

»We are.«

»Yeah?«

»Of course, we are.«

Considering their distinctly different conceptions of friendship and love, this can mean a lot of things.

Sam feels tempted to ask, but he’s not sure if there’s any answer that would actually satisfy. He knows this is not going to work if he’s second guessing everything Cas says. Honesty and clarity in words is important, but so is taking a leap of faith.

Sam draws Castiel’s face closer and asks again, pushes their lips together, just to make sure that he understood him right this time.

Yes, comes the wordless reply, you understood.

Yes, Castiel’s tongue provides, pressing into Sam’s mouth, I want you too.
Dean walks over to them cautiously.

He’s not sure what he’s hoping for.

It doesn’t really matter, because within seconds it becomes clear that whatever happened between the two of them last night, whatever Castiel ended up saying to Sam, it went well.

They’re sitting at the table, Sam’s laptop between them. Their chairs are slightly turned towards each other, their knees touching.

The video they’re watching shows some kind of factory machine producing what looks like cloth. Dean feels immediately lost.

Sam’s arm leans on the back of Castiel’s chair, while his eyes go back and forth between the screen and Cas’ face.

»What are you watching?«

Sam visibly stiffens, but leaves his arm where it is.

»I was just showing Cas this website. It’s, um, videos of all sorts of machines and robots and things like that.« He scrolls through the site, clicking through more videos. »It just shows you how stuff works. Like this here is a metal shaper. And that’s a rotating grapple on an excavator used to stack tiles.«

»I can read the headlines, thanks.«

»It’s pretty cool«, Sam says, before closing the web browser. The home screen shows a row of neatly organized folders in front of a wallpaper sporting an oversaturated sunset. Dean recognizes it as the one that came pre-installed with the laptop years ago.

»I’ll never get tired of saying this, but you’re literally the biggest nerd I know.«

»That’s not saying much.« Sam shuts the laptop, visibly flustered. »You don’t really know that many people well.«

Dean turns his head to Castiel, who’s watching them closely.

»I’m sorry, Cas. How many of these did he make you watch?«

»They’re quite interesting. I hadn’t thought much about these rather trivial human inventions before. Some of these machines are a lot more intricate than I’d imagined. I’d like to think it’s these sort of things my father would be proud of.«

»You think God is a big fan of rotating grapples?« Dean cocks an eyebrow. »I always thought of him more as a forklift kinda guy.«

Sam releases a small, barely audible sigh.

Which, Dean thinks, is not really fair.

Sam gets to have everything and yet he still wants to mope around.
Bullshit.

A little bit gratitude would be in order.

Then again, Sam doesn’t know Dean’s given up anything for him. And he shouldn’t know, of course.

»I’m going to look for a case«, Dean says, already turning to leave.

Dean’s already halfway out of the bunker, on the bottom of the stairs, when Sam runs into him.

He eyes Dean’s jacket.

»Where are you going?«

»There’s something in Wichita I wanted to check out.«

»I read about that, too. Are you thinking ghosts?«

»Maybe.«

»Hang on. I’m just going to grab my jacket.«

It’s odd, seeing Sam so eager to join him on a hunt.

»It’s alright. I don’t think we both need to go. I was only going to check it out.«

»Yeah, sure you were.«

»Whatever.«

He doesn’t have time for this.

Sam looks at him, waiting.

»Come on, then.«

It’s only when they’re already in the car that Dean asks. Not that he’s forgotten.

»Where’s Cas?«

»I don’t really know. He just said he had some things to take care of.«

»What?« He stares at Sam in disbelief. »Are you kidding me?«

»No. Why?«

»Because! Taking care of things? That didn’t sound ominous as hell to you? And you just let him go?«

The puzzled look on Sam’s face is just maddening.

»I didn’t let him go, Dean. And it’s nothing like whatever you’re thinking. We were just looking for
cases and he, I don’t know, he just stumbled upon something and told me he wanted to see if there was anything to it.«

»On his own«, Dean repeats.

»Yeah, on his own. I don’t get what the big deal is.« Sam huffs. »Stop looking at me, and focus on the road.«

Dean’s never had trouble driving and being mad at the same time.

»Are you seriously telling me you didn’t even ask him where he’s going? You know what he’s like! He gets all heroic and thinks he can save the world all by himself.«

»You sure you’re not describing someone else?«, Sam mutters and Dean can’t even tell which of them he’s referring to. »I really don’t understand what your problem is. Cas isn’t stupid. If he says he’s just checking out if there’s a case, why would I question that?«

»And the fact that he didn’t even tell you where he’s going didn’t tip you off?«

»No.«

»Well why the hell not, Sammy?«

Sam glares at him.

»He’s always done that kind of thing… What exactly is it that you think happened anyway? Where do you think he is?«

There’s so many possible answers to that, all of which are horrifying.

»I trust him. He wouldn’t lie.«

Dean snorts.

»He wouldn’t?«

»No, he wouldn’t.« Sam’s lips are pursed. »Not about something like that. Why should he? It’s not like I’d stop him from going anywhere. I’m pretty sure he knows that, too.«

»Yeah. Of course.«

It’s unclear if Sam really believes what he’s saying or if it’s just wishful thinking.

»Well, let’s just hope you’re right and he’s not off somewhere with some angel dicks he still thinks of as his friends.«

»Why do yo think he’d go and meet other angels and not tell me?« Sam’s voice is filled with doubt now. Wishful thinking then. »Tell us, I mean.«

»Because he doesn’t want to worry you.« Dean hesitates. »You’re probably right. He’s probably fine.«

It’s a ghost. For Dean’s liking they’ve been dealing with a few too many of those lately. But at least in this case boring means simple and quick, too. The remains are where they’re supposed to be. It’s a deserted private graveyard and they don’t have to wait for the night.
There’s something strange about digging up bones with the sun is still shining and birds chirping in the trees.

Sam seems fine, kinda.

He does his job and he doesn’t complain much.

It’s a far cry from the apathetic guy who’d let himself be captured by a monster and listlessly stared into the eye of death.

Sam doesn’t seem particularly happy, either, but that’s probably just thanks to the seeds of doubt Dean’s planted earlier.

If Cas had messed up last night, if it hadn’t gone well, Sam would be in a much worse state, Dean figures.

After the Salt & Burn on the way out of the city, Dean puts the music back on.

He starts humming and eyes Sam closely, looking for some sign of discomfort. But he seems, well, just, normal.

He’d also seemed pretty normal the other day. Before he’d started shouting and telling him and Cas and the invisible fourth passenger to shut up.

Maybe Grand Funk Railroad is fine and only Black Sabbath is triggering. Maybe it’s got nothing to do with the music at all. Dean should probably ask and make sure, before Sam’s tumbling down the road again, having a fit.

Dean’s pretty sure, Sam wouldn’t react as well if it were him cradling him in his arms instead of Cas. He wonders if he’d get him to snap out of it at all.

It was difficult thing to watch. The madness was easier to take than the sheer reverence in Sam’s eyes.

He’ll get used to it. Somehow. He has to.

»You hungry?«

»No.«

»What did you eat today?«

»I had breakfast. I’m okay.«

»Alright. Just grab me something from the gas station then.«

»Fine.«

When Sam returns, he throws a package of chips into Dean’s lap and puts something that looks vaguely pie-like into the backseat. He opens a mud-brown can with a mustached guy on it, saying ‘Care for a cappuccino?’. It’s probably the least appealing coffee Dean’s ever seen.
»Did someone rob this place right before you went in?«

For a while they drive in silence that’s only disturbed by the chewing of stale paprika potato chips and Sam’s quick sips of coffee.

If you hate me so much, why did you insist on tagging along?

»You could just call him«, Dean says, making Sam look up.

»Mhm?«

»You could just call Cas. He got a new phone.«

»I know he does.« Sam balances the empty can on his oversize knee. »I don’t have to call him. He’s probably back in the bunker by now.«

Alright.» The chips package crackles under his fingers. It’s all gone, leaving Dean to draw back empty-handed. »What’s the deal between you two now?« The roof of his mouth is coated with a greasy film. He lets his tongue run over it, while he waits for a reply. »I know you guys talked.«

»I know you know.« Sam’s voice is hard to read. »He told me you talked to him last night.«

»You’re welcome. So you’re officially a thing now?«

Sam’s expression is pained.

»Dean….«

»It’s a simple question.«

»I don’t know… I guess so.«

»Well, you just sound thrilled!«

»I don’t know.« Sam lets the pop tap clink against the thin metal can again and again. »I guess I’m just… I don’t know.«

»Care to elaborate?«

»I don’t really know how.«

»Did he stay in your room last night?«

»Yeah.«

»That’s that then.«

»Nothing happened,« Sam says, way too quickly, a guilty look on his face. »I mean, not really.«

»You just held hands, kissed and talked about your feelings.«

When Sam doesn’t reply, Dean realizes that’s exactly what happened.

»Shouldn’t you, you know, be happy? That’s what you wanted, right?«

»Yeah«, Sam nods and looks outside the window, wistfully. »Yeah, I’m happy.«
Castiel sits in the library, a bunch of books in front of him, when they return.

He stands up when they enter the room, which is not something he normally bothers to do.

»Hello«, he says, quite formally.

»Hey.« Dean nods. »Did you get to take care of whatever you wanted to take care of?«

»Yes.« Castiel says curtly. »How did it go wherever you were?«

There’s a hint of worry or maybe even something akin to annoyance in his voice.

»Salt and Burn in Wichita. It went fine.«

»That’s good to hear. I’m glad you both seem well and unharmed.«

Dean wants to ask Castiel where he was and why he just went without telling him. But he’s distracted by Sam, who’s nervously shifting from one foot to the other. He’s waiting for Dean to leave.

Castiel is still standing in that awkward

Of course. Right. That’s what it’s going to be like from now on.

»I’m heading to the kitchen. We didn’t stop for food on the way here.«

»You must be hungry too, Sam«, Cas says, soft-voiced.

Sam ducks his head a little.

»No, I’m fine.«

Dean feels lost in the kitchen, unsure what to do.

He eyes the freezer, the fridge and the stove.

He slaps the wall, open-handed, in a way he knows hardly makes a sound.

In the cupboard he finds a Single Malt he’s kept there for a few months now, waiting for a special moment. This will have to do.

In his room, he puts on headphones and turns the volume up so high that the noise becomes uncomfortable. His ears become hot, the pain a nice distraction until the alcohol kicks in.

Dean has trouble appreciating the smoky notes and subtle sweet undertones in his drink.

He can’t let this, let them, take up so much of his head space.

Sam is safe and happy-ish. That needs to be enough.

You make a decision, you stick to it, you move on. You don’t dwell on things.

Maybe he just needs some time to adjust. It has to be like this. Because if it doesn’t -
The thought of feeling like this every day seems unbearable.
»Really?« Sam laughs. »You liked that horrible movie?«

»Don’t mock me.«

»Sorry.« He laughs again. »Just the thought of you enjoying a Spaghetti Western, it’s-«

»Is it off-putting?«, Castiel asks, a serious note in his voice.

»No. Just surprising.« *Cute* is what it is. »Let me guess, Dean gave you a must-watch list that you worked your way through?«

»He has quite an eclectic taste. There were some surprising choices. However, I haven’t watched all of them yet. There were more pressing matters than expanding my knowledge on film history.«

Sam presses his shoulder against Cas’, shifting his weight on the mattress.

»You know that’s not what we are doing right now though, right? Turning you into a movie buff?«

»How do you mean?«

Sam gestures at the TV.

»You enjoy watching movies and shows, don’t you?«

»Yes, I do«, Castiel says after a moment of consideration. »I enjoy watching them with you. Your emotional response to them is quite interesting.«

»You’re not supposed to watch me«, Sam says, a heat burning in his cheeks. »You’re supposed to pay attention to the screen.«

»I can multitask«, Castiel asserts. »Besides, you do the same. You’re always paying attention to my reaction when you show me things you like.«

»That’s just because I don’t want to bore you.«

»I thought it was because you wished to bond with me over these things.«

Sam doesn’t know what to say. Castiel is right of course, but there’s something unsavory about spelling it out like that.

»Your worry is unnecessary«, Castiel says. »You would notice if I got bored. I would most likely just tell you. Besides, watching things you enjoy helps me get to know you better. And I appreciate how eager you are to expose these aspects of yourself to me now. More so than you used to do.«

Sam turns his head and smiles timidly.

»Yeah, I guess I can get a bit overeager.«

»You think I am criticizing you?«, Castiel asks, bemused.

»No. I know you weren’t. I just know I can get that way sometimes.«

The furrow on Castiel’s forehead deepens.
He seems about to say something, to argue back. Instead he just puts his fingers to Sam’s face and pulls him closer.

Castiel kisses him with such ease that it’s hard to believe this is still new to him, too. There’s nothing confused in his touch.

»Um«, Sam says, when Castiel pulls away.

It’s been like this for a few weeks. While he’s longed for this deepened physical closeness, while he craves it, he’s still mostly caught off guard when Castiel initiates anything (not that much has happened, really, which is both incredibly frustrating and reassuring at once).

It all seems just such an unlikely turn of events.

Him falling for Cas is one thing. Unexpected at first, maybe, but the more Sam thinks about it, the more it seems almost inevitable. In fact, he finds it more surprising that it took him this long. He wonders if it’s the physical proximity and the touch that flipped a switch. Or if it was mostly the time Castiel was gone, the fear for his life, that broadened the feelings of companionship and deep gratitude, that muddled up everything, until he eventually found himself undeniably in love.

Sam’s own feelings make sense to him. Reciprocal feelings are another thing altogether.

It feels silly to still have self doubts. It’d be stupid not to take Castiel at his word. The thing is, Sam does believe him. It’s not as if he doesn’t know Castiel likes him or thinks he’s lying.

It’s just what he’s not saying, what he’s leaving out. It’s the blanks that bother Sam.

It’s kind of hard to ignore the fact that Castiel has professed his love for Dean so clearly and repeatedly. Sam’s not had the courage to talk about it. Probably, he thinks, because deep down he knows nothing’s changed for Castiel when it comes to Dean.

Sam knows. So he tells himself he’s fine with it. There’s no point in not being fine with it, when there’s nothing he could do to change it.

And what does it matter, really? It doesn’t make what they have any less true.

He looks past Cas’ face at his own hand, watches his own fingers stroke through dark, velvety hair before they disappear from his view, nestling in the back of Castiel’s neck.

Why ask, when he doesn’t want to hear the answer.

»I guess I should have gotten us two rooms now, huh?«, Dean says, throwing his bag onto one the bed. »Sorry, brain fart. Next time.«

Sam peels himself out of his jacket, throws it over the back of a chair.

»It’s fine.«

»You could still get a second room«, Castiel says, sitting down on the other bed. »If you wanted to.«

Dean shoots Sam a look, his eyebrow raised.

»Cas«, Dean says. »You wanna make sure no one’s followed us? I saw a suspicious car that seemed to be trailing us for a few miles. Might have been nothing, but you never know.«
»There was no car«, Castiel knows. But he gets up and leaves the motel room anyway.

»What are you talking about?« Sam slumps down on the bed, taking the warm spot Cas has just evacuated. »I didn’t see any car.«

»There’s no car«, Dean says brusquely.

Sam furrows his eyes.

»You could have just said you wanted to talk to me privately.«

Dean leans forward, forearms on his thighs, and clasps his hands together.

»You sure about the second room?« His eyes won’t leave Sam’s. »I’ve got enough cash on me and I get it if you guys want privacy now. Cas seems to, anyway.«

Sam looks down at his hands.

»It’s fine.«

»You really sure?«

»Yeah, I’m sure. It’s fine.«

When he looks up again, he finds Dean studying him with a strange look on his face.

»What?«

»So I figure you two haven’t even had the birds and bees talk yet, huh?«

»Dean.«

He means to say his name threateningly but instead it comes out like a whine.

»Well, let me tell you, as the one of us who’s actually done the deed with an angel before, it works pretty much the same as it does with anyone else, anatomically speaking at least. Then again, Anna was a woman. But it’s probably not the where-goes-what part that’s the problem, is it?«

»There’s no problem.«

»Well, I don’t know about that. You get all gooey-eyed and weak in the knees just looking at Cas, and he seems really eager to get you on your own, too. So whatever it is that’s not working, it’s not a lack of hormone-driven eagerness.«

»Dean«, Sam pleads. »Just drop it.«

»What? I’m just trying to be helpful.«

»No. You’re trying to embarrass me.«

A genuine look of confusion appears on Dean’s face.

»Why would I do that?«

»Because you always loved doing that. From the first time I was ever interested in anyone… You even did when you met Jess.«
»I hardly even got a chance to talk to her.« Dean shakes his head. »Anyway, I wasn’t trying to embarrass you.«

»Really? What else is this then?«

»I just care«, Dean says. Again, it sounds weirdly genuine, as if he’s actually convinced himself that that’s what he’s doing. Helping.

»I really don’t need your sex ed talk«, Sam glares. He’s trying not to feel embarrassed. »It’s a bit late for that.«

»Yeah, well, I know that. But it’s different now, you know? It’s kind of like being a virgin all over again. I thought you might be scared. I mean, a man? An angel? I get why that would intimidate you.«

Sam shakes his head. Not as an answer. He’s just trying to shake the conversation out of his mind.

»It’s not like you know anything about that«, he mumbles.

»Oh, but you do, smart ass?«

He doesn’t say anything but whatever expression it is that he’s wearing now, it makes Dean’s face falter.

»You do?«

If there’s anything worse than talking about his potential sex life with Dean, it’s talking about this.

»Who?«, Dean demands to know, incredulous. »When?«

Sam gets up from the bed, walks over to the door and opens it. Partly because he hopes to see Cas on the other side, and partly just to avoid Dean’s scrutinizing eyes.

There’s no one outside.

»It doesn’t matter.«

Dean gets up too.

»The hell it doesn’t!«

Dean shuts the door, leaves his hand flat against the wood.

Sam turns around slowly.

»Why are you getting so angry?«

Dean’s standing close.

»Why don’t you just answer my questions?«

»Because it’s none of your business.«

Sam’s not even sure if that’s really true. The lines of whose business is whose have long been blurred far too much to able to tell. He just knows he can’t, won’t, talk about it.

»An angel? I mean, how many angels have you even met? And guys? Are we talking plural? I
always thought you were straight until this whole Cas-thing happened!«

»I did, too. I am. I was. I-«

He shouldn’t be spluttering, he shouldn’t be trying to explain himself.

Dean snorts and thankfully takes a step back into the room. Sam still doesn’t move from the door.

»Well, you’re clearly not straight«, Dean says. He holds up his hands. »Which is fine, of course. I just figured you’d repressed that until you realized you wanted to get into Cas’ pants.«

»Don’t say it like that. That’s not what’s happening.«

»No. Hang on.« Dean waves a hand, doesn’t let him finish. »You know me. I’m a tolerant guy. Like I said, I just thought you were a late bloomer. It’s a bit weird maybe, I mean, after all that time, but I’m not going to judge. But now you’re telling me, you’ve had gay sex with angels before and you can’t even tell me who with…?« He shakes his head in disbelief. »What the fuck, Sammy! Why are you keeping shit like this from me?! Don’t you trust me?«

»It’s not about trust.«

Dean brushes his words aside.

»Is this because of Ruby?«, he asks. Sam doesn’t even understand what he means at first. Whether Dean’s lumping demons and angels together or why else he’d bring her up. »Because you know that was never about judging your bad taste in women. I just knew she was using you, corrupting you, turning you to the dark side.«

»This has nothing to do with Ruby«, Sam snarls. »Congrats for knowing she was playing me long before I did. And I’m sorry for actually thinking someone was on my side, trying to help me. Do you want me to apologize again for something that happened a decade ago?«

There was little Sam regrets as much as falling for as her, but there comes a point when apologizing over and over again for the same thing just feels hollow.

»I mean, I wouldn’t call starting the apocalypse just something that happened, but that’s just me. Also: not what I was talking about. I just meant -« Dean sighs. »I know most angels are dicks, but I wouldn’t have judged you for it, so I don’t get why you kept it a secret from me. Did you think I’d get angry?«

»This has nothing to do with you«, Sam says, quieter now. »I just don’t want to talk about it.«

»Why?«

Dean’s piercing glare makes it clear that he won’t stop asking. That he’ll be relentless until he gets his answer.

»Because they’re just not really the greatest of memories to wade through, okay?«

»So you had some bad sex with some angel.«

How nice it’d be if that was all there was to it. Some awkward encounter that made him uncomfortable, a bit embarrassed maybe.

Dean shrugs. He’s trying to make sense of the tidbits of information Sam’s offering him, not getting any hints.
»It really doesn’t explain why you can’t tell me who it was. It’s not recent, is it? And the guys? Are we talking college experimentation or something else?«

»Just leave it«, Sam begs, before turning around and opening the door again. This time Dean doesn’t stop him.

It’s quite chilly, but he welcomes the cold.

There are only a few cars parked in the parking lot. He finds Castiel leaning against the Impala. He doesn’t seem like he’s been looking for outside threats or possible intruders. He’s just been waiting here until he’s allowed back in again.

»Sometimes I really hate him.«

Sam’s surprised by his own harsh words. Castiel doesn’t seem to be.

»What did he want?«

»It’s dumb, really.«

It’s precisely because Castiel doesn’t ask further, that he’s able to go on.

»I just don’t really feel comfortable discussing the entirety of my sexual history with him.«

Castiel takes a hold of his hands.

»He never used to be like that. He’s always the first one to boast about his conquests to me, sure. And, yeah, he always loved to tease me with what he thinks of as my quasi-celibacy, but he never actually wanted to know anything if something did happen. It was almost like… you know how kids are when they’re reminded of the fact that they’re parents had sex at least once?« Sam doubts Castiel knows. Why would he know that. »There’s just something that feels really icky about it. And Dean, he… he was always the same way when it came to me. When it stopped being jokes, whenever it actually veered into serious talk about anything sexual pertaining me, he’d kind of freak out.«

Normally physical contact would feel bad when he feels this raw, but Castiel’s touch is merely affirming.

»So I don’t really get why he’s like this right now or what’s changed.«

Him and Cas is what changed, he knows. The thought only leads to other uncomfortable thoughts, so he tries to brush it aside.

»I think he’s actually angry with me.« Sam scoffs at the absurdity. »He was always fine with not talking about things he doesn’t want to hear, but now he’s actually angry just because I don’t want to tell him everything.«

»Why don’t you?«

It’s a good question.

»Because there are just some things I don’t want to talk about. With anyone, but especially not with him. We never really talked that much about our time in hell, anyway. Not the specifics. Why would I want to do that now all of a sudden? Besides, I kind of thought he’d have gathered the main points, but maybe not.«

One single deep crease appears on Castiel’s forehead.
"You are talking about the abuse you’ve encountered at Lucifer’s hands."

Sam halts for a breath and slips his fingers out of Castiel’s.

"Am I?", he asks. "I know he tortured me, don’t get me wrong…"

He halts again, unsure of what he really aims to convey. He’s not looking for sympathy or even clarification. He just wants someone else to get it.

Castiel doesn’t understand.

But then, after a few seconds of blinkless staring, Castiel does understand something.

"You think this is partly your own doing."

"I know it is. I know there were times, many times, when it wasn’t. But there were others."

All of a sudden he can’t for the life of his remember why he’s talking about this at all. There’s nothing to gain from sharing this.

He could have just left the topic with Dean inside the motel, he could have pulled Cas close, and forgot about this whole damn thing, instead of delving deeper into it.

"Sam. I saw what happened. I know what he did to you. Not one part of this is your own doing."

Castiel probably expects him to be comforted by that notion. It’s the opposite. If none of what happened happened because of his own actions, he’s stripped of his agency. If there was nothing he could have done differently, could have done better, it means it could simply happen again and there’s nothing he can do to stop it. If Castiel was right, it’d mean losing even the last shred of control.

"No.« Sam shakes his head. "You see, there were times… There were times I thought him out.« He can hear the strange hitch in his own voice. "There were sometimes days, weeks, or what felt like weeks, when he wouldn’t talk to me. When I’d bored him to death and I would miss —"

He stops talking. It’s the first time he’s said any of that out loud, and it feels bizarre. Surely speaking these truths will have dire consequences.

He awaits them, a tight feeling in his throat, that only gets tighter when nothing happens. No thunder, no disgust, nothing.

"Don’t you get it«, Sam adds with emphasis. "I thought out his company, at times when I could have been left in peace."

"And you think by doing so you waived your rights to be upset about all the times you did not?"

"No. I know what he did. God, you know how much I’ve tried not to remember. How much you had to take on, for me to even function again. I’m not trying to make him the good guy here. I just - I know what I did. And I know part of what happened was my own fault."

"It most definitely was not.« Castle’s shift in mood is swift and brutal. Where there was quiet consideration, there’s only plain anger now. "Sam. You were physically and psychologically tortured by one, if not the most, cunning being in the universe. The fact that you’re contemplating your own responsibility in the matter is testament to that. That you’d doubt yourself in such a way just shows how much power he still has over you. It does not show any of your failings in the matter,
of which there are none.«

No. This isn’t true.

_He liked it. He liked some of it._

And he’s supposed to believe that doesn’t change a thing?

Castiel’s anger dissipates as quickly as it came. His face softens. Sam lets himself be drawn closer again, despite the bubbling urge to run.

»Sam, listen to me. I need you to understand that there’s nothing about the harm done to you that is your fault.«

»You can’t really believe that.«

»Are you accusing me of lying?«

He is, but he doesn’t mean to.

»If you’re not lying, then you’re mistaken.«

»What would it take for you to believe I was right?«

Sam thinks for a while. He considers Cas’ brightly lit face, a mixture of the moon and the street lamp illuminating his features.

There’s nothing, he realizes. He knows the way things unfolded in the cage is partly his own doing. He thinks there’s nothing that could be said to convince him otherwise. And really he’s mostly accepted it, too. He’s learnt to almost live with it.

He just wishes Castiel could see him for who he really is too. For someone to fully see him.

Castiel’s embrace is hesitant, meek enough for Sam to easy draw away if he wanted to.

»I wish you’d believe me«, he says into Sam’s shoulder, his arms softly draped around his middle. »I have hope that, eventually, you will.«

Despite everything else, the implication of a future, a far-off future for them, with ample opportunity for Castiel to change his mind, is heartening.

No matter how futile, a part of him wants Castiel to keep trying.

They stay like this for a while, in a stock-still embrace.

Sam doesn’t know who moves first. For a moment he’s unsure of why they have to return to the motel at all, when they could just stay right here.

He appreciates the tight hold Cas has on his hand, and him not letting go until long after they’re back in the room.
A white-haired patron exists the diner, leaving his newspaper behind.

Dean leans out of the red vinyl seat, reaches over to the table next to theirs and fetches the thin paper.

He unfolds it and starts skimming.

It’s unlikely that he’ll find something in there that he wouldn’t come across online, but he doesn’t really like reading the news on his phone. And he’s definitely not about to grab the laptop from the car just for some casual case-browsing.

Sam would. He knows Sam would, because Sam has done so many times.

Sam likes to get his laptop out all the time. He’ll eat for five minutes and spend the remainder of the breakfast behind his laptop, taking advantage of free coffee refills. Only looking up when he’s found something interesting and needs to read Dean’s face for a reaction.

Sam doesn’t have his laptop with him now.

While perusing the paper - more than half of it is just ads for local businesses - Dean tries to ignore his brother and Castiel across from him. They’re talking in a low tone, but carefully just loud enough so he could join in on the conversation, if only he wanted. How polite of them.

It’s become apparent that it doesn’t take very long for people to develop in-jokes and other things that become impenetrable as an outsider.

Dean takes out a pen and circles a small mention about a former employee at a high school a few towns away, kitchen staff, who claims to have been attacked by ghost. It sounds far-fetched, but it’s the first thing that sounds vaguely supernatural at all.

A matronly server approaches the table. Dean folds up the paper and orders the breakfast special.

»And what can I get you, fellas?«

»I’ll take the omelette«, Sam says. »And a coffee. Thanks.«

She smoothes her apron, as she eyes Castiel curiously.

»And you, sweetheart?«

»I’ll take a coffee as well, thank you.«

»Are you not going to eat? You look like you could use some more meat on those bones.«
Sam puts a hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

»We’re sharing the omelette.«

»We are?«, Cas asks, when the waiter’s left.

»If you want, sure. I just wanted to get her off your back.«

Castiel looks down his chest. He catches Dean’s eyes when he glances back up.

»The server seemed to imply there something wrong with my body.«

»There’s nothing wrong with your body«, Sam says in that soft, nauseatingly gooey voice he’s been using 24/7 with Cas lately.

»The waitress likes you«, Dean explains. »She was just negging you. You know, insulting you in flirty way.«

Castiel doesn’t seem sure if Dean is only joking.

»That’s a very confusing way of showing interest.«

Sam throws a disapproving look in Dean’s direction.

»She was just trying to get you to order more food.«

»Whatever.« Dean rolls his eyes just a little, before opening the paper again. He turns it around and shoves it over to Sam. »What do you think?«

Sam inches the paper into Castiel’s direction, allowing him to read along, as they lean in.

»A ghost hunting a school cafeteria?«, Sam asks, when he’s done. »I don’t know…«

It’s about what Dean’s expected.

»Can’t hurt to check it out. It’s not far from here.«

»It’s Sunday. There’s not going to be anyone in the school to haunt.«

»It’s the perfect time to check for EMF, when the school is empty.« Sam knows this already.

»Besides, we can find this David Something guy.« He taps the paper. »If he just seems like a nut job, we can leave again.«

Sam lets go of the paper and turns towards Castiel.

»What do you say?«

»If you both think that it’s worth investigation, it surely is.«

Sam still doesn’t seem too convinced.

»Yeah… Maybe.«

The food arrives. The omelette comes with two forks. Castiel opts to try some of it, under Sam’s encouraging eyes. He’s not a fan.

»I still find it odd that many humans center so much of their dietary intake around the unfertilized
reproductive cycles of hens. It seems an eccentric choice.

»Ugh.« Dean pulls a face. »Thanks, Cas. People trying to eat here.«

»Why would that put you off your food? «

»Some things are better thought than said out loud. So zip it.«

»I’m sorry.«

»Whatever. Don’t worry.« Dean pulls his plate closer. »I’m still going devour it all.«

Sam smiles to himself, while shoving his omelette around with the fork.

It looks quite sad like this, deserted half-eaten on his plate. It doesn’t look any different, when they’re leaving. Dean’s too full to do anything about it.

He grabs his jacket and leaves for the counter to pay.

Castiel and Sam follow him out.

»I don’t know«, Sam mumbles a few steps behind, again in a conversation that’s not necessarily meant for Dean’s ears, but not really secretly, either. »I guess it’s worth checking out. I was just of hoping we’d be back in the bunker by tonight.«

Sam looking forward to the bunker is a new one.

Dean stops forward to the bunker is a new one.

Dean stops and turns around.

»We might be back by tonight, anyway. The school’s just half an hour from here and kinda on our way.«

Holding hands in public is new, too.

For a second Dean is too perplexed to talk on. He just stares at them and their enlaced fingers. The incredible casualness of it all.

No one should be holding Cas’ hand like this.

He remembers Sam’s admission that this isn’t the first time he’s been with a man or an angel. His stubbornness around not telling him any more. As if Dean were going to do anything about it. When there’s nothing he could do, even if he wanted to.

Sam’s always acting like he’s going to scold him or punish him for his actions, when really he should know that most of the time, Dean’s letting everything slide.

Sam’s done so many horrible things. Morally abhorrent as well as just vile shit. Things that make Dean’s toenails curl. And yet, he’s still here, taking care of him. So what the fuck does Sam think he’d do now? He’s just asking for a where, when and who. Not because Dean disapproves - maybe he kind of disapproves, too, but that’s beside the point - but because he doesn’t understand how he could have missed something so big about Sam. When he’s spent most of his life focusing on nothing but him.

Besides. It just hurts to be reminded how little Sam trusts him. The repeated lying about being straight. The repeated dismissal of having feelings for Cas. Laughing in his face at the mere mention.
He probably doesn’t even know that it’s thanks to Dean he gets to hold Cas’ hand like this out in the open now.

»What’s in the bunker that can’t wait another day?«

»Nothing.« Sam’s grip around Castiel’s hand visibly tightens. »Just tired of motels.«

»There’s always the car. Although that might be a bit too crowded now.«

»It’s fine«, Sam says. »A motel’s fine. Let’s just go.«

»I doubt it’s a ghost.«

Sam lowers the EMF meter in his hand. He watches Castiel through a shelf, where, behind the pots and pans, he inspect the kitchen.

Dean wipes the dust from his coat. They’re in their FBI disguises just in case.

»We should check the rest of the school.«

»Is that really worth it? We just broke into a school based on a hunch…«

»It’s not just a hunch. This guy says he’s been attacked by a ghost. What’s up with you, man? Normally that’d be enough for you.«

Sam doesn’t reply. Dean follows his gaze.

Castiel’s squatting next to the shelf now, in a investigative pose that looks awfully close to something from an old school detective show. He’s just missing the magnifier and the right hat.

»You need to stop watching all these crime shows with him«, Dean says.

Sam squints.

»We don’t watch a lot of crime.«

»Huh. Could have sworn you do.« Dean shrugs. »Do you want to check the rest of the school or should we find try to find the guy first.«

Sam hums. It’s clear he wants to do neither.

»We should split up«, he eventually says. »You find the guy. I’ll check the school grounds.«

Dean could have sworn Sam’d have gone for the other way round.

»You sure?«

»Yeah. Why not?«

»Because you’re better at listening to people’s sob stories.« Dean turns to leave. »Let me know if you find anything.«

»I doubt it.«

Castiel’s not crouching anymore, but he’s still inspecting the kitchen, more specifically the ceiling,
now.

Dean sees nothing up there but stains and dusty cobwebs.

He taps Cas’ shoulder.

»You coming? I could use your help.«

»Oh.« Cas glances at Sam quickly. »Yes, of course.«

David Banks’ address is only a quick google search away. His home is about as much a mess as his hair. Dean immediately mistrusts him. He, on the other hand, starts telling them everything before they even have time to reach for their badges. They decline the offer for coffee, but they take a seat on the couch with its crocheted overthrow.

»What makes you think you saw a ghost?«

»You think I’d have quit if I hadn’t?!« He takes a nervous drag on his cigarette. »Believe me, I need the money! And now I’m out of a job just because of Casper!«

Dean raises an eyebrow and shares a quick glance with Cas.

»Casper…?«

David Banks rolls up his sleeve, exposing a bandaged arm.

»Do you wanna see what he did to me?«

He doesn’t wait for them to nod.

»At first I was so thrilled«, he says, slowly peeling off the bandage. »I mean, Casper! He’s really real! I’d never dared to dream - and then…« The flesh wound is deep and not nearly healed yet. »Then he bit me! How could he?!«

They don’t stay for long after the guy just keeps repeating the same lines about just how hurt and betrayed he felt, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Dean’s glad for his lungs when they’re finally outside the house again.

»It’s not a ghost«, Castiel concludes.

»No. It’s not.« Dean puts a hand to his sore throat. »But it’s something.«

»Who’s Casper?«

Dean smiles at him for a moment. Then he pulls out his phone.

»Sammy. Found anything?«

»Nope…« He sounds on the edge. »The whole place is clean. I even checked the playground in front of the school, which turned out to be a big mistake. I was run off by two women who called me for a creep for perving on their children. I almost lost the EMF meter running away.«

Dean snorts.

»Yeah, there’s probably nothing the EMF could detect. It’s not a ghost. We’ll meet you at the school.«
And don’t let the scary moms get you.«

Castiel looks at him with big eyes.

»Is Sam okay?«

»Yeah, he’s fine, just trying to fight off some women who took him for a perv. Well, a different kind.«

In the car he reaches over Castiel to get to the glove compartment, and for a second he thinks he can feel him tense up. He retrieves a pack of gum, eyeing Castiel closely.

»Need to get the taste and smell of cigarettes out of my mouth.«

He offers one to Castiel, who shakes his head.

It’s the first time they’ve been alone in what feels like ages but really can’t be more than a few days. And yeah, of course, they’ve been alone in a room for a few minutes after that, too, but no longer that that. And not in a confined space like this. This shouldn’t feel awkward. If nothing else, aren’t they supposed to be best friends?

»So, I heard you took me advice to heart, huh?«, Dean tries casually, as he starts the engine. »You and Sam, I mean.«

»I think I would like a piece of gum after all.«

Dean watches Castiel reach for the glove compartment in what seems like a really silly way to avoid answering the question. His slender fingers unpack the piece of gum as if it’s a present. He carefully shoves it between his lips and starts chewing slowly.

Dean forces himself to look away.

»You happy?«

Castiel pauses the chewing to think.

Dean clears his throat.

»You guys seem to have figured stuff out, right?«

»If you didn’t use words as opaque and at same time loaded with possible meaning, I’d find it easier to answer your questions in a satisfactory manner.«

»What’s so difficult about: Are you happy?«

»Are you asking if I’m happy in general or in regards to the developments with Sam?«

»Both? I don’t know. I’m just making conversation here.«

»No, you’re upset.« Castiel sounds intrigued. »Why?«

»I’m not upset. I was just asking how you’re doing. Forget it.«

Castiel continues his chewing. Otherwise they’re silent.

The school is already in view when Castiel decides to speak again.
»I really care for Sam.« He turns his head sharply. »A lot.«

»I know.« In the side view mirror Dean can tell how strained his own face looks. »We’ve established that.«

»I have strong feelings for your brother and I’m acting on them now. Why does that upset you?«, Castiel asks point-blank.

»Dude, chill it with the accusations! I’m not upset.«

The words coming out of his mouth hardly seem to matter. They’re clearly not true and Castiel decides to just ignore them.

»I can sense your anger with me, but I have hard time understanding what I have done wrong.«

Dean parks the car.

He sighs deeply, wishing he’d have started a conversation about the case instead. Or anything but this. But it’s difficult to ignore what’s at the forefront of your mind.

He puts his arms onto the steering wheel, and ducks his face into it.

»You didn’t do anything wrong«, he says tiredly. »I just wanted to know how you’re doing.«

»I’m doing well.«

»Great.« He lifts his head and opens the car door. »That’s just great, Cas.«

Castiel’s grip around his arm is strong.

»You’ve encouraged me to do this, Dean«, he reminds him.

»I know I did.«

He looks at Castiel over his shoulder.

»You wish you hadn’t.«

»No, of course not. I meant what I said. You’re clearly good for him.«

»But?«

»You know Sam’s track record with relationships isn’t the greatest. I mean, most of his girlfriends are dead now.«

»You think I’m going to die?« He sounds merely curious. »You think I’m in more danger than I was before because of Sam?«

»I wasn’t just talking about dying. You could get hurt in other ways. Both of you. I mean, what’s gonna happen when you’ll inevitably split up?«

»Inevitably?«

Dean shakes his head.

If you split up, I’ll lose you. Not just lose you like I’ve lost you now. Really lose-lose you.
He exists the car, without saying anything.

Cas follows him closely.

»You have been talking a lot more to me lately«, he says, as they’re approaching the school entrance. »More than you have in a very long time.«

Dean halts, turns to him.

»I don’t know what you’re talking about.«

»You’re showing more interest and concern, asking more questions, inquiring my opinion.«

Dean spits the chewed up gum onto the ground. There’s not much taste to it now, anyway.

»It was not meant as criticism.« Cas narrows his eyes, as if blinded by the sun. »Merely as an observation.«
How do you love with a fate full of rust?

Chapter Summary

Chapter Title taken from Razorlight's "Wire To Wire".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

»Can I ask you something?«

Most shops in this small town close early. They’re still looking for a place to get some takeout, something both him and Dean could agree on.

Not many people pass them by. They walk slowly, strolling down the main street in a place new to the both of them. If Sam tried harder, he might be able to imagine they’re just a normal couple on holidays, and not whatever it is they really are, working a case that he’s still not sure even exists.

»You can ask me anything, Sam.«

There’s this soft smile on Castiel’s face that he gets to see more and more these days. Which is a good thing, because directed at him it makes him feel all kinds of fuzzy inside. And it’s a bad thing, because it’s distracting as hell. He keeps forgetting what he meant to say or do, when Cas looks at him like this.

He’d forgotten what being in love is like. That something can be so unsettling and uplifting at the same time.

You just spend a couple of centuries in hell and these kind of things feel very foreign all of a sudden.

Not loving someone. He’s had no time to forget that one. He never stopped feeling the steady, almost unshakable kind of love of family, friendship and past relationships. Lord knows, he often wanted to forget, considering how much Lucifer loved exploiting and manipulating these feelings.

But being in love? With all its perks and drawbacks, the hope for a potential future and the dread of
failing, and its sure-fire promise of change of some sort, good or bad— its it just seems like a concept from another, simpler life.

»What is it?«

Castiel scrunches up his face in worry.

»A few weeks back, when you said you wanted to check out something. You know, when Dean and I had that Salt and Burn in Wichita. Where did you go?«

»I went to Oregon.«

»Oregon?«

»Sometime back, I’d suspected there might be a case and you and Dean both thought I was mistaken.«

»The divorce thing? Lots of people selling their houses? Yeah, I remember that. Why did you go back there?«

»I went to a place not far from it. A city called Fairview. There was an odd mention in the paper and I just-« He considers his words carefully. »It just seemed prudent to make sure you were both right and I was wrong.«

»Were you?«

»I don’t know.«

Sam stops in front of burger place. The bright lights and bad photography on display suggest overt greasiness, but thinks they shouldn’t walk much further. He knows how Dean can get when he’s hungry. This should do. Maybe he can just get a packaged salad on their way back. He remembers passing the bright neon sign of an open supermarket.
»If you still think there’s case«, Sam says, turning from the glass front towards Castiel beside him. 
»Let me know. I’d want to join you if you go back.«

»Of course.«

Despite the repeated talk of two rooms, Dean’s only gotten them one again.

It’s fine. Hopefully, it’s just one more night.

It bugs him anyway, even though it shouldn’t.

It’s not like anything happens, when they’re alone in the bunker. He’s starting to feel a bit self conscious about the not-happening thing, since it’s all him. Whenever things are starting to get heated, he finds himself panicking. He’s not sure why, really. He’s had sex after the cage, not tons and not all of it great, but it was mostly fun. At least it never felt like this. He never just completely froze.

Maybe it’s the being in love part, and twice the amount of intimacy, that makes it more difficult.

Or maybe it’s the fact, that all the women he’s been with after the cage seemed like they’d have had a hard time overpowering him, lulling him into a false sense of security. They hadn’t been powerful angels with the ability to smite you in a second. Normally, it doesn’t feel like there’s anything Castiel has in common with Lucifer, and he plans to keep it that way.

Whatever reasons there are for his freak outs, overanalyzing it probably won’t help. He’ll just have to get over himself. It’ll be fine. He wants this. And while Castiel is hardly pressuring him, he’s clearly not opposed to the idea either. He’ll deal with it soon. When they’re back in the bunker, in a more familiar environment. In the back of his mind, this sounds like an excuse. After all, what could be more familiar than a run-down motel room, what could ever feel more like home.

There’s some subtle changes in Dean’s demeanor and expressions that always betray the hard-fought stony faces he pulls, when he wants to look tough, noncommittal, and unemotional. Sam has had decades to read them. But Sam’s not longing for the privacy of his room in the bunker for the reasons Dean thinks he is. Instead, tonight he just really wants to shut the door behind him and keep everyone and everything out that isn’t Cas.
But it’s practical to share a motel room when they’re hunting, he tells himself, trying not to take it as a slight. Besides, Sam has to admit, that maybe there’s even something weirdly gratifying about having Dean in the room when Castiel lies down next to him at night. A proof that it’s real, an actual thing that others can see too and nothing he’s overblowing in his head. But the uncomfortableness of the situation trumps any satisfaction he might get out of it.

»Jesus, finally.« Dean welcomes them back with a strained grin on his face. »What took you guys so long? Do I even want to know?«

He snatches the brown paper bag from Castiel’s hands and sits down at the table. There’s only one other chair. Castiel nods towards it and Sam sits down, the salad still in his hands.

»Did you find anything?«, Sam asks, peeling the plastic foil off the container.

»No. But doing research with so little to go on is always taking a crapshoot.«

Castiel steps closer to the table, halting shortly before he reaches Dean’s chair, his hand wavering above the back of it.

»You said that there’s no need for one of us to stay.«

»I know. There wasn’t. Besides, I thought you guys might appreciate some time alone.« He unwraps the burger, then looks up at Cas. »Sorry, man.« His eyes go soft. »I’m just tired and frustrated. I hate when things aren’t going as straightforward as I want them to. I thought we’d quickly gank a ghost and get out of here. And now everything we’ve got is vague as hell. I wasn’t even sure what I was supposed to be looking for!«

Castiel smiles sympathetically.

»We’ll continue the research after you’ve both had dinner.«

»Yeah, well. What kind of leads do we even have?«

Dean takes a bite out of the burger. He nods approvingly, the food appeasing him for the moment.
»Maybe the guy is just mistaken after all?« Sam asks, untangling the flimsy fork from the sticky plastic. »I mean, you both said he seemed weird to you.«

Not that either of them had said much else, when they’d returned to the school. Sam had momentarily been too distracted by the unusual image of Castiel chewing gum to ask.

»Yeah, he was definitely weird, but that doesn’t mean he was just imaging stuff.« Dean drops the burger onto the wrapper, and leans into the back of the chair. »I just don’t know. It just seems so pointless. We should be out there, doing something real, something that actually matters. It’s been so freaking quiet lately.«

»Maybe that’s good thing?«

Sam pierces the fork through a cherry tomato, the juice and its seeds running over the white tines.

He already knows what Dean’s is going to answer and he agrees. It’s not a good thing.

»Nah. This kind of stuff is always just the quiet before a storm.« Dean sounds as frustrated as he looks. »When has shit ever gone our way, Sammy? Never, that’s when.« Dean stares at his half-eaten burger for a second. »I don’t trust it.«

Castiel’s hand hovers in the air for a moment, before it lands on Dean’s shoulder.

»Forget it«, Dean says. »I just - It’s just been a craptastic day.«

»Sorry«, Sam says, getting up. »We forgot to get something to drink. Do you want a soda?«

»Yeah, sure. Thanks, that’d be great.«

The case is really only of peripheral interest to Sam. Instead, Dean’s words about things being too quiet are ringing in his ears, as he walks into the lobby of the motel. He’s probably not being paranoid. When have they ever had a semi-break from anything big for this long? Castiel being
captured had felt big, of course, but if it’d really only been a few angels holding a grudge, objectively it wasn’t quite apocalypse-bad. Besides, even if anyone was still out to get Castiel, it wouldn’t work a second time. He’d try and make sure of that.

The reflection that greets him in the glass of the soda machine shows a tired, disgruntled looking man. Not quiet young, but younger than the centuries he remembers living.

He averts his eyes, pushes some buttons, puts in some coins, and buys one can of coke and one soda water.

When he puts the change back into his wallet, he halts.

He counts the bills, looks over at the counter behind which a middle-aged seems about to fall asleep, his eyes half-closed.

*It’s so, so silly.*

It’s just a friendly touch, a friendly hand on a friend’s back. It’s just consoling a loved one. It’s nothing he’s not seen a million times. Nothing strange about it. This possessiveness that’s momentarily and all-consumingly taking ahold of him feels like a sickness.

He’s been pushing down anger for so long, for most of his life. He likes to think he’s pretty good at it by now. But there are still times, when he can sense it getting out, provoked by the most trivial, inconsequential things.

He can feel it in the tenseness of his shoulders and his jaw, the acidy taste in his mouth.

He knows right now it’d take just one stupid comment from Dean, or any other kind of provocation, for him to snap.

They’ve always shared.

Sharing makes it sound much too balanced. It’s an euphemism.

All the things that are primarily Dean’s, that he’s graciously let Sam use or be a part of. And it’s not just leftovers, either. In the times they’ve stuck together, Dean alternating between his roles of mother hen and rival brother, he’s mostly tried to make sure that Sam got his fair share.

Like the hand-me-down’s he’s worn until he got to tall, Sam thinks he’s growing out of sharing other things with Dean now, too.

»Hey.«

The man is startled when Sam approaches him. He brushes through his grey-tinted hair, while eying him tiredly.

»Could I get a room?«

»Don’t you already have one? I remember you guys getting a double.«

For a split second he imagines telling the truth or some variant of it.

»My brother’s got a cold«, he says instead, putting the cans onto the counter so he can pay. »He’s quite the snorer.«

»And you only noticed now, huh?«

»Can I get another room or not?«

»Sure. Whatever.«

He throws him a last skeptical look before turning around to get a key.
Dean and Castiel sit next to each other at the table, the laptop between them.

Dean doesn’t look up from the screen, when Sam walks in.

»I think you might be on to something, Cas.«

Sam puts the coke onto the table and, for a lack of chair, sits down on the bed. The keys in his back pocket feel heavy. He’s sure Dean will consider it a provocation, instead of an attempt to keep an actual fight out of the way.

In a way this has nothing to do with Dean and everything to do with regaining some sort of sense of self. Maybe it’s a foolish thing to hope for, but at least hope feels better and less stagnant than despair, no matter how ludicrous.

»It’s only a possibility«, Castiel muses.

Sam opens the soda water with a loud clang.

»What’s a possibility?«

Dean looks up. He’s in a better mood than before Sam left. It’s evident in his face, his posture, the way he talks.

»That David guy, he said the reason he’s so sure he saw a ghost is because he’s obsessed with them. Well not all ghosts, only Casper.«

»Casper? Like the Disney cartoon?«

»Yup.« Dean opens the coke and takes a swig. »He described that thing in detail to us. White, wide-eyed and, uh, apparently with rattling chain around his ankle. Said at first he was really excited when he appeared to him in the kitchen.«
»Why didn’t you mention any of this before? You just said you were sure he didn’t see a ghost, but that there was probably something else.«

»Well, there is. He showed us the bite marks on his arms. I told you about those.« Dean throws a quick, slightly irritated look at Castiel. »I thought Cas filled you in with the rest.«

»No, I didn’t elaborate, either. Sam didn’t ask. I assumed you two had talked about it in detail.«

»Anyway.« Dean takes another sip. »I thought it’d be like a weird shapeshifter thing. Just, you know, just appearing as a friendly ghost instead of a human being? Saying it now, I realize that sounds pretty crazy.«

»It’s not crazier than turning into Dracula or a mummy.« Sam raises an eyebrow. »If it’s a shapeshifter it could be anywhere by now. It’s not going to be hanging around the school anymore. Why do you want to go back there tomorrow?«

»Because it’s not a shapeshifter.« Dean says it like it’s the most obvious thing, before taking another sip from his coke. »At least not the kind we know.«

Sam can feel himself getting more frustrated by the second.

»Why not?«

»When it attacked the guy, it didn’t just want to fight, it wanted to eat him. He said it seemed super hungry.« Dean tips the can upside down to get the last drop out of it. »I mean, that alone should have made it clear to him that it’s not a ghost. Casper the Friendly Ghost munching on folks is news to me.«

»OK. So. What’s your working hypothesis?«

»Our working hypothesis«, Dean snorts, amused, »is whatever Castiel was just talking about, before you barged in.«

Sam’s grip around the can tightens. And all of this while Dean’s actually in a good mood.
»A flesh-eating creature that turns into whatever we most desire to see,« Castiel explains. »It’s a myth that exists in several cultures all over the world. I have never encountered any myself so far.«

»You think this guy was so obsessed with a cartoon ghost, that it was literally the thing he most desired, out of everything? That sounds far-fetched.«

»I agree with Dean that we should return to the school tomorrow«, Castiel continues, »just in case it’s attached itself to the place in some way.«

Dean tips the coke can into the air in agreement.

»And also because we don’t really have any other place to start.«

»He could also just be lying«, Sam says. »This David guy.«

Dean looks at him skeptically.

»What, you think he bit himself?«

»No, of course not. It could have been a dog…. or something.«

»That was no dog bite.«

When Sam gets up, both Dean and Castiel look at him surprised.

»Where are you going?«, Dean asks. »We still need to figure out how to kill this thing, before we find it.«

»I’ve got a pretty bad headache, I don’t think I’d be much use right now.«
»So?«

»I got myself another room, so I can already get some sleep.«

Dean merely keeps an eyebrow raised.

»Okay…«

Sam walks to the door. Then he’s awkwardly waiting with his hand on the door knob.

»Night, Dean.«

»Night.«

»I’ll be with you shortly«, Castiel says, finally.

Finally.

Sam nods, pulls out the key, looks at the number engraved into the wooden tag.

»It’s room 13.«

He feels stupid, as he’s walking along the corridor, looking for his room. He’s not sure why this tinge of disappointment is even there.

He drinks the remainder of the soda water and puts the empty can down next to the bed.

He’s learnt to lower his expectations of life as years went by. Even the mere idea of longing for a career and a family of your own seems to belong to someone else. It just seems pompous and naive now. The thought of bringing a child into this world, of marital bliss. What did he think, that he could just play-act being normal all his life?
After the cage, after Lucifer, all he’s really wanted was sanity and maybe one person to believe in him. And when that didn’t materialize, he would have settled for the will to go on fighting. He just can’t remember why he’d want more than that in the first place. What he was trying to prove to whom. He knows what and who he is now. He’s not really expecting anything from anyone anymore.

Except… here he is. Expecting things, needing things. Getting angry for being denied them.

When Castiel appears in the room, Sam is lying on the bed, eyes closed. He’s been trying not to fall asleep. He knows the kind of dreams that come when he’s like this.

_Dreams sounds so much nicer than memories._

»Sam?«

He stands in front of the bed, his trench coat folded over the crook of his elbow.

»How are you feeling?«

Sam sits up, pulls his legs over the side of the bed.

»I’m fine.«

He puts the heel of his palms over his closed eyes.

»If you still have a headache, I could -«

Sam shakes his head, the white lie uncomfortable now.

»I’m fine. It’s gone. Did you guys get any further with the research?«
»Not really. Dean said we’ll return to the school in the morning to ask around.«

»So what did you do instead?«

Castiel steps closer to the bed, until their feet almost touch.

He considers Sam carefully.

»We talked about things not pertaining the case.«

»Okay«, Sam says.

Jealousy is not a feeling he’s comfortable with. Not just because it feels awful, but also because it’s much too closely connected to anger.

Anger is just no good for him. And anger right now is not justified. Probably not directed at Dean (he can’t expect him to tone down their friendship, can he?), but definitely not directed at Cas. He settles for being angry with himself.

The folded trench coat is put down on the bed next to him.

Castiel nudges Sam’s feet apart, comes to stand in between his legs and puts his arms around his neck.

»Are you still wishing you could spend the night in the bunker?«

It’s not a position he often finds himself in, gazing up at Cas, having him tower over him. Despite the tenderness of his touch, there’s something almost dangerous to it, too. It’s towing the line between comfort and arousal.

»No. It’s okay.« He looks down at Castiel’s middle and places his hands on his hips, feeling the hard
bones beneath skin and clothes. »I just wanted to be alone.« He pushes his face against Cas, a button of his shirt pressing into his cheek, he can hear his own breathing. »I just wanted to be alone with you.«

Castiel already stands as close to him as his position will allow him, but he tightens the embrace and his chin comes to rest on Sam’s head.

»We are.«

Chapter End Notes

You know those people who start uploading their chapters less and less frequently? Ugh, hate when that happens to a story I'm reading. So I definitely don't want to be doing this... Mainly saying this just to hold myself accountable.
Dean is glad that they’ve split up. Splitting up is always a gamble, but, really, so is staying together. After the awkward drive to school, it’s just good to be alone.

Walking down the school hall on his own right now, he’s torn. He wants to be the one to find and kill this thing, and he’s curious. But another part of him is downright scared of what or who he’s going to face, in case Castiel is right about the nature of this creature.

Whatever or whoever he’d see, he knows he doesn’t want anyone company when he does. In the back of his mind there’s the vague memory of Amara. There’s no artificially produced need or want for anything supernatural in him now. There’s only mundane shameful love.

He doesn’t even know how he’s supposed to kill this thing. It would certainly help if they were working on more than just a hunch. Cas’ idea sounded like a really good guess, definitely miles better than the nothing he’d come up with. But he shares most of Sam’s doubts. He doesn’t think David Banks is faking the attack, or hallucinating cartoon ghosts - but whatever munched on him is probably long gone by now.

If it's a sort of shifter maybe he’ll get lucky and find some goo or shed skin. Or maybe a shred of white sheet, considering what this thing was probably last cosplaying as.

Dean puts his hand to his mouth, stifling a yawn.

He spent the night mostly lying awake, fighting the urge to get up from the worn out mattress to seek out Sam.

Once, he got as far as half-way out the door, before flopping back onto the bed.

He hadn’t been able to concentrate on any research after Sam had left the room. Castiel had dutifully stayed and worked on with no comment about Sam’s absence. Dean had been relieved at first.

After a while, every five minutes or so Castiel would look up at the black plastic clock on the wall, not saying anything.
He’d once told Dean that as an angel he could “always feel time calibrating itself”, which had sounded like a bunch of mumbo jumbo to him, but clearly meant that Cas had no use for a clock.

»You wanna go to him?«, he asked, as casually as possible. When he got no answer he closed the laptop, and caught his eyes. »It’s fine. It’s getting late anyway. We need to leave early, so we can get there before the school opens.«

»You don’t seem very tired.«

»I’m not.« Dean raised an eyebrow, leaning back into the chair. »But I’m also not the one antsy to get out of here.«

»I’m not«, he paused, »antsy.«

It made Dean smile, the way he said it. Curious. Trying out the word as if it could come back to bite him.

Castiel returned the smile.

»You can stay here for as long as you want. I’m just trying to keep you from getting into some sort of domestic row.«

»You’re just saying Sam is waiting for me.«

It was hard to tell if it was a question or a conclusion he’d drawn.

Dean shrugged noncommittally.

Castiel looked down at the table. With the index finger of his right hand he traced a profanity that some guest must have engraved into the wood. It was such a human gesture of insecurity that it gave Dean a halt. Was this Sam’s doing, that Castiel seemed to be changing in front of Dean’s eyes?

»I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something«, Castiel eyes’ focussed on him again. »I am
unsure how to navigate the subject without breaching Sam’s trust.«

They looked at each other silently for a second. Castiel waiting for him to speak; Dean adamant that he’d neither stop him nor give him any absolution that he was clearly asking for. If Cas wanted to tell him something that wasn’t his to tell, the decision was on him and him only.

»I have been meaning to ask you about your increased interest in Sam’s sexual orientation and activities«, Castiel finally said.

»I’m sorry - my what?« Dean coughed, thinking he’d misheard, knowing he hadn’t. »My increased interest?«

»Yes.« Castiel nodded. »I am certain Sam would not think it my place to bring this up, but I feel it’s important.«

»If you’re about to tell me all the ways you and him get hot and bothered together, I’m pretty sure you’re right about him not wanting you to talk about it.«

»It’s not about me and him.« He narrowed his eyes. »Although your reaction to our relationship still puzzles me, too.«

»Yeah, yeah, I get it. I told you to go and do your thing, and now you did, and you don’t get why I’m not standing by the sidelines cheering you guys on. But you know that’s just not me. I keep telling you, I’m fine with—« He gestured at Castiel and then at the door. »This thing. I’m just wary of it, that’s all.«

»Wary.«

»Come on.« He could hear the whininess in his own voice and he disliked it. »Don’t make me repeat all this crap.«

»No, please do repeat yourself. I clearly need reminding as I still have not fully understood what you’re trying to tell me.«
It didn’t happen that much anymore, Castiel taking such a biting tone with him. Dean wasn’t sure what to make of it.

»I’m not going to explain the simple fact that most relationships don’t last to you again.«

»How fortunate that this is not most relationships.«

»Oh yeah, because you’re an angel?« Dean raised an eyebrow. »Right, because angels never fight, or get vengeful. Spear me the bullshit. You killed angels, people you cared about for centuries, so how’s that for friendly breakups? Besides…« He trailed off. »Why do you act like it’s weird that I’m curious about Sam’s sudden change of heart. It’s not strange that I’m a bit weirded out by him being someone else than I thought he was?«

»He isn’t someone else.«

»I never figured him to be queer for one.«

»I don’t see how that’s relevant or cause for anger. Why does it unsettle you so? If he now found out that he liked a type of food or drink he previously thought he did not, it would not make you question his very being. You wouldn’t feel the need to alienate him.«

»Well«, Dean put both his hands on the table. »That’s a really dumb analogy, but I’ll play. If Sam started liking food he hates, you bet I’d question him about it. But this isn’t about a freaking pepperoni pizza! He lied to me.«

»He lied to you?«

»He said he was straight, when he’s not. And I get that people change, I do. But he lied to me for years, man. Decades even. All his life for all I know.« He paused, feeling how emotional he was getting. »I get if he wanted to keep this shit from other people, from Dad, friends, other hunters, whatever, but from me?«

»What do you think he lied to you about?«
“I mean…” Dean rubbed his thumb over the rough surface of the table. “I just keep wondering, did that shit happen all the time, right under my nose and I was just too blind to even notice? If it was just a phase in college that he was trying to forget, I’d get it. Hell knows, there’s enough stuff I did when he was gone that I’d like forget.” At this Castiel raised an eyebrow. “I guess it shouldn’t surprise me. It’s not the first time it turns out he’s someone else than I thought.”

“I think you’ve misunderstood Sam.”

“Really. I misunderstood him?” He scoffed. “He told me he fucked an angel. What is there to misunderstand?”

Castiel didn’t seem surprised, this wasn’t news to him. Instead, he seemed to be getting angry at Dean.

“And you couldn’t possibly piece together what he might have been talking about?”, he glared.

“Obviously not.” Dean put his arms up in the air, in question. “You wanna let me keep on guessing now or what?”

Castiel pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“I don’t think it’s my place.”

“You gotta be joking. What the fuck was all this about then?”

Castiel stood up, looking down on him.

“Is there no angel you can think of that Sam might have spent an exuberant time in close proximity with? He was still glaring, spitting words at him. “Is there no way for you to consider that maybe it’s got nothing to do with you or the perceived lack of trust Sam has in you that he’s not spoken about these things? That maybe, just maybe, Dean, he finds it unbearable and shameful to speak about? He needs your acceptance, not your judgement.”

He’d let Castiel storm out then, his anger still palpable in the room long after he’d left.
He had wanted to talk to Sam immediately. Both to confront him and to apologize. But then, he’d sat down on his bed again, undecided what exactly he’d say. He still couldn’t fully wrap his head around it.

Even now, the morning after, in that damned empty school, he still can’t make head or tail of it. He gets what Castiel and Sam had both tried to tell them in their equally in-apprehensible way. Of course Castiel was alluding to Lucifer's abuse.

Dean isn’t stupid. He knows what hell is like. He knows what torture, torture in every and any way possible means, what it looks like.

He’d hoped of course, against odds, that things had been different for Sam. But knowing the state of Sam’s soul after his time in the cage, it hardly came as shock that sexual abuse had been part of the package deal for him.

It’s just… the way Sam talked about it. Like an drunken mistake he wasn’t proud of, not like torture.

*Rape isn’t sex.*

Dean keeps coming back to that obvious truth. It seems incomprehensible that Sam doesn’t know that too. Sam had talked about it like it had been voluntary. Like it happened with different people, too.

Suddenly what had made him angry before, Sam lying to him because he just didn’t trust him enough - it seems preferably to the alternative.

Sam can't possibly consider whatever happened with Lucifer to be anything but torture.

It wasn't even his own damned body down there.

Sure, Dean's had plenty of sex that wasn't of the emotional touchy-feely kind, but he's not messed up enough to not get when consent stops. Hell, even as a demon he'd never been able to get it up if the other person wasn't clearly into him.
He was the odd one out in hell, too. There was no sexual gratification in it for him, and he'd never... well, he'd never done that. Although he doubts that his victims would have cared much, how far gone there were.

He hates when images of hell come up. Being tortured, being the torturer, remembering it all makes him feel empty, pointless, unlovable. There's a reason he keeps this shit locked up as tightly as possible. He wishes Sam could do the same. Wishes he could have taught him that, like he taught him how to drive shift, or how to hustle pool.

*Just watch me, Sammy, and learn. Just copy my moves and you'll be fine.*

On the other hand, look where repression’s gotten him.

Unlike him, Sam’s got his sadness and anger all in the open. He's got his nightmares and his panic and all that shit. But he also got Cas now. And Dean can't help but think that these two things are connected somehow. Sam being less repressed, being able to open up and getting rewarded the person he wants in return.

He remembers opening up and getting shit in return, too. His heart aches, thinking of the people he's lost. All the ones he’s worked hard on forgetting, who form this tightly-woven ball of shitty hurtful past emotional connections inside him. He hates how seeing Sam and Castiel together makes it almost impossible not to reconsider his past, and all the times he went wrong. Like thinking of Lisa and Ben, memories of a nightmare-turned dream-turned nightmare. Unlike most of the people he’s lost, they're not actually dead. He’s periodically checked in weak moments, thanking and cursing the ease of internet at once. They’re not dead. It’s more like they’ve never existed in the first place. The closest thing he ever came to an actual family of his own.

He's not feeling sorry for himself. He’s really not.

It’s just that when you’ve lost everyone you ever loved, and the only two people who still qualify stop prioritizing you, it feels like you’ve already lost them, too.

In the process of losing. Already lost. Who can tell the difference.

Ok. So maybe he's feeling a bit sorry for himself after all, but he's mostly angry.
And who could blame a guy for -

Dean stops in his tracks. It's just a noise behind one of the classroom doors. Cas and Sam are both at other ends of the school, so unless someone's way too early for school, this should be empty.

His fingers tighten around his gun and he opens the door.

There's a lanky boy at the front of the room, with his back turned to him, facing the blackboard.

»Hey«, Dean says, because he's not going to shoot a kid just like that, as long as there’s the chance that he’s human.

When there's no reaction, he moves closer.

»Hey«, he repeats.

He stops in a safe distance to the boy, who looks up and turns to him, chalk in his hand.

»Dean!« Sam smiles brightly. »Dean, finally!«

Dean knows he's a good hunter. But there are few things that always take him off guard. Seconds where he needs to recalibrate his brain, until he's back on the "shoot first, ask questions" later thing. This is one of those moments.

Sam's smile broadens. Something about it knocks the breath out of his chest.

Sam nods at the chalkboard.

»All the other mathletes are already gone, so I figured I'd get in some more practice until you came.«

Dean stares at the chalkboard full of equations.
Nothing about this makes any sense. Sam doing maths is definitely not the thing he desires the most. He always made fun of the mathlete crap Sam used to get so juiced up about.

»Mr Andrews said I should do the math summer camp«, Sam says. No. Not-Sam says. But his eyes are the same hazel they've always been, and when he says »I thought about it. It would be pretty cool. And I don't care that Dad wouldn't let me. I don't care what he thinks. But then I thought of you and him on the road, and I just«

Sam shrugs, almost meekly, like he's ashamed of admitting it. And then he hugs him and Dean finds himself pulling him closer. He knows he shouldn't, but it's a reflex. Sam's hair smells just like it did back then, too.

He thinks he gets it now.

He doesn't want to let go. He probably wouldn't have either, if wasn't for the fact that Not-Sam's started biting his neck.

Now that he's hurt, there’s enough adrenaline running through Dean that nothing about beating up something that looks like Sam feels wrong. In fact he's just angry with this thing now.

They struggle. The gun is thrown out of his hand with much more ease than the real teenage Sam ever had.

It's a short and painful fight, by the end of which Dean's on the ground, holding his bleeding neck and this thing has run out of the room.

»Fuck!«, he curses through gritted teeth, and scrambles himself up from the floor.

You should never hunt while feeling sorry for yourself. You should never hunt when feeling sentimental or insecure. And since you always have to be ready to hunt, the only real solution is to just never feel these things in the first place.

He's long gone when he enters the hallway again. He looks around, but there's no clue as to where the thing's run of to. Dean decides to go for the left. Right around the corner he runs into Sam. The
real Sam. The one with the right age and height hair, the one with soft crinkles around his eyes when he looks worried.

»Dean? You okay? I heard you scream.«

Dean stares at him, trying to think of a way to make sure it's really his brother this time. He hesitates before grabbing the flask with holy water. For one thing, this thing is not a demon, who knows how it feels about holy water, salt, and the other usual suspects.

But it’s not a safety thing. There's something else that's stopping him.

He doesn't really want Sam to know what he saw. It's humiliating. Even more so because he let that thing bite him and take off. He considers lying, but it's too late for that now.

»Fuck. Your neck.« Sam's fingers are already on his skin, inspecting the wound. »Are you okay?«

»It's not so bad«, Dean says. It's true. The blood makes it look worse than it is. »I got him off before he could take a proper bite. It's not deep«

There's familiar worry and empathy on Sam's face, as his fingers make sure that Dean's words are true. It shouldn't feel good at all, but it does. Maybe they need this. Maybe they need the danger, the blood and the life and death worry to be able to show each other they care. Sam didn't use to be like this. Dean used to be able to rely on his unconditional love without endangering himself.

Sam lets go off him, turns around.

»I didn't see anything coming this way.«

The change back to normalcy is sudden and harsh.

»He probably ran into the other direction.«

Dean walks back to where he came from.
»He, huh?«, Sam says behind him, another question nestled in there that Dean’s deciding to ignore, glad they can't see each others faces right now.

He checks his watch. They still got about half an hour before the school upons.

Why did this thing show itself to him in the first place, when it could have taken its pick from all of the students and staff instead.

»Cas!« Sam exclaims.

Dean looks up from his watch.

»What are you doing here?«, Dean asks, as they walk towards him. »You were supposed to be at the back entrance.«

»I heard you and it sounded like you were in a fight, so I came.«

»You heard me all the way from there?«

»I can hear your prayers from another timeline, too.«

»Cas«, Sam says, touching his shoulder, drawing his gaze away. »The thing got away from Dean, but it shouldn't have gotten too far.«

»It bit me«, Dean says, pointing to his neck. »Could you, you know, do your thing?«

Castiel hesitates, as he eyes on the wound.

»I wish I could, but my battery is drained.«
»From what?«

»I am not sure.«

»Okay, well, that's weird.«

»What happened?«, Sam asks.

Castiel turns from Dean to Sam and back.

»Are you okay?«, Sam asks, softly massaging Castiel's shoulder.

Dean's not sure what it is exactly that gives him away. But the second he notices, he is completely sure of it.

It's harder to tell because this thing looks and sounds exactly like the Cas they know right now.

With a swift motion he's got his arm under the thing's chin, pushing him against the wall by his throat.

»Dean! What the hell?!?«

»Sam, this isn't Cas!«, he says through gritted teeth.

»Cas?«, Sam asks, quieter, but still like he hasn't fully understood what's happening here.

»What are you?«, Dean asks, angrily.

For some reason there's no fighting back.
It just looks like Castiel, smiling at him in a deranged and almost relaxed way.

»You know what I am.«

Dean pulls out his knife, which is apparently amusing.

»That thing won't kill me«, Not-Cas says. »But you know that, don't you? You can try, but that's not really what you want, is it?«

It's Castiel's voice, but the way his hands touch Dean's chest now is completely unfamiliar.

»We could come to an arrangement«, he says, roaming downwards teasingly. »You’ve got something I want, and I clearly got what you want, too.«

»I’m good, thanks.«

Dean puts the knife through his chest, and it feels horrible. Seeing Castiel’s face screw up, hearing his voice cry out in pain.

But when Dean pulls the knife out, the thing still isn't dead. Not even close.

»What are you?«, Sam asks. »What do you want?«

»Nothing. I just want to survive, just like you.«

»We don't eat people«, Dean spits.

»You don't eat your own species. Neither do I. Looks the same to me.«

Dean considers what to do next, but he’s distracted when the thing takes his hand.
»You're wondering if they're more of me«, he says. »Plenty. But I'm running on my own.«

Dean pulls his hand away.

»You're awful mouthy for something about to die.«

»You don't really want to kill me. Not yet anyway... I get it. You're curious.« He puts his hand flat on Dean's chest, right above his heart. »You're wondering how much I know about what's going on in there?« He closes the distance between their faces, his lips almost touching skin. »I can't read minds, I just know what you're craving.«

»Why are you telling us this?«

»Why not? You're right. I'm going to die anyway. I ran before, but I didn't recognize you right away. I know who you are. Besides.« He looks past Dean at Sam. »This is a pretty interesting situation you got going here.«

»Why are you staying at this school?«, Sam asks.

»It's perfect. Teenagers want stuff just so badly. The intensity helps. And they're incredibly gullible, too.«

He grins, almost leeringly. It looks wrong in combination with Castiel's features.

»Why have we not heard of any deaths or disappearing cases yet?«

»Because I'm not an idiot? I haven't killed any of them yet. The cafeteria guy was a mistake.« He shakes his head. »But I don't really want to talk about that. I'm curious about some things myself. The famous Dean Winchester, who would have thought that--«

Before he gets to say anything else, Dean's fist smashes into his face.
So he probably can't kill him like this, but he can hurt him. He can make him shut up.

Soon Dean’s straddling the thing, pounding away, until he's sure it won't be able to talk.

While he didn't fight back before, he's struggling now, trying to shove Dean away and trying to get out words between the blood.

»Cas!«, Sam shouts, relieved.

»Dean«, he hears Castiel say, right behind him. At least he hopes it's actually Castiel and not the thing he's beating up, but the smashed in face below him is calm now.

There's white light and when Castiel is finished the thing below him goes limp and then turns into ash. It’s weird and not what he’s expected, but it beats feeling Castiel's corpse under his body.

Dean looking up at the real Castiel kneeling beside him. He tries to smile.

»I think you just killed yourself.«

»Are you okay, Dean?«

»I'm fine.«

He takes Castiel's outstretched hand. He can't decide what's stranger, the offer or him taking it.

»I just wish we would have gotten more information of it this thing.«

»We would have if you hadn't tackled him«, Sam says. He doesn't sound angry, as much as he sounds exhausted and irritated.

Castiel cocks his head, notices Dean's bloody neck. Dean wishes he wouldn't touch him now. Not
now. But he lets him.

»Thanks.« He rubs over his good-as-new neck, nods, and tries to read the expression on Sam's face without having to look him directly in the eye. »I have to use the bathroom.«

Castiel’s healed him, but he didn’t get rid of all the blood. Dean washes it off. In the mirror above the sink he checks if he’s got it all.

He didn’t want the monster to shut up out of shame for the things he truly wants and craves.

He’s pretty sure he did it for Sam’s sake.

He feels an odd sense of exhilaration as a sort of epiphany overcomes him.

Maybe he doesn’t understand his little brother anymore, and hasn’t for a long time. And maybe he never managed to protect him from any of the things that are truly evil. It’s probably the blood still rushing through his head, but it seems to make sense to him right now. Maybe this is his chance to repent.

Atonement is supposed to be feel almost unbearably difficult.

It’s been a long time since he’s heard Lisa’s voice in his head. It’s loud and clear now.

»You two have the most unhealthy, tangled-up, crazy thing I've ever seen. And as long as he's in your life, you're never gonna be happy.«

He’s never told anyone about this. He’s often thought of it. She’s right of course. He’s never going to be happy with Sam in his life. But he’s also never going to be happy without him.

Back in the hallway, he stops before he Sam and Cas see him. He half-hides behind some lockers, which is kind of ridiculous, but it doesn’t matter much to him right now.

They’re just talking, hardly touching, but they’re standing close.
He takes them in carefully.

Castiel is saying something that he can’t hear. Sam is smiling. They look oddly at ease for the fact that Castiel just killed his lookalike.

Dean takes a deep breath.

He’s going to try. Goddamn it, he’s going to try to hard, like his life depends on it, because it fucking does.

Unhealthy, tangled-up, crazy? Oh yeah. Most definitely.

But no one will ever be able to say again that he didn’t do everything for the people he loves. The ones he needs the most.
You can have anything you want but you better not take it from me

Chapter Summary

Chapter Title Taken from Guns N Roses' "Welcome To The Jungle".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

»Are you okay?«

It’s got to feel strange to kill your lookalike, but Castiel seems unfazed. After all, Sam figures, he didn’t even see himself lying there on the ground, just a body that looked like his vessel.

Lately, Sam’s been wondering about that more. Imagining Castiel’s true form. Wishing he could see what he really looked and sounded like. But it’s not like he wants to go blind and deaf. It seems a silly want, anyway. He already knows the real Castiel. It shouldn’t matter what form he’s in.

He knows one angel’s true form. He's seen how beautiful and dreadful and horrifying it can be. He can’t help but imagine now and then, how different Castiel's would be.

»I’m fine. How about you?«

»Yeah, me too«, Sam says, not stopping long enough to check if it’s true.

He turns his head and looks at the pile of ash on the ground. Where moments before he’s watched his brother straddle the fake version of his boyfriend.

»So that was weird, huh?«

A moment passes in which Castiel only looks at him.

»Which part?«
The part where you’re what Dean wants the most.

»The part where you just went for the thing and made it explode without asking any questions. Most people would at least hesitate.«

»Well, I definitely knew it wasn’t me«, Castiel explains. »And in a way it was nice seeing me there.«

»It was nice killing something that looked like you?«

»It was nice seeing me there, considering. Flattering.«

»Oh, right.«

Sam ducks his head. Of course he’d think of it as encouraging, being Dean’s… whatever.

»There’s no need to feel bad about it.« Castiel takes his hand. »It’s a good thing. It feels… very good to know how much you care.«

He pulls Sam forward into a warm hug.

It feels nice and he doesn’t want to ruin it, so he lets him. He doesn’t say that he’s pretty sure Castiel got it wrong.

It’s not like his main takeaway is too far off. Sam does want and need him, a lot. A lot more than he’s comfortable with. But does he crave him more than anything else in the universe?

When he thinks about what he craves the most, what comes up is…

Quiet. Peace. For just about everything to be over with. Eternal bliss.
He doesn’t think he’s ever known what that would look or feel like. Nothingness?

How would that work. The thing could have hardly turned into the embodied concept of nothingness for him.

Maybe Castiel’s the closest thing in actual existence to what he truly craves. He’s definitely the closest a person comes to encapsulating safety and peace to him.

But it doesn’t trump the need for the past 200 years of his existence to be erased. Attempting to give him that would have any shapeshifter punching above their weight.

He once told Dean, a lifetime a go, that after hell, it was like having a clean slate. That he finally didn’t feel perpetually guilty anymore.

He believed it then, in that very second.

If only he rode his bike enough, skipped the alcohol, drank enough smoothies and protein shakes, if only he did everything right - he’d be okay. He could be good enough, clean enough. He could cleanse himself morally, spiritually and physically.

He believe that shit for a second. That all he needed was to try his very best, shake the vision of the devil off once and for all, and he’d be purified for good. Cleaner than he’d ever been as a baby even, pre-demon blood.

It was absurd, of course. There’s no tabula rasa for sin.

God, how he hates Lucifer. How he fears him. And yet.. If he were here right now, for real or in Sam’s head, he’d tell him the truth. His version of the truth, sure, but the truth nonetheless.

In an odd way, he’s the one he trusts the most.

Other people confuse him with their intentions and expectations and their contradictions. It's so easy to disappoint people who think you could do better. That you could be a better version of yourself if you only tried hard enough.
Evil, on the other hand, is simple.

Sam wouldn’t even have been surprised to see him today. Not Lucifer in the flesh, but a copy of Nick’s body being worn by this thing.

They never really figured out how this works. Maybe it’s not about what you think you crave and need, not what you think you deserve. Maybe it's about the thing that would actually make your life better.

Castiel being his thing makes sense. He’s improved Sam’s life drastically. It’s not just being close to someone who appreciates you, but also the act of loving itself. The knowledge that he’s still capable of it. There's some baggage there, sure, but it's about as pure a love as Sam has felt for anyone since… Well… How long ago was Jess? And even that relationship was rife with guilt and denial of his past.

In short: He gets how Castiel could be his one thing. But this fake Cas today? It wasn’t there for him.

It wasn’t even interested in talking to him. Didn’t even look in his direction.

It was Dean’s. As clear as day, even before it said the things it said. Before Sam had been forced to watch them almost-make out.

It’s not like they haven’t met intrusive monsters and demons before who’d flirted and groped and overstepped boundaries. This wasn’t that.

Dean had looked scared and uncomfortable, but unsurprised.

Sam’s not surprised, either. He’s also not angry. He mainly feels foolish that he tried to act like Dean’s feelings for Castiel weren’t a mere fact. He took Dean’s denial at face value because it paired well with his own interests.

»Hey, so…« Sam jumps when Dean’s hand lands on his shoulder. »You guys ready to take off?«
»We should probably get rid of the ashes first.«

»You think it’s going to rematerialize or something?«, Dean asks skeptically, his gaze following Sam’s to the floor.

»No. I just thought it’d be weird to just leave it.«

Dean shrugs.

»They got a cleaner here, right?«

The door opens and a drove of teenagers fill the hall, ignoring the men in suits.

»Well, too late now anyways.« Dean takes them both by their elbows. »Come on, let’s go.«

It’s strange, spending this much time in a high school and not having Dean make one dumb cheerleader comment. It would probably sound hollow even to his own ears right now. Knowing that Sam now knows that his true type is more angel in a trench coat than teenager in a skimpy outfit.

When they stop for gas, Sam asks Castiel to pick up some coffee.

Castiel leaves them alone by the car.

Dean watches the tank guzzling up the gas and eat up their money.

»Should we talk about the elephant in the room?«, Sam asks, stepping closer. He sounds a lot more self-assured than he is. A big chunk of him just wants to ignore it, the same way Dean has apparently decided to.

This feels almost a bit suicidal, but low-key suicidal has been his vibe for a while now. So maybe he's going to mess up the best thing in his life right now. With his stupid need for clarity and honesty. But these things always fall apart, eventually.
»Mhm?« Dean looks at the tank level gauge and back at the nozzle in his hands. »What do you mean?«

»Back in the school.«

Dean looks up at him, a frown on his face.

»You need to be a bit more specific.«

»The monster looking like Cas! You don’t think we should, you know, talk about that?«

»There’s nothing to talk about.«

He shakes the drops off the nozzle, before putting the hose back into the tank station.

He's really going to do that. What for? Dean's desperate need to keep things as they always were, his over the top nostalgia for the things used to be, is almost as infuriating as his lies.

»Right.«

Sam clenches his jaw. The anger comes now with full force.

He stares at the back of his brother, who’s pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

He grips Dean’s shoulder and makes him turn around again.

»What? I told you, there’s nothing to talk about.«

»The thing you want the most.« He enunciate each word clearly. »That’s what we see, right?«
Dean shrugs.

»Yeah, well, that’s what Cas said, at least.«

»We should be able talk about this like grownups«, Sam says, despite what he’s feeling. Which is a lot less civil. »The thing appeared as Cas to you, and be both know what that means. You lied to me. Repeatedly. I don’t know if you're doing this for my benefit or your own, but it sucks! You know how that makes me feel? I'm not a freaking pawn in your… whatever, your stupid game! I know it's hard for you to accept your feelings and I know how denial works with you, but damn it, Dean! I'm not going to sit here and watch this whole will-they-won't-they shit!«

Dean studies him for an uncomfortably long moment.

»That’s why you’re so pissed?«, he finally asks, in a calm voice. »Well, you got your panties in a twist for nothing. It didn’t appear as Cas to me.«

»What?« Sam shakes his head. What nonsense strategy of aversion is this? Just more denial on that staggeringly large heap of denial. »Are you trying to tell me I was hallucinating?«

Dean has the audacity to laugh, as he puts his wallet back into his pocket.

»Don't! Don't laugh. I'm being serious.«

»I know you are. I’m telling you, man. Cas was all you.«

»Yeah, right.« Sam rolls his eyes. »I really don’t get what you’re trying to do here. I was there. I heard what he said.«

»Yeah, I heard it too. You gonna believe that thing over me? It was clearly just trying to mess with us.«

»It didn’t even look at me. It was only focused on you.«
Dean shrugs again.

»You saw him first, didn’t you? How could it have been there for me then?«

»Before«, Sam says. This conversation feels horrible. With each second that Dean looks at him like he’s getting tired of explanation the ABCs to a child, Sam gets more unsure. »Before I was with you. When it bit you.«

»When I was alone with this thing, he looked different. Obviously.«

»Obviously.«

Dean steps closer.

»You think I wouldn’t have been a bit suspicious of the doppelgänger if he’d looked like Cas before, too?«

It makes so much sense. Sam falters.

»Why did you not let him talk then? Why did you shut him up like that?«

Dean half-smirks and shrugs yet again.

»I got a bad temper?« This is also hard to argue with. »He was shitmouthing us. I’m just tired of listening to monsters spew pseudo-psychologizing bullshit about us.«

Dean turns to go, when Sam thinks of something. He touches his brother’s elbow, makes him turn back yet again.

»What now? Still afraid I’m secretly trying to get into your boyfriend’s pants?«
Sam can feel himself go a deep shade of red. Said like that it sounds stupid. It sounds like pure idiotic jealousy, like paranoia.

»Who did you see instead?«

He can see Dean wavering. He's weighing the pros and cons of lying.

»It doesn’t matter.«

»Dean.«

Dean pulls a face like he’s in pain.

»I saw you, okay?«, he huffs. »Happy now?«

Happy is not the feeling he’s getting. More confused. Ashamed, too.

»But don’t go getting any ideas, I don’t want want you like that.« Dean jokes. Right. Because he’s straight and Sam isn’t. Because that’s apparently all there is to say on the topic. Like the fact that Sam's the thing he wants the most isn't kind of fucked up in itself.

Dean turns around, and Sam lets him walk away to pay for the gas.

And then somehow Castiel is by Sam's side, shoving a cup of coffee into his hands.

»Everything okay?«

»Yeah, uh, yeah.«
He takes a sip of the coffee and burns his tongue.

»Sorry. It’s still quite hot.«

»Yeah. I should have expected that. I just-«

»Are you sure you’re okay? You seem upset.«

He stares at Cas, his tongue almost blistering, trying to make sense of this morning.

»So apparently you’re the thing I want most in this world«, he says. Which is not what he’d planned on saying at all.

»It appears that way, yes.«

»And it’s not freaking you out.«

»Should it?«

»No, I don’t know.« He blows into his cup. »I guess a lot of people in your position would freak.« He looks up from under his lashes. »You’re not even surprised, are you?«

»I told you already.« Castiel takes the hand that’s not holding the cup and presses firmly. »It’s flattering.«

»Okay…«

»I take it you were surprised?«

»I honestly didn’t know what I expected to see.«
Castiel lets go of his hands. They share a quick smile and drink.

The coffee is still hot, but not scalding anymore.

»This isn’t very good«, Castiel says, shaking his head in disgust.

»It’s okay. It does its job.«

Castiel takes out his phone.

»If you’re so inclined, we could stop at The Filling Station or at something called The Crow’s Espresso Bar on our way?«

Dean has walked up behind Castiel. He looks over his shoulder at the phone in his hands.

»'The 10 Best Coffee Shops in all of Kansas'? What the hell did you do to him, Sam?«

Castiel hands his coffee to Dean.

»Feel free to drink this burnt and ashy brew, and tell me I’m wrong.«

Dean takes a sip and shrugs.

»Gets the job done.«

Castiel shakes his head again.

»Given your inclination to drink the worst barrels of alcohol, I shouldn’t be too surprised.«
»Who thought you’d become such a coffee snob?« He smiles. »Can I keep this?«

»You can.«

They get into the car and drive off.

Dean’s juggling the cup of coffee and holding the wheel with one hand, sifting through the tapes with the other. When he finds what he’s looking for, he does a little victory fist pump.

»Appetite for Destruction? Really?« Sam raises an eyebrow. »That’s getting you all excited?«

»What? It’s -«

»Please. Please don’t say it’s a classic.«

»I don’t know what you’re complaining about. For someone who’s so into hair metal, you’re protesting way too much.«

»You need to stop saying that. I’m not into hair metal. And don’t start about Bon Jovi again. A) That was one freaking song. And B) They’re not even a hair metal band to begin with.«

»Whatever you say, man. But you have a lot of opinions about something you claim to not be into.«

»What is hair metal?«, Castiel asks from the backseat.

Dean laughs and drinks his coffee.

»Not this«, Sam says and goes to finish his coffee.
It's the old-married-couple bantering and bickering indicating they’re both trying for normalcy.

It feels a bit contrived, but it does do the trick. It's them both inadequately saying.

Sam knows he’s trying extra hard because of the guilt. He shouldn’t have gone off like this and shouldn’t have accused Dean of lying yet again. Most of all, he shouldn’t still be feeling these twinges of doubt.

If Castiel is really what he wants the most, then jumping to wrong conclusions like this makes sense. Jealousy and fear of loss can do that to a person.

But it didn’t feel like paranoia.

It felt like a recognition of a fact he'd accepted deep down long before. After all, he went into the whole thing knowing, thinking he knew, of the thing between Dean and Castiel.

What’s weird is: The moment when your fears finally turn out to be true, you actually end up sighing a breath of relief, too, along with everything else.

Now he's yet again back to telling the voice in his head that it's not true. That he needs to relax. That everything is fine.

They’re about halfway through Paradise City, when Castiel says that he was serious about the atrocious coffee earlier. He tells Dean to drive off the main road.

»Are you serious? You want to try some ironically plaid-wearing hipster’s cold drip that badly?«

»You’re wearing plaid right now«, Sam points out.

»Not ironically I’m not.«

»We’ve made detours for lots of crappy burger places before.«
»You guys are the worst.« Dean rolls his eyes. »Alright. But we’re not staying. These places give me the hives.«

They stay in the parked car and watch Castiel disappear into the coffee shop.

Dean keeps staring at the door, a bemused smiles on his place.

»What is it?«, Sam asks.

»I can’t believe I let myself be talked into to driving you guys to fancy coffee places.«

»Sorry.«

»Meh. It could be worse.«

»No, really. I'm sorry.« Sam turns towards him, an apologetic smile on his lips. »About earlier. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions like that.«

»Forget it. It’s fine. I’d have done the same thing in your situation. I’d probably punched you before asking any questions.«

The smile they share is tense.

»I can’t believe you saw that thing as me.«

»Well, you better believe it. Just goes to show what an exciting life I live, where my freaking baby brother is still my main priority. I probably need to find a new hobby or something.«

There’s people leaving there coffee shop but none of them are Cas.
Sam closes his eyes and tries to block out the noise in his head.

»I just… I appreciate you’re trying. And I know, I’m not the brother you want me to be right now. I haven’t been in a long time. «

Dean does that thing, that’s half a shrug and half a sigh and full-on uncomfortable.

»You know that’s my problem, not yours. It’s good that at least one of us is trying to live an actual life.«

Dean taps against the windshield. Castiel has just walked out of the coffee shop.

»What do you think he would have seen today? What would that thing have turned into for him?«

Dean studies Sam’s face, as he’s waiting for an answer.

»I don’t know. Maybe God?«

»As in Chuck? No way.«

»Well, what do you think?«

Sam really wants to hear this, but Dean just shrugs and leans back into his seat.

»It probably wouldn’t have worked on him. I’d guess angels aren’t a part of their diet.«

»Well, we won’t know now. Not unless we meet another one.«

»Ugh. No thanks. Whatever that was, its earned its spot right behind witches as the most annoying mofos I know.«
The door opens and Castiel slides into the backseat, a filled paper coffee tray in hands.

»You were right about the drip system, Dean, but there was no plaid to be seen anywhere.«

»Well, you can’t get everything right all the time.«

Dean throws a Are we okay?-glance at Sam.

Sam smiles in reply. Then he turns to Castiel.

»So, the master’s become the student. Tell me about the coffee.«

»With pleasure.«

Chapter End Notes

I think I mentioned this before, but I'm kind of obsessed with figuring out/wondering Sam's taste in music is like (my google search history is so freaking sad...). A lot of people seem to think two scenes of listening to Vince Vincente and belting Bon Jovi mean that he's generally into Hair Metal, which I refuse to believe is true.

Also, I swear, when I started this I had no idea I'd end up writing so much about freaking coffee. Just, uh, bear with me, please.
Generally, Dean is not big on going against his own instincts. But he’s really trying to give this whole being-more-accepting-thing a go.

It’s not an instant 180° turnaround. Still, he surprises himself. Once he's set his mind on it, things change fast.

He still gets jealous and hurt. And in turn angry and frustrated. He longs for the cathartic feeling of snapping. He resists. He swallows any derogatory comments before they leave his lips. It's a short-lived catharsis anyway.

Honestly? It’s not as difficult as he thought it'd be.

Sometimes acting like you’re not bothered by something feels pretty close to actually not being bothered by it.

Things actually are better now.

He likes himself more like this. So do they.

He thinks he can see it in Sam's body, too. He's more relaxed around him. His shoulders are less hunched. He smiles more. At Dean, too. Or at least, Sam's smiles don’t drop when he’s around. Whatever. Pretty much the same thing. It feels good. Proof that he's acing the "taking care of Sam" thing.

It's not the only thing he feels better about. Sam's and Cas' relationship, objectively speaking, is a good thing. He's almost upbeat about it now. They're good for each other. That's what matters, right?
The terrifying “everything will fall apart any minute now” feeling recedes. And makes room for a quasi-normalcy.

He can do this, he thinks. He can live like this.

Technically, not that much has changed between Castiel and him, anyway. Technically, he’s lost nothing.

Because you can’t lose shit that’s not yours.

You can’t keep circling around the same pot of gold for years, and then get upset when a dragon snatches it first. Which he knows is a dumb simile because it’d make Sam the bad guy.

If there was a bad guy in this, which he isn’t sure of, he’s pretty sure it’d be him.

It doesn’t matter. That was the past. He’s supportive now. He’s there for them. And stuff.

Sometimes it even feels like not that much has changed. Just him and his best friend and his brother. A best friend he’s aching for, sure, but the gift of suppression's gotta be good for something.

Cas and Sam are still his and he doesn’t give a rat’s ass how possessive that may sound. They're still his. They’re just, also, each other’s now.

He gets that, in a way, he’s still lying to Sam. It bothers him, but what’s he supposed to say?

»Hey Sam, so remember when I lied to you? And then did it again and again when you confronted me about it? So yeah, congratulations, you always had great emotional instinct. Don’t worry, though, I’d never do anything to jeopardize your happiness. Not that I could. Not like Cas still wants me. But I think he did, didn’t he? You guys are so close, I bet you talked all about of that.«

So yeah, apart from all that, things are good now. He’s doing real good.
There’s times, of course, when he’s really really not ok.

He tries to not take it out on them. He’ll leave them be and get drunk in his bed room with his headphones on, until he falls asleep. When that doesn’t work, he takes the Impala. He drives to some dive to be reminded that’s there’s a world out there that’s bigger than the three of them.

And then there’s times like now, when he comes back early from a supply run and finds them entangled in the library.

They’re still decent, fully dressed even and everything is quite innocent.

He thinks maybe it’d feel less awkward to catch them fucking. But probably - no, probably not. They’d be all emotional and heartfelt about that, too. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to see that.

They’re not fucking. They’re not kissing. They’re not even really moving.

Books are sprawled on the table next to where Sam’s half-sitting, half--leaning. His feet still firmly on the ground, far apart.

He’s got Castiel’s standing in the v of his legs.

They don’t see him because they’ve both got their eyes closed and their foreheads pressed together.

For all Dean knows they might have been in that pose for ages, in stillness, just holding each other.

Why is this so shocking?

He’s managed to talk himself into being fine with the idea of them being together. And then shit like this, the reality of it, takes him out completely.

There’s no preparation for or escape from these things. It’s not a rational thing. It’s an automatism. Punch-drunk and disorientated, the taste of bile in his mouth. A part of him knows he should say something. Announce he’s there or leave. Not stand around and make this so much more awkward
than it needs to be.

He can’t expect them not to touch in their own home. Especially when they think he’s not even around.

Why does it make him so fucking angry then?

It’s not weird if he’s not making it weird.

»Whatever you two were going for here, but I'm pretty sure that's not how it's done.«

He knows he hit the right tone when Sam opens his eyes and immediately rolls them at him.

»Hello Dean«, Castiel says.

»I see you guys been busy working.«

»Yeah.« Sam softly shoves against Castiel’s chest, who takes a step back. »We were, actually.« He takes up the book closest to him. »I didn’t find the exact signs but I found something that comes pretty close. Maybe it’s some sort of variation or-«

»Or it’s a dumb kid messing around and getting the signs wrong.«

»What?«, Sam looks up from the book.

»Yeah, I got another call on the way here. False alarm. They caught the neighbor’s son spray painting more of those signs onto their wall. The idiot’s probably got no idea what they mean and just googled satanic ritual stuff and copied the first thing that popped up.«

»And the blood?«
»He kept some of that cat's blood in a jar, which is definitely fucked up, if you ask me, but not supernatural.«

»Just a case of vandalism then?«

»Yeah, seems like it.«

Castiel turns towards Dean.

»But didn’t you say there was a possible ghost sighting, too?«

»Yeah, I asked about that too. She said she was probably just so worried from the signs and the dead cat at their door. So she started seeing things. I mean, I get it. When your daughter gets taken by a ghost, it's no wonder you go a bit off the rails. Could be a ghost, could be a window banging a bit too hard. Could just be the lights flickering or something trying to decimate your family.«

Castiel nods.

»That is quite sad, yes.«

»Great«, Sam says, more upbeat than appropriate, and shuts the book close. »That means we're free tonight - movie night?«

They’re both looking at Dean, waiting. Like they actually want him to be there.

»I don’t know. I’m kind of beat. You guys go ahead.«

Sam raises his eyebrows.

»What if you get to choose?«
If he got to choose, he wouldn’t be choosing this.

»Anything?«

»I’m gonna regret this, aren’t I?«, Sam echoes Dean’s thoughts.

»Hell yeah. I’ll make sure of that.«

Sam laughs and shakes his head. A strand of hair falls into his face and he tugs it back behind his ear.

Dean finds himself wondering if that’s something Castiel ever does for him when they’re alone. He decides that yes, Cas tugging Sam’s hair back is exactly the kind of cutesy shit they’d do.

»We still got some of that extra buttery microwave popcorn, right?«, Dean asks. Castiel’s face is unreadable, almost blank.

»We definitely didn’t eat your nasty popcorn«, Sam says, hopping off the table. He starts picking up the books. »So unless you ate the whole multipack, there should be some left in the cupboard.«

We were doing research. We’re not eating crappy popcorn.

»Great. More for me.«

So this is progress. If you manage to ignore the acidy tone in Sam’s voice, this is fine. If it’s not really fine yet, it sure will be. Fake it till you make it.

That’s how it goes on for the next rather uneventful week. They hunt a ghost. They burn two corpses. Something called a Dripster appears in their kitchen. The device looks like it belongs with the witchy mortar and pestle Sam uses for spells. It makes pretty good coffee. Cas seems weirdly hyped about it.

(We’re drinking artisan coffee from a magic fountain thingie now.)
It’s late in the evening on a Saturday night. They’re all sitting together doing research out of habit rather than necessity.

Sam and Castiel are on the couch discussing something Sam’s found in one of the books. Dean’s on his laptop. He's started looking for cases instead. He doesn’t like groundwork research. It's essentially studying from old ass textbooks. He gets why it’s a good idea, he appreciate that Sam does it. Unlike him, this nerd enjoys it.

Dean's still skimming headlines, when something in Castiel's tone peeks his interest. A shift in frequency. Dean looks up.

Sam’s head lies in Castiel’s lap. They've changed the topic from flesh-eating creatures to… Dean’s not actually sure what.

»Yeah, right«, Sam laughs quietly. »Where would we even live big enough for that to work?«

»I don’t know. On a farm maybe? I can see you as a farmer. You’ve got the right physical build for it.«

»On a farm? «

They’re both laughing.

»OK, not a Farm then«, Castiel admits. »What world you prefer?«

Dean looks back down on his screen. It's that kind of conversation.

»Somewhere with less manure for one«, Sam says. Dean recognizes that tone of voice from when they used to rank shit. Movies, cars, people, actions. Sam loves lists and ranking stuff. He can hear Sam making a list in his head.

»I thought you liked animals?«
I do like animals. That doesn’t mean I to shovel their shit all day. I think a lot of people romanticize this kind of life way too much. Not that that’s what you’re doing.

But you’ve had dogs, Castiel says, like he doesn’t get the difference between owning a pet and a bunch of stinking cows.

I really only ever had one. And dogs are different.

So you’d want a dog?

They’re not exactly being subtle now.

I don’t know. I don’t know what I’d want. What does it matter?

What do you mean? Why wouldn’t it matter?

Dean peers over his screen again.

Why would it not matter what you want?, Castiel asks.

Sam’s looking at the ceiling, chewing his lips.

I’m a hunter. He sounds defensive. I’m gonna stay a hunter.

Hunters can’t own dogs?

Sure they can, other hunters can.

But you can’t?
Castiel seems confused. Dean can’t blame him.

»Let’s just talk about something else.« Dean recognizes the tension in Sam’s voice. Castiel either doesn’t, or choses to ignore it.

»Why?«

Sam sits up abruptly and runs a hand over his mouth.

»Why does it even matter?«

»Because what you want matters.«

»Not when we’re talking about…« He makes a vague motion into the air. »Out there stuff like that. I thought we were just goofing around and suddenly you’re all serious.«

»I guess, I just don’t see what’s supposed to be ‘out there’ about the idea of owning a dog. Besides, it always matters what you kind of life you want to live. I have learnt it's best not to be afraid of making changes, even ones that might seem scary at first.«

Castiel catches his eyes. It’s impossible for Dean to look away in time.

»Yeah… Cas is right, Sammy«, he mumbles. »You do you.«

Sam glares at him.

»Yeah, right. Cause you’d just be thrilled if I brought a dog into the bunker.«

»No. That's obviously not going to happen. But if you really want to go and buy a farm, you should maybe just go for it.«
»What the hell. I don’t want to live on a freaking farm!«

Castiel looks constipated. He shifts his position on the couch.

»What did I say that’s so wrong?«, he asks, eyes on Dean.

»Nothing.« Sam’s jaw clenches. »You didn’t say anything wrong. Everything’s fine.«

»I didn’t know pets and farms were such controversial topics.«

»Sam’s pissed because you’re making him think of the grand life he could have lived instead of« Dean motions around the room.

»I’m not pissed. It’s just pointless thinking about these kind of things. We could all always be dead the next day, what’s the use in thinking about the future in terms like that.«

»Because in the future you would like to…?«, Dean prompts.

»I don’t know. How would I know? You want us to stay here forever? You want to get old and grey in the bunker?«

It’s surprises Dean that Sam expects them to even live this long.

»As a matter of fact, yeah. It’s a pretty sweet setup. What’s wrong with the bunker now?«

»Nothing.« Sam shrugged. »It’s fine. But you know I was never in love with it as much as you were. It’s fine. It’s practical. And you really like it.«

Dean narrows his eyes.
»You want to move out?«

»Of course not!« Sam looks like he thinks Dean’s lost his mind. Not like he’s the one having a damn freakout about dogs. »Don’t be ridiculous. Where would we move that’s even half as safe as here?«

»You’re staying here for safety reasons only?«

»That’s not what I said.«

»Well, what are you saying?«

»Nothing!« Sam shakes his head, his frustration palpable. »Look, just tell me what you want me to say right now?«

»I don’t want you to say anything.« Dean closes the laptop and put it down. »You guys were just doing your cutesy “Uhhh, are we going to move into the woods or get a house on the beach“ thing and you freaked out about it for whatever reason. What’s it got to do with me?«

»See, I knew it.«

Dean’s sure it’s costing Sam all his energy not to point fingers.

»You knew what?«

»I’d knew you’d react like this. That’s why I don’t want to talk about it.«

»Like what, I aint reacting? Cas, help me out here, how am I reacting?«

»I don’t-« Cas hesitates. »I’m not sure I’m qualified to mediate this discussion, even though I brought it about.«
»No.« Sam turns to Castiel. »No, you didn’t. This here is old.«

»I don’t understand what we’re even supposed to be fighting about right now«, Dean shrugs. It’s difficult doing the friendly thing, when Sam’s being all weird. Escaping the situation seems like the best option. »I’m going to get a beer.«

»Look«, Sam says, prompting Dean to stay seated. »You’re always hearing all kinds of things I’m not saying. It’s been so many years...« His breath is labored. »You can’t even hear the words California or Stanford without getting all weird. It’s as if you expect me to run off at the mere mention of other places. If I say it’d be nice to see the Louvre one day, you think I’m about to run off to Paris! When all I’m saying is I’d like to maybe see some sights someday. I’m not saying, whatever, *Fuck Kansas, I’m running away to Europe!* or whatever you think I’m saying.«

»Why are you talking about traveling now? You’re the one who never wants to even talk about going on trips.«

»Stop that… Stop making a joke out of everything. I’m serious. *I’m here*, aren’t I? I’m still here. I don’t want you to think...«

Sam gets quiet, puts his head into his hands.

»Do you want me to leave you two alone?«, Castiel asks. He sounds unsure what he’d prefer himself.

A resolute »No« from Sam settles it.

»I get it, Sam.« Dean breathes in deep. »I get it, you think I freak at the mere mention of you wanting a different life. It’s not true.«

»It’s not?«

»No. I just think maybe you guys should go on a date before you’re discussing moving out. You’re kind of doing it the wrong way.«
»Moving out?«, Castiel asks, at the same time that Sam lets out a »What?«

»What are you talking about?«

»A date. It’s like a meeting of romantic nature. A social activity, a dinner or a visit to the cinema. Something classy like that.«

»I know what a date is. Dean.« Sam’s face softens. »Why the hell would you think I’d want to move out?«

He hadn’t. It hadn’t even occurred to him as an actual possibility. But now it was out there, and they’re actually discussing it.

He meant it as a quip.

Cas and Sam exchange quick glances. It clearly hadn’t come out that way.

»I never even considered that«, Sam says, all serious. »Ever.«

»Well good, cause it would make hunting together a hell lot more difficult.« Dean slaps his high and gets up. »Gonna get that beer now.«

Well, fuck. Well done. Bring that shit to the table, why don't you?
When You Wake You're Still In A Dream

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from My Bloody Valentine's "(When You Wake) You're Still in a Dream"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sam wakes up, he’s alone in his bed.

He closes his eyes again and thinks back to his dreams.

If he ignores them at the start of the day, sometimes they dissipate. Sometimes they don’t, and seep into his thoughts unexpected. He prefers being prepared. Dissect them first thing and file them under real memory or fantasy. Maybe that’s a fake categorization. When, despite what it feels like, some of the real things never happened to him, not to this body.

Something happening to your soul or your subconsciousness letting you believe it happened. What’s the difference?

It doesn’t matter, he decides, if the distinction is real. Categorizing helps to get to the root of things. To know that he can stare the evil right in its face, and manage.

Of course, this, too, is self deception. If Lucifer was actually here, or if the full madness was still inside Sam - he’d be toast.

Today it doesn’t work, anyway. There’s murky images, bits and pieces, faces and feelings. But there isn’t enough to string together a narrative or purpose. Not enough to figure out where it’s coming from.

»Are you awake?«

Castiel stands beside the bed, clothed, a mug in his hand. Sam recognizes it. It’s the same one they
shared their first coffee together. He’s not sure why he remembers, and if Castiel is aware.

»Yeah.« Sam sits up, scratching his chest through the cotton of his T-Shirt. »Morning.«

»It’s almost noon.«

»Really? Wow.«

Well that explains the waking up alone thing.

Castiel sits down on the bed and hands him the mug.

"Smile - You're in Omaha!“

»Thanks. Why didn’t you wake me?«

»I thought about it, but you seemed content asleep. Weren’t you?«

»I guess so. I just kinda feel like I already missed half of the day now.«

»You didn’t miss much.«

Castiel watches him drink.

»I thought you might be ill at first. Generally, you wake up early. And punctual. But you’re fine. I checked.«

Sam takes another sip and puts the mug down beside the bed.
»What did you do while I was still out?«

»I stayed with you for most of it.« He sounds almost apologetic. »Until two hours ago, when I heard Dean clanking with pots and pans. I got up to tell him to keep it down.«

»Thanks. I bet he was thrilled.«

»He cursed at me while making pancakes.«

»Did you try them?«

»They were very good.«

Castiel looks at him, expressionless. Sam’s not sure what he’s supposed to say. Yeah, Dean’s really good at making pancakes.

»I thought a lot about the discussion I prompted last night«, Castiel eventually says. »I wasn't aware some topics were so fraught between the two of you.«

»What do you mean?« There's a lot to choose from. »The dog thing? Look... I’m sorry. There's so no way you could have known. I overreacted. And I really didn’t mean to be such an ass to you last night.«

Castiel shakes his head.

»You weren’t. I underappreciated the tensions between you two. I see now that a serious discussion about your aspirations, canine or otherwise, only gets more difficult with an audience.«

»It’s not that.« Sam bends over to fetch the mug again. One last gulp and it’s empty. The coffee is strong. He feels himself waking up from the placebo effect alone. »It’s not just that.«

»You don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to.«
I just didn’t want to fight, yesterday. Well, we saw how well that turned out. At least we’re all clear now on the fact that I don’t want to live on farm.

You’re also not really considering moving out, are you?, Castiel implores.

Why would I?

In the past, from what I could tell, when you were both apart for a long time, it didn’t necessarily lead to much happiness.

I don’t know. Maybe we just did it wrong. Maybe the circumstances just weren’t right. Maybe we’re just kind of damned if we do, damned if we don’t.

Castiel puts a hand on Sam’s thigh, a quizzical look on his face.

You’re considering it?

I mean, I’m thinking about it right now, because you’re asking me about it…

Do you think you’d be happier?

No. No, I don’t know. Probably not. How to explain that this isn’t a question of happiness. I think, he starts and hesitates. Castiel squeezes his thigh in encouragement. Whenever we tried… whenever I tried, we always end up together again anyway, you know? And each time, it becomes more difficult to piece us together again. I think, we’re just stuck together, whether we like it or not. When we try to change things, it’s... it mostly gets worse. So I figure it's best just to preserve it as it is.

That doesn’t sound very reasonable. That sounds like fear.

So? Sam shrugs. Maybe it scares me for good reason. It’s always gone wrong. And it’s also- He looks at the bare wall on the other side of the room. The last time I tried, actually tried to get out,
and I did. I loved it, but I in retrospect, it was selfish. And even then I only managed to leave, because Dean was, well, I thought he was gone for good. You and him, both actually.«

»When we were in purgatory?«, Castiel asks. His eyes glaze over. Longing, Sam thinks, or at least some sort of nostalgia.

He shouldn’t feel jealous about their time in purgatory. Sam’s aware it’s bizarre and unfair. Especially when he himself spent the year shacked up with a quasi-wife and a dog.

He’s trying to remember why he chose to leave it behind. Why it’d felt more important to show Dean he was the best brother out of all the options, than to lead an actual happy life.

»Anyway… It’s kind of all or nothing with us, you know? Normal people, normal brothers can just live in different places and be fine. But I’d never just be leaving the bunker, I’d be leaving him.« He smiles wryly. »I’m so sorry, you ended up tangled in this crazy co-dependent shit we got going.«

»I’m not sorry.«

»So, yeah, me moving out… I don’t see that happening. Besides -« He chews the inside of his mouth. »We never talked about your... living situation. I know Dean asked you stay, but I was never sure whether you were planning to stay indefinitely. I hope you don’t feel like you have to stay here, just because-«

»I don’t want to be anywhere else«, Castiel says quickly.

»Yeah, so, that’d be another good reason for me to want to stay in the bunker, I guess. You being here.«

Castiel studies him for a while.

»You think I’d stay here if you left?«

»No. Yeah, no. I didn’t want to, you know, presume.« He shakes his head. »Not that it matters, since I’m not planning on leaving.«
»I wouldn’t want to stay here without you. I thought that would be obvious.«

»But you’d rather not leave Dean, either, right?«

This moment of hesitation, Sam thinks, this is a moment as good as any to ask. They should talk about it. It’s only going to get worse with time.

»I don’t really live here in the first place«, Castiel dodges the question. »I would still see him. We’d still see him, if you left.«

»Yeah. I guess.«

Sam pushes the cover off, when Castiel grabs his hands.

»But I liked the idea«, he says. »I spent a lot of the night thinking about it. I’ve never really lived anywhere on earth I’d consider my own home. The bunker, it’s… I’m a guest and I know it.«

»No, Cas. That’s not true. You’re not a guest. Dean doesn’t think of you like that, and I sure as hell don’t. I want you to be comfortable here. I want you to-«

»I’m comfortable.« Castiel says. »That’s not what I meant. I’m just aware this isn’t mine.«

»It’s not like this is Dean’s and my place and you’re just crashing, either. I honestly don’t care very much where I am. I’d just prefer you to be there. If you want to.«

Castiel grabs the back of his neck, surges forward and kisses him.

»You need to abolish these qualifiers« he says, against Sam’s lips. »It always makes you sound so insecure. It’s irritating.« He kisses him again. »Of course I want to be there.«

It’s a bit strange, being kissed and scolded at once.
»Sorry«, Sam says. »I’ll try to remember to skip the qualifiers from now on, but I can’t promise anything.«

»Don’t apologize«, Castiel murmurs, before pulling Sam's face closer again.

There’s a knock. Which is a new but welcome thing Dean’s been doing. Knocking.

»Hey, you all decent in there?«, he asks, already opening the door.

»Morning«, Sam says.

He resists the urge of scooting away from Castiel completely.

»You might wanna get into some pants that aren’t Cas’«, Dean says. »I just got a call from Jody.«

»What’s wrong?«

»She got ahold of some fishy missing persons records and thinks there's a case.«

»Fishy how?«

»She didn’t really say all that much. Something about it being connected to some older deaths that were filed away under "animal attack"? She said we'd see once we arrived.«

»In Sioux Falls?«

»I guess. You ready?«

»Uh.« Sam musses his hair. He needs a shower. »Yeah, in a bit.«
Dean shifts his attention to Castiel.

»You coming, too?«

»Why wouldn’t I?«

»I don’t know. Just asking. Right. See you guys in the car in 10.«

»Does he not want me to come?«, Castiel asks, when Dean's left.

*He always wants you to come.*

»Who knows«, Sam shrugs.

»Oh.« Castiel turns to him, all bright eyes. »There was something else Dean said.«

»He said a lot of things.«

»That one should date before moving out.«

»You want us to go on a date?«, Sam blurts out. It sounds so odd and makes him feel self conscious, even though he's not the one bringing it up. »I guess. I mean, if you want.«

It’s early in the evening when the Impala pulls up in front of Jody Mills’ house.

Jody’s hugs are the rare case of tight and non-possessive. Non-threatening.

Sam has always liked her, more than most of their allies and friends, dead and alive alike. When she looks at them, she doesn’t see Dean with a capital D and his sidekick. It feels good to be seen - and
at times even preferred, he’s felt - by someone who isn’t a demon.

»Boys«, she says, like they haven’t outgrown that word about a decade ago. Then her eyes trail over to Castiel.

»Oh right«, Dean says, following her gaze. »You two’ve never met before, right?«

Castiel steps forward and stretches out his hand. She takes it.

»’ this the angel I’ve heard so much about?«, she asks, looking at Dean.

»I’m Castiel.«

»Jody. Pleasure.«

She pulls back her hand and straightens her red plaid shirt. Everything about her is functionality and ease now. Her clothes, her haircut, even the way she moves. Sam empathizes.

»You guys wanna come on in, so I can fill you in?« Dean nods. »Are you hungry?«

»Yeah. Crazy hungry«, Dean says, like he hasn't inhaled a burger and fries on their way here.

They follow her in the kitchen.

»Sorry«, she apologizes to Castiel. »I’m not really well-versed in the whole angel thing. Do you guys eat?«

»I don’t require sustenance for survival, but I can eat.«

»You should see this guy go to town on coffee«, Dean says. »Sam got him really hooked.«
»Really?« She raises an eyebrow at Sam, who shrugs non-committely. »I’m going to get four plates then.«

She’s a good cook. Sam is almost tempted to take a second helping of the lasagne. He takes another drink of the beer instead.

Dean’s just polished off his plate.

»So what are you thinking?«, he asks, wiping tomato sauce into his face instead of off.

»I was thinking vampires. The disappearances felt off to me from the start. But today they found one of the missing victims dead. Same thing as the last ones, supposed animal attacks.

»Neck bites?«

»You bet.«

»Did you get a look at the body?«

»Not yet.«

»Why are you so sure the cases are connected?«

Jody shakes her head at Dean.

»Because this isn’t my first rodeo?«

»Is there anything else you can tell us?«, Sam asks, re-arranging the knife and fork on his plate. »Anything the victims all have in common?«
»I haven’t found a clear pattern. Why?«

»Some vampires go more for the virginal type«, Dean explains.

»Nothing like that. One guy in his 40s, a pensioner, a teenager. Hang on.« She gets up. »I’ll show you the files.«

Sam gets up, too, to clear the table, and to go to the bathroom. On his way back he runs into Jody in the hallway.

»Hey Sam«, she says, all warmth. »Are you alright?«

»Yeah?« He looks himself up and down. »Why?«

»Just« She leans against the wall, her dead family smiling down at them from a framed picture. »The last time I talked to Dean he sounded pretty worried about you.«

»I’m fine.« Sam rolls up the right sleeve of his shirt. »What did he say?«

»Oh, nothing really.« She tries to wave her comment away. »It was some time ago, anyway. He just needed some info and when I asked about you, he said you were fine, but he sounded really gruff. I don’t know.« She crosses her arms under her chest. »I just couldn’t get it out of my head. I thought I’d take a shot and ask.«

»You could have called and asked«, he says. When he realizes how defensive it sounds, he adds: »I mean, there was no need to worry. I’m fine.«

He smiles.

»I know you guys have a rough life...«

»So do you.«
»I guess.« She heaves up her shoulders. »Maybe that's why I worry about you. It's always easy to fall into a pretty dark place.«

A dark place. That's one way to call it.

Her caring eyes look up to him, a genuine offer to help. It's tempting. Explaining and talking. Where to start. Lucifer, Dean, his general frame of mind, Castiel.

»I appreciate it.«

She squeezes his shoulder.

»I'm glad you both got each other at least.«

It takes a second to sink in that she means Dean.

»Yeah, me too.« One time, he thinks, a few times. When he thought there might be something. A real connection, friendship, a hint of something more. »Thanks, Jody. Are you sure you're okay, too?«

»Same old, same old.«

She averts her eyes and withdraws her hand.

Yeah, she probably understands him better than she's aware.

They smile at each politely, before walking back to the the dining room.

She grabs his arm again, makes him bend down to her.
»What about that?«

A knowing look on her face, she nods in Castiel's and Dean's direction. They're both bend over the folders, not speaking.

»What about what?«

»They got the whole star-crossed thing down pretty well, huh?«

He realizes he's staring at her, not saying anything, when her face changes.

»You've noticed too, right?«, she asks. »Sorry, I didn't mean to shock you.«

»No«, he says. »It's okay. I've noticed.«

»Okay.« She breathes a sigh of relief. »For a second there, I thought-«

»No, it's fine.« *What in God's name are you doing?*, he wonders, as he hears himself dig himself deeper. »Kinda hard not to notice, huh?«

»I'll say.«

»Hey!« Dean turns around to them. »What are you girls gossiping about in the back? Come here, Sam.«

When she walks up to him, Jody smacks Dean's head.

»Sorry«, he ducks, and hands Sam a picture of a teenage girl’s corpse.

Sam is glad she's not saying anything.
He feels approximately 10 again. Back at school, waiting for someone to pick him up from a stupid school dance, where he knows no one and no one knows him and it's all so fucking embarrassing.

»Don't think it's vamps«, he hears Dean say.

»What makes you think that?«, she asks.

»The pattern and the bites, it's kind of... I don't know. Just a feeling I got. I'd say we find more about the vics first and go from there. What do you think, Sam? Sam?«

»Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, sounds good.«

Dean looks at his watch.

»It's too late for the morgue now, but one of the victims didn't live too far away, right? We could swing by there now.« Dean looks at Jody. »Or did you already visit her family?«

She shakes her head.

»Okay. Awesome.«

Dean gets up, grabs his leather jacket from the back of the chair.

»Uh«, Sam feels himself panic for some reason. »I don't feel so good.« He puts a hand on his stomach. »Maybe I should sit that one out.«

»What's wrong?«

Dean furrows his brows.
»Just sick, I think. Maybe I ate something wrong?« He quickly looks at Jody. »Not the lasagne, of course.«

Dean looks even less convinced now.

»What else did you even have?«

»Maybe that protein bar was off, I don't know. I just-«

»Okay. We don't want you throwing up in the car.«

»You guys are staying here for the night, right?«, Jody asks. »The house is big enough.«

»Sure«, Dean says, »if it's alright with you two?«

»Of course«, Sam nods.

»I got two spare rooms, is that enough?«, Jody asks Castiel.

_Oh God._

»I don't require sleep«, he says.

»Really? Wow, that's a lot of extra time on your hands.«

»I don't think a few hours of extra time's all that thrilling when you're immortal«, Dean says.

»I'm not immortal. I can die. I _have_ died.«
»You know what I mean. You don't die from age and shit.« Dean's expression changes as he considers Cas. »Do you want to stay here, too?«

Castiel looks at Sam.

»You should go. I'm fine. I probably just need some sleep.«

He hates lying, even when it's stupid white lies to get out of... Out of what exactly?

»Are you sure?«, Castiel asks. »If you're unwell-«

He walks up to him. Maybe to heal him, or to hug him. Sam dodges away.

»It's fine. See you guys tomorrow.«

»I'm going get some clean sheets«, Jody says, and walks out of the room.

»You sure, you're okay, Sammy?«

»Yeah, course. If you guys can spare me.«

»Right«, Dean nods. »Just call us, if it's more than a stomach bug, okay?«

»It's not.«

Castiel steps closer without a second warning and puts his fingers to Sam's forehead.

Great. Even his lame excuse is gone now.
Dean and Castiel leave without asking him to come along yet another time.

»So you want to get some rest now?«, Jody asks, when she returns.

He feels like he shouldn't be alone right now.

He nods.

»Yeah, sorry.«

»What are you apologizing for? I just hope you feel better soon. You look really pale. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. There's some painkillers in the bathroom, if you need any.«

»Thanks. I don't want to be a bother.«

She gives him a "Are you kidding me?" look, and leads him to the room.

Sam suspects that he's in her son Owen's former bedroom. There's nothing indicating it's a child's room anymore, it's just a feeling he gets. It's almost clinically functional, hardly furnished.

The bed is a single.

»I hope this is alright for you? I know it's pretty bare but I got rid of most of my old stuff a while ago. I figured, there's really no point in re-decorating.«

»Do you have a lot of guests?«

She shrugs evasively.

»Not really.«
He looks back at the room. It's kept very clean.

He puts his bag down on the floor.

»You know where the bathroom is, right?«, she asks, and remembers earlier. »Oh, right, I know you do.«

She leans agains the door frame. It feels like they're about to hug or like she wants to emotionally share.

She takes a step back.

»Well, you better get some rest then. Holler if you need anything.«

»Thanks. I will. Thanks for letting us stay here.«

»Thanks for helping me decimate the population of eviltown again.« She smiles. »Goodnight, Sam.«

»Good night.«

There's something about people who carry their sadness right under the surface without making a big deal out of it. It always resonates with him.

Liking her makes it feel worse that he's acting so childish. What even happened there?

Tomorrow things will be better, he tries to tell himself, as he closes the door.

He sits down on the bed. He kicks off his shoes. The mattress isn't as awfully soft as he's used to when they're on the road.
He wonders what she might be thinking about him now. If she's thinking about him at all, about his odd behavior. Or she's knee-deep in the case, or her normal police work.

Speculating about her doesn't feel great, but it's better than thinking about Dean and Cas. Picturing them in the car together, serious looks on their faces.

Maybe Castiel is trying to figure out what's wrong with Sam. Maybe they're worrying together. Or he's the furthest from their thoughts. He's not sure which thought he prefers.

You're pathetic.

You fold at the slightest touch.

All he'd have needed to say was "Oh, no, he's actually my boyfriend". It would have been awkward for a second, and then it would have been fine. He'd be out there in the front seat of the Impala now, doing his god damn job.

They all know he's faking it too.

Who does that?

And what the hell, since when is Dean going around telling people how bad he's been doing? Is he that much of an impediment? Next time they meet another hunter, he's be better off just asking beforehand.

Shit.

He's aware what's happening. Spiraling thoughts like this can go on for hours. This is mild, but they only get worse with time.

He gets out his phone, checks the time. He's not going to be that kind of person and call Castiel.

He's a grown adult, he can deal with some shitty thoughts himself.
Really, it’ll be okay in the morning anyway.

He gets out his toothbrush and toothpaste. If he runs into Jody on his way to the bathroom, he thinks he’ll tell her he feels better. Maybe she can appreciate his company, and he can be useful instead of moping around.

He doesn’t run into her. He doesn’t hear her. Maybe she’s in her room (maybe she’s avoiding you, after how weird you were acting, ever thought of that, huh?).

He brushes his teeth vigorously.

He’s trying to figure out where Dean and Castiel are by now.

Parked in front of the house now, before they step onto the neatly trimmed lawn. Dean’s straightening Castiel’s tie, telling him he’ll be fine if he follow his lead and lets him do the talking.

Maybe he’s telling him how nice it is to do this on their own, an almost smile on his lips.

Okay, that’s clearly bullshit. That’s something Dean would hardly allow himself to think, let alone say out loud.

He’d just feel it.

Castiel smiles shyly, grateful. They throw each other meaningful glances before Dean rings the doorbell.

These aren’t even paranoid thoughts. This is just a run down of what’s actually happening right now, and he can’t even deal with this? How is going to be when the inevitable happens.

The next time one of them narrowly escapes death. The next time one of them saves the other and they end up in each other’s arms. When even Dean’s shell cracks so much that all emotions spill.
Sam stops brushing, when he realizes his gums are bleeding. They feel raw. He spits out red foam. He rinses. He opens the medical cabinet and finds some Ambien.

It’s not like Dean’s way of dealing with things. Sam does this for his own and everyone else’s good. If he can just go to sleep now, tomorrow will be fine, and he can be normal. This is a rational thing. Normal people take sleeping aids.

_This early in the evening? Who are you trying to kid?_

Back in the room, he gets undressed and gets into the bed in his boxer shorts. It takes a while until he can feel himself getting sleepier.

His phone is heavy in his palm, as he considers texting them. Saying what? That he went to bed? Big fucking news.

Maybe he’s too tall, too much body mass for one measly pill, and that’s why he's still awake, he considers after half an hour. He hasn’t taken Ambien in years. Artificial sleep is never as refreshing. It makes him feel like shit the next day. This was such a stupid idea. Why didn’t he just seek out Jody instead? Or suck it up, ignore the stupid thoughts. Get his laptop out and work. Anything would have been better than this.

He’s got his eyes closed, but it feels like they're open. He’s seeing things, not just imaging them.

The perspective is off, too.

It feels like he’s on his side looking into a big black gaping thing. Vivid darkness.

If he stretched out his hand now, he could -

He opens his eyes. He touches the sheets. He knows he’s lying on his back. He knows where he is.

»You knew this wouldn’t work, didn’t you?«
It’s fine. He’s just having an adverse reaction to sleep medication. It’s still all going to be over soon. If he wasn’t feeling so sleepy, he’d get up and get a glass of water. Turn on the lights again.

> What did you expect? You’re not like your daddy or his protégé. Drown some pills with alcohol and forget how pathetic your life really is? Come on, Sam. Even you’re smarter than that.

When he opens his eyes, he’s alone in the room. He knows he’s on his own.

> Unless you were hoping for this, of course. You don’t even want to be on your own right now, do you? You prefer my company.

> Shut up, he says. He’s not sure if he says it out loud. They both hear his voice either way.

> If you wanted me to shut up, I wouldn’t be here right now. Ah- Lucifer wiggles his finger. > I know what you’re going to say next. That I’m not really really here. Well, I know that, you know that. So let’s skip right past that. I’m here in all the ways that matter. You ever thought about why that is? Why I’m in your head? That angel of yours - or well, your brother’s, if we’re going to be honest - he took the crazy away. And sure, you’re almost a functioning person again. So what gives? Why do you think I’m still here?

Sam closes, no, opens his eyes again, and tries to sit up.

A hand against his chest presses him back into the icy cold floor.

> I’m not talking to myself, Sam. Show me some respect. I don’t just how up for anyone. I asked you a question. Why am I here?

> I don’t know.

The touch softens, but the hand remains where it is.

Sam looks around them, still vast blackness, nothing to hold onto but him.
»You never wonder that? Why I show up in your dreams, your thoughts and now… whatever you call this. An optical and audial hallucination brought on by medication? That’s real cute.«

This time, he lets Sam sit up half-way.

Lucifer looks tiny, crouching next to him.

»Come on.« He shakes Sam’s shoulder. »You’re supposed to be smart. Tell me, why am I here? Why can’t you let go.«

»Because you traumatized me?«, Sam answers, exasperated. »Because I spent more time with you than with anyone else?«

»Not bad.« Lucifer sways his head from side to side. »But that’s not all.« He presses his index finger into Sam’s chest. »You were always a little bit of a weirdo, a bit special, weren’t you?«

Sam doesn’t know what he’s supposed to be saying.

»Being with me seemed more real than anything else, didn’t it? It rang true. It fit you. Of course, it did. You were made for me.«

»Shut up«, Sam mumbles, he tries to avert his eyes, but Lucifer’s fingers are on his chin, holding it in place.

»Make me«, he smiles. »This is all you, Sam. You could make me say and do whatever you want. So why…« His fingers wander down to his throat, press down hard. »Why do you make me hurt you?«

He lets go. Sam catches his breath.

»Why can’t you just fucking leave me alone?«

»Exactly!« Lucifer claps. »That’s what we’re trying to figure out right now. Why can’t I? You want
to hear my theory?« He takes Sam’s hand and pulls him up further, into a full sitting position. »I mean, really, it’s your theory, but you know what I mean.«

»Is there any way I can stop you from sharing it with me?«

»Aw, cute, sass. Keep it up.« The smell of sulfur gets stronger as he leans in. »You know you miss me, but you don’t know why. I think it’s partially cause I’m actually nicer to you than you are.«

»I’m sorry, what?« Sam splutters, laughing. »You’re anything but nice. You’re the definition of evil.«

»And still I’m nicer to you than you are. Let that sink in for a second. I understand you, Sam. I know you. Like none of them ever will. Well.« He pauses, as if he’s waiting for Sam to argue back. »You know your brother doesn’t understand you. You know my brother’s not going to be there for you much longer, either. Once the whole bromance thing between him and Dean gets taken up a notch. He pities you, sure, but how long is that going to last? You think you can squeeze a few more months out of this? But me? I’m always here.«

»You’re not really here, though.«

Lucifer shrugs.

»You want me to be?«

»Of course not.«

»Of course you don’t,« Lucifer cups his cheek. His fingers aren’t callused. The touch is velvety soft, repulsing and caring.

»This isn’t real«, Sam says. »You aren’t real.«

»Duh.« He rolls his eyes. »That gives me a free pass, right? Not that I believe in asking for the things I want. Consent, shmonsent. But I’m not really here, so this means this is you.«
A tongue parts Sam’s lips, presses its way into his mouth.

Fear, arousal. Flight and fight.

Sam grabs his collar, violently, wants to push him away and pulls him closer.

»This is all you«, Lucifer laughs in his face. »No wonder you hate yourself so much. You let your boyfriend run off with the love of his life for this? You act all cute and prude around him. Playing shy and insecure, when we both know you're the opposite. You're so screwed.« He licks over Sam's lips. »Well, you will be, anyway.«

Chapter End Notes

- As the timeline of this story is pretty wibbly wobbly, and I can do whatever I want with it, this is Jody pre-Alex & Claire, but also not meant as an indication when this is set.

- I didn’t realize Sam actually mentions Casper the Friendly Ghost in season 7 until I was re-watching it last week. That really took me out for a minute. The more you know!

- Sorry if you caught some mistakes. I try my best but my eyes just start glazing over after a while beta-reading, especially now that the chapters got longer. I hope you like overly long arches and slowness, because apparently I can't help myself.

- ...Also, apologies to Sam.
Some fools fool themselves I guess

Chapter Summary

Chapter title taken from Nazareth' "Love Hurts"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence in the car is deafening.

»Sam’s not answering?«

Castiel pockets his phone. »No.«

»He’s probably just getting some sleep in.«

Castiel turns to him abruptly. »He was fine.«

»What do you mean, he was fine?«

»He was fine when I touched him. Why would be he lie about being in pain?«

Dean shrugs. »People lie for all kinds of reasons. Maybe he was just trying to be polite, you know?«

»Polite?«

»Yeah, you know. Maybe he needed a little bit of me-time. Sometimes you don't want to get into all the reasons for why you do something or want something.«

Dean turns his gaze away from the road long enough to see Cas' face wrinkle up in irritation.

»If Sam wants to spend time on his own, there is no need to lie. He should know that.«

»Oh, Cas....« Dean breathes out, shaking his head. »Man, sometimes you’re still so...«

»I’m still so what?«, he asks, irritated.

»It's like you almost get it, you know.«

»You’re telling me it’s a deficiency on my part that I don't understand the need for pointless lying?«

»It’s not necessarily pointless, is what I’m trying to say.«

Castiel doesn’t reply. But for the rest of the car drive, when Castiel isn’t checking his phone, Dean catches him staring.

They park the Impala in front of a big white house that screams money.

»That's the address«, Dean says, lamely. Of course it is. »Leave the talking to me.«

Castiel listens. He lets him do all the talking.
There are days, most of the days, really, when talking to relatives and friends of victims is no biggie. It's just a part of the job, that you learn to deal with quickly, because you have to. Tonight, it's different. Sam's not here to do his emotional puppy eyes and understanding thing, which doesn't help. Shifting his attention from the distraught parents' eyes to old photo albums. Dean feels himself growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

»She was just such a wonderful girl«, the mother repeats again and again, while she tugs on her white blouse. Everything else she's wearing is black. She'd probably attractive when she's not grieving. »Who would do something like that?«

»Did you notice any recent changes in her behavior? New friends? Anything like that?«

»What?« She rubs over her eyes, reddening the brim further. »No. No. What are you saying? We were told it was an animal attack.«

»Of course. We're just working every angle here.«

»I'm sorry. I know you're just doing your job.«

It's not her that's unnerving Dean. He's used to the crying and the open pain in situations like this. It's the father that makes him uneasy.

Unlike them, he's not sat down. He's leaning against the wall. Like his wife he's immaculately dressed. His arms crossed in front of his chest, he's effusing nothing but anger and resignation.

»What difference is it going to make?«, he asks. »She's dead.«

When they leave the house, she thanks them profusely, and it feels wrong. They've done nothing. The father knows it, too.

»Dean«, Castiel says, when the door behind them closes.

»What?«

Cas' hand is warm on his shoulder and Dean finds himself instantly leaning into the touch.

»What is wrong?«, Castiel asks, stepping closer.

He's close, this close, to turning around and naming every little thing that's wrong. It would take all night. But he hates whining. And this isn't a night to get all emotional and say a lot of shit he'll regret.

»Nothing's wrong. That was mostly a waste of time.«

He starts walking back to the car.

»You don't know that yet,« Castiel says. »You were gathering general information, why would it have been a waste of time?«

»It sure felt like it. Man.«

Dean rubs his index finger over his forehead. A headache is trying to settle in.

Castiel looks at him like he knows something, although Dean doesn't know what.

»I don't know, man. These people.« He waves at the house. »They kind of got to me. I feel like...«
whatever did this, we need to find it and kill it.

»We will.«

»Yeah, but it's still not gonna bring her back to them, is it? Shit. There are just some people that you lose and you can't ever get over it. You know?«

»Are you still talking about the family in there?«

Dean doesn't know what he's trying to say. He just knows he can't stand Castiel looking at him like this anymore. His fingers slide over Baby's hood, as he walks away from him.

»I don't know, man.« He opens the car door, not looking up. »Let's just go.«

On the way back, Castiel starts fidgeting with his phone again.

»Why don't you call him again, if he's not answering your messages?«

»I don't want to wake him, in case he's asleep.«

»So? He's probably just talking to Jody. Man--« Dean laughs. »I used to think the two of them--« He halts, looks at Castiel, who frowns.

»What did you use to think?«

»I wanted to make a joke about the two of them boning and then I figured that'd probably not be cool.«

Dean presses down harder on the accelerator pedal.

»Sam likes her,« Castiel nods. »I could tell right away.«

»Yeah, but... I was just messing around. I don't think there's anything going on. I'd be surprised if there ever was. You know how Sam is.«

Castiel puts his phone away again.

»You're not jealous, are you?« Dean notices. »The thought doesn't freak you out?«

»What thought?«

»Right...« Dean shakes his head again. »You're a better man than me.«

»Are you a jealous person, Dean? Generally speaking.«

»Are you?« Dean huffs.

»Yes. Sometimes very much so. But I've been trying to learn how not to be for a very long time now. I don't enjoy it.«

»Big shocker. No one likes it.«

»You didn't answer my question.«

»What do you think? When you grow up fighting for some drunk man's attention, it's kind of a given.«
»I think I know what you mean.«

Dean turns his head. Castiel seems serious enough.

»I guess you do, yeah.«

He wills himself to think about the case instead. It doesn’t help his mood. At least it feels somewhat more productive if not less guilt-ridden. He knows the girl’s death is not on him in any way, but the way her father looked at him. He saw straight through him to his uselessness.

He jumps in his seat, when Castiel’s hand appears on his knee.

»I'm sorry you're feeling so unwell.«

Dean tries to ignore the burning sensation the touch drives up his thigh.

»I'm fine«, he says, glad this car ride is almost over.

»You know I'm always here to help.«

»Yeah, well, you can help me by figuring out what the hell we're dealing with.«

Castiel pulls his hand away, miffed.

»I thought that’s what I was doing.«

They park in front of Jody’s house.

Before they reach the door, Castiel turns around to him quickly, so they almost bump into each other.

»Sorry, Dean, I just-« He puts his head to one side. »You have been behaving so strangely lately.«

»What?«

Nice. All he’s been trying is to be nice. Well, nicer.

»Let me just help.«

Castiel takes Dean’s hand, interlaces their fingers.

Dean’s all too aware that he’s definitely not supposed to let this happen.

When he feels warmth spreading up his arm, he abruptly pulls away.

»What the hell? I’m not sick. What were you trying to do?«

»I was trying to help you by taking on your pain.«

»Don't do that again,« Dean hisses and wipes his hand on his pants. »Not without asking first.«

»Why?«

»Really? Why? There’s a reason Sam wanted you stop. And unlike me, he could actually do with some more help. We all know he’s got a few screws loose. But he stopped letting you do this stuff when he realized how much it fucked you up. So what on Earth made you think I would let you do this? I’m having a crappy day, that’s all! You think I’m putting you in danger for that?«
»Sam’s insistence on not letting me help is unreasonable. It isn’t different than any other energy-
draining activity that you all gladly let me do. The difference between a broken leg and emotional
hurt is marginal in this context.«

Well this, this is bullshit.

»So you’re telling me he’d be fine with this?«

Castiel looks disappointed, and a little ashamed, too. Dean can’t stand knowing he put this face on
him. »Just don’t do it again, okay?«

Jody immediately opens the door, a beer in her hands, when they ring the bell. »I thought I heard you
guys.« She steps aside and lets them in.

»Yeah, we were just-«

»No need to explain yourselves.« She smiles and holds up her beer. »Do you want one?«

Something about her smile is off.

»Uh, yeah, I’d love one.«

Castiel looks around. »Where’s Sam?«

»He headed straight to bed when you guys left.«

»Where?«

»Where?« Jody laughs.

»Yes, where. In which room is he?« Castiel asks, impatiently.

»In Owen’s old room. I’ll show you.« She gestures to the door. »Is everything alright?«

»Yeah, sure,« Dean nods. Of course, she doesn’t understand why Castiel is so eager to get to Sam.
»To be honest, I could do with some shut-eye, too.«

»Sure. No beer then.«

»That’s not what I said.«

She laughs.

They follow her down the hall until she stops.

»This is Sam.« She touches the door frame. »Do you guys want to check on him?«

»Yes,« Castiel says.

»Uh-huh«, Dean nods, when he sees Jody’s confusion grow. He’s not sure if she’ll think it any less
weird, when they both appear overeager to check on Sam. But Dean’s not going to be the only
explaining anyone’s relationship to anyone tonight. Especially when the alternative is as easy as
listening to Sam snore for a second.

Sure enough, when she opens the door, they find Sam asleep. He’s on his stomach, decoratively
draped over the small bed, his arms sprawling over the frame. Dean can see his hand, in a tight fist,
touching the floor.

Jody raises her eyebrows at Dean, he nods and she closes the door.

»That’s Sam asleep alright«, he says.

»Are you sure everything is okay?«

»Yeah. Sure. Cas here can just get a bit over-anxious at times.« He pats Castiel’s shoulder, who’s visibly more relaxed now that he knows Sam is okay.

Jody is everything but convinced, but she drops it.

»Alright, let me show you your room then.«

Jody doesn’t seem surprised when Castiel tags along.

The room is bigger than Sam’s, but just as bare. It has a double bed, a big wardrobe and not much else.

Jody points at the bed, as if they could miss it. »I’m not in here a lot. It used to be our bedroom, but I just couldn’t sleep in here anymore. It was just too eery.«

»Where do you sleep instead?« Castiel asks for some reason.

»Guest room«, she says like an apology.

»Ever thought about moving?« Dean asks.

»I’ve got a job here.«

»Yeah could stay in town, move into another house?«

»It’s been a mortgage nightmare.«

Dean doubts that’s the reason, but he’s not going to be lecturing anyone about holding onto hurtful memories.

»Well, I’ll leave you to it. See you tomorrow, guys.«

»Goodnight.«

She closes the door on her way out.

Dean kicks off his shoes.

Castiel looks around the room.

»She didn’t ask if we found anything,« he says. »I thought she would.«

»I think she was too distracted by your need to check on Sam. We can tell her we found bupkis tomorrow.«

Castiel’s gaze is piercing.

»What?« Dean shrugs. »You got all intense back there and she doesn’t know you two are, you know«
»Dating.«

»Yeah, dating.«

»Do you think I should have told her?«

Dean shrugs.

»I don’t care. I just figured it’s not my place to explain anything to her. If you guys don’t want other people to know, that’s your thing.«

»Why would I not want other people to know?«

»You or Sam, or whatever. I didn’t know. You guys didn’t say anything, so how would I know?«

»I see.«

Dean plants himself face-down into the pillows. When he looks up again, Castiel hasn’t moved.

»Something else you need to get off your chest?«

»Dean,« Castiel says. In that especially gravel-toned voice that always does _things_ to Dean's insides. »Are you sure you don’t want my help?«

»You help me plenty.«

»You know what I mean.«

»I’m fine. And I agree with Sam. You shouldn’t waste your energy on stuff like this.«

»It’s not wasted on yours and Sam’s well-being.«

»We’d both prefer you alive and kicking, anyway. You know what happened last time. So keep your mojo to yourself.«

Castiel’s still standing in front of the bed, stiff and undecided. Now that he’s seen that Sam is asleep, safe and sound, he takes his time.

»When you asked me to stay with you,« he eventually says. »Where you asking me to stay permanently?«

Dean heaves his head from the pillow, trying to decipher Castiel’s facial expression.

»You can do whatever you want, Cas.«

»I know I can. That’s not what I asked. I’m inquiring about your wants.«

»Right now all I want is to go to sleep.«

Castiel mulls this over for a moment.

»If Sam left the bunker, would you be angry with me for following him?«

»Probably. Not that that should change anything for you. Why? Did he say something else?«

»No. It was a hypothetical question.«
»Yeah, well, hypothetically, you guys should do whatever makes you happy.«

»Just not practically?«

»Also practically. I’m just not going to go all Hallmark on your ass again.«

»I don’t know what that means.«

Of course he doesn’t.

»I care about you guys, I want you both to be happy. So: do that. Whatever that means.«

Dean knows his voice sounds anything but sincere, but it’s all he can muster up.

»We care about you, too«, Castiel says, an absurd amount of gravitas in his voice.

Dean presses his face into the pillow.

He hears the door open and close.

He feels like crying. This is absolutely pathetic. He never even got that stupid beer.

- 

Sam has been stirring his coffee for a good five minutes now. There’s no way in hell it’s still hot. Tepid at best.

»Are you sure you’re okay?« Jody asks. »You look like you didn’t get a second of sleep.«

She sits down on the chair next to Sam and puts the back of her hand against his forehead.

»I’m sure.« His smile is strained. »And I never had a fever or anything.«

She looks down at the cup in her own hand, momentarily embarrassed.

»Shouldn’t we be leaving?« Castiel asks. »Isn’t this a time-sensitive case?«

»Are there any other kind?« Dean replies. But Cas is right. »We’ll call you if we find something and you’ll let us know, too, right?«

»Of course,« Jody says.

She looks at Sam, biting the inside of her cheek. Before she can ask him if he’s fine again, Dean takes the last sip of his coffee and gets up.

»You know,« he says, once they’re in the car. »Jody’d probably stop hitting on you, if she knew you’re off the market.«

»She’s not hitting on me,« Sam mumbles and turns on the radio. He immediately wants to turn it off again, but Dean shoves his hand away. You don’t disrespect Nazareth like that.

They glare at each other.

»Sure. Right.« Dean turns the volume down, the tiniest bit, just to appease Sam. »You don’t want Jody to know?«

Dean looks from Sam to Castiel in the backseat.
»What?« Dean furrows his brow. »Really? She might be a bit disappointed but I doubt she’d judge.«

Sam looks at Dean pleadingly. »Let’s just focus on the case, okay?« The fidgetiness from earlier has turned into something more desperate.

Jody is right. He looks too tired for the amount of hours he was out.

»Sure.«

Dean’s forcing himself not to belt along to the song. Sam already looks miserable enough. He’s not just sad. Whatever he is, he’s clearly not going to explain shit.

*I know it isn’t true, I know it isn’t true. Love is just a lie made to make you blue.*

»So is now a good time to ask about your freakout last night?«

Sam glares again. Glaring indicates irritation, and that’s at least better than the pure doom and gloom.

»Cas, a little help maybe?«

Dean meets Castiel’s eyes in the rearview mirror. But he just shrugs and looks away.

Well, if this isn’t just a really bad joke. That’s what you get for trying.

»Awesome. This day is just going to be great.«

He turns the volume up.

Sam closes his eyes and leans his head against the window.

*Ooh, ooh love hurts*

Well, at least someone gets it.

Chapter End Notes

I almost completely scrapped this chapter for a lot of reasons, but ultimately decided it made less sense to completely skip it. That's my way of saying I know there's not a lot of stuff happening here...

Thanks so much *VenezuelanWriter* for all your help!
Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took so long. I had to do a lot rewriting and deleting and more rewriting. Meanwhile my real life BS was taking away all my precious writing time, and a death in the family gave me all the wrong kind of sad feelings that weren't very incentive to writing. But I still thought about this story every day... So, anyway, here is the new chapter with a tentative promise that it won't take as long next time.

On another note: I'm not one for extensive trigger warnings, I just wanted to write a friendly reminder to whoever is prone to forget it, that Sam's victim-blamey thoughts about Lucifer and interpretations of their interactions and his hallucinations, in this and some other chapters, definitely shouldn't be taken at face value. And definitely not as an endorsement either.

PS: If you wanna make my birthday, let me know what you think.

Dean shields his face from the sun and squints at both of them.

"Well, that was an enormous waste of time. Took fucking ages, too."

Sam doesn't disagree. They've spent hours talking to teachers, friends, frenemies. By all accounts, this girl was your regular teenager, maybe a bit on the boring side.

Nothing indicates any voluntary entanglements in the supernatural, anyway.

Sam rubs over his temple. He's battling a searing headache, just like he knew he would last night.

Castiel, standing next to him, presses the back of his hand against Sam's.

A group of girls pass them. Dean cranes his neck, watches them leave the school grounds.

"You okay there, Sammy?" he asks, when he turns back.

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

Dean shrugs. "Let's go grab something to eat. I can't hear myself think over the sound over my insides going all topsy-turvy." Before Sam can even open his mouth in protest, he adds: "I know you're gonna say you're not hungry. But you could definitely use a coffee. You almost fell asleep back there."

Again, Sam doesn't disagree. He stifles a yawn and follows Dean to the car.
Sam smiles at Castiel. He wants everything to be as normal as possible. If they don’t mention last night or this morning, the awkwardness will be over soon.

They don’t have to talk about this morning. Shoving your boyfriend out of bed by accident can happen to anyone.

When Sam woke up, feeling a body close to his, he immediately jerked back.

Castiel sat on the floor, wide-eyed and confused, before he said: "It's a small bed."

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "Sorry." Which wasn’t a great thing to say but still better than the more elaborate truth of "Sorry, but I thought you were the devil."

Now Sam’s sitting in a car, trying to forget about it, and about last night. If he ignores the lingering feeling of roaming hands, his skin will soon stop tingling and the itch will stop. The urge to get out of his skin and as far away from himself as possible is strong.

Last night was on him, all on him. Not telling Jody the truth, spiralling, knowing he was spiralling and not stopping it. The way he kept ignoring the sensible part of his brain that told him to just ask Castiel to stay, and once that was too late, to talk with Jody instead. Even the things that happened after the Ambien he could have stopped.

Sure, he didn’t actively choose to hallucinate, but the stuff he came up with? All him. Some part of him probably thought that it’s what he needed. Maybe he did need it. Maybe he requires someone to tell him all the things he’s been trying to push away.

He’s not sure if he can explain the sex part away this easily. He gets how powerful fear and sensory memories are, but this felt different, like a tug of far between want and contempt. It would be easier to think he just surrendered to Lucifer. But Sam knows, in a way, it was only himself who took what he needed. He’s morbidly fascinated by how easily his body yielded, and how familiar it felt to be roughly manhandled. How could he want this, when he’s sidestepping intimacy with the person he loves.

He’s supposed to not be mad anymore. Castiel took away the craziness a long time ago. But if he’s not crazy, then what is this? Just good old regular PTSD? It’s not insanity, but maybe this is as sane as it gets for him.

Sam realizes he’s sitting in a diner. He’s not sure how he got here. He doesn’t remember getting out of the car, but he must have.

He hears Dean and Castiel’s voices, but it’s hard to pay attention to what they’re saying. Sam feels Castiel’s body by his side. Their thighs are pressed together and Castiel’s arm brushes his’ whenever he moves.

Dean’s talking while chewing his pancakes. Sam stares at his brother’s open mouth. Teeth, illogically bright. Tearing the food into pieces, grinding it down until it’s nothing but brown mush, before flushing the mush down with coffee. Dean’s pink tongue darts out of his mouth, licking syrup off his bottom lip. It looks obscenely carnal.

"I shouldn’t let you get away with not eating, just because you’re in a bad mood," Dean says.

This Sam hears, because he takes it as an attack. His shoulders tense up. He doesn’t dignify the comment with an answer, which Dean doesn’t seem to have expected either.

"So, I’ll drop you off at the old folks home and I’ll drive over to this other guy’s home," Dean says,
wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

"Why?" Sam asks.

Dean grimaces. "Why what?"

"Shouldn’t one of us go to the morgue?"

"Yeah, course. I’ll swing by later."

"We’re three people. Cas can go check the morgue."

"Right..." Dean says, drawing the word out. "Because him posing as an FBI on his own has gone over so well in the past."

"I’m pretty sure Cas can handle it."

Dean narrows his eyes and studies Sam. "What’s up with you, man?" There's only a hint of worry in between the irritation, but it feels like too much already. "You've been acting so weird since last night. Cas said you weren't sick, so don't even start with that bullshit again."

"I'm fine. Nothing's up." Sam grabs a cup of coffee in front of him that must be his.

"Nothing, uh-huh, sure. That's why you were out as a light at what – 7'o clock?"

"I wasn't. I -"

"Jody told us you headed straight to bed when we left."

"I was just tired."

Dean clenches his jaw. "You can keep your secrets, Sam. I just need to know if you're fit to hunt."

"Of course I'm fit to hunt!"

"Great. Why do you want to work on your own then?"

"I don't! You said it yourself. We already wasted so much time today. Splitting up just makes sense."

"I mean, I guess." Dean does a half-shrug and turns to Castiel. "If Cas feels up to it."

"I’d rather stay with Sam."

Irritated sadness flinches over Dean’s face, before he nods. "Alright then. Let's go."

Dean gets up to pay. Castiel follows Sam outside.

"If you really think I should go to the morgue instead, I can do that." Castiels' knuckles brush against the back of Sam's hand. "But I'd rather not leave you alone right now."

There's a voice in the back of Sam's head that sounds like his own, but strikingly bitter.

"Because he knows you’re weak, and he thinks you can’t take care of yourself. Because if he doesn’t protect you, he knows how pissed off Dean will be with him."

"I appreciate that." Sam pulls up the corners of his mouth. "It’s fine. Of course you can come with me."
He doesn't explain why he suggested they split in the first place. It seems clear to him, though, that Castiel knows it's not about the time.

"I understand you don’t want to talk about what’s been bothering you since yesterday. But I think it would be beneficial for both of us, all of us really, if you did."

"Yeah…” Sam tries not to pull away, as Castiel takes his hand.

"As in 'Yes, I will talk to you'?” Castiel looks up at him, apprehensive, waiting for his answer.

"I wanna talk. I really do," Sam says. A part of him wants nothing more than pouring his guts out to Castiel, but the thought also sets him into panic mode. "Just not now, okay? Let’s just focus on the case first. I don’t want our heads to be somewhere else right now."

Castiel frowns. "I don’t think talking to you would be detrimental to my work ethic, if that’s what you’re worried about."

"I think it might be detrimental to mine." Sam hitches up the corners of his mouth. He knows the melancholy on his face is obvious, but the smile is genuine. He hopes Castiel can see that, too. "If I started digging into it now…”

"I see," Castiel says in a diplomatic tone. Not content but willing to wait.

"Thank you," Sam says. He squeezes Castiel's hand, and realizes that with the touching, it's a little bit easier. It feels nice, grounding, and he can appreciate the warm soft skin under his.

The calm doesn't last long. Suddenly, there's a sensation bolting through his body, as strong arms wrap around his middle and pull him close. It's like breathing in icy cold air and being punched in the gut at once. So much direct body contact.

It's just Cas, he tells himself. It’s just Cas’ head pressed to his chest.

Hesitantly, Sam stretches out his arms and hugs back. He tugs Castiel’s head under his chin and holds on close, and tries to relax. Again, when he's the one doing the holding, it's easier.

This is good. Safe. Innocent. Most of all, he knows that it’s real, no matter what it might seem like.

The smell of Castiel’s hair is clean, crisp, almost odorless. Sam breathes it in deeply, shuddering slightly, as he tries to anchor himself to reality.

Dean clears his throat.

"I don’t want to interrupt… whatever you got going here, but we’re on the clock."

Sam pulls back from Castiel. "Yeah, we’re -" He gives Castiel a quick look over. "We’re good to go."

In a little while, Dean drops them off at the old people's home.

The lady at the desk wears her hair in a red-tinted perm. She pretty much waves them through, as she’s leafing through a battered romance novel. She doesn’t want to hear their story.

"Room 12, straight down the hall," is all she says, when they ask about Don Smith.

"He died recently," Sam prompts.
Now she does look up. She’s a lot younger than he first suspected, in her mid-30s, maybe. The perm, the frown and her shrill 80s make-up ages her. Her name tag reads 'Anne'.

"You know where you are, right?" She cocks an eyebrow. "People die here all the time."

"People do die all the time," Castiel nods in agreement.

"He was killed in a suspected animal attack," Sam adds.

"Oh, right." The book in her hands is half closed now, two of her fingers pressed between the pages. She expects to go back to reading any minute. "Now I know who you’re talking about."

"We’re following up on the case."

Her eyes grow big in a mixture of surprise and disbelief. She perks up and seems to grow a bit younger. "You’re really FBI? I thought you were joking! I mean, Grohl and Cobain - really?"

Sam hadn’t pegged her for the Nirvana type. She fishes for the bookmark on the desk, pulls it between the pages of her paperback and closes it. On the cover, a sailor and a young busty woman gaze at each other longingly.

"Why do you guys care about animal attacks at all? How is that fed’s business?"

"It’s confidential." Sam puts on his professional smile, it feels as fake as his badge. "Can you tell us anything about Mr Smith?"

She shrugs. "Like what? You want to see his medical records?"

"What was he like? Hobbies? Friends? Did he show any eccentric behavior? Any recent changes his attitude or routine?"

"I’m sorry." She is disappointed, either by the questions or her inability to answer. "I really didn’t know him well. He was just… a normal old man? He was alright, I guess. He didn’t start any fights, as far as I know. He was no trouble."

Sam finds himself feeling bad for her for some reason. She might have a more depressing life than him. This is probably the highlight of her day.

"Are any of his belongings still here?"

"I think there’s still a box of his stuff. Someone was supposed to pick it up, but they never came."

"Room 12, right?"

"Yeah. It’s to the left, and then down the hall. I’d show you but I’m not supposed to leave the desk unattended."

"It’s alright. We’ll find it. Thank you for your help."

She watches them walk away, and only picks up her book again once they’re out of sight.

"It smells like cat piss," a voice in Sam's head provides. He only realized he's mumbled the sentence out aloud when Castiel says: "There’s no feline urine in the near proximity. What you perceive as such is just very salty fear- and dread-induced human sweat. But I see how you could mix up one for the other."
The door to room 12 is unlocked. On one side of the room there's a wardrobe and a bookshelf, empty except for a pristine looking bible. On the other side, there's a hospital-like bed, the mattress stripped of any bedding.

A cardboard box rests underneath it.

"This gotta be it," Sam says.

"You think?"

Sam jumps. The voice is so crystal clear and loud. The mocking tone cutting right through him. But, of course, when he looks around, Lucifer isn’t here. It's just another familiar voice inside his head.

Castiel grips Sam’s arm, and steadies him, before Sam realizes he needs steadying.

"What’s wrong?"

"I just," Sam begins and turns his face from Castiel’s worried gaze. He looks around the room. "I just thought I heard something."

"You heard something? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Must have imagined it." Sam kneels down next to the box. "Just some noise from one of the other rooms, I guess."

He starts going through the box, unsure what he’s supposed to be looking for. There’s a framed picture, two books, a leather-bound bible and a Tom Clancy paperback. He opens a wallet. A whole life contained in one measly box. Sam’s not sure anymore if the stench of fear is coming from this place or himself. He looks up at Castiel when he hears him say his name.

"Sam, I know you don't want to talk right now, but you're worrying me."

In Sam’s pocket, his phone is vibrating. He reads Dean’s message, still on his knees.

'Nada. Still nothing that’d connect the three. Heading to the morgue now. How are things on your end?'

"Is it Dean?" Castiel asks. "What does he say?"

Sam is vaguely aware that he must be imagining the reverence in Castiel’s voice. Or that he's, at the very least, over interpreting it. This is just how he's always said Dean’s name, with gravitas and depth. It's not new or meaningful.

"Right, Sam. The fact that the guy's always saying your brother's name like he's salivating at the mere thought of him, means nothing. Yeah, no, that makes total sense. What in Daddy's name is wrong with you?"

"Dean’s heading to the morgue now," Sam gets out. He looks down at the box again. His mind is occupied by trying to ignore Lucifer's voice, as his hands sort through stained paper notes, bits and pieces of junk. This is what he gets for last night. How absurd was of him to expect he could welcome him for one night without consequences. If he’d just fought harder. If he’d fought at all, none of this would be happening.

"Sam." Castiel crouches before him and cups his cheek. Sam forces himself not to flinch. These are different hands. These are good hands. "Look at me."
Sam does. He looks at Castiel, who now seems unsure what exactly to do with this attention.

"Please, just tell me what’s wrong. I want to understand," Castiel says. "Let me help you."

Accepting Castiel’s help him and letting him feel what he feels, see what he sees? God no.

He thinks of the stupid moment that started all of this. If he just hadn’t stumbled over his own words, feeling sorry for himself. If he’d just told Jody what’s up. He wouldn’t have ended hallucinating fucking the devil.

"I can’t." Sam shakes his head. "Not right now."

"It’s not like he doesn’t already know you’re my bitch."

Sam looks past Castiel’s head to where the voice comes from. On the other bed, Lucifer sits, his feet dangling in the air.

Fuck. Sam's not supposed to see him now. The medication has long worn off, he’s… Well, he feels lucid, but he’s obviously not.

"Come on!" Lucifer jumps off the bed. "You know why I’m still here. You engaged, and boy did you engage." He whistles. "How about another round later?" He eyes the bed. "After you're done with your little 'Nancy Drew meets angelic Hardy Boy' mystery thing. But you know I’m good for those, too."

Castiel grips Sam's shoulder, his voice tight. "Sam."

Lucifer walks up to them, crouches down, his knee almost bumping into Castiel, as he peers into the box.

"You know, it’s flattering that you’re so focused on me, but we could get the case over with sooner if you actually paid attention to the details. 'Daily Grind.' Doesn’t that ring a bell?"

Sam follows Lucifer's gaze and pulls out a flimsy piece of paper. A flyer for a coffee shop. Castiel looks down at the paper in his hands, like he’s considering just how crazy Sam is being right now.

"What is it?" Castiel asks.

"I know this logo," Sam says, trying to ignore the stinging sensation. Following Lucifer’s ideas, engaging with him further, will only make it so much harder to leave.

It’s made even harder by Lucifer’s stupid and constant comments. "He recognizes the logo. Aw."

Sam pushes himself off the floor, trying to concentrate on the task at hand. Trying to ignore the air of Lucifer’s presence all around him.

"Are you sure?" Castiel looks doubtful. "Where?"

"I’m sure! I remember now." Sam’s speech speeds up. "I saw it when I looked up the victim’s names."

"When did you do that?"

"I don’t know. This morning. I was trying to make up for time lost last night, I guess." He shakes his head. "The girl. She worked there."
"The dead girl worked at this coffee shop?" Castiel asks for clarification.

"Yeah, I found her under the staff section." On the flyer there's a small map. Someone's drawn a line in red ball pen ink from the pensioner's home to the coffee shop. "The place is just a block from here. Let's go."

Sam bolts out of the door. He barely notices Anne's curious eyes following them outside. On the street, he looks at the flyer again, and then down the street, to the left and to the right, trying to figure out the directions.

Just when he's about to start walking again, Lucifer says: "So what's your genius plan now, big guy? Maybe try thinking before you act. I know you're trying to impress someone here, but emulating your brother's 'shoot first, ask questions later' thing? I mean, I guess it's what you did last night, but isn't sulkingly hesitant and somber more your forte?"

Sam hasn't really thought further than this. Get to the place and tell Dean where they're heading and-

"And then everything's going to magically solve itself? You know that there's got to be something about the girl your brother and Castiel missed last night. Maybe they were too busy," Lucifer waggles his eyebrows, "to focus. They didn't even tell you about the job, you had to find that out yourself."

"Right, so what are we supposed to do?" Sam asks, out loud.

Castiel blinks, confused by the one-sided conversation he hears. Then he says: "We should call Dean."

"Well, of course that's his suggestion. Call his white knight to save the day." Lucifer rolls his eyes. "Father, he's so predictable. What do you even see in this guy, Sam? Listen, how about this: You send this idiot away for a bit, and I'll help you solve this thing real quick."

"Why would I do that? I don't want your help," Sam thinks and glares at him.

"You want to solve the case and find out what kind of monster you're hunting before more people die, right?"

Sam licks his lips. There is no need to reply.

"And me? I want him gone," Lucifer cocks his head in Castiel's direction. "Look at us, we can't even have a proper conversation while he's here."

"Why would I do anything you say?"

"Because you want me to leave again. At least that's what you claim when you're not, you know, wriggling and moaning under me, but I digress. So here's the deal: You send him away, I'll help you save all these poor souls bla bla bla, and then I'm gone. Until you want me back, of course. Because we both know you will."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying! How could I? You know I can't lie. Besides, are you really this curious to see the alternative? Do you want to piss me off and see what happens if he stays?"

When Sam doesn't answer, Lucifer's hand appears on the side of his neck. He's softly stroking over his skin with his thumb, until he starts pressing down, harder and harder.
"Do you really want to test me?"

"You can't hurt me, you're not real."

"Really?" Lucifer’s face is inches away from him, Sam can smell the sulfur on his breath. "So I’m not," he says, his grip around Sam’s throat tightening, "taking your breath away right now?"

Sam manages to shove him off and takes a step backwards. Nothing about this makes any sense.

"Why are you doing this? There’s no need to send him away. We’re talking now, aren’t we?"

"It’s so cute how you still think you’re in a place to negotiate." Lucifer stretches his lips into a humorless smile. "Just like the good old days, when you tried to outsmart me. By now shouldn’t you know that I always get my way in the end? I’m just being nice and offering you a, mhm, more amicable solution. There are always other options if you want to choose the hard way. I can think of a few off the top of my head." He starts finger-counting. "Public humiliation, a favourite of mine. Letting your loser boyfriend know how crazy you really are. Classic burning in a pit of fire - haven’t done that in a while, have we? Oh, no, now I know! You were always especially sensitive to cacophony!"

Lucifer grins, as an ear-shattering high pitch screech resounds. It’s only for a fraction of a second, but it’s long enough to make Sam wince and hold his ears.

"Do you swear you’ll leave me alone after?"

"I swear. Pinky promise."

"Sam," Castiel says softly, stepping closer to touch him, while Lucifer mimes throwing up. "Are you sure you’re feeling okay? Are you in pain?"

"I’m fine," Sam says out loud. He feels worse when Lucifer gives him the thumbs up.

"What do you want to do know?" Castiel asks.

"You’re right. We should contact Dean." Sam manages to look into Castiel's eyes. "I'll text him about the coffee shop. And you, um," he throws a side-glance at Lucifer, who nods encouragingly, "maybe you should head back to the girl's house for now."

Lucifer smiles and then he’s gone. For the moment, at least. Sam breathes out a sigh of relief.

"Why?" Castiel furrows his brow. "I was there yesterday. What would we gain from going there again?"

Sam scratches his neck.

"You want to be on your own?" Castiel asks, sounding surprisingly hurt. "Like last night?"

"No." Sam shakes his head. "I don't want to be alone. I just think it'd be good for you to go back there now that we've got a connection between the victims."

"That doesn't make much sense. Are you sure you are okay? You're still behaving very strangely, ever since last night. Dean thinks you might."

"Spare me, ok? I don't want to hear what Dean thinks right now!" Sam surprises himself by the harshness in his voice. "I'm sorry. I just. It was just a bad night. I don’t want to fight. Just stop asking me if I’m okay! Last night was last night. It has nothing to do with this." Later he'll be able to explain
all of this to Castiel, right now he just needs him to leave. "Can't you just go?" Sam begs. "Please."

"No," Castiel shakes his head. "I can't just go. Not when your disinterest in my company comes so suddenly. You're clearly unwell. What happened? Did I do something to upset you? Are you angry with me?"

"I'm not disinterested in your company! And I'm not angry, Cas. Far from it. I-" He thinks of repeating his lie, but decides against it. "You didn't do anything wrong. I still just need you to go right now. It's not you, it's... it's me." He realizes what that sounds like. "Everything's fine," he hurries to add, aware of what a hollow statement it is. He takes out his phone and texts Dean.

"I told Dean you're heading back to the girl's house and then you'll join him. I'll let you both know once I find something."

"This doesn't make sense." Castiel grabs Sam's lapel and carefully takes ahold of his hand. "I just want to help you, Sam."

Lucifer's chest pressed to his back last night, whispering in his ear. "He's just feeling sorry for you, you know that, right?" His hand slipping between the cold hard floor and Sam's front, wandering down his torso between his legs. "He'd do anything for Dean, whatever he wants. And if that means having to make you happy in the process, he'll even sacrifice himself for that. Granted, he's probably also just a little bit excited he gets to be with a Winchester at all, even if it's the wrong one." Lucifer's tongue wetting his earlobe. "Even if he's just borrowing my property."

Sam shuts his eyes close for a brief moment.

When he opens them again, Castiel is still there, holding his hand, looking up, an unsettled look in his eyes.

"Just... Trust me, please," Sam asks. "I know what I'm doing."

Castiel doesn't look any less doubtful.

Sam understands that Castiel deserves an explanation for all the weirdness. He doesn't know how he knows it, but he's sure that he's not allowed to explain right now. That the deal would be off. He can't risk that.

Sam squeezes Cas' hand. "I know that if we want to keep these monsters from getting any more people, you need to follow my lead, okay?"

This, the deflection from the personal to the case, finally seems to convince Castiel enough for him to nod.

Then, without another word, Castiel is gone and Sam is alone on the sidewalk, staring into thin air.

He hurries down to the coffeeshop, pushes open the door and scans the brightly-lit place. It's reasonably busy but not crammed. He decides to get in line, question the staff when suddenly-

"Did you see that?" Lucifer asks beside him. "The shifty-looking guy following that girl through the backdoor?"

"Yeah. I wonder-"

"Sammy, don't be dense and let's not waste even more time. Do you need me to light a fire under your ass to get you motivated again?" He smacks Sam's butt. "You need more spunk if you ever
wanna keep that little boring angel of yours. Come on."

Sam looks around, making sure no one's paying attention, and moves across the room towards the door. Outside, the backyard is empty save for two delivery trucks and a van. There's no man, no girl and for a moment Sam is so confused that he just stares, before starts walking towards one of the trucks.

The feeling of something heavy crashing into the back of his head is familiar. Sam tumbles forward, his face makes contact with the tarred ground, something pointy scratching his cheek.

It takes another hit for him to fall into unconsciousness.

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