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<th>Explicit</th>
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<tr>
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**Fumbling in the Dark: Love Advice For the Romantically Impaired**

by leonidaslion

Summary

True Love really is blind...
“So you’re Dean,” Jess says. The way she won’t stop staring at him rankles in a way Dean thinks it shouldn’t. He’s used to hot chicks being unable to take their eyes off him, after all.

It’s just that this hot chick is Sammy’s girl, and therefore technically off-limits.

“Yeah,” he agrees, leaning back against the couch and kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

Jess doesn’t seem to notice. She’s too busy staring at his face with that high, almost shocked color in her cheeks.

“And you’re Sam’s brother.”

Dean cocks his head to the side, frowning slightly. He’s starting to think maybe the reason Jess is with Sam instead of some stud is because she’s not all that bright.

“Yeaaah,” he agrees, drawing the word out as he stretches one arm out across the back of the couch and makes himself at home.

“Oh.” She falls silent then, for all of about ten seconds, and then fidgets and says, “It’s just that. You know. From the way Sam talks about you, I thought.”

One of Dean’s eyebrows lifts. Whatever it is, this is gonna be good. He can tell from the embarrassment in Jess’ voice.

“Yeah?” he says, giving her a filthy, ‘it’s all true’ grin. “What’s he say?”

But for some inexplicable reason, she shakes her head at that, tearing her gaze from him and all but running from the room.

“Nothing,” she answers over her shoulder as she goes. “I just didn’t think he was talking about his brother, is all.”
Hailey can’t put her finger on it at first. She doesn’t think Dean’s lying \((\text{at least not once he comes clean about the whole Ranger thing})\), but something about the story of two brothers out looking for their dad just doesn’t sit right with her. Trying to spot the misalignment is like trying to read on a diagonal, though, and the attempt leaves her with nothing more conclusive than eyestrain.

But then.

Then Hailey wakes up with Ben shaking her. Her head hurts and her eyes won’t focus on anything up close, so she looks past him—she looks to the side down that diagonal—and everything pops into clear, sharp relief.

Sam’s standing closer to Dean than Ben is to her. Sam’s hands are running over Dean’s chest and sides—he’s looking for an injury, Hailey knows that, but the movement is too familiar and easy to be anything but practiced. It’s weird, she thinks, for a guy to be that used to touching his brother so intimately, and then an entire series of glances and casual brushes and conversations that were more silent than spoken flicker through her aching head and she thinks, \textit{Oh}.

Oh.

After, she considers saying something—mostly morbid curiosity and an urge to see if she’s right—but they just saved Tommy’s ass, so she keeps the ugly word locked in her head where it belongs. She kisses Dean instead, keeping her eyes open and over his shoulder—keeping them on Sam.

She’s right.
There’s a paucity of good men in Lake Manitoc. Andrea knows, because she scooped up one of them when she wasn’t much more than a child and settled in to make a go of it. But he died—he drowned—and while it was a tragedy it wasn’t the end. It wasn’t the end and then Dean saunters into her life, with his swagger and his grins and his smooth way of talking.

Andrea puts him in his place easy as pie—a paucity of good men means she’s gotten accustomed to handling that sort of thing—only for some reason he keeps coming around. He keeps coming around, and Lucas is actually reaching out to him, which is a goddamned miracle, that’s what it is, and Andrea realizes somewhere around the time she’s naked and wet and shivering in front of him and all he does is avert his eyes and pass her a towel, that Dean is that rarest of creatures: a good man masquerading in wolf’s clothing.

She isn’t so much thinking in terms of wedding bells as she is a nice, quiet dinner—see where things lead—and then there’s Lucas in the lake, oh god, and Daddy, and this thing is going to take both of them from her in one terrible, sun drenched moment. Andrea can’t see anything beneath the surface—nothing past the glint of light off choppy water—and she feels the dock spinning out from underneath her hands and knees as her heart beats faster and faster and her chest goes cold.

And then Dean Winchester, a Good Man, comes gasping up into the sunlight with Lucas clenched tightly against his chest.

Andrea isn’t too proud to cry over Lucas (and over her daddy, who isn’t coming back) as she helps them get him up on the dock. Her hands shake as she holds him close, her son, her precious, the only thing she has left in the world, and it takes her a while to notice that Dean’s partner Sam (another Good Man, but too tall for her taste, too lean) is crouched close to Dean where Dean’s sitting slumped and coughing on the deck. Sam is watching Dean intently and stroking his hand soothingly up and down Dean’s back and Dean is leaning into it like Sam’s touch is going to help him breathe better.

And Andrea is maybe possibly okay probably in shock, but she still knows how to recognize this sort of thing when she sees it and it damn well figures.

The good ones are always gay or taken and Dean?

Well, he’s both.
“So, who is he really?” Jerry asks when all is said and done.

“Who’s who?” Dean replies, confused.

“‘Sam,’” Jerry says. He actually uses air quotes. Dean can’t remember the last time he saw someone do that.

“He’s, uh. Sam. My brother?”

Jerry gives Dean a look like he’s slightly disappointed in him and leans closer. “You shouldn’t be ashamed of him, you know. He’s a great guy. And anyway, when your dad hears you’re hunting with ‘Sam’—” There are those air quotes again. “—isn’t he going to get suspicious anyway?”

Luckily, that’s when Sam finally emerges from the bathroom.

Dean gives his brother a quick, ‘let’s-get-the-fuck-out-of-here’ look and jerks his head toward the Impala. One “call me if you ever need some frequent flier miles” and a “just remember what we talked about” later, they’re cruising down the highway at sixty miles per hour. After a reasonable interim—long enough for the roar of flight traffic overhead to fade—Dean lets out a sigh of relief.

Sam, of course, takes that as a signal to Talk.

“So what was that all about?” he asks, tossing a glance in Dean's direction. “I thought you were gonna slam Jerry’s hand in the door you shut it so fast.”

“Nothing,” Dean answers as he reaches over to turn on the radio. “Dude was high or something. Creeped me the fuck out.”

“Yeah, those free frequent flier miles sounded pretty terrifying.”

“Shut up, bitch,” Dean mutters, putting his arm up on the back of the seat in his default Driving-With-Sammy position and using the helpful proximity to flick his brother’s ear.

In retaliation, Sam smacks Dean’s chest with the back of his hand (*Dean grunts like he’s supposed to*) and then they both settle into the drive. It’s a gorgeous day for it: all smooth asphalt, and open windows, and the warmth of Sam’s skin against Dean’s lazy fingertips. When Sam turns his head to look out the window, that warmth is joined by the comforting brush of Sam’s hair over Dean’s knuckles and Dean smiles.

Fuck flying, this is the only way to travel.
They think she’s asleep.

As if she could sleep after finding out that all the things in the dark are real. As if she could sleep after seeing the Winchesters come back to the motel room with bloodied cheeks and red-rimmed eyes.

Dean tried to get her to go home. Sam let her stay.

‘Not like we need the bed,’ he said, and Charlie thought he meant one of them was going to stay up and keep watch. Maybe that was how they lived, how they had to live to face what was out there in the night.

But now they think she’s asleep and Dean, who was puttering around the room for the last hour or so—packing up, Charlie thinks—is shucking off his shirt and climbing into bed next to his brother. It’s a little strange, but okay, there’s nothing particularly wrong with it. Charlie lies still and listens to the silence of the room until it’s broken by the sound of voices.

“Took you so long?” That’s Sam, sleep clinging to his vowels and softening his consonants.

“Wanted to be ready to go tomorrow,” Dean answers. There’s a pause and then, “How’s your head?”

“Hurts like hell. How’s yours?”

“Peachy.”

A soft, fond laugh. “Yeah, right.” Another pause, longer this time, and then—

Charlie stiffens. That sounded a lot like ...

The moan comes again, this time followed by, “Fuck, Sammy, marry me.”

“You just want me for my hands.”

“Damn straight. Mmm. Harder. C’mon, man. I know you got more than that.”

The springs of the other bed squeak and Charlie can’t see anything but she squeezes her eyes shut anyway. She thinks her heart might explode out of her chest at any moment. Oh God, no wonder they didn’t need the other bed, and she’s right here, less than two feet away, and they’re … they’re …

They think she’s asleep, and Charlie does her best to play along. The noises don’t go on for long anyway—Dean’s soft moans, and Sam’s tired chuckles, and every so often a creak of the bedsprings. Finally it gets quiet, and their breathing evens out into the slow rhythms of sleep, and Charlie creeps out of the bed.

She won’t be able to look at them, in the daylight. Won’t be able to meet their eyes. And then they’ll know she heard them, and she doesn’t want to be there for the Awkward.

It’s almost sunup when she eases the door open, and she takes one last glance behind her and sees that she wasn’t as stealthy as she thought. Sam’s eyes are open and he’s watching her from the bed. Dean is pressed up close against his chest, his back to the door and his face squished up against Sam’s collarbone, and Sam’s arm is draped over his side. Sam gives Charlie a little smile—seems
embarrassed, but not enough for what she heard—and she tells herself she doesn’t care when he looks a little hurt and surprised when she shuts the door on him without a word and runs down the walk.

Some things should stay in the dark where they belong.
Perspire (Skin)

Dean seems to forget she’s there, sometimes, despite the fact that it’s her skin he’s slicing into.

“I’ll show you,” he mutters under his breath as he draws a thin, stinging line down her arm. “Carve you a pretty little picture so you can appreciate how much I need you. So you won’t go running off again.”

Rebecca tries screaming again, the sound muffled by the gag, and Dean blinks, eyes focusing.

“Well, hello there, pretty,” he murmurs with that razor-sharp grin of his, and for a few minutes (oh god, no) she has his undivided attention. Then things slip sideways again, and this time she’s smart enough to keep quiet and let him ramble on.

“Always so damned gorgeous ... touching you ... smell like ... fuck you till you can’t walk straight ... show you who’s in charge ...”

He tried to rape her. Couldn’t get it up and ended up tying her to the chair instead.

When he takes himself out now, though, he’s hard and full, and Rebecca isn’t just sweating (ladies perspire, becky; get it right) but pouring out moisture like her entire body is weeping. Oh God, oh God, she doesn’t want to die like this, tortured and violated.

But Dean still isn’t paying her any attention—is stroking himself and mumbling under his breath, and the only word she understands is the one he says when he comes with a vicious, frustrated growl. Except she can’t have heard right, because Dean is definitely a monster but that word (that moan) is unthinkable, and she squeezes her eyes shut and turns her face away as he comes down from his high and picks up the knife.

After, when the monster (not Sam’s brother at all, no matter how much it looked acted was him) is dead, Rebecca finds herself searching for it in his face. She watches with cold hands as Dean helps Sam up from the floor and over to her couch. Her stomach clenches as he kneels between Sam’s legs and lightly brushes the darkening bruises on Sam’s throat (the bruises his hands would match perfectly) with his fingertips. She watches his face as he meets Sam’s eyes.

She didn’t mishear.
They’ve been sitting on the log next to each other for a while now, sharing a half-awkward, half-companionable moment after their monumental failure of a kiss. Dean would be laughing his head off if he knew, so Sam is going to do his damnedest making sure Dean doesn’t find out. He was thinking about how to do just that when Lori breaks the silence by saying, “It’s not a sin, you know.”

“I, uh, no? I mean, I don’t know. What were we talking about?”

Lori gives him a patient look and then leans forward, elbows on her knees. “You shouldn’t hide behind lies, though,” she adds. “I know some people think it’s wrong, but you—you should always tell people how you feel, you know?”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, more confidently this time, and Lori smiles at him as she pushes to her feet.

“I’m glad we talked, Sam,” she says, leaning down to give him a hug. “You and Dean are going to be very happy, I just know it.”

Okay, wait. This is not the conversation Sam thought he was having.

“You’ve got the wrong idea. Dean and I aren’t—” he starts, and that’s when the Sorenson’s door flies open and the Reverend comes storming out and the fact that Sam and Dean are emphatically Not becomes a moot issue.

After everything calms down again, when Lori gives him another hug and tells him that he should just kiss Dean already and stake a claim on his territory, Sam just smiles and nods.

He figures that arguing with someone as repressed as Lori about all the sex he isn’t going to be having with his brother is a lose/lose situation.
Dean is so overdue for this. Seriously, after all the crap he’s had to put up with lately—and especially after having to put up with not one but two idiots assuming he was fucking Sam (*like he wouldn’t have better taste if he were gay*)—he deserves a treat. And this steam shower qualifies in every sense of the word.

Or it does until Sam bangs on the door.

“Dean!”

Dean groans and jacks himself faster. “Someone else better be dead, dude!” he calls back. “I’m kinda busy.”

There’s a beat where he thinks he’s gotten rid of Sam for the time being and then Sam shouts back, “Tell me you’re not jerking off in there.”

“I’m not—oh, shit—jerking off in here,” Dean repeats dutifully.

He hears Sam swear on the other side of the door and then the door is actually opening as Sam storms in. Dean can see him on the other side of the glass, only vaguely obscured by the steam.

“Come in to help?” he pants, leaning against the side of the stall and stroking faster. “You know, they don’t discrimin—ah, yeah—against—”

“I have to piss, Dean,” Sam growls. “You’ve been in here for an *hour*."

“What can I say?” Dean replies, tipping his head back as he feels his orgasm building low in his belly. “I like ... to take ... my time.”

He comes as noisily as possible—cause orgasming and being able to fuck with Sam at the same time is pretty much the best thing ever—and then leans against the wall with a contented sigh. Sam doesn’t say anything where he’s busy relieving himself over by the toilet, but Dean can practically hear the prissy little bitch face he’s making.

“You know,” he comments with a lazy smirk. “There’s room in here for two.”

“Thanks,” Sam replies dryly. Dean can hear him zipping back up. “But I’m not a huge fan of being parboiled.”

And then, with motions that Dean can tell are exaggerated and triumphant, he flushes the toilet.

Dean grins. “Steam shower, bitch!” he calls. “Better luck in the next crap motel.”

Sam swears as he storms out, but Dean’s enjoying his victory too much to respond.
Sam teases him about it, but he doesn’t have the Psychic From Hell nipping at his heels. Doing chores for the woman isn’t anything but self-preservation, and Dean’s good at that. Even if he’s been at this whole wood chopping and stacking thing long enough for his arms to really be feeling the burn. He’s sweating, too—lost his coat before he started, his outermost flannel a couple of minutes after that, and his second one half an hour later. Now he’s down to the classic standby, jeans and a t-shirt, and he’s seriously thinking of ditching the shirt as well.

Pausing, he leans on the ax and looks around to see whether he’d be offending anyone’s delicate sensibilities. The only one in sight is Sam, who’s sitting on the back porch steps with his lanky legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles.

When Sam sees Dean looking over, he gives him a broad grin and a wave and calls, “Nice form. You’re losing some speed, though. Maybe we need to do some endurance training.”

“Screw you very much,” Dean shouts back, and then gives in and pulls his shirt off.

Sam shuts up at that, leaning back on his elbows to watch, and it’s always been a thrill having Sam’s full attention like this. As long as Sam keeps his trap shut, that is.

Mopping first his brow and then his chest and lower back with the shirt, Dean enjoys the feel of his brother’s eyes on his skin. Enjoys the knowledge that Sam is admiring him—just like a little brother should, damn it. Dean is one fine piece of work, after all, and even if Sam won’t admit it out loud (not unless there are noogies and Indian burns involved), it’s nice to get this kind of quiet appreciation.

Dean plays into it, flexing and posing a little with each swing and casting glances behind him. Sam hasn’t moved, but his mouth is open a little and he’s breathing hard. Dean would tease Sam about his own cardiovascular stamina—seriously, he’s just sitting there—but the dumbstruck look on his brother’s face is too amusing.

Then the back door opens and Missouri strides out. Dean flushes, feeling vaguely guilty—weird, since he wasn’t doing anything wrong, but then again this woman could make Mother Teresa feel like an ax murderer—and puts down the ax before he can get smacked and end up dropping it on his foot.

Because he can see the smack coming. It’s plain as day in her snapping eyes and the set of her mouth.

Sure enough, Missouri doesn’t disappoint. It doesn’t hurt too much—way less than Sam’s ‘love taps’—but Dean winces and rubs his arm anyway. Mostly because he’s sure she can do better if he isn’t properly chastened the first time.

Woman’s scary.

“Stop teasing your brother,” Missouri orders, one hand on her hip and glaring.

“I didn’t say anything!” Dean protests.

Missouri’s eyebrow rises. “You might fool most people, Dean Winchester, and you can even fool yourself, but don’t you pull any of that nonsense with me. Now put your shirt back on and finish up.”
Dean’s shirt is kind of gross from the sweat-mopping thing, but he complies anyway as Missouri stomps back toward her house. His sour mood dissipates, however, when she pauses by Sam on her way past and grips his ear in a punishing grasp.

“Ow!” Sam complains, sitting up at her sharp tug.

“And you. Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been thinking about. Now get in the house. I’ve got some cabinets need fixing.”

The look on Sam’s face as he’s pulled back into the house by his ear would totally be worth chopping up another five cords of wood. Maybe six.

Tired or not, Dean whistles as he gets back to work.
Dean bans him from bed.

It’s a sure sign that he’s been hurt worse than he’s letting on (on the inside, not from the rock salt Sam spent thirty minutes picking out from his brother’s chest), and it leaves Sam feeling even more guilty and shamed than he already did. He apologizes (again), soft and low and genuine, and Dean rolls over, turning his back on Sam with enough emphasis that Sam shuts up and leaves it alone.

It’s strange sleeping in the other bed. Sam tosses and turns all night: misses the warmth of Dean, misses fighting with Dean for control of the covers and whatever pillow they both decide they want to use. He misses the comfort of having Dean’s hair inches from his nose so that he can breathe in the clean, citrus scent of the expensive conditioner Dean always uses.

All in all, Sam doesn’t sleep a wink all night—and neither does Dean, Sam can tell from the dark smudges below his brother’s eyes in the morning—and when Dean tries to bar Sam a second time, Sam ignores his protests and forces his way into their bed.

Swearing, Dean starts to make his painful, awkward way to the other side of the mattress, and it isn’t difficult to guess the purpose of that migration. Sam catches Dean’s wrist before his brother can climb off the other side and jerks him back down. When Dean gasps and winces, Sam hides his grimace of sympathy and uses his brother’s distraction to quickly curl around him, pulling Dean in close to his chest where he belongs.

“Get off me,” Dean says as soon as he has the breath for it.

“I’m sorry,” Sam replies. He’s said the words often enough by now that they should have lost all meaning, but they haven’t. His chest aches just as deeply with regret as it did the first time, when he came back to himself and realized what he’d done.

“You’re an asshole. Now let go.”

“No. Dean, I can’t sleep alone and neither can you. You can be as angry as you want with me, but you need some rest and I’m going to make sure you get it.”

“Slept fucking fine when you ran off to Stanford,” Dean spits, hurt and vicious with it.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees softly, because he knows how that goes. “But it’s different when we’re in the same room, isn’t it?”

It’s different for Sam, anyway—knowing Dean is so close and being unable to touch—and he expects Dean has the same issue. His brother’s sullen silence confirms it.

“Come on, man,” he urges, nestling his nose in its accustomed place in Dean’s hair. It puts his lips close enough to brush Dean’s forehead when he talks: reassuring connection. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t me. I’m sorry.”

Dean’s body is still tense and resisting in Sam’s arms, but after a few moments he grumbles, “How’m I supposed to sleep with you yapping?”

Sam’s relieved enough that he can’t resist pressing a quick kiss to Dean’s forehead, which prompts a weak squirm and a muttered, “I’m still pissed,” from his brother.
Sam holds him tight and smiles.
Scurrilous (Scarecrow)

Sam makes it a little over a day before he breaks down and calls.

Dean picks up on the third ring, which means he’s either busy or he was staring at the caller ID and letting Sam sweat. Sam’s money is on option number two.

Although Sam can tell Dean is on the line, for a long moment his brother doesn’t say anything. The silence stretches out between them, unbearable but unbreakable, and Sam’s throat clenches painfully.

Then Dean says, “You ever wonder why they call them hot dogs? I mean, they’re not made out of real dogs, are they?”

The wash of relief that spills through Sam is strong enough that he laughs before responding, “Please tell me you’re not having a hot dog for breakfast.”

“Breakfast of champions, Sammy,” Dean replies.

Sam’s prepared to be horrified but that’s when he hears, over Dean’s end of the phone, “More syrup for those pancakes?”

“Thanks, Cheryl, but I’m good,” comes Dean’s reply—slightly muffled, and Sam imagines his brother’s hand cupped over the phone’s mouthpiece in a belated effort to keep his cover.

“So, pancakes, huh?” Sam says as soon as he senses he has Dean's attention again.

“Just because I’m having pancakes too doesn’t mean I’m not chowing my way through a footlong.”

It’s true enough that Sam laughs again, appalled by the prospect as he is, and just like that they’re off and running. Later, when the silence falls between them once more (after Dean has filled Sam in on the case and Sam has told Dean about his own travels), it doesn't feel so strained. They might be sitting across from each other in the diner Sam's imagining, close as he feels to his brother right now.

He smiles at the comforting warmth that nearness leaves beneath his ribcage, and then can’t resist teasing, “Admit it, you miss me.”

“That’s a scurrilous accusation, dude,” Dean shoots back.

Sam’s grin stretches wider. “You’re not using that word right.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That’s a scurrilous accusation, you pansy-ass little bitch. Better?”

“I love you too, Dean.”

“Blow me,” Dean comes back, but he sounds pleased and Sam’s mouth is actually starting to ache from all the smiling as he hangs up the phone. When he turns around, Meg has woken up and is blinking up at him with sleepy eyes.

“Boyfriend?” she asks through a yawn.

Sam’s smile slips. “Uh. Brother.”

Meg fixes him with a sympathetic look. “You know, Sam. It’s not an issue for me. Really. You don’t have to lie on my account.”
“But I’m not—Dean isn’t—”

But Meg’s already leaning back against the wall and shutting her eyes. “Whatever you say, Sam.”

Sam’s getting really tired of nobody believing he and Dean are related.
Shouting doesn’t get her attention, but grabbing the cross from her hands and dashing it to the ground definitely piques Sue-Ann’s interest. She turns on Sam, her face a rictus of righteous rage, and yells, “You blasphemer! Look what you’ve done!”

“I’m not the one killing people, lady,” Sam replies, breathless from his run and from his anxiety over Dean—no way of knowing whether he got to Sue-Ann in time, and he won’t feel settled in his skin until he has Dean in his arms again, whole and safe.

“He never deserved to be Saved in the first place,” Sue-Ann spits. “Dirty fornicators, the both of you! Sodomy is a sin in the eyes of the Lord!”

Sam blinks, pulled out of his fear by the accusation, and gets out, “I’m not sleeping with my bro—” before the woman’s eyes bulge horribly and she turns away from him, sinking down to her knees.

“No,” she breathes. “No!”

A few moments later, she’s gone.

Sam wishes he felt horrified or sad, but all he really feels right now is annoyed.

By the time he finds Dean again, he’s grumpy enough that the only thing he says is, “It wouldn’t keep happening if you weren’t so obviously butch.”

Dean blinks and then says, “What wouldn’t keep happening?”

Sam snorts and keeps walking. “Oh, like you don’t know.”

“Is this about the almost dying thing?” Dean shouts after him. “Because I’m not really getting a kick out of that one either, Sam!”
Avarice hasn’t ever been one of Sam’s sins. He’s never wanted material wealth or gain; didn’t get the attraction even when he met Carl Ross at Stanford and spent a week on the family yacht.

Jealousy, he’s a little more familiar with. He knows it when he feels it, creeping hot and heavy through his stomach and leaving his muscles tight. The green-eyed monster, Shakespeare called it, and it’s being caused by something green-eyed right now, oh yes it is. Being caused by his green-eyed, smirking brother who apparently had no trouble at all shopping for replacements when Sam was gone.

*You had Jess,* a tiny rational voice tries to tell him, but that isn’t the same. It isn’t.

And when Dean comes crawling back to their bed, Sam kicks his brother off onto the floor without giving it a moment’s thought.

“Ow!” Dean protests, popping back to his feet almost immediately. “What the fuck, man?”

“You smell like sex,” Sam answers. “I’m not fucking sleeping with that. Go shower first.”

Dean stares at him, the anger on his face slowly slipping into something worse—something confused and hovering on the verge of understanding. Sam looks away, staring at the wall, and finally Dean says in a soft, tentative voice, “It never bothered you before.”

Sighing, Sam pushes up on one elbow. “Look, I don’t care who you sleep with. I mean, it’s not like you and I are—I just don’t want to smell that all night, alright?”

Dean shuffles his feet for a moment and then, with a tiny, “Okay,” takes himself off to the bathroom.

When he gets into bed afterward, smelling clean and citrusy the way he should, Sam doesn’t pull him close. Instead, they lie stiff and awkward on their own respective sides of the bed.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says finally. The words are genuine but confused, like he doesn’t really know what he’s apologizing for.

That’s okay, though, because Sam isn’t sure either.
Clavicle (Nightmare)

Dean’s missing his collar when he comes back downstairs. The top three buttons on his shirt have been undone as well, and Sam gets a shadowy glimpse of his brother’s clavicle as Dean drops down on the couch beside him and reaches for the tray of hors d’oeuvres.

“Nothing upstairs,” he mutters out of the corner of his mouth, as though he’s being at all stealthy when he's looking and acting like ... well, like Dean.

“Where’s your collar?” Sam hisses, looking around to make sure no one is staring at them.

Dean shrugs as he pops a deviled egg into his mouth. “Took it off. It was cutting off my air flow.”

“We’re supposed to be priests, Dean, you can’t just—” Sam cuts the rest of the words off and offers what he hopes is a genuine smile as Max wanders past. “Hi again, Max.”

Max gives him a brief glance and then goes back to staring at Dean—Dean the de-collared, face-stuffing priest—with dawning suspicion.

Desperate to keep their cover from being blown, Sam looks around for a distraction and spots Dean’s discarded collar hanging out of his left pocket. With an inward sigh of relief, he pulls the collar free and starts doing up the buttons on his brother’s shirt again.

“Hey,” Dean protests, although really Sam guesses he could be saying anything—the food stuffed in his mouth is getting in his way.

“My colleague here was having a little trouble breathing,” Sam offers as he hurriedly replaces the collar around his brother’s neck. It isn’t technically untrue, based on what Dean told him, and even better Sam can see from the slight widening of Dean’s eyes that he gets the memo. A moment later, he stops trying to pull away and tilts his chin up, giving Sam room to work.

Sam offers Max another friendly smile as he reattaches Dean’s collar for him, but the kid just snorts and mutters, “Way to perpetrate the stereotype,” as he moves away again.

Dean frowns after him. “What stereotype?”

Sam, who really isn’t in the mood to restrain his brother when Dean figures out what Max was implying, finishes up on the collar and gets to his feet. “Let’s go,” he says, and then hauls Dean up after him and out into the daylight.
It’s difficult to get out the door with Sam practically glued to his side the way he is, but Dean can’t find it in himself to complain. Mostly because he’s using Sam’s strength to keep himself upright. Getting branded with a poker sure takes it out of a guy.

They manage it eventually—while the beast of a little girl screams for her Pa from the closet where Dean kicked her (and wasn’t that cathartic)—and then Sam pauses on the top step of the Benders’ porch, adjusting his arm where it’s slung around Dean’s body.

The movement jostles Dean’s shoulder a little, making him hiss, and he can feel the change in his brother immediately. The bar of Sam’s arm isn’t any less of a support, but it’s gone soft somehow: gentle. Sam’s fingers brush against Dean’s side as he sways closer; his forehead touches Dean’s temple in silent apology.

Talking takes too much energy, so Dean settles for hooking his fingers low in his brother’s shirt and hanging on while Sam helps him down the steps. It’s a short trip, but by the time they reach the bottom, Dean’s sweating and his head is spinning. He’s pretty sure he’s going to throw up, actually, but that doesn’t stop him from letting his head loll against Sam’s shoulder.

After all, it’s Sam’s fault he feels like day-old road kill in the first place. If he loses control of his stomach, Sam’ll deserve what happens.

“You need a break?” Sam murmurs, reaching up with his free hand to touch Dean’s face.

“You ... kiddin’?” Dean pants, shutting his eyes and enjoying the light drag of his brother’s knuckles across his cheek. “I could ... go all ... night.”

Sam laughs, soft and warm, and that sound right there is almost enough to make the rest of this sorry Deliverance rerun worth it.

Dean opens his eyes again at the approaching sound of footsteps and sees Kathleen coming toward them. She doesn’t look like the put-together, by-the-book cop anymore, and from the careful way she’s holding the gun in her hand, Dean has to wonder whether she’s bent a few of those rules of hers back on themselves. He guesses he would’ve done the same if they’d gotten here too late for Sam.

Something flickers through Kathleen’s eyes as she looks at them—looks at Sam’s hand, which is still gently stroking Dean’s face—but Dean’s too busy focusing on the alternating brush of Sam’s knuckles and fingertips to care. Seriously, Sam has until just about a quarter past never to stop doing that.

Sam continues to hold on to Dean while he discusses business with Kathleen, and then he eases him down onto the Benders’ front step and jogs off into the night—something about borrowing one of the Benders’ cars to get Dean into town and to a doctor. Dean wouldn’t mind the ride back to civilization, but he’s sure as hell gonna put his foot down about the sawbones. Sammy’ll be able to patch him up just fine back at the motel.

Eyes slipping shut again, he leans against the railing with his good shoulder and listens to the complaints of his body. When he feels the worn wood sag under him, he cracks an eye to find Kathleen sitting to his left and regarding him with a considering expression while she cradles that shotgun of hers in her lap.
“You didn’t have to lie, you know,” she says.

“Sorry?” Dean mutters. He could have sworn they already covered the whole phony badge thing.

“Family aren’t the only people we’re allowed to care about,” Kathleen answers. “I’d still have helped you, is all I’m saying.”

Dean’s brain isn’t working well enough to figure out what she’s driving at, so he just nods and rests his head against the splintering rail. He drifts into a light doze there, reassured by the knowledge that Sam is coming back for him soon.

When Sam finally does return, coming over to close one oversized hand on Dean's good shoulder and grip him low on the waist with the other, Dean means to help Sam get him onto his feet—he really does. But Sam’s proximity is radiating comfort and safety, and Dean’s been running on fumes for a while now.

Despite his brother's muttered curses, he finds himself sinking into sleep, and he doesn’t wake again until Sam lifts him out of the car on the other end of the ride.
He watches them approach from the window.

His boys. Men now, he supposes, according to the laws of society, but they’re always going to be boys as far as he’s concerned.

They’re hurt, he sees as they pass through the orange buzz of a street lamp. Bloodied and bruised. Dean’s holding himself like he’s busted a rib up; Sam’s limping. They’re leaning on each other—moving as one slow, united front—and so John has more than enough time to see Sam’s thumb rubbing back and forth over Dean’s shoulder where he’s gripping him. It’s harder to see Dean’s hand, positioned low on the opposite side of Sam’s body, but John’s pretty sure his eldest’s fingers have nudged their way beneath the layers of Sam’s shirts.

Business as usual, then, and despite the uneasy twinge in his gut, John’s done trying to pull them apart. Been done trying for years now, ever since Sam went to Stanford and Dean ... well, it was more like living with a ghost than with a son.

It’s his fault, he guesses, what they’ve become. He’s made his peace with that.

He just prays his boys can forgive him for it.
See, the problem with prank wars is that they always escalate. And then there’s a truce—which Dean inevitably breaks—and basically Sam ends up in a quagmire of itching powder and Nair and crazy glue until he has had enough and decides to be the bigger man. Of course, then there’s always the wonderful period of wading free from said quagmire, which involves putting up with Dean until he gets tired of tormenting Sam for his own amusement.

Sam’s really starting to wish he was back in Richardson with those wannabe ghost hunters.

“So, Mrs. O’Leary,” he says, trying to keep his expression and voice pleasant. “You said your husband was acting strange before he died?”

The old lady nods and starts telling Sam all about Mr. O’Leary’s newfound habit of crawling across the ceiling in the middle of the night, but Sam isn’t really paying attention. He’s too focused on Dean’s hand where it’s resting on his upper thigh and creeping steadily closer to pretty dangerous territory.

Goddamn it, now is not the time to be playing gay chicken.

Sam manages to hold onto his temper long enough to get out of the interview and then, without missing a beat, grabs Dean by the upper arm and walks him into the nearest blind ally. Dean’s smirking at him and asking what’s got his panties in a bunch, and Sam. has. Had. Enough.

Growling, he shoves his brother up against the wall, enjoying the brief flicker of shock that passes over Dean’s face, and then follows. It isn’t easy to hold Dean in place, but Sam’s bulked up over the past months and he manages. And then he grabs his brother’s dick through his pants and Dean’s struggles become absolutely no problem at all.

“Whoa,” Dean says, pushing back against the wall on his own. He even goes up on his tiptoes, like that’s gonna do anything, and Sam grins at his brother mercilessly as he tightens his grip. The strangled sound Dean makes in response sends a heated pulse of satisfaction through Sam’s gut.

“Sammy, man, what the hell?” Dean blurts, his eyes widened in a way that really highlights how embarrassingly girly his lashes are.

Grimly, Sam answers, “Next time you decide to play footsie while we’re interviewing witnesses, you better be ready to deal with the consequences. Baby.”

Dean gapes at him—or, well, he’s panting, actually, lips shiny and slightly parted. Sam meant this to be the ultimate move in the whole gay chicken thing Dean had going, but he seems to have overshot the mark a little because he's not actually positive that his brother’s dick is completely disinterested anymore.

Letting go, he steps back quickly enough that he almost trips and falls on his ass.

Dean’s going to laugh at him, and when he does Sam is going to chew his brother out for being such a horn dog it doesn't matter who’s touching him, but the expected, mocking noise doesn't come. Instead, Dean keeps leaning against the wall and staring at Sam like ... like ...

“So I could use a beer,” Dean says finally, breaking the silence in a rush.

Sam nods, his chest unknotting in relief at the subject change. Not because things were awkward, of
course. He's just grateful that Dean is finally seeing reason on the whole prank thing.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Me too.”

It’s the quickest, most painless end to a prank war Sam has ever seen.
The kid’s cute, all button nose and a golden-brown tumble of hair across his brow. But Dean’s seen the look in his eyes before, and he knows what the boy’s going to say before it comes sneering out of his mouth.

“King or two queens?”

And then the little snot looks back at Sam where Sam’s leaning up against the car, waiting for Dean to finish up in here and come back to him.

The boy’s got a bit of a superior smile and a cocky attitude, and either alone would be enough to annoy Dean. Today, when he’s still recovering from the swift kick to the groin this case has become, he loses his grip on his temper and leans across the counter with a wide, sugary grin tugging at his lips.

“Oh, one king’ll be fine.”

The look on the kid’s face is totally worth Sam bitching about the fact that they have nowhere to spread out their bags.
“He’s an asshole.”

“Dean.”

“What? I’m not fucking apologizing to that—that—curmudgeon.”

In the midst of his annoyance, Sam pauses. He didn’t think Dean knew that word.

Then again, Dean’s vocabulary isn’t the issue here.

“You told him to go fuck a horse, Dean! We’re supposed to be getting him to talk to us, not file a restraining order.”

Dean snorts, shaking off the hand Sam was using to hold him still. “Yeah, well, he told me to go fuck my brother, so I’d say we’re about even.” As Sam stands on the side of the street, trying to get his wind back from that little nugget of information (seriously, what is wrong with people?), Dean turns back long enough to add, “Don’t worry, dude. I’m sure you can still seal the deal with what’s-her-face.”

Sam slowly follows his brother toward the car, turning over his conversation with Sarah in his head—how long have he and Dean been together, and ‘you people’ have such good taste. Suddenly, he’s not so sure his brother’s faith in him is well placed.

Looks like they’re going to have to do this one the old fashioned way.
“Car trouble?” she asks, coming around the hood toward him. The sensual sway in her walk and the inviting tilt of her lips might have been enticing if Dean didn’t already know what she was. She smiles wider as he backs away from her approach. “Let me give you a lift... take you back to my place.”

Dean offers her his most charming, stick-it-where-the-sun-don’t-shine grin and replies, “I’ll pass. I usually draw the line at necropilia.”

“Oh,” she returns, with a coy little flick of her eyes, and the next thing Dean knows he’s on the ground and his jaw feels like it’s been dislocated. He reaches for it, grimacing, just in time to have his hand knocked away. The crazy bitch vamp grabs his face instead, and then uses that grip to lift him off the ground.

It’s one of the less comfortable positions Dean’s been in, and his jaw is gonna come right off in a moment, but fucked if he’s gonna let this bitch know she’s getting to him.

Ignoring the fanged gorilla coming out of the shadows to join her, he rasps out, “I don’t normally get this friendly till the second date, but—”

“Cute,” she interrupts. “But don’t worry, sugar. Your virtue’s safe from me. I know you’re only interested in that tall drink of water of yours—Sam, isn’t it?”

She pulls him in closer, still holding on too tightly for Dean to do much more than wrinkle his nose and tilt his face away, and then licks up the side of his cheek.

“You two’ll look so picturesque together once we’re through with you,” she purrs, nuzzling his ear. “Gotta promise to let me watch—”

Which, thankfully, is when Sam’s bolt slams through the bitch’s chest.

She lets Dean go, staggering, and starts to turn around. Dean lands on his feet and immediately lurches forward to grab her by the hair. As Dad and Sammy rush out of hiding to take care of the bitch’s companion, he jerks her back against his chest.

“He’s my brother, you crazy bitch,” he hisses.

She starts to sag as the dead man’s blood rushes through her system, but clings to consciousness long enough to scoff, “Oh please, I could smell you on each other a mile away.”

And while Dean’s trying to figure out if that’s an insult—he showers every day, damn it, and he only uses Sam’s shampoo when he runs out of his own and can’t be bothered to run to the store—she passes out and goes down for the count.
Gray (Salvation)

Angry as he is, it isn’t red Sam sees when he snaps and slams Dean against the motel wall. He’s too drained for that. Instead, the world is blurred around the edges by dull, foggy gray. The only bright flare of color in his vision are Dean’s eyes, watering and devastated and still that vivid, intense green that makes something low in Sam’s stomach catch when he looks too long or too close.

Sam says something—he’s not sure what, he can’t think past how broken and scared Dean’s eyes are—and then, when the next word gets caught in his throat, Dean’s voice cuts in, ragged and hoarse.

“Sam, look,” he says. “The three of us, that’s all we have. And that’s all I have.”

His breath hitches on the last word and Sam feels his own chest constrict in sympathy, like Dean’s breathing for them both, just like he always has. He shakes his head as though he can shake his brother's desperation away, can unfog the gray from his own thoughts, and Dean just plows straight ahead with all the single-minded determination of a bull in pain.

“Sometimes,” he says in a choked, confessional voice, “I feel like I’m barely holding it together, man. Without you and Dad, I—”

But Sam’s heard enough. He grabs Dean’s face, his hands loose and clumsy with the ache in his chest, and Dean’s words cut off on a barely restrained sob. Sam’s vision swims the same way Dean’s must be and he moves forward blindly. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, brain shut down and just his heart and gut driving him on, but he can feel Dean’s breath on his mouth now. He can feel the rough stubble of Dean’s cheek scraping his nose.

Oh God. Oh God, he doesn’t know what he’s doing.

But he can’t seem to let Dean go, and now he’s adjusting his grip on his brother’s face, moving Dean’s head so that their mouths are more perfectly aligned, so that they’re breathing past each other’s lips, and this is it. This is—

Dean tries to turn his head to one side and the bolt of denial that shocks through Sam’s gut is so strong it hurts. He gets a better grip, pulls Dean back to him, and Dean's eyes are darting everywhere that isn't Sam. Sam's own attention is fastened on Dean's parted lips, watching as his brother pants in shallow, hitching breaths, and instinct drives him to lean in a second time.

Dean ducks his face away again, a flush spreading over his cheeks and making the dusting of freckles there stand out. Sam feels an answering warmth heat his own face as his fingers fumble for a firmer hold on his unusually skittish brother.

He isn’t exactly sure what he’s after as he forces Dean's head back up, but he's certain if his brother denies him one more time there are going to be consequences.

He starts to move, pushing forward, and that’s when Dean gasps out, “Sammy.”

Dean’s voice is wrecked—he sounds just as lost and helpless and consumed by this thing as Sam—and somehow the knowledge that Dean is drowning gets through where nothing else did.

Sam blinks rapidly, feeling the gray dullness dissipate, and then lets his hands slide free from his brother’s face and steps away. The air in the room feels like ice on his face, which is overheated from having been so close to Dean, so close to ... whatever that was.
“Dad,” he says, mostly to remind himself what they’re doing here. His hand is shaking as he brings it up to wipe his mouth. “He should have called by now. Try him again.”

If Dean isn’t moving all that steadily himself as he makes his way over to his phone, then neither of them mention it.
The clerk has been eying them since they came in. It's making Sam uneasy—he knows what he looks like with his face smashed to a pulp the way it is, but he's gone into food marts nicer than this one with blood dripping behind him in a trail and no one's so much as batted an eyelash. This guy's taking an interest, though; shooting dark glances between Sam and his brother as they root through the aisle for supplies.

Sam finishes his run first and, wearily, approaches the counter. He's expecting a warning not to cause any trouble, but instead, as soon as Sam gets close enough, the guy leans forward and whispers, "I can call the cops for you if you want."

Sam blinks his good eye. "What?"

"You don't need to leave with him," the clerk replies, and then gives a glowering, meaningful look in Dean's direction.

Sam's exhausted enough that it takes a few moments for that to register, and then he exhales and says, "Oh. No, man, you—he didn't do this."

"That's what they all say," the clerk replies skeptically. "Look, I get that he's your boyfriend and you think you love him, but—"

"Whoa," Sam interrupts, more loudly than he means to. But seriously, today is not the day he wants to be dealing with this crap. Again. "He's not my boyfriend. He's my brother. And he didn't do this."

He stopped it, he thinks but doesn't say, remembering the way the demon's body jerked on top of him, remembering how the beating and the pain had stopped moments before Dean was there, hauling him to his feet and into the safety of strong arms.

The look the clerk gives him is pitying and sad. "Look, son, he can make all the promises in the world, but you keep covering for him and he's just gonna keep doing it."

Which is when Dean clomps over, arms full of bottled water and Gatorade and, ridiculously, a girlie magazine that must have caught his eye. He walks into the conversation blind and dumb, just like usual, dumping the stuff on the counter next to Sam's haul and offering the clerk a casual smile that falters when he notices how the clerk's looking at him.

"What?" he says.

The clerk opens his mouth, and Sam knows where the man is going to go with this—knows what he's going to say. What accusations he's going to make.

Dean's going to laugh them off now, sure. He'll laugh right in the clerk's face with that same, falsely bright cheer he's been broadcasting since he got Sam and Dad loaded into the car and sped away. He'll swallow the accusations whole and spit them out again, twisted around with the cutting humor he always resorts to when he's under too much pressure—the humor that's had him busting Dad's balls for lazing around while he and Sam did all the legwork, and telling Sam that he really likes what Sam's done with his face.

On the surface, this misunderstanding is going to be just another joke to Dean, but inside he's going to carry the words around like an open wound, because he's just noble enough and stupid enough to
believe that he is to blame. One word from the clerk about abuse and Dean's mind is going to snap there like a bloodhound baying after a fresh scent—should have been quicker, should have stopped the beating before it happened, his fault—and Sam can’t let his brother do that to himself.

There’s no real time to think, so Sam acts on impulse, turning and grabbing Dean by the lapels of his leather coat and hauling him into a kiss. It stings Sam’s split lip and Dean is stiff as a board—mouth shocked and frozen at an awkward angle where it’s pressed against Sam’s. Uncomfortable as the position is, though, Sam holds it long enough to make his point to the clerk and then lets Dean go.

He expects Dean to bolt or smack him, but Dean stands there instead, looking at Sam with a blank, nonplussed expression. When Sam sneaks a glance, though, he finds the clerk looking angrier than ever, which means he needs to get his brother out of here now. Putting an arm around Dean’s shoulders, he quickly pulls his brother away from the counter and toward the door.

“I’ll get this, sugarplum,” he says, pulling Dean’s wallet out of his back pocket and then giving his brother’s ass a friendly swat.

Dean jumps at that, giving a little yelp, and shoots Sam an affronted look as he makes his way grudgingly outside, rubbing his ass as he goes.

Sam's pretty sure he's going to be hearing about that tonight. And probably offering Dean a massage to make up for bruising his delicate skin—it's the only surefire way to shut him up when he gets going.

Not that Sam minds, of course. Dean's way too amusing when he's moaning and coming apart under Sam's hands. He always snuggles just a little bit closer afterwards, too, and Sam could sure use the added comfort right about now.

But that's going to have to wait until later, once he's done dealing with his would-be hero and they're safely holed up in Bobby's cabin.

Turning back around, Sam meets the clerk's disapproving eyes and slips into the closest thing to Dean's shit-eating grin that he can manage with one side of his face swollen and aching like it is.

“Like I was saying,” he says as he comes back and leans on the counter, fishing a fifty out of his brother's wallet. "We’re gonna need a full tank on two. Oh, and throw in a couple bags of M&Ms while you're at it. My boyfriend just can’t get enough of ‘em.”

* * *

When he gets back in the car, Dad’s still asleep in the backseat and Dean is sitting behind the wheel with feigned casualness. Dean nods once as Sam climbs in, waits for him to get his seatbelt on, and then says, “I'm guessing there's a good explanation for you laying one on me. Aside from me being freakishly good looking, I mean.”

Sam snorts—looks are one area where Dean has no shortage of confidence—and leans back in his seat. “I'm sick of having to explain to people that we’re related,” he answers.

“So you figured giving me a tonsillectomy was a good alternate play?” Dean replies skeptically.

“Oh, please. You’re just pissed you didn’t think of it first.”

Dean scoffs, waving one hand dismissively, but Sam notices that he doesn’t actually disagree. After a moment, he leans forward again and digs one of the M&Ms out of the brown shopping bag between his feet. When he tosses the bag into his brother’s lap, Dean makes a gleeful, happy noise
and almost drives them off the road trying to get it open.

“Now this?” he says around a fistful of M&Ms once he’s got the job done. “This is true love. This right here.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a cheap date?”

“Aw, Sammy. You say the sweetest things.”

Sam rests his head gingerly against the window and smiles softly to himself.

Dean happy and by his side, Dad saved, and the demon served up a very heartily deserved ‘fuck you’?

All in all, it’s shaping up to be a pretty good day.
In a roundabout way, the young man reminds Doris of her son. Of course, that was decades ago and miles distant, in Chicago back during the war—the Second of the two Great Wars, which she guesses this young man would have read about in the history books at school. But he’s tall, like her Jimmy was, and his face (what she can make out of it) is open and kind beneath the lines of worry.

Doris catches glimpses of the young man through the open doorway as he comes and goes—his Someone Special is in the room opposite hers, on the other side of the hall. Mostly it’s coming that he does; he comes and he stays for hours, and her heart and lungs may be failing (riddled with cancer like a honeycomb’s riddled with honey) but her ears are sharp as ever and he hardly ever speaks.

She imagines him sitting by his Someone’s bedside—maybe clasping a young woman’s hand, maybe one wrinkled and claw-like as her own. She imagines his Someone getting better, and then getting up, and finally getting out. She tries to imagine what the young man’s face would look like then, all lit up with relief and joy, and thinks he’d be a handsome sight to see.

She asks Annie about the young man finally, several days after he first moves past her door, and Annie tells Doris in hushed, pitying tones that it was a car wreck, and a bad one, and the patient in the room across the hall isn’t expected to make it. The patient is another young man, Doris’ young man’s Someone, and the hospital paperwork says the young men are brothers but Annie says in a confessional whisper that she thinks it’s a pretty lie to get the young man (Sam is his name, Samuel like the Prophet) in to see his lover.

It makes Doris sad, after that, to see the young man come and go. It makes her sad the way her own state, forgotten and ignored and dying here in this bed, doesn’t. She’s lived a long, full life, after all; it’s time for the Lord to take her home. He shouldn’t be bothering these two—not the young man dying in a bed just like hers or the young man who comes to sit with him. The young man who reminds Doris of her Jimmy shouldn’t have to feel such grief.

After a particularly bad night of living with the crawling, devouring pain in her chest, she sees Samuel leaving again and raises her voice as much as she’s able to rasp out, “Young man.”

She doesn’t think he’ll hear her, but he does. He hears and comes over, wiping his eyes with one hand. While she can’t see so well anymore, Doris is sure he’s been crying. And she thinks, now that he’s in her room, that she can make out the marks the accident left on him—there’s a blurry shadow around his left eye and dark flecks marring the lighter tan of his skin.

“Do you need me to call a nurse, ma’am?” Samuel asks in a hushed, careful voice. Polite and considerate and a ‘ma’am’, too. Doris knew he’d be a gentleman.

“No,” she refuses. After all, there’s nothing a nurse can do for her now. Not even the drugs continuously pumped into her through the IV do much these days. “I wanted to ask.” She stops then, confused and a little disoriented by the dark shadow blossoming on the wall behind him.

Samuel steps closer and, after a moment of hesitation, reaches out and takes her hand. Doris pulls her attention from the shadow on the wall and peers up at the one on his face. Her cancer-riddled chest warms at the gentle, soft way he holds her hand.

“You have a nice smile,” she tells him.

“Thank you. You wanted to ask me something?”
“I did. Do you know Mr. Frost?”

“I’m sorry, I—no. I don’t know who that is. Is he your doctor?”

Doris shakes her head weakly. “No, dear, the poet.”

“Oh,” he says in a brighter, comprehending tone. “You mean Robert Frost.”

“He had a poem. About the woods.”

Samuel nods. “The Road Not Taken.”

“Ah, a literary young man,” she says, smiling, and then has to cough as a tight, clenching spasm of pain takes her. The shadow on the wall deepens, and she senses there isn’t much time left to say what she wants to. “My son always liked that poem.”

“It’s a nice poem,” Samuel agrees.

“You should always take the less traveled road. Jimmy met the love of his life there.”

Through the darkened blur her vision has become, Sam’s face shifts somehow, and Doris knows he’s attempting a smile. “Bet she was hot.”

“Oh, he was a real looker all right. Pretty as that David—the one with the leaf.”

There’s an awkwardness to the way Samuel is standing suddenly, and Doris can feel his hand starting to pull free from hers.

Doris clings on and asks, “How’s he doing? Your own young man?”

“Dean?” Samuel says, sounding surprised. “He’s not—I mean, he’s. He’ll get better.”

Doris listens to the desperation in that statement and thinks about what Annie told her (just a matter of time now) and pats the young man’s hand. “That’s good,” she says, and then tilts her head more squarely toward him where it lies heavily on the pillow. “I want you to promise me something.”

“Okay.”

It’s said quickly, with the same ease that all promises seem to be made these days, now that everyone knows Doris isn’t going to be around long enough to hold them to it. Used to be, she had to pry promises out of her husband with a crowbar. She guesses if he were still around to see her now, old Eddie Hershaw would be singing a different tune.

“When you get out of here, you take the Road Less Traveled. You and your Dean both. Life’s too short for anything else.”

Samuel laughs softly. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Good,” Doris says, giving his hand one last pat and then sinking back into the pillows to watch the shadow detach from the wall and come toward her, turning her world night-dark. “That’s good.”

Samuel leaves then, with soft words about getting a nurse or a doctor, but Doris doesn’t pay him any mind. The shadow has changed now that it’s closer, getting clearer for all its darkness, and it looks like Jimmy. It looks like Jimmy in his uniform and his smart dress shoes, just as he was when she sent him off to war.
The last time she set eyes on him, as it turned out.

“Jimmy,” she exhales, seeing him just fine now—and oh, he looks so handsome, same as he did standing by the curb with his hat in his hand and the sunlight in his hair. She smiles up at him as he comes over to the bed and rests his hand on her cheek.

“It’s time to move on, Doris,” Jimmy says.

“The road less traveled.”

“Yes.”

Doris closes her eyes and lets out one final, shaky breath.

She’s going on a great adventure.
Ellen runs off the first hunter with wandering eyes and eager hands when her baby girl is no older than fifteen. It doesn’t take more than a little polite conversation over a shot of Jack and the Glock casually laid on the table between them. Man runs out of there so fast Ellen’d think his tail feathers were on fire.

Jo never even knows there was a problem.

They aren’t all quite so easy, although Jo has good sense (mostly, apart from one or two lapses in judgment) and is more than capable of taking care of herself once she knows what’s what. Ellen’s proud watching her baby girl work around the bar—her beautiful, beautiful Jo with her no nonsense attitude and easy way around a shotgun.

Bill’d be proud too, if he were here to see her, Ellen thinks one night as she watches Jo shoot down yet another denim Casanova without so much as pausing as she cracks open a bottle of beer and slides it down the bar. She ain’t much for sentiment (not these days, not since John Winchester came back to her with a hangdog, guilty face and offered her Bill’s favorite hunting knife instead of a husband), but she also ain’t too proud to admit she tears up a little at that thought.

Jo’s turning into quite the woman, but she’ll always be Ellen’s baby.

* * *

Ellen only really worries about Jo twice.

Once with Donnie Carlyle, Jo’s first love. Jo keeps disappearing out back with the boy and coming back with her hair a mess and her lips reddened. Acts like Ellen’s insane when Ellen tries to caution her about boys who don’t know enough to keep their guns holstered. Like Ellen was never seventeen herself; never felt the rushing heat between her legs of a woman yearning for her man.

Like she never pulled the exact same crap on her own ma and pa.

But Donnie’s got a yellow streak a mile wide, turns out. Ellen corners him one day over by the jukebox while Jo’s busy signing for a delivery, gives him a piece of her mind and lets him see the pistol she’s packing on her hip and that’s the end of that nonsense. Jo mopes around for a bit after Donnie clears out, but she gets over it quick enough, thank the Lord.

And then he walks into her place.

That man-child with his swagger and his cocky smile and his larger than life personality. He’s pretty, all right, and Ellen can tell from the way he holds himself that he knows his way around a woman’s body. Good heart underneath the jaded exterior, too.

But he’s another soldier, just another casualty waiting to happen, and her Jo isn’t going to mourn for a fallen lover the way Ellen did.

Especially not for a Winchester.

Jo’s already interested, though; that much is plain as day. She walks a tough walk but she wears her heart on her sleeve—always has—and she’s just about crawling into Dean Winchester’s lap and demanding he take them both over Niagara in a barrel.
Ellen’s thinking about fetching her shotgun when she realizes that there’s no heat to Dean’s returned glances. Appreciation, sure (*he damn well better appreciate Ellen’s baby girl*), but even from across the bar Ellen can tell he don’t mean anything by it.

It ain’t until later, when she cleans up the room she leant the Winchester boys for the night and finds only a single bed’s gotten any use, that she learns why.
“Well, I guess that’s it,” Sam says, coming around the front of the van and giving the hood a pat. “I mean, it isn’t pretty, but you’ve got tinted windows, a full tank of gas, power steering...”

“Sam,” Lenore interrupts, resting her cool hand on top of his with a smile only slightly marred by exhaustion. “It’s wonderful. Thank you.”

“Hey, it’s the least we could do after, uh—” He trails off, not wanting to bring up the whole Gordon tying her to a chair and torturing her with dead man’s blood incident, and then finishes, “—you know.”

“Yes,” Lenore answers, lifting her hand. She could mean ‘yes, she knows’ or ‘yes, it’s the least they could do’. No telling which from her sphinx-like expression.

“We’ll try to spread the word around,” Sam offers as he shoves his hands into his pockets. “I can’t promise anyone will believe us, but having one or two less hunters on your tail has to help a little, right?”

“It can’t hurt.”

Lenore pulls open the driver’s door and starts to haul herself up behind the seat, then pauses with one foot on the running board and one still on the ground. When she looks over her shoulder at him, there’s a still, otherworldly grace about her that just about takes Sam’s breath away.

“You know, you don’t need to worry about him, Sam,” she says with her head tilted to one side. “He won’t stray.”

Sam stiffens slightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answers, although his brother’s face is suddenly lingering around the edges of his mind. He can recall, vividly, what it felt like watching Dean fawn all over Gordon. How it felt almost as wrong as watching him slice through that vamp’s throat with the saw.

How it felt worse.

“Blood’s thicker than water,” Lenore replies placidly, but her smile is fang-sharp as she finishes getting in the car and drives away.
Clinical (Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things)

There’s something about being dead that makes everything clearer. All of those muddy, mortal morals are stripped away, leaving only the moonlight and the truth. Her senses are sharper, and her mind draws connections with rapid-fire synaptic pulses that were never possible with all of those human hang-ups getting in the way.

So when Angela sees the men—dark and wrathful, carrying weapons and standing between her and the justice she knows she deserves—she recognizes it instantly. The way the shorter one knows exactly where the taller one is without having to look. The way the taller one follows the shorter one with his eyes, brushes his shoulder against his companion's.

The way they move together, as though they have one purpose between them. One mind. One soul.

Then, later, she watches them from the shadows as they kneel by her grave with candles and lighters. It’s with her newfound, almost clinical detachment that she observes how close they are—how the taller man is more aware of his companion than of the night cradling the world. She sees the way he keeps making excuses to touch the shorter man: compulsive, greedy impulses that she remembers from days of sunlight and warm flesh.

The memory grows almost strong enough to touch and she forgets, momentarily, to guard her footfalls. The men—hunters, if ever she saw any—jerk to alertness at the sound of a branch snapping beneath her bare foot and then the chase is on.

Angela isn’t going to be able to flee from them forever—would prefer to end things now, when she knows they’re near—and it’s the taller, more unaware of the pair that she decides to tackle first. Except he turns out to be more astute when he’s on his own, because he turns before she can close the distance between them. He looks at her with eyes that are a strange, muddied mix of pity and ruthlessness, and his hands are steady when he aims his gun and puts a bullet in her head.

The wound stings, bullet rattling around inside of her skull and interfering with her thoughts. Confused and half-blinded by the unexpected pain, Angela gives chase without a moment's concern for her surroundings. Her focus gives her the edge needed to barrel into the tall hunter, knocking him to the ground with the satisfying, sharp snap of breaking bone. She straddles his back, gripping his face and readying herself to twist his head clear around—see how he likes the pain—when she’s distracted by a swarm of hornet stings in her chest.

But there are no hornets at night, not in the dark, and when she lifts her head it’s the other one, sighting down his gun as he empties the clip into her body. The bullets drive Angela off of the tall hunter, pushing her first to her feet and then tumbling her backwards into her own open grave.

The stars are bright above, and clear, and she admires them briefly before they're blotted out by the shorter hunter's body. He slides into the grave, dropping on top of her and pinning her in place. His face is twisted into a sneer of righteous revulsion as he looks down on her, and Angela snarls back.

How dare this man scorn her for being as she was fashioned, when he and the other are clearly—but the stake through her chest turns off the world before Angela has a chance to point out his hypocrisy, and her last, true thought is that Death has such pretty eyes.
Handcuff (Simon Says)

When he's sure Andy isn’t going to tell Dean to shoot himself in the head, or douse himself in gasoline and set himself on fire, Sam leaves the guy alone with his brother long enough to go into the bathroom and shower. He knows he didn’t get close enough to the burnt remnants of what used to be a woman to actually need one, but he can still smell the stink (like roast chicken) clinging to his skin. He’ll feel better once he’s clean.

The walls are thin as hell in this particular fleabag, so even with the door shut and the shower on, Sam can make out the conversation going on in the other room. At first it’s just Dean interrogating Andy, squeezing him for any shreds of information that might remain. Finally, though, there’s a lull in the conversation.

Andy fills it by asking, “So you guys sleep in here together, huh?”

“Yeah, and you’re on our bed, so get the fuck up.”

Sam grins to himself as he works the shampoo into a lather. Dean’s never been a fan of anyone sitting on their bed. It's some kind of junkyard dog, territorial instinct that Sam is never in a million years going to admit he finds endearing.

There’s a brief silence and then Dean’s voice comes again, tight with annoyance. “If you don’t stop messing with our stuff right now, I’m gonna handcuff you to the chair.”

“Okay, okay! I’m putting it down.”

Over the noise of the shower, the metallic clunk is almost inaudible. Sam catches just enough of the noise to recognize it as one of the guns being dropped on the table and flinches at the weapon’s rough handling. There's no following shot, which means Andy didn't accidentally thumb the safety off when he was playing with it, but Sam's stunned by the awareness that it easily could have happened differently. His heart thunders in his chest; adrenaline races through his veins.

Christ, if he's feeling so shaky in here, then out in the main room, Dean's probably a couple of pounding heartbeats away from having a stroke.

Sure enough, Dean's voice follows the clunk a moment later, still rough and choked with adrenaline: “Gently, Jesus!”

“Sorry. Hey, what’s th—oh.”

“Give me that.”

“E-Z Glide, huh?” Andy’s voice comes—must have been rooting through Sam’s bag, and Sam’s cheeks heat.

Oh. Oh crap. He really, really didn’t want Dean to see that.

He can just hear his brother’s taunts now—‘Thought I told you how to pleasure a woman, dude.’ ‘So, Sammy, when you switched teams did you decide to pitch or catch? Me, I’m thinking you’re more of a catcher.’ And, inevitably, ‘Strawberry lube? Could you be more gay? Wait, don’t answer that.’

It isn’t Sam’s fault he’s ... more than adequately equipped. And occasionally needs a little more in the
prep department than he’s capable of on his own.

But as Sam thunks his forehead against the wall with a grimace, Dean’s chortle doesn’t come. Instead, there’s another, longer silence, and then Andy clears his throat and says, “So you guys are close, huh?”

“Yeah, sure, we’re,” Dean starts, sounding distracted by something, and then stops with an abruptness that tells Sam he caught on to just what Andy was asking. “No,” he continues in a completely different tone of voice. “No. You did not just go there.”

Sam almost feels sorry for their guest.

“Hey, it’s, uh. Not my place to judge, of course ...”

“That’s it. In the chair. Now.”
Pursuit (No Exit)

Dean Winchester is actually better looking than she remembers, now that some of the haggardness of fresh grief has rubbed away from him. He’s sharp-edged where he was dulled when he walked into the Roadhouse, and there’s a vividness to his gaze that was missing the last time.

This time, when Dean looks at her, Jo’s positive he sees her.

Of course, that doesn’t guarantee he’ll give pursuit, but there’s a hell of a lot better likelihood of that happening here, away from her mama, than under Ellen Harvelle’s watchful eyes.

So Jo puts her arm around him, and calls him her boyfriend, and tries not to look too pathetically excited when he slaps her ass. She’s hoping he likes what he feels (even though it's clear he isn’t trying anything at the moment), but as soon as the landlord is gone Dean drops her like a hot potato and starts chewing her out for showing up—on a hunt she found, too.

It’s almost enough to make her give up on him altogether.

When she inspects their newly rented apartment and finds only a single bed, though, she can’t help picturing the things they could do with it (economy pack of condoms Ash packed at the bottom of her bag as a joke will come in handy). As she jokes about flipping the boys for the sofa, she makes sure to keep an enticing tilt to her smile to tell Dean how she’d prefer sleeping arrangements work out.

He might as well be blind for all the attention he pays that invitation, of course, and then her mama calls (because Ellen has some sort of sixth sense when it comes to her baby girl and boys) and the rest of what could have been a promising conversation gets lost in the shuffle.

Anyway, the bed turns out to be a moot point because they end up working right through the night—or Jo does. Dean crashes on the sofa (contorted into an uncomfortable looking position) around midnight, when Sam is out walking the apartment building.

Jo’s busy watching him instead of researching, and she startles when Sam gets back, unexpectedly bearing coffee and a paper bag with grease stains on the outside. He pauses by the door, taking in Jo still seated at the table and his brother dead to the world on the couch, and then comes over and sets the tray of coffee and the bag (donuts, from the smell) down in front of her.

“How long has he been out?” he asks, keeping his voice low and his eyes on Dean.

“How long has he been out?” Jo answers just as softly. She takes one of the Styrofoam cups at random and sips on it before asking, “Should we wake him up and move him to the bed?”

Her own desires aside, Dean’s going to be sore as hell when he wakes up if they leave him there for long.

Sam hesitates for a moment and then shakes his head. “No. Let him sleep.”

Something about the way he says it tells Jo that Dean isn’t doing as well as he looks—tells her maybe he isn’t sleeping at night the way he should be.

She chews on her lip as Sam wanders closer to the sofa and looks down at his brother. Sam has a funny look on his face—fond and soft and almost doting—and Jo thinks about averting her eyes. She feels intrusive, for some reason, watching this. Feels like some kind of voyeur.
Then Sam reaches out and lightly runs his fingertips down the side of Dean’s face. Dean makes a sleepy, contented noise and rubs his opposite cheek against the sofa before subsiding again. Sam brushes his thumb lightly—and not quite accidentally—over his brother’s lips and then lets his hand fall to his side.

Jo’s stomach gives a wrenching, nauseating flip of understanding and she grips the edge of the table with one hand to keep herself from falling.

“What do you want the bed?” Sam asks, acting as casual and open as you please, like he didn’t just caress his brother’s face while Jo watched.

“No,” she manages to answer through numb lips. “I’m going to stay up and finish this.”

Sam nods and then, smiling, strokes Dean’s hair. It’s an absent touch—familiar and intimate—and oh God, of course Dean is ignoring her advances.

*But they’re* brothers, a shocked, little-girl voice exclaims in her head.

Except it seems Sam and Dean don’t care about that.

When she watches Sam massage the cricks out of Dean’s neck the next morning (*Dean moaning all the while like he’s auditioning for porn*), she wonders if her mama knows.
Diana doesn’t believe it, even when she believes him guilty of other crimes.

His reaction isn’t quite right when Pete throws the accusation at him—too much offended annoyance and not enough smug superiority or caught-out fear to make the charge stick. And then there’s Sam, who turns out to be built like a bull moose and looks fully capable of taking care of himself. Sure, he was a little boy once, and maybe things started then, but all the usual signs of trauma are missing, and the thought that Dean might have forced his brother into that sort of relationship just doesn’t sit right in her gut.

Later, though, everything becomes clear. A dizzying score of criminal charges polish up into badges of honor—not blemishes on Winchester’s service record at all, but decorations for the war he’s fighting. But that one accusation can’t ever be spun into gold like the rest, and Diana is thankful that it isn’t—can’t be—true.

It isn’t until Pete lies dead and unmourned (the murdering, lying bastard) on the ground at her feet that she pauses to wonder if there’s some foundation to that charge as well. No smoke without fire—isn’t that the saying?—and for the first time Diana can feel the heat of those flames beating against her skin.

She watches as Sam unlocks Dean’s wrists—with a paperclip, she notices, although the key is within easy reach at Pete’s belt. Sam doesn’t notice it there—doesn’t seem to have eyes for anything but his brother. He’s too anxious to wait until he has both sides of the cuffs off. As soon as one bracelet dangles open and empty, he hauls his brother into a hug and keeps him there with tensed arms.

Dean hugs back almost immediately. Pressing his face against the side of Sam’s throat, he shuts his eyes and breathes in deeply.

Maybe some of their shared desperation comes from Dean’s recent near-brush with death, but Diana can’t deny that the Winchesters are acting as though it’s been years instead of days that they’ve been separated. When they finally part, there’s too much reverent care in the way Sam finishes opening the other cuff. There’s too much fond flirtation in Dean’s muttered ‘why don’t you just file ‘em off; it’d be quicker’. And then the cuffs and clip are being dropped carelessly on the ground while Sam pats his brother down, checking for injuries.

“I’m fine, dude. Jesus,” Dean grunts, but Diana notices he doesn’t push Sam away. He doesn’t duck back from the fingertips his brother brushes across his cheekbone, or turn his face away when Sam presses their foreheads together, leaving their mouths mere centimeters apart.

As she watches them breathe in each other’s air, Diana thinks back to the motel where they picked up Sam. She thinks about how only one of the beds looked like it had gotten any use, and waits for the queasiness to take her.

It doesn’t.

They’re not hurting anyone, after all, and this war of theirs seems a lonely, desolate place. It has to be difficult for men who live in the shadows and hunt nightmares for a living to make any kind of meaningful connection. Brothers or not, the fact that these two have made anything for themselves is something of a miracle.

Diana glances down at Pete’s body and thinks that, when weighed against all of the hate and
violence in the world, a little genuine love doesn't seem like much of a crime.
It takes a couple of days for the tension to settle between them—although if Dean ever thinks about selling himself, for any reason, Sam’s going to hogtie his brother and toss him in the trunk of the Impala for safekeeping—but when it finally does, Sam finds himself curious. It’s stupid, wondering, but he’s always had a mental image to work with when imagining his brother’s hookups (even if it’s as unreliable as a slender back and pert ass glimpsed as Dean walks the girl out of the bar). And yeah, in this case they’re talking about a demon, but Dean has a certain amount of stubborn pride that makes him bring his A-game whenever it comes to women, and Sam knows how deals are made.

“So did you kiss her?” he asks over breakfast on the third morning.

Dean looks up from his plate, a strip of bacon dangling out of one corner of his mouth as he chews, and without missing a beat says, “Probably,” around the food in his mouth. Sam makes a face as he watches his brother swallow—Dean eating is not Dean at his most suave. Once the way is clear for more speech, Dean asks, “Who are we talking about again?”

“Mississippi?” Sam prods. “Crossroads? Ring a bell?”

Comprehension flickers in Dean’s eyes and he’s suddenly absorbed in his food. The foot he had pressed up companionably against the inside of Sam’s calf pulls back under his own side of the table. “No.”

“Then how’d you deal for Evan’s soul?”

Dean shifts uncomfortably in his seat without looking up. He’s always been a terrible liar. “Okay, fine. I kissed it. Happy now? Curiosity satisfied?”

Not now that he’s sure there’s more to the story, Sam isn’t. But he’s content to wait until later to ask—preferably when Dean is in a more talkative mood.

It’s another two days before he gets his chance. Dean is slightly tipsy from a night out at a bar, slumped low in the passenger seat with his hand cupped around the back of Sam’s neck and his thumb sliding through Sam’s hair. He’s got this contented, easy smile on his face that Sam hasn’t seen in a while, and he figures he’s safe enough to ask what he’s been wanting to.

“What was it like?”

“Mmm?”

“You know, kissing a demon.”

Dean snorts. “You know what it was like,” he points out. “You kissed Meg.”

“That was different,” Sam protests. For one, he was tied up at the time. And injured. And very much not an active participant.

Dean’s quiet for a moment, and then he says, “I dunno. I guess it was kinda like kissing a girl. Kinda weird having to look up, though.”

“So she was tall?” Sam asks, adding to his mental picture.

“What?” Dean asks, fingers stilling on Sam’s neck. “Who was tall?”
“The crossroads demon.”

Dean’s fingers twitch. “Oh,” he says, voice awkward and slow for some reason. “Yeah, uh. She. Uh. She was tall.”
“So how come you never joined up?”

Dean looks up from the bottles he’s filling up with a cocktail designed to make a pretty big boom to find Sarge standing just inside the doorway. There’s a hint of an assessing furrow in the man’s brow and a frown lingering around his mouth, but his gaze broadcasts approval, so Dean doesn’t take offense. Shrugging, he drops his eyes again so he can concentrate on what he’s doing.

“Ideological differences,” he says shortly, remembering the two weeks he spent posing as a student at a military academy and the amount of times his mouth got him into trouble. If he ever had signed up for a tour of duty, he would have spent over half of it in the brig. “Anyway, there’s plenty of shit to fight right here.”

He thinks the conversation is over, but instead Sarge comes close and sits down across from him in the seat Sam was using before Dean sent him out after alcohol.

“Corps is funny about some things,” Sarge says, lifting one of the finished cocktails and giving it the once-over before setting it carefully back down. “Personally, I think that Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell shit is crap. My Warrant Officer was a fairy, and he could’ve kicked the ass of any man on base. Loyal as a fucking dog, too, you know?”

“Uh, I guess?” Dean says, not sure why Sarge feels a sudden urge to discuss military policy.

But Sarge nods like they just had a meaningful discussion and gets up, clapping a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “He woulda made the same call you did today,” he says, giving Dean a quick squeeze. “Corps could use a few more good men like you and your ... brother. If we get out of this.”

Dean’s not sure he likes the pause in Sarge’s voice before he gets the word ‘brother’ out—like the guy isn’t a hundred percent sure they’re related—and he’s about to pursue it when there’s a crash and a scream from the other room.

Sammy.

In the ensuing chaos, the issue of just who’s related to whom never seems to get addressed.
Gordon knew Sam Winchester was no good when he met him the first time around. The full depth of the creature’s depravity hasn’t sunk in until now, though, when he has Dean tied to a chair in front of him and sees again how deep the damage runs.

Oh, he noticed it before, of course: they were too close, too tactile with one another. More than just partners in a losing war. More than just brothers.

And the way Sam’s hackles went up whenever Dean spared a smile Gordon’s way, well, that was just gravy to Gordon’s already substantial pile of evidence.

He hadn’t said anything at the time—disgusting, but it wasn’t his place to butt in, and anyway he liked Winchester. Still does, which is why he drags his own chair closer and says, “It’s sick, what he’s done to you.”

Dean glares at him sullenly and doesn’t answer.

“I’m not trying to insult you,” Gordon assures his hostage. “I like you, Dean. You seem to be a good man, and you’re one hell of a hunter. But Sam … he’s like a sickness. I’m doing you a favor, taking him out.”

“Go ahead and try,” Dean responds, smiling a tight, grim smile that isn’t anything like the open one Gordon was getting before. Just more proof that Sam’s been rubbing off on his brother. Degrading him and cracking him apart.

“I’m not one to vaunt my own abilities,” Gordon says casually, “But I will kill him. I’m going to put a bullet in his head.” Reaching forward, he rests a hand lightly on Dean’s cheek. “And then you’ll be free.”

Dean jerks his head away, jaw and throat working, and Gordon lets his hand fall back down onto his own thigh.

“When this is done,” Gordon says, “You’ll thank me. No man should have to touch his brother the way Sam’s been making you.”

Dean laughs—a hard sound—and looks back at Gordon. “Man, you really are a bowl of Fruit Loops, aren’t you?”

Gordon counsels himself not to be too disappointed—Sam’s still alive, still has too strong a hold on his brother—and heaves himself back to his feet to return to his post at the window.

After this is done, he thinks, Dean shouldn’t be left on his own. He needs careful handling to scrub him clean. Get him back into fighting form. He’ll make a good hunting partner without that taint dragging him down.

“You like Chinese?” he asks without glancing back. Dean’s silence is sullen and resisting, but Gordon’s feelings aren’t hurt. Man’s not in his right mind. “There’s a great place just outside town. When this is over, I’ll pick us up some chow. My treat. What d’you say?”

Dean’s agreement isn’t precisely necessary, of course—Gordon’s already decided he’s taking Winchester under his wing. But it’d be nice.
“Go to hell.”

Gordon sighs. He’s got a lot of work to do.
“Dean.”

Dean lifts his head wearily, looking across the room at his drunken (and stupid) brother. Sam has rolled onto his side and is watching him with wide, unguarded eyes. He’s wearing the same pleading expression he was when he made Dean promise the unthinkable.

And if Sam thinks for one second that Dean was actually agreeing to that, then he’s a goddamn moron.

“Go to sleep, Sammy.”

“Can’t,” Sam answers, making a drunken flail in his direction. “C’mere. Come t’bed.”

“Think you need your space tonight,” Dean answers, not moving. “Don’t want you to puke on me in your sleep.”

Sam’s mouth pulls down into something suspiciously like a lopsided pout. “Please? Dean, I can’t—I can’t sleep without you.”

Sighing, Dean runs a hand through his hair and gets up, moving across the room to the bed. It’s a twin, which means this is going to be cramped, but he doesn’t plan on staying longer than it takes Sam to fall asleep, so it should be okay.

Fuck, Dean needs to get out of here and go for a walk. Clear his head.

He sits on the edge of the bed to toe his boots off and feels Sam fumbling at the lower hem of his Henley.


Sighing, Dean complies. “You know you’re a pushy bitch when you’re drunk?” he points out as he tosses his discarded Henley on the floor. “Better?”

“Both,” Sam insists, grabbing Dean’s undershirt now.

“Christ,” Dean says, pulling that off as well. “How naked do you want me, Sam?”

“Lay down,” Sam orders, ignoring the annoyance Dean can hear lacing his own voice, and Dean bites back the snapping, hostile things that want to come out of his mouth and complies. Sam is immediately plastered to his back, one hand worming underneath Dean’s body and the other draping over his side.

“I’m not a teddy bear, dude,” Dean mutters as his brother tosses a leg over his hip and tugs their lower bodies closer together as well.

“Know that,” Sam murmurs. “Just want. Feels better when you’re close.” His hand skims down Dean’s bare chest, making his nipples pebble, and comes to rest low on his stomach. Splays wide and possessive.

Sam hasn’t been this grabby since just before he left for Stanford, and it turns something low in Dean’s stomach.
“You aren’t thinking of doing something dumb, are you?” he asks tentatively. “Sammy?”

“No,” Sam answers after a moment. “No, just wanted. Wanted you here tonight.”

Dean shivers at the wet press of Sam’s mouth against the nape of his neck, stomach trembling for a different reason. “Sam?” he manages hoarsely. “You’re slobbering on me, dude.”

Sam’s mouth moves lower, getting Dean’s shoulder this time, and Dean’s heart hasn’t beat this fast in months. He thinks of that motel room in Salvation, for no reason whatsoever. And the way Sam tried to—tried to do something. What, Dean’s not sure, but he knows it made him feel twitchy and unsettled and exposed.

Kinda like he feels now.

“M’ big brother,” Sam exhales, and then he bites Dean, the little fucker.

“Ow!” Dean complains, jerking in his brother’s arms and shifting onto his back. “Watch the fucking teeth, dude.”

When he twists his head to the side so he can get a look at Sam, his brother is grinning in a sloppy, out-of-it way and looking proud of himself. Dean’s pretty sure Sam just gave him a hickey, the little bitch.

“If you left a mark,” he mutters, “I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“Leave a mark on your ass,” Sam answers, nonsensically, and then rests his head on Dean’s left shoulder and snuggles his nose up underneath Dean’s chin.

Dean stares at the ceiling with a long suffering sigh and lets his little brother cling to him. It isn’t like it’s much different from their normal sleeping arrangements, aside from Sam’s misplaced biting fetish, and anyway, Dean doesn’t have to wait long for justice to be served. He grins at the thought, cheered enough to work a hand free and stroke his brother’s hair.

Sam’s hangover tomorrow morning is going to be *Epic.*
“So, you guys are, like, partners, huh?” Ronald says, shifting from one foot to the other and adjusting his grip on the gun.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees shortly, doing his best not to snap. No matter how pissed he is at the man for getting them into the mess in the first place.

Ronald is quiet for almost an entire, blessed minute, and then he says, “I’m gonna go out on a wire and guess you don’t like me much.”

“That’s ‘out on a limb’.”

Ronald bites his lower lip, darting another glance toward the front bank of windows, and Sam wonders when Dean’s going to get back.

“That’s okay,” Ronald continues, still talking with that manic, nervous energy he’s had since he started this whole, crazy ball rolling. “I didn’t like you either, but Dean seems cool, and I guess he wouldn’t date someone who was a total creepazoid, so—”

“We’re not dating.”

Ronald doesn’t even blink. “Okay, so, um, married? In a long-term relationship? Anyway, if you’re cool in Dean’s book, you’re okay in mine, I guess.”

And then, smiling, he leans forward and claps Sam on the arm.

“Yeah, thanks,” Sam mutters, giving up on explaining the whole brothers-not-lovers thing.

Coming from someone who came up with the whole ‘mandroid’ theory, the assumption doesn’t carry much weight, anyway.
Painstaking (Houses of the Holy)

It feels good to be out of lockdown, even if it does mean making nice with a priest, so Dean makes a painstaking effort not to take the man’s head off when he mentions, casually and in passing, that the parish is very welcoming of ‘their kind’.

In fact, with a stiff grin, he even manages to get his hand into Sam’s and say, “That’s just swell, isn’t it, sweetie?”

Sam looks kind of like he swallowed a toad as he nods and plays along.

It makes up for being cut off from the Magic Fingers.

Almost.
Narrow (Born Under A Bad Sign)

“Do you ever wonder?” Sam asks.

_Wonder what?_ Dean thinks, looking at the gun he dropped onto the bed with wet, dull eyes. _What it’d be like to kill you? Cause that’s more nightmare material than anything else._

He doesn’t answer. Doesn’t resist as Sam comes up behind him and slides a hand around his waist. Slipping his eyes shut, he leans back into his brother’s chest instead, drinking in Sam’s proximity. The comfort of connection.

“I wonder, Dean,” Sam breathes into his ear. “I wonder a lot.”

Sam nuzzles the corner of his jaw and Dean swallows, stomach lurching and heated. His whole world has narrowed to the feel of Sam’s hand on his stomach, the brush of Sam’s breath over the side of his throat.

“You’d let me, wouldn’t you?” Sam whispers, fingers rubbing back and forth over the top button on Dean’s jeans. “You’d roll over for it if I asked you to.”

Dean blinks with difficulty—he doesn’t know what Sam’s talking about, what he means, but he knows the answer is yes. For Sam, the answer is always going to be yes.

“Well,” Sam says, sliding his hands free and stepping back with an abruptness that leaves a protest wedged in Dean’s throat. _“That’s no fun. I think we’ll play a different game.”_

His arm comes into view, reaching for the discarded gun, and Dean turns around to watch Sam pick it up and step away from him. Something’s wrong. The way Sam’s behaving, the way he’s moving, the things he’s doing ...

“Sammy?” Dean chokes out, stepping after him.

And then Sam turns, the gun held high and snapping toward Dean’s temple, and Dean drops into the black before he even knows the floor lurching up to meet him.
Possess (Tall Tales)

Dean is just about to seal the deal when the girl’s (*Starla? Stella?*) eyes flick over his shoulder. Her face pales and she immediately takes a step back as Dean feels someone move in close enough behind him to brush against his back.

Sam.

If he’s gotten himself possessed again, Dean’s gonna kill him. Might anyway, even if Sam is demon free and still wearing his pretty jewelry, cause what looked like a sure thing a second ago is starting to rabbit.

“I just remembered I have to meet someone,” the girl says, grabbing her purse off the bar and turning away.

“Hey, wait, it’s just my brot—”

But she’s already gone.

Dean turns slowly, lifting his chin so he can look Sam in the eye, and thinks about slugging the self-satisfied look off his brother’s face.

“You couldn’t have given me two more minutes?” Dean demands.

“Oh, right. Like that’s all it would have taken,” Sam snorts. “You would’ve been out the door and I wouldn’t have seen you until tomorrow.”

“So?”

“So we’re in the middle of a case, Dean! Can’t you keep it in your pants long enough to—”

“I’ve *been* keeping it in my pants, Sam,” Dean shoots back. “A guy has needs, you know!”

He realizes suddenly that they’re shouting at each other in the middle of the bar. Everyone else has gone quiet around them, and Dean can feel eyes boring into his skin, and he flushes but doesn’t back down. Doesn’t look away from Sam’s eyes, only inches from his own. Their chests are brushing together and there’s adrenaline rushing through Dean’s veins, promising some kind of violent response, and Christ he really is gonna punch Sam in a moment. Punch him or ... or do something equally stupid.

Then some drunken asshole shouts, “Oh, just kiss him already!” and the tension breaks.

Dean turns away from his brother, snapping out, “Blow me,” in the direction of the drunk, and then storms out into the night.
“She took my Sara from me,” Greely pants as he forces the knife closer to Dean’s throat. “And you two, you’re helping her.”

Dean grunts as the knife slips closer, just grazing his skin. His muscles tremble from the effort of keeping it back.

“That man of yours is going to know grief, son,” Greely gloats, sneering into Dean’s face as the tip of the knife trembles in a tiny, stinging line. “Lost my wife, he’s gonna lose his. Show him the true meaning of pain.”

And then flames spark out from the ghost’s cheek, spreading through his form like wildfire. He lets go of the knife, backing away and screaming as the fire consumes him and leaves nothing but a trace of smoke on the air.

Dean leans back against the wall, trying to catch his breath, and lightly brushes his fingertips against the shallow cut on his throat.

He’s not sure what pissed him off more about the encounter: the fact that Greely (like everyone else on God’s green earth) seemed to think he and Sam are fucking, or the fact that Greely assumed Dean would be the girl.

Once—just once—he’d like someone to picture him as the pitcher in the equation.
All men are flawed, and for all his charms, Sam is no different.

Madison gets her first glimpse of that when she watches the two of them together—the way Sam orients himself, the way his partner always seems hyperaware of Sam's location in the room. She gets her confirmation after Sam has left her sore and contented between her legs. When he shifts around restlessly in the bed before getting up and going over to the window to look down at the street like he’s expecting to see something there.

Madison thinks she knows what, too. Thinks maybe he’s looking for a sleek black car with a shadowy figure behind the wheel.

“Come back to bed,” she calls, and then needs to use his name to get his attention. “Sam.”

“Sorry,” Sam apologizes as he lets the curtain drop and turns back to her. “I’m just not. I guess I’m not used to being away from Dean. It’s been kind of a tough year.”

Madison was thinking in terms of taking what she could get a moment ago, but as she watches him shoot a glance in the direction of his discarded clothes—at the cell phone peeking out from his jean pocket—she understands that he’s already given her more than he maybe should have.

She wonders if his partner is out there somewhere drowning his sorrows and imagining them together.

“Call him,” she sighs, sinking back down onto the mattress.

“You sure? I don’t have to.” But Sam is already headed over to his pants, bending down and pulling out his phone. “I’ll just be a minute, okay?”

She watches him flip the phone open and hit two buttons before wandering out into the living room. He’s still naked, and anyone peering over from the apartments across the way is going to get an eyeful, but it’s closing in on two in the morning and she thinks he’s safe.

Rolling onto her side, Madison stares out the window at the sky and listens to the rise and fall of his voice as he talks to his partner. Soft, fond laughter mingled with stretches of silence and idle conversation.

*This is Sam’s flaw,* she thinks to herself as she curls her toes in the bedsheet. *He’s already in love with someone else.*

Her bed feels cold and empty after having held a man so briefly but memorably, and Madison expects to lie there wakeful as Sam’s minute bleeds out into ten, twenty, thirty. But sleep creeps in around the edges of her thoughts, lulling her, and her last thought before she drifts away isn’t of Sam at all.

She dreams of the moon.
Dean’s the best PA Tara has met in a long time. He’s competent, smart, always ready with a smile, and easy on the eyes. Not to mention the fact that he’s made quite clear he’d be willing to cater to her needs. All of them.

But even though he seems to be good with his hands, and has a mouth that looks like it was made to drive a girl (or a boy, for that matter) crazy, Tara’s not sure she’s going to take him up on the offer. She’s seen the hulking gigantor of a boyfriend that shadows Dean everywhere he goes, after all. Dean may be pretty, but he isn’t worth the amount of trouble Tara is sure Gigantor could cause if he wants.

Still, when he comes around to shyly (and isn’t that endearing) take his leave one morning, she can’t help grabbing his shirt and tugging him closer. He comes with bright, eager eyes and a hopeful grin, and a moment later his body is blanketing hers where she’s leaning back against the wall.

“Can I get you to help me with one more thing before you go?” she asks, looking up at him.

Dean’s grin widens into something filthy and full of promises that make her ache way down low where it counts. “I think we can work something out,” he answers, leaning in to catch her lips.

She turns her face aside at the last second, clinging to prudency and asking, “And it’s okay with your boyfriend? He doesn’t mind you being a little promiscuous?”

Dean stiffens. “My what?”

“Stan?” Tara tries. She’s sure it’s something like that, anyway, although Dean is still looking at her blankly. “The guy who’s always looking at me like he’ll take my hand off at the wrist if I try to touch you?”

“Oh,” Dean says, voice rich with realization and something that wavers between annoyance and amusement. “You mean Sammy. Yeah, his bitch face is legendary. He’s not my boyfriend, though.”

“He’s not?” Tara says. She can’t quite keep the doubt from coloring her voice.

“Nope. I’m a free agent.” He leans in closer, one hand closing around her hip suggestively. “So. That help you were wanting …”

Stan—Sammy—is probably going to kill her for this (Dean can claim otherwise til he’s blue in the face, but there’s clearly something between them), but Tara’s willpower isn’t infinite and she nods.

Later, when she follows Dean to the steps of her trailer for one last goodbye and finds the two men very awkwardly not looking at each other, she wants to feel guilty about it and can’t.

Dean’s mouth does feel as good as it looks.
“What I don’t get is why everyone assumes that I’m the bitch,” Dean complains.

He isn’t even bothering to keep his voice down, although his words are attracting all sorts of the wrong attention, and Sam keeps a close eye on a neighboring inmate with a skull tattooed on one bicep and the word VILE spelled out in black ink on the knuckles of his left hand.

The problem, Sam reflects with varying degrees of anger and exasperation, is that despite having watched pretty much every prison movie ever, Dean is still completely unselfconscious about standing in the shower—naked—with a bunch of cons. He’s maybe even strutting himself a little bit, like he wants to be looked at.

And then has to go and ask stupid questions.

“I mean, seriously, have they seen your hair?” Dean continues, and then with an absent, “Damn it,” bends over to pick up the soap.

Sam quickly shifts over to stand behind his brother and does his best not to follow Vile’s gaze where it’s lingering on Dean’s wet ass. When Dean straightens again and his back collides with Sam’s chest, he makes a startled noise and starts to turn.

Sam grabs Dean’s hip and bicep, holding on to both tightly enough to keep his brother facing the wall, and hisses, “Are you trying to get jumped? Because I’m having serious doubts whether it’s worth fighting to keep you right now.”

Twisting his head, Dean looks back at Sam with wide, doe eyes (full, curling lashes like a girl’s) and a startled expression on his face. When Sam slants a meaningful glance in Vile’s direction, Dean follows his gaze and immediately flushes.

Sam tries not to notice the way Dean backs up more firmly against his front as he belatedly grasps the situation. He tries not to think about the fact that they’re both wet and naked, or about the fact that there’s way more skin touching than either of them is used to.

Not that it’s a thing, or anything.

“I can take care of myself,” Dean grumps, but Sam notices he isn’t moving away.

“Well you can,” he says in a pacifying murmur, nosing at the side of his brother’s neck to keep the words hidden from their audience. “But do you really want to have to fight naked, or would you rather hold still and let me wash your hair for you?”

It’s dirty pool—Sam washed his brother’s hair for almost two weeks straight after Dean burned his hands on a faulty explosive charge when Dean was nineteen, and Dean clearly equated the experience to Heaven. But Sam isn’t actually sure about their ability to take on the other eight men showering with them, and any way they can avoid a throw down is okay in his book.

Sure enough, some of the stubborn stiffness goes out of Dean’s shoulders at the suggestion.

“You make a good point,” he murmurs, and then tilts his head back against Sam’s shoulder in clear demand.

The noises Dean makes as Sam carefully massages his scalp draw even more attention than they
were getting before, but that’s okay because Sam has his hands on his brother now, and both that and the dark, warning glances he’s shooting around the room while Dean’s eyes are closed are making his point.

*Mine. Off limits. Do not touch if you know what’s good for you.*

He still has to break someone’s wrist the next day out in the yard to drive the message home, but Dean’s too absorbed in his card game to notice.
Linger (What Is And What Should Never Be)

When they return from the clinic, Sam sets the laptop up so that he can keep an eye on Dean while his brother dozes—so that he can enforce the doctor’s order for Dean to rest, really, but Sam doesn’t mention that and Dean is studiously pretending he isn’t being babysat. Fiction maintained, dignity preserved, and status quo upheld. Dean even lies down without grumbling, although Sam can tell what little sleep his brother manages isn’t very restful.

When Dean gets up after a couple of hours, looking cross and out of sorts, Sam doesn’t even try to make him get back into bed. Instead, he takes Dean out (keeping a careful watch for any patrol cars) and lets his brother exhaust himself on another walk of the warehouse—looking for other victims, Dean claims, but Sam thinks that the search that matters is the one he can’t help with. It’s the one going on in Dean’s head as he tries to process whatever he saw in the djinn dream.

Afterward, Sam swings by a local grease pit and gets some solid chow into his brother. He tries not to take offense when Dean flinches back every time their hands meet on the diner tabletop, or when he jerks if their legs happen to brush together below. He fights to bring them back under even keel by holding out a couple of his steak fries (Dean's favorite) in offer.

Dean takes them gingerly with his fingers—first time he hasn’t just leaned across and let Sam feed him since those few, wretched days before Stanford—and then puts them down onto his plate with a halfhearted ‘thanks’. The fries stay there for the rest of the meal.

The only good thing about the expedition, as far as Sam’s concerned, is the fact that Dean is clearly exhausted when they return to the motel room. The dark circles under his eyes make him look ill, and he’s swaying a little on his feet.

But he’s sure to rest now.

“Do you want to shower before we turn in?” Sam asks, reaching for his brother's arm.

His breath catches at the sharp pang that clenches his chest when Dean skittishly jerks out of reach.

“’M good.”

“I could help,” Sam offers, remembering how pliant Dean was against his chest during their brief stint in prison.

Dean hesitates—he wants to say yes, Sam can tell he does—but finally shakes his head. “No. You go ahead. I gotta, uh, find us a new job.”

Sam would love to point out that Dean’s not going to be physically ready for a new job for at least a week, but Dean’s posture is practically begging to be left alone right now, so he settles for, “Okay. I’ll be quick,” and heads into the bathroom.

When he comes out fifteen minutes later, he expects to find Dean crashed out in their bed. Instead, he’s greeted by the sight of his brother’s back where Dean is sitting at the table in front of the laptop. Dean has deliberately moved the laptop around so that he would be facing away from Sam, and the exaggeratedly casual way he’s sitting tells Sam that his brother is trying to be smooth. Thinks he is being smooth.

Yeah, right, Sam thinks. Smooth as a pane of glass.
But he lets Dean have his smokescreen while he finishes getting ready for bed—drying his hair and then tossing the towel over the back of a chair to his brother’s right. Then, finally, he turns off the lights (Dean’ll take the hint) and gets into bed. Maybe keeping the whole situation nonverbal will help Dean get past whatever he’s stewing over.

Dean does shut down the laptop, but it isn’t their bed he climbs into.

Sam’s chest goes suddenly, terrifyingly cold at the sight of Dean making himself comfortable over six feet away on the other mattress.

“Dean,” he manages before his brother has finished pulling the covers up. “What are you doing?”

“Going to bed.”

Sam’s trying to give Dean his space, really he is, but this is taking things a little too far. He sits up with an abrupt movement, reaches over to the lamp on the nightstand between them, and clicks it on. In the sudden, warm flood of light, Dean isn’t looking at Sam. He’s staring down at his hand where it’s clutching the bedsheets.

“Dude, what’s with you?” Sam asks, keeping his voice gentle. “You’ve been acting weird ever since we got back from the hospital.”

“I’m fine.”

“I call bullshit,” Sam replies immediately. He gives Dean almost a minute to come clean and then, when his brother just sits there silently, urges, “Dean, please. Talk to me, man.”

Dean’s jaw clenches, which could be a bad sign, but his hands are smoothing out the sheets. Sam waits patiently this time, and after a moment Dean rewards him by saying, “You, uh. You don’t think it’s ... weird?”

“What?”

One of Dean’s hands leaves the sheets to gesture at the space between the beds. “Us? I mean, it’s kinda ... I dunno, fucked up, I guess. Me. Always clinging to you and shit. Maybe I oughta, uh, get my head checked. Or something.”

The lingering chill Sam’s chest thaws and then boils into anger. “Who told you that?”

Dean’s shoulders hitch noncommittally, but a muscle high in his cheek jumps and he still won’t look at Sam. Suddenly, Sam knows. He gets it.

He should have known instantly that there’s only one person whose words have that much capacity to wound.

“I’m not him,” he says softly.

“Maybe you should be.”

For a few seconds Sam is sure he misheard. Then Dean slants a quick look in his direction, gauging his reaction, and no. He didn’t.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,” Sam says when he can speak without yelling.

But Dean never could leave well enough alone.
“You didn’t see yourself, man,” he pushes. “You were happy, and studying to be a lawyer, and—fuck, normal.”

“And us?” Sam shoots back. “What about you and me?”

The slight and unconscious shake of Dean’s head answers that one simply enough: there wasn’t any them. Which Sam kind of figured if his other self was enough of a prick to talk to Dean like that.

Way to go, alterna-asshole me, he thinks sourly.

In the other bed, Dean has taken a new tactic. “People are always—y’know, making assumptions. Maybe it’s us. I mean, statistically speaking—”

“When did you ever give a fuck about statistics?”

Dean shrugs again and doesn’t answer.

Sighing, Sam sits up and waits until Dean chances a glance. It’s easy to catch Dean’s eyes once he’s looking over, and then Sam holds his brother’s gaze as he says, “All those people? Fuck them. And fuck that other me too. He wasn’t real, Dean. He was just some illusion the djinn made up to mess with you.”

Dean doesn’t quite buy it, Sam can tell, but he can also tell from the longing in his brother’s eyes that he wants to.

Pushing his advantage, he continues, “Who gets to decide what normal is, anyway? Huh? Cause last time I checked, all those ‘normal’, ‘perceptive’ people are the same ones who’d be happy to chuck us in the loony bin if we told them even a tenth of what we’ve seen.”

Dean snorts at that, grudgingly amused. “Heh. With our luck, we’d wind up with an Elicot wannabe calling the shots and Nurse Ratched giving us sponge baths.”

Sam laughs, the knot in his chest easing as his brother starts to come back to him, and Dean offers him a grin. Neither of them says anything—no need for it, not now that Dean is smiling again, and meeting Sam’s gaze evenly—and after a few minutes, Sam feels his own smile soften.

“Come to bed,” he urges, voice gentle and low.

Something flickers in Dean’s eyes—like the barely glimpsed crackle of summer lightning—and then he’s getting out of the other bed and crossing the space between them. Sam gives way, scootching back briefly so that Dean has enough room to lie down and then moving forward again to press up against his brother’s back. Dean lets out a deep, shaky breath and all of the tension runs out from his body, leaving him loose and easy in Sam’s arms.

“Missed this,” Dean murmurs. It’s a confession dragged from him unwillingly, and all the more precious for his reluctance.

Sam presses a welcoming kiss to the back of his brother’s neck and then makes sure his nose is buried in Dean’s hair. Pushes his right foot between his brother’s where it belongs.

His last thought before he drifts away is that alterna-him didn’t know what he was missing.
Sanctuary (All Hell Breaks Loose, Part I)

Boys have always been too close for comfort.

Bobby isn’t the only one who’s seen it, either. Jim Murphey knew, and that ornery son of a bitch, Caleb, and even Erin Baker, who only met them once and not for too long a period at that.

Didn’t raise too many eyebrows back when John first joined the ranks. Not when the Winchester boys were so young. No, then it was cute. Then Dean turned heads, the way he was always looking after Sammy for his daddy, dandling the kid on his knee till Sammy grew too fast and big for his big brother to manage the trick.

Wasn’t until the boys got older that it started pinging Bobby the wrong way. Made him look at the pair of them again, sideways-like, and wonder how the hell he hadn’t seen this particular brand of trouble coming.

He didn’t bother saying anything—it was clear from the hot-cold way John Winchester ran towards his eldest that their daddy saw what was happening as well as anyone. He’d shove them apart one second, cussing Dean out for coddling his brother too much, and then turn around and berate the boy for not paying enough mind to his charge the next. Got so bad for a while there that Bobby didn’t even know if he was coming or going, and he was just standing on the edges looking in.

No wonder Dean stopped listening to his daddy (least as far as his relationship with Sam was concerned) and started concentrating exclusively on what the compass of his heart was telling him. And that compass only ever did point one way.

Bobby could’ve tried to do something himself, but he somehow never managed to have the sit-down he wanted to with the boy, and then Sam was going off to school and it seemed like things were sorting themselves out.

Lazy thinking like that, Bobby reflects now, is what got them into this situation in the first place.

“Son,” he says, forcing the word out through a throat that feels three sizes too small. “Come on, now. We can’t sit here all night.”

Dean doesn’t move. Or rather, he doesn’t stop moving, still holding Sam—Sam’s body—and rocking his brother back and forth like a mechanical toy with a broken spring.

“Dean,” Bobby tries again, reaching out this time and getting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Dean moves at that, just a blur of motion in the rain, and Bobby finds that breathing is even more difficult to do when a Winchester is digging the point of a knife into his throat. There’s nothing sane in Dean’s eyes. Nothing human.

“Dean,” Bobby tries, but there isn’t so much as a flicker of recognition. He’s calling for a soul that isn’t home. Not anymore.

There’s a fifty-fifty chance that Bobby’s going to die out here.

Teach him to stick his damn neck out.

“Dean,” he says again, keeping his voice even and his tone calm. “Sam’s getting wet.”
That gets through, and Dean cuts a quick glance down and back—not lessening the pressure on Bobby’s jugular enough that he wants to make any sudden moves. The boy takes in his brother’s body, slumped facedown where it fell in the mud, and the spasm of grief that crosses his face is strong enough and vivid enough that Bobby’s chest clenches with a bolt of pain that feels like a heart attack.

Then the knife is gone—dropped—and Dean is back on the ground, hauling Sam up and using his left hand to wipe the mud from his brother’s face.

Bobby should leave them here while he still can. Before he steps wrong and ends up with a blade in his throat or a gunshot to the belly.

No telling what Dean might do right now. No sanctuary or respite for any that might come between a grieving Winchester and his lost one.

Boy’s daddy was the same way about that wife of his, only he was never quite this dangerous because he wasn’t raised to it.

But the grief in Bobby’s chest isn’t all an echo. He knew Sam too—loved him a little like a son, maybe. And as unwise as it might be, he knows he feels that way about Dean. He must, to be this stupidly reckless.

“Come on, son,” he says again. “Let’s get your—”

He stops awkwardly. Was going to say ‘brother’, but he knows that doesn’t even come close to encompassing what these boys are—were—to each other. He doesn’t know as there is a word for it. Might have to invent one.

*Christ, old man, get a grip.*

“Let’s get Sam out of the rain.”

From the tilt to Dean’s head, Bobby can tell that the boy is listening to him, and after what feels like an endless delay, Dean staggers to his feet with Sam’s body cradled close to his chest. It’s obviously a strain, holding all that (*dead*) weight, but Dean doesn’t ask for help, and Bobby doesn’t offer.

Man’s entitled to carry his own grief.
Aware (All Hell Breaks Loose, Part II)

Sam takes him to a motel. He doesn’t even give Dean time to say goodbye to Bobby or Ellen. He all but shoves him into the Impala and peels out, driving like he forgot where the brake is, and then, once they get to the parking lot, stops fast enough that Dean grunts as he’s thrown forward into the seatbelt he’s fortunately wearing.

Then Dean is being bundled into a room, and before he’s aware Sam is even going to try anything, he’s been tackled onto the bed. Fumbling in the dark follows—Sam forgot to turn on the fucking lights—and Dean accidentally gets elbowed in the chin while doing his best to stay out of his brother’s way as his coat and shirts are stripped from him. His head pounds, still achy and hot from getting tossed face-first into that tombstone, and his grimace pulls at the gash in his forehead.

But that discomfort is only a minor annoyance in comparison with Dean's bewilderment at the violence of his brother's silent demands. Actually, he’s a little frightened by the fact that Sam hasn’t bitched him out yet. In cases like this, though—when Sam's blood is up too high to use that oversized brain of his and he has to fall back on brute instinct instead—Dean has learned that it's best to play possum, so that's what he does.

And ends up stripped down to his boxers and blinking on the bed in confusion as Sam carries his clothes back to the door, opens it, and tosses them outside on the sidewalk.

“Hey!” Dean yells, sitting up in belated protest.

Sam’s gaze is hot and furious as he whirls around. “You want your boxers out there too, keep talking.”

Dean isn’t cowed, exactly, but that wasn’t anywhere near his favorite outfit, and Sam is clearly out of control right now, so the smart thing to do is stay silent. He watches Sam strip down as well and doesn’t resist when he brother comes back to the bed and pretty much lies down on top of him.

“Dude,” he grunts after a couple moments. “Crushing me.”

“Shut up,” Sam answers, and although Dean can’t see his brother’s face, he can hear the tears in his voice.

He shuts up.

Sam is mostly quiet for a while, just making these soft, whuffing noises that mean he’s crying and trying not to, and then he winds his arms and legs around Dean, holding him tightly, and whispers, “You idiot.”

Dean guesses that’s the least of the insults Sam could be hitting him with, so he lies there and enjoys the sensation of Sam blanketing him. Sam gripping him close.

One more year of this, he thinks, snaking his own arms up to hold his brother back.

“If you die,” Sam breathes. “Dean, if you—”

“Everyone dies, Sammy.”

Sam lifts his head at that, and even in the dark motel room Dean can tell that his brother’s face is miserable. “Except for me?”
Dean looks away—can’t meet Sam’s hurt, wretched eyes—and tries to change the topic by asking, “So how come your clothes get to stay in the room?”

“Because I’m not a flight risk,” Sam answers shortly. “And don’t—don’t try to change the topic either, Dean. I’m not. I’m not fucking losing you.”

“Sorry, Sammy. I sold my soul first. Beat you to it.”

Something in Sam’s eyes changes at the goad—they go heavy and heated and violent—and then his head darts forward.

Dean tries to jerk back from what he’s sure is a head butt, but the pillow and the mattress are in the way and he’s not going anywhere. Before he can think of an alternate exit strategy, Sam’s mouth is on his, rough and demanding, and Dean’s insides give a twisting, trembling lurch.

Sam is kissing him.

It’s ... kind of like an attack, though, what with the way Sam is practically mauling Dean’s mouth and biting his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, so it’s not weird or anything. And when Dean catches up and starts kissing back, it’s only because he recognizes that he’s in a fight and sort of has to retaliate. Besides, he isn’t just going to lie there and take it like a pussy. He’s got skills in this department, and if this is the way Sam’s gonna play this conversation, then Dean’s damn well going to use them.

It’s a question of self-respect.

Things maybe get a little confused for a few minutes until their signals (just stress, they’ve both been under a lot of pressure these last few days) uncross and they both figure out that this isn’t quite the same thing as fighting. Then Sam jerks his head back, tearing his mouth free, and if Dean chases him for a second then it’s because he wasn’t done proving his point.

Not that he’s one hundred percent sure what that point is, but he knows he wasn’t quite finished making it.

Sam lowers his head again, this time resting his forehead against the top of Dean’s shoulder. When he speaks, his voice is harsh and choked with emotions too painful for Dean to acknowledge.

“I’m going to save you. You hear me, Dean? I’m saving you.”

Dean stares up at the ceiling with wet, tingling lips and doesn’t respond. He’s too busy trying to catch his breath.
Dean is humming to himself as he moves around, getting the house ready for the coming assault. There’s a tiny smile playing around his mouth—same one he’s been wearing since the graveyard. Sam knows because he can’t stop looking. He can’t stop drinking Dean in—all of him. He spends every spare moment taking note, it seems: the scattered freckles on his brother’s cheeks and nose; the green of his eyes; the gelled peaks of his hair; the curve of his jaw, which somehow manages to be strong and graceful at the same time.

His infuriating, maddening smile.

“Hey, earth to Sammy,” Dean says, and Sam blinks, jerking his gaze from his brother’s mouth to his amused eyes.

Dean looks like he’s having fun. Like Sam can’t count down the days left to his life on the pocketbook calendar in the Impala’s glove compartment.

“Sorry if this whole life or death thing isn’t interesting enough for you,” Dean continues, “But you might want to think about putting in a little effort before the rest of the seven dwarves come looking for Grumpy downstairs.”

And then. Then he smirks.

Dean’s always had a way of sending Sam from zero to pissed off in point five seconds.

“This is just a game to you, isn’t it?” Sam seethes. “We could die tonight, Dean. You could die. And you already got your admission ticket to Hell punched.”

Dean’s eyes close off with only the faintest, unreadable flick of emotion. His smile dims. “We already had this talk,” he points out.

“Yeah, well, we’re having it again,” Sam insists. “You stupid, goddamned selfish, son of a bitch. One year isn’t short enough, now you want to duck out on me even earlier?”

He’s pushing too hard and he knows it—knows that this mess with the Sins is as much his fault as it is Dean’s: his brother is just making the most of whatever spare moments he has left. But dealing with Dean’s beaming cheer is like having salt rubbed into open wounds, and Dean’s cavalier attitude is making Sam angry enough to want to hurt his brother back.

Which is why, when Dean turns to walk away from him, Sam grabs his arm and says, “Dad didn’t sell himself for this. You’re pissing on the man’s memory, Dean.”

Dean spins back at that, color high in his cheeks and eyes snapping, and shoves Sam up against the nearest wall. Sam’s stomach twists eagerly—yes, violence is good: something to vent all of his pent up frustrations on.

But Dean doesn’t punch him.

Instead, Dean mashes their mouths together, both hands locked around Sam’s biceps and holding him in place. Sam could push him off, but this—is a manner of sparring as well, and instead he strains forward, opening his mouth and trying to seize control of the volatile, dangerous energy between them.
This feels good—it feels like a goddamned release—and Sam hasn’t really thought about his own, screwed up response to the news of Dean’s deadline before but his mind snaps back to it quickly enough now. In some ways, it was better the first time—all of his anger and deep, aching pain were easier to force out of his chest when his bare skin was pressed up against Dean’s—but Sam can’t deny that he likes having more room to maneuver.

Dean makes a grunt as his back collides with the wall, and then surges forward again, driving his mouth more violently against Sam’s. Sam gets his hands up, tangling them in his brother’s hair—not to jerk Dean’s head away, it looks like, since he seems to be using the grip to force his brother closer, but—

“Jesus!”

Sam flinches, startled, but doesn’t have to shove Dean away because Dean is already scrambling back and putting a couple feet between them. Sam isn’t looking at his brother, but as he turns to face Bobby, he can still see Dean wiping his mouth with one hand from the corner of his eye. Bobby’s face has gone a strangled, red color, and he’s staring fixedly at the floor—of course he is, he walked in on the middle of ... of ...

Christ, Sam hasn’t been able to categorize it in his own head yet; he can’t even begin to imagine what Bobby must be assuming. Or rather, he can imagine—just as well as Dean from the deafening, awkward silence flooding the room—and it’s embarrassing as hell. Denials spring to his lips and burn there, unspoken, because he knows how it’ll sound, however truthful the explanation might be.

Sam gets that most brothers don’t diffuse their anger by kissing it out of each other.

“Didn’t see nothing,” Bobby says finally, and it makes Sam rethink his not offering any explanations plan, because if Bobby can say something that sounds so much like bullshit, then he ought to be able to as well. Then Bobby continues, “Just came to tell you to get your asses into position.”

“They’re here?” Dean checks. His voice sounds a little unsteady, a little rough, and something low in Sam’s stomach shifts. Nerves.

Bobby gives a jerky nod, hesitates a moment longer, and then practically runs out of the room.

Which leaves Sam and Dean alone in a silence that feels more awkward than Sam thinks it should, because no matter how heatedly they were—were arguing—a few minutes ago, they both know what the score is. If Bobby got the wrong impression by walking in on something he can’t ever understand, it’s not their problem, damn it. Anyway, it’s not like they’re going to get in the habit of doing this. It’s just—Dean’s deal, it’s—it’s putting a lot of pressure on both of them.

When it becomes clear that Dean isn’t going to, Sam makes himself move, going to get his shotgun where it’s leaning against the wall.

“Sammy.”

Sam turns his face toward his brother, but doesn’t lift his eyes from the floor.

“I’m not leaving until they make me, okay? Wild horses and all that shit. But I can’t—I don’t have anything left to sell, so you gotta keep your head in the game too.”

Sam’s lips are still tingling when the Sins burst through the front door ten minutes later.
Rush (The Kids Are Alright)

The only thing Lisa sees at first is Ben. Her baby—her precious, precious baby, and he’s all right, he’s safe. She goes down on her knees right there in the driveway, spreading her arms wide, and her eyes tear up as he runs toward her in a rush, looking about three sizes too small in a leather jacket that doesn’t belong to him. Still, it isn’t until Lisa has him folded tight in her arms, her face turned to the side and tucked close against the upturned collar, that his presence begins to register.

It’s the smell—leather mingled with the sharp, alarming scent of gunpowder (when she asked that weekend, he said he was a hunter; she thought he meant deer)—that has haunted Lisa’s libido for years. Just takes a whiff of something similar to tighten her loins and set her aching, and this coat that her baby boy is wrapped in is actually his, it’s Dean’s, it belongs to him, and Lisa knows that as soon as Ben is inside and has been put to bed she’s going to be taking this coat’s owner into her own room and putting him to bed in a different way.

She lifts her eyes, searching for Dean so that she can try to communicate some miniscule, pitiful fraction of the gratitude she feels right now, and finds him leaning against the side of his car with Ben’s jacket held loosely in his hands. There’s another man with him—the same one who came to the house last night, before the thing Lisa isn’t thinking about happened—and the second man is leaning close enough to Dean that their shoulders are overlapping.

The man—tall, shaggy hair and an intent expression—meets Lisa’s eyes for a moment and then shifts a little, pushing his arm between Dean and the car. Lisa sees the man’s fingers curl back into sight around Dean’s waist. Dean doesn’t so much as blink, tilting his body so that he’s leaning into his companion a little more clearly, and when Lisa glances back into the tall man’s eyes, she finds that they carry more than a little bit of warning.

Lisa doesn’t so much as hug Dean goodbye, but the man—Dean’s man—is touching Dean enough for the both of them, and Dean doesn’t seem to mind.
Effulgent (Bad Day At Black Rock)

Some of it’s the rush of holding the rabbit’s foot—if Dean could bottle the endorphins released by being able to stopper a gun with the flick of a pen, he’d never have to hustle pool again. He could just set up shop on some street corner and sell it by the gram. As he steps over the two jackasses’ bodies, though, he has to admit that most of it is sheer relief that Sam is still alive and okay enough to be making that prissy, annoyed face he’s wearing right now.

Either way, Dean’s chest is light and buoyant and glowing—no, fuck, the feeling is bigger and better than that, it’s goddamned effulgent, and Dean is going to crack wide open with how full and bright he is inside. He’s lit up like a motherfucking nuclear blast with relief, and with all those other confusing, too-vivid emotions that are always humming inside of him when it comes to Sam.

Dean’s hands shake as he undoes the ropes tying Sam to the chair—too excited to work his fingers properly; the simple task is taking too fucking long—but finally they slither free and he’s able to haul his brother up to his feet. Sam sways a little (concussion, maybe; Dean’ll have to check that), and Dean steadies him and then, before he knows what he’s doing, he tastes copper where his lips are pressed up against his brother’s.

Sam makes a muffled, pained grunt that registers but does nothing to convince Dean it’s time to back off. Anyway, after a few moments he’s kissing back, so clearly it can’t hurt that much. Dean goes on kissing his brother until the expanding, brilliant, effulgent feeling in his chest has dimmed to something bearable and then, finally, steps away.

It isn’t until he catches sight of Sam’s dazed, confused eyes that he realizes what he just did, and then there’s a couple seconds of grinding, churning gears in his head. Kissed him—again—and once was Sam’s fucked up attempt at an attack and twice was just self-defense (anything to shut Sam up before he said something more damning), but this is number three and it’s dangerously close to becoming a habit.

Dean’s on the verge of tipping over into panic when one of the dipshits on the floor groans, distracting him. He cuts his eyes away from Sam to make sure he doesn’t need to kick anyone back into unconsciousness, and without the weight of that too intimate connection, he can finally think clearly enough to understand that he doesn’t have anything to feel awkward about.

Clearly, the rabbit’s foot has some kind of stupefying effect on the bearer—holding that little bit of fur and metal is sort of like being drunk and high at the same time. Dean is under the influence right now, and in no way, shape or form responsible for his own actions.

Eat that, panic.

“No time to chat, Sammy,” Dean says quickly. “Got all the ingredients for that ritual Bobby found, so we’ve got a date with the nearest boneyard.”

And, because Dean has the rabbit’s foot right now and everything has to go his way, Sam lets it drop.
“This’s my sister—uh, Cheryl.” Richie had to scrounge for her name for a second, but she’s a professional and don’t so much as bat an eye. Come to think of it, Cheryl’s probably not her real name, anywise.

“Hey,” Cheryl drawls as she comes up into the doorway next to him. She’s giving Dean the twice over, eyes roving up and then down his body before moving over to the big fucker Dean’s with. Richie’s not sweating it, though, cause he knows she’s just trying to guess how much they’ve got in their wallets.

“Cheryl,” Dean says, nodding to the broad with an admiring set to his mouth—yeah, Dean wants in there and Richie totally nailed that. Framed it up and mounted it on the wall even.

The sound of Cheryl’s gum popping in his ear—and the hand she’s holding out in his direction—reminds him that he hasn’t finished up with their business yet. He’s good for it, though, and pulls out the wad of cash from his pocket. She takes it without counting, strolling down the hall with a strut like she owns the place. Richie watches her go—serious caboose on her, phew—and then returns his attention to Dean.

Dean’s giving him a meaningful, amused look.

“Well, you know,” Richie amends with a flip of his hand. “Stepsister.”

The big fucker with Dean has gone into their room—right across from Richie’s, which’ll make catching up with his good buddy here easier—and now Dean steps back out of the doorway himself, leaving the door open behind him.

“Come on in,” he offers.

It ain’t too often that Richie gets to talk shop with a colleague, let alone one as sharp as Dean (Winchester, like the rifle), so he steps across the hall eagerly.

“This is my brother, Sam,” Dean announces when Richie’s inside.

Now, normally Richie wouldn’t so much as blink at that sort of introduction, but it’s been tossed out there a little too casually, if you know what he means, and he freezes just inside the room with visions of gay orgies and dropped bars of soap rattling around in his head. Dean don’t seem to notice. He’s too busy shutting the door and then heading over to help the big fucker—Sam—off with his tie.

Jesus Christ on a cracker, but Richie never figured Dean for a fruitbat.

Richie’s a little stiff (not like that, though, what the fuck do you take him for) through the introducing chit chat, while the two other guys in the room undress each other—he can tell that they ain’t exactly green at this from the way they’re not getting in each other’s way about it. Come to think of it, he seems to remember Dean shooting his mouth off about this ‘Sam’ guy last time they met, so chances are good they were already playing hide the salami back then.

Eventually, though, when he figures out that they’re too busy making ga-ga eyes at each other to ogle his ass, he relaxes a little. Doesn’t hurt that the layers stop coming off at t-shirts, neither.

And then, suddenly, they’re talking about Richie and Dean’s first meet and greet.
Richie used to feel bad about how Dean blew through that succubus like it wasn’t nothing, like she wasn’t packing a pair of double Ds and a smoking pair of legs. Used to be, it made him wonder if Dean was right and he should give the hunting gig a rest, go back to collecting on loans for his cousin Larry. It’s nice to figure out that the guy was playing with an unfair advantage.

Looks like this is Richie’s line of work after all.
At the sensation of lips pressed against his own, Dean comes awake immediately. It isn’t his normal, sluggish wakening—it’s a snap to consciousness that leaves his heart beating too quickly and his eyes wide. Exhaustion rushes in a moment later, once Sam’s earnest eyes and floppy hair register, and he relaxes back into the bed.

Sam’s developed quite the oral fixation lately, he reflects, kissing back without putting too much thought into it. He’s too tired to analyze the ways this is different from the kisses that came before—driven by a softer, gentler emotion than frustrated anger—but he has to admit that it feels nice. Affectionate.

Then Sam straightens and Dean realizes that his brother is standing next to the bed, fully dressed and wearing his coat. Last thing Dean remembers, the guy was stripped down to sweats and curled up in bed with him. As his brother moves away and begins undressing, Dean sits up, kiss forgotten.

“What did you do?” he demands, trying to catch his brother’s gaze.

Sam avoids him, eyes cast down and to the side while he removes his coat and shirt. He shrugs as he drapes the clothes on a chair—a belated, lackluster response—and his silence isn’t doing anything for Dean’s peace of mind.

Dean watches his brother step out of his jeans and doesn’t ask the questions racing through his head. He doesn’t repeat his inquiry.

He’s too afraid Sam will answer this time.

When Sam finally gets into bed, he still isn’t looking at Dean, but he doesn’t hesitate before reaching over and pulling him close. Dean lets Sam maneuver him, not protesting when he ends up with his nose squished up against the side of Sam’s throat and his lips pressed against Sam’s collarbone. His brother’s mouth and nose are in his hair, and Sam is breathing with heavy, deliberate inhalations that tell Dean he’s being scented.

For his own part, he’s doing his best not to smell Sam. Not to smell the smoky after-burn of gunpowder clinging to his brother’s skin.

*What’d you shoot, Sammy?* he thinks helplessly, bringing one hand up to palm his brother’s shoulder blade in what’s meant to be a reassuring caress.

Has to be a ‘what’. Wouldn’t ever be a ‘who’. Not with Sam.

“I can’t let you go, Dean,” Sam whispers. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

There aren’t any words Dean can offer in response to that, so he just closes his eyes against the clench of his chest and grips his brother tighter.
The Winchester boys are certainly pretty to look at, but neither of them is much in the brains department. Typical Americans, the both of them: all buck and brawn as they blunder forward without the slightest concern about what might be waiting around the next corner. Taking the hand from Dean was a bit like taking candy from a baby ... only now that Bela considers it, the baby might have posed more of a problem. They do tend to notice when someone takes what they want.

Still, she didn’t think it would be quite this easy to arrange a show.

Neither of the sturdy specimens kneeling on the bed has noticed yet that Bela has edged her way out from between them and over to a nearby chair. Dean doesn’t even have his eyes closed all the way; they’re riding at half mast as he slides his hand down Sam’s back to cup the fine, tight arse that Gert had her sights set on the other night. Of course, he did drink enough of the whiskey Bela brought with her as a peace offering to drown a small horse. Perhaps he still thinks he has his arms full of a woman’s curves.

The “Sam!” that spills from his lips when his brother bites down on the side of his neck dispels her of that notion quickly enough.

“Well, well, well,” she murmurs to herself as she slides her hand into her panties and settles back into the chair to enjoy the show. “Aren’t you the naughty boys.”

Neither of them takes any notice of the words—they’re too far gone, she thinks, for anything short of an explosion to jar them from their primitive rutting. Actually, it’s a pity that she didn’t take the time to strip them herself before disengaging. From the fervor of their kisses, they’re both clearly panting for it; would be shagging if they weren’t too plastered to remove the necessary articles.

As she works herself to completion, she imagines first Dean on his hands and knees, then Sam, and can’t decide which she’d prefer. Not that it matters, since she’s coming bloody hard and fast, her orgasm strong enough that she remains slumped and winded in the chair for a good while after.

In the bed, Dean has enjoyed his own climax, and is limp in his brother’s arms. Just like a man, Bela thinks lazily, to pursue only his own pleasure and not give a fig for his partner’s. Sam manages all right anyway, though, and by the time she has finished putting herself back together, both of the boys are unconscious and collapsed together in a sweaty heap.

Grinning to herself, Bela strolls over to the bed and smoothes Sam’s hair back out of his eyes. His face is slack with drink, and this close she can’t even smell their semen over the stink of liquor.

It’s likely they won’t remember much of this when they wake in the morning.

As Bela stacks two five thousand dollar bundles on the table, she considers how easy and familiar the Winchester boys were with each other’s mouths and bodies. Almost certainly, they’re already in the habit of falling into bed together.

And if not?

She’s planning on being well over the horizon before they wake.
Dean’s in the room for all of three seconds before Sam is shoving him against the wall to the right of the entrance. Sam slams the door shut on his way past with one elbow and then his two massive mitts grip Dean’s face and knock him back into the wall.

“What the fu—” Dean starts, trying to shake his brother’s hands away, and then Samtightens his grip, eyes narrowing with intent, and surges forward.

Sam’s mouth is hot and urgent on Dean’s, and Dean is—he can’t get a breath because Sam’s mouth is in the way, is what he tells himself, except that’s an explanation that becomes less and less plausible as he feels lower, baser instincts kick into high gear. Alarm (and something that feels terribly like dawning recognition) pulses through his chest and he thrashes where he’s pinned against the wall.

Sam clearly isn’t expecting the resistance because Dean gets his mouth free long enough to gasp out, “Wait! Fucking hold—” before his brother’s tongue is in his mouth again and getting in the way.

A flush of icy fear lights up the muscles in his chest and arms at the renewed attack, giving him the strength necessary to shove Sam off and back a few steps. Dean wants that to be the end of this, he wants not to have to think about it—about the growing pressure of revelation tickling at the back of his mind—but he can tell from his brother’s dark, hungry expression that Sam isn’t through with him.

He has about two seconds to prepare himself and then Sam is there again, blanketing Dean’s body with his own and gripping Dean’s biceps to keep him still.

This time, his mouth is even more demanding—Dean’s lips are gonna be fucking swollen—but some self-protective system inside of Dean seems to be broken because he tilts his face up and opens for his brother. Sam’s tongue is there immediately, accompanied by something that sounds horribly like a groan, and Dean really isn’t thinking about what’s going on below his waist.

Not until Sam lets go of him with one hand and reaches down to ruck his shirt up, that is.

Then his heart thunders with the same urgency it did when he was running down the alley with bullets zipping past his head and he stiffens on the surge of adrenaline. Or, rather, his muscles stiffen, because he was already really fucking hard down south, and even as his mind is offering up explanations (delayed adrenaline from Gordo’s assassination attempt; waitress slipped Viagra in his coffee when he stopped at the diner) he knows the truth.

His body’s reaction has nothing to do with the world outside this room and everything to do with the way that Sam is fucking making out with his mouth, because Dean can’t even call what his brother is doing kissing anymore, and Sam’s—Sam’s hand is on Dean’s stomach underneath his shirt, and Sam has touched him there a thousand times before but it’s never felt like this, felt so fucking intense, and

—

No.

On a surge of panicked denial, Dean twists and shoves a second time, driving his brother stumbling back, and shouts, “Will you stop fucking kissing me already!”

Sam, who was already moving forward again (fucker’s determined), halts at that yell. The heated, single-minded demand on his face tilts into confusion, quickly followed by hints of the same, horrified understanding that Dean’s been grappling against for the past five minutes. He lifts one
shaking hand to wipe at his mouth and Dean blinks, cutting his eyes away so he doesn’t have to look at his brother touching his swollen, wet lips.

“Jesus Christ,” Dean mutters as he stares at one of their bags (Sam’s, judging from the red plaid overshirt spilling out the top) and does his best not to focus on the needy throb in his cock.

“I—I’m sorry,” Sam says finally. “I just. You keep—you keep doing these stupid, suicidal things, and then you fucking disappeared for hours, and I was—I was worried.”

“So you kissed me?” Dean demands. He looks over again—if Sam’s talking, it’s probably safe—and finds that his brother has pieced himself back together. There’s embarrassment on Sam’s face, and some lingering anger that’s likely leftover from the awesome way Dean got both their asses out of a tight spot (dude’s a tad overprotective these days), but none of that weird hunger or the dangerous almost-knowledge that came after.

Fuck, this is almost as bad as that time they woke up after that thing with Bela ...

But Dean’s definitely not thinking about that drunken, accidental and totally neither-of-their-fault’s-whatever incident. There’s no proof anything actually happened, and Dean can’t recall more than a few confused sensations anyway, so what the fuck ever.

Too bad they can’t shove this into the rearview mirror as easily.

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” Sam offers apologetically.

But Dean can’t just let this one go—not with his insides squirming like they are, not if he wants to be able to sleep at night. “I don’t care if you were thinking in squiggly lines,” he barks. “I wanna know what the fuck’s with all the kissing!”

Sam shifts a little and then shoots back, “Don’t pin this all on me, dude. You’ve started your fair share.”

“Yeah?” Dean says, groping after a reasonable defense. “Well, uh—um—you kissed me first!”

Sam flushes. “That was an accident!”

“Well, then you must be really clumsy, cause there’ve been a whole bunch of accidents lately.”

Sam doesn’t seem to have anything to say to that (although Dean guesses he could—now that his mind is reviewing the “accidents”, he’s finding himself at fault for almost as many of the damned things as his brother), and an awkward silence falls between them. Uncomfortable as the quiet is, though, Dean welcomes the chance to recover. Every beat of his heart is slowing his pulse, and his breathing is evening out, and his erection (which, truth told, is really what’s freaking him the fuck out) has finally started to wilt.

By the time Sam clears his throat, Dean’s almost back to normal.

“Maybe we should talk about this,” Sam offers, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I mean, clearly there’s something going on here.”

Much as Dean would like to deny it, he can’t. If they try to bury this discussion now, it’s gonna claw it’s way out of the coffin like a motherfucking zombie. And probably right when it would be most inconvenient to deal with. At least here they’re in relative safety.

But he’s still reluctant enough that his agreement comes out, “Alright. So go ahead and talk. No
one’s stopping you.”

“I meant we should have a conversation,” Sam corrects, shooting Dean one of those half-fond, half-exasperated looks that usually make Dean grin.

Now, he ducks his head instead, rubbing at the back of his neck, and mumbles, “Right. Okay. You go first.”

“All right,” Sam responds, speaking slowly and clearly thinking about the words as he’s saying them. “I think maybe it’s because of your deal.”

Dean’s head comes up with a flush of hope at the prospect. “You mean you think that crossroads bastard did something to me? Some weird kind of kissing force field or something?”

Sam’s face contorts into something that might have been a laugh if things were less awkward. “I mean I’m worried about losing you. I—I love you, man. Hell, Dean, you’re my brother, and you’ve always been there, and now there’s this expiration date on everything. I get so ... twisted up inside sometimes, like there’s some—some overwhelming pressure against my ribs—and I just—sometimes I need to let it out, so I—I kiss you.”

Dean’s chest has gone full and tight listening to his brother, and that thrum of self-awareness is back again, stronger this time but less alarming. Unexpectedly, he recognizes the feeling that Sam’s describing—that too full, gonna explode sensation that simmers and bubbles just beneath the surface. Used to be Dean could ease some of the pressure by funneling it into the job, or taking it out on an ignorant, backwoods asshole, or just fuck himself calmer with the help of an eager barfly.

But Sam’s right. Since Dean made that deal, his normal methods of coping haven’t been working so great.

“Yeah,” he agrees reluctantly. “Same here.”

“So what do we do about it?”

Dean sort of wants to punch Sam for putting that question on his shoulders, but he can’t deny that Sam already held up his side of the conversation by explaining things, so he limits himself to a scowl as he thinks it over. Not that there’s anything to offer other than the logical answer.

“Nothing,” he says finally, in as firm a tone as he can manage. “It’s weird, but fuck it. It makes you feel better, makes me feel better, and it’s not like we’re, y’know, doing anything.”

The reluctant, pinched expression Sam gets is not what Dean was expecting.

“Dean, we just—what just happened, it was—”

Dean doesn’t want to hear what Sam thinks just happened, thanks muchly. He’s already figured out what’s on that subject.

“I haven’t been laid in a while,” he cuts in. “Neither have you. It’s just—you know, biology.” As Sam continues to look at him skeptically, Dean grins and adds, “You’ve got this whole ‘woman in distress’ thing going on, I’ve got a whole hell of a lot of manly charisma ...”

Sam laughs, shaking his head, and Dean mentally pumps his fist in triumph. “Okay,” Sam says after a second, “Leaving aside your petty attempts to insult me, what you’re saying is that we need to get laid?”
“Hell yes, we need to get laid,” Dean answers with a nod. “Tell you what, Sammy—once this thing with Gordon’s taken care of, I’ll buy you a hooker.”

“Dean,” Sam protests, making a face.

“Or we can both watch you flounder around for a few months trying to find a pick-up line that works.”

“Screw you, dude,” Sam mutters, but he’s smiling, and Dean feels damn near light as a feather inside. Relief, mostly, that they got that whole kissing thing sorted out.

He was beginning to think there might be something really fucked up going on.
Princess (A Very Supernatural Christmas)

It takes them four tries to find the shop selling the meadowsweet wreaths, and by then Dean is clearly an unpleasant mix of frustrated and bored. Sam can tell from the way his cover stories have gotten more and more inventive as time creeps on.

In the third shop—Flowers By Flo—Sam got to play a ‘Christmas enthusiast’ while his brother looked on with poorly concealed glee. If Flo hadn’t been so busy questioning Sam about the reindeer he apparently keeps on his Yuletide Ranch (*Dean solemnly informed her that Dasher was Sam’s favorite*), then she would have heard Dean snickering into his hand. If she hadn’t been frantically scribbling down all of Sam’s awkward lies, she would have seen the swift, hard kick Sam got in to his brother’s ankle on their way back to the car.

“No more stupid stories,” Sam hissed while Dean, wincing, hopped up and down on one foot.

But Dean’s either feeling vindictive about the kick, or he didn’t hear Sam’s demand, or he’s just that freaking annoying, because they haven’t been in Walt’s Wonderland for more than a minute when he responds to the shopkeeper’s offer of help with a, “Oh, I sure hope so. We were playing Jenga with the Walshes the other night, and my baby here hasn’t shut up since about this Christmas wreath.”

Sam stiffens as Dean reaches out and pulls him into a one-armed hug, then tries to make his expression look more like a smile than the annoyed frown that wants to be there. The shopkeeper’s expression is dour and mildly disapproving, but Dean is beaming brightly enough next to Sam to melt the non-existent snow.

“Go ahead and tell him, honey,” he prods, and then gives Sam a quick, rib-cracking squeeze.

“Sure,” Sam says lamely, still with that painful, awkward smile plastered on his own lips. “It was yummy.”

Next to him, Dean makes a suspicious, smothered snorting sound.

Sam is so going to kick his ass for this later.

“I sell a lot of wreaths, guys,” the shopkeeper says. He looks mostly resigned now, with a side of disgusted that Sam is actually finding more annoying than Dean’s antics. If there’s anything he can’t stand in a person, it’s this sort of blind, stupid prejudice.

But they need the guy to be cooperative, so he does his best to pretend he’s not getting looked at like he’s a sick son of a bitch and says, “Right, right. But you see, this one would have been really special. I had, um, it had these green leaves, uh, white buds on it? It might have been made of meadowsweet?”

“Well,” the shopkeeper drawls. “Aren’t you the fussy one?”

Sam purses his lips on a hot surge of anger as his brother laughs and reaches up with his free hand to pinch his cheek.

“My baby’s a real princess, all right,” Dean agrees, not dropping his hand again until Sam’s whole face is burning red.

Sam can tell that his brother is mentally high-fiving himself for the joke, and his ire shifts back and forth between the two of them for the duration of the interview—the shopkeeper is pissing him off by
being a bigoted asshole, and Dean is sending him over the edge by remaining completely and utterly oblivious that anything’s wrong at all.

He’s getting looks too—more than Sam, actually, since he’s the one playing the whole thing up—and as annoyed as Sam is that Dean is being such a juvenile prick about their cover stories, Dean’s still his brother. He’s Sam’s to be disgusted by (and yeah, Dean is frequently disgusting, for various reasons), not this prejudiced bastard’s. He’s Sam’s to defend, too, even if that fact seems to have escaped his notice, and when Sam notices the mistletoe hanging over the door on their way out, there’s a fierce, victorious zing in his chest.

The whole kissing thing is still a little awkward, despite—or maybe because of—their discussion, and they have an unspoken agreement not to try anything in public (they aren’t idiots, they know people wouldn’t understand, no matter how platonic the gesture), but Sam doesn’t hesitate. He grabs Dean’s arms and spins him up against the doorframe and lays one on him—feels a deep, warm pulse in his chest when Dean doesn’t protest and instead opens right up for it the same way he always does.

Sam kisses his brother until he’s good and done and then—because he can’t resist the chance to needle Dean and get back a little of his own for all the crap he’s been putting up with—he meets the shopkeeper’s offended, shocked eyes and says, “I may be a princess, but he’s my little pony.”

And then he slaps Dean’s ass.

It’s totally worth the epic bitching he has to put up with for the rest of the day.
Sam waits until Dean is asleep and then slips out, knowing that she’ll be there. He’s beginning to understand that she’ll always be there when he wants—needs—to talk to her.

She looks up when he nears—looks up with a smile—and Sam shoves down the bitter, hostile words he wants to throw at her. She’s one of his only allies in this—he sure as fuck can’t count on Dean, who’s too busy puffing out his chest and parading himself around and pretending he’s fine to lift a pinky to save himself—and he can’t afford to alienate her. But she also doesn’t get to sprawl on Dean’s baby like that, so Sam snaps his fingers and points at the pavement.

“Dean’ll kill you if he finds you there,” he says, offering an added incentive to move.

Ruby’s smile widens a little and she tilts her head to the side. “Guess you better make sure he doesn’t find me, then.”

“I don’t want you on the car either,” Sam clarifies. “Off.”

Ruby rolls her eyes, gives her hair a flip, and then slides off the car. One manicured nail rests on the hood where her ass was a moment ago, tapping the black metal lightly. “So,” she says, smiling up at him. “You’re up late.”

“I wanted to know if it’s true,” Sam returns bluntly. “You used to be human?”

He’s sure that she’s already had this conversation with Dean—he could almost smell the resignation on his brother when Dean came back inside a few hours ago—but he needs to hear for himself. Needs to hear it from her, and not dragged out of his brother in unwilling bits and pieces over the next few days.

“Yes.”

“And Dean? If he—if we can’t get him out of it?”

“He’ll become a demon like me. Eventually.”

Sam was expecting as much, but his head still spins. His stomach lurches alarmingly enough that he presses a hand over his mouth as though he can settle his stomach that way. The thought of Dean like that—of Dean’s beautiful, green eyes gone oily black—is making him sick. It goes against all the laws of nature and God that are rooted in Sam’s heart.

“You know, it might not be so bad,” Ruby says in a slow, cautious tone. Tilting her head, she watches Sam give a full-bodied jerk of denial and then clarifies, “Demons have ... different rules. Human morality doesn’t matter so much, after you’ve spent a couple years in the Pit.”

She shifts closer and Sam has to resist the urge to back away before she can rub against him.

“Just think what he’d be like if he weren’t angusting over all the bad, naughty things you two do together,” Ruby breathes, going up on her tiptoes and dropping the words right into his ear.

Sam shakes his head and, this time, when the urge takes him, he lets himself back away. He doesn’t know what Ruby’s talking about (no, that’s not right—he knows what she means; he just doesn’t know where she’s getting that sort of misconception from), but he knows that his brother isn’t going to become a demon, because he isn’t going to Hell. End of discussion.
“We’re saving him,” he argues, forcing the words from his dry throat. “You said we could. You said you’d help.”

Ruby nods, crossing her arms and tilting her head back the other way—almost like an inquisitive dog. “And I will. We can save him, Sam. I just wanted to make sure you were still motivated, given the possible benefits of failure.”

“I don’t know what ‘benefits’ you’re talking about, but I’m saving him. He’s mine. Hell can’t fucking have him.”

“That’s the spirit, slugger,” Ruby tells him. “Now go back to bed and get some sleep. We’ve got a long road ahead.”
Joust (Dream A Little Dream of Me)

There are two of them, pulling up in a classic black car that makes Dave think in terms of government officials or, at the very least, MIB. He sets aside his Quenya dictionary (there are a couple of phrases he can’t for the life of him remember, and he’ll need them for his LARPing group tomorrow) and straightens attentively while pushing his I Believe placard behind a cleverly placed stack of papers.

Hah. See those MIB catch him now.

But when the men come into the office, he sees with a twinge of disappointment that they’re dressed like his least favorite uncle Earl. He knows what to expect from their kind: noogies and wedgies and swirlies and, worst of all, disbelief. Taunts about his ‘crazy theories’ and ‘gay magic crap’ and sneers that are either unsuccessfully hidden behind hands or blatantly thrown at him.

Dave challenged one such lout to a duel once, but that ended fairly poorly. Less like a duel and more like a joust where only one of the knights was equipped with lance, armor and shield.

Yeah, not doing that again.

Still, he’s paid to be polite, so he smiles and says, “Welcome to The Enchanted Bungalow, where you’ll sleep so well it’ll feel like magic. How can I help you?”

“Enchanted Bungalow,” the shorter (relatively speaking, anyway; these two are built like orcs) guy mutters with a sour glance at his companion. “What, do you have, like, a guidebook to America’s weirdest motels stuffed in your backpack?”

“This is the closest place I could find,” the taller guy replies, and while they’re absorbed with their sniping Dave takes a moment to look them over more carefully and whoa.

Little Orc would be a dead ringer for an elf, if he weren’t so bulky in build. He’s certainly pretty enough, with those pouty lips and vivid green eyes. Big Orc is really good looking as well—guardsman of Gondor, maybe. Ooo, or maybe they both are.

Dave tries to imagine the men clad in shining breastplates and can’t quite manage it. After a moment, he switches them into Rohan and feels a bit better about the leathers that accompany that picture. Short Rohirrim even has the perfect bow-legged stance that would naturally come from practically living on horseback.

The two of them have moved away from the counter a little as they continue to bicker softly (would you rather sleep in the car, dude? yeah, actually, i would), and Dave leans one elbow on the desk’s surface, propping his chin in his hand and letting his imagination wander. He sees these two—maybe Eomer’s two most trusted lieutenants—sent out on a reconnaissance mission among the orcs. He pictures them riding hard through wind and sun and snowstorm, and setting up camp for the night, and in the dark plains they wouldn’t have to be careful the way they usually do, because in Rohan that sort of thing isn’t tolerated, but out in the wilds they can—wait a second. Where did that come from?

Frowning, Dave looks closer and realizes that Tall Rohirrim has his arm around Short Rohirrim’s back. They’re almost done with their argument, and Dave watches as Short Rohirrim rolls his eyes before leaning against Tall Rohirrim’s body, letting Tall Rohirrim take most of his weight. Tall Rohirrim reaches over with his opposite hand and runs quick fingers through Short Rohirrim’s hair,
making Short Rohirrim exhale softly as he shuts his eyes and leans his head on Tall Rohirrim’s shoulder.

Oh.

“Sorry about that,” Tall Rohirrim apologizes as he walks Short Rohirrim back to the desk. “He, uh, hasn’t slept in a few days.”

“Gonna sleep for a fucking week now,” Short Rohirrim mutters without opening his eyes, and then turns even more fully toward his companion and noses at his neck.

Tall Rohirrim absently strokes Short Rohirrim’s cheek and unleashes a blinding but slightly weary grin on Dave. “So we’d like a room.”

“King bed?” Dave checks, even though he’s sure he already knows the answer.

“No, we’ll take—”

“King’s fine,” Short Rohirrim interrupts.

“What about the bags?”

One of Short Rohirrim’s eyes cracks open as he tilts his head so that he can look up at his companion. “Fuck the bags. Want the space. Gonna spread out.” And then he—he sort of rolls his back in some kind of lazy stretch that looks like it’s rubbing his body against Tall Rohirrim’s in all the right places.

Tired as they both look, Dave thinks that these two Riders aren’t going to get much sleep tonight.

“Room 23,” he says, passing over a key.

“Thanks,” Tall Rohirrim says as he takes it, and then he pauses, leaning forward to peer over the counter for a better look at something. Dave’s Quenya Dictionary, sitting right out there for all the world to see.

Son of a Balrog.

Except Tall Rohirrim’s smile doesn’t look mocking, and a second later he says, “Hantale. Nai haryuvalyë melwa rë.”

Dave is still gaping when the (Rohirrim, they really are) men disappear out the door and around the corner.
On Tuesday, Dean drowns in a freak flash flood.

On Tuesday, Dean is struck by lightning. Twice.

On Tuesday, Dean is stung to death by a swarm of angry hornets.

On Tuesday, Dean’s throat is sliced open when a velociraptor skull (who the fuck keeps that sort of thing just lying around on top of a bookcase?) falls on him and he bleeds out in seconds.

On Tuesday, Dean dies again, and again, and again.

Sam has long since stopped correcting people in the brief periods when Dean is alive and his. Brother or lover, it doesn’t matter. Either way, Dean is there, and then he is dying, and then he is gone.

Sam can’t breathe anymore—he can’t survive the crushing pain in his chest that only deepens with each freakish end—and finally he wraps himself around his brother while Asia blares in the background and drags him back into bed. This will keep Dean safe—them, their bed, Sam’s touch—so he cradles Dean close, and kisses him, and drags his hands over his brother’s body (warm, alive), and Dean goes along with it (need you so much, touch me, let me touch you) until he chokes on his own spit.

It’s Tuesday again.
Victor has never had a day this good. Might never have one this good again, either, so he’s going to milk this moment for every ounce of satisfaction it's worth.

Months of chasing what felt like ghosts. Months of Too Late and Not Quick Enough. Months of adding to his files instead of filing the paperwork that would close the book on these two murdering psychopaths. Months of eating bad take-out and living out of shit motels just like the one he’s standing in now.

But today is the best of days, because today Dean Winchester and his deranged little brother are standing in the room with him. Cuffed, shackled and guarded with extreme prejudice while Victor savors the moment.

“You know, Dean, I gotta say I’m pretty disappointed. I mean, I’ve been chasing your ass for months. Thought I’d be a little more excited than this, but ...” He winces, shaking his head and giving his tongue a cluck. “This was just too damn easy.”

“Aw, sugar, having trouble getting it up?” Dean smarms, dripping with false sincerity. “You know they got pills for that sort of thing.”

Little Sammy gives his brother a disgusted, annoyed look and knocks their shoulders together. “Dean,” he mutters. “Shut up.”

But Sam’s not the alpha in this relationship, and Dean just goes on grinning at Victor. Insane, cheeky bastard.

Still, Victor knows how to get under his skin. Daddy’s good for applying the pressure, but he isn’t Dean’s true weak spot.

“Better listen to your brother, Dean,” Victor advises. “After tonight, you aren’t going to be seeing too much of him any more.”

Sure enough, Dean’s eyes narrow. His jaw clenches.

Smiling wider, Victor continues, “See, the powers that be have decided that you boys are just too much trouble when you’re together. I’m impressed, actually. I haven’t seen this much inter-agency cooperation since Mansfield. You know how it is with the paper pushers; they wouldn’t know how to coordinate their way out of a paper bag. You two sure are motivating, though.

“So Dean, you get to take a trip back to St. Louis for processing. Sammy here, on the other hand, has won himself an all expense paid vacation in glamorous Milwaukee.”

Sam looks more anxious about the prospect of separation than Dean, but Victor isn’t fooled. Beneath the cool exterior, John Winchester's eldest psychopath is sweating bullets.

“Looks like you're just gonna have to find yourselves some new boyfriends,” Victor notes, grinning broadly. “Don’t worry, though. Couple of pretty boys like you, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble working something out.”

Dean looks confused by Victor’s words, which proves he’s either too stupid to follow Victor’s meaning (doubtful) or delusional enough that he forgets what he does with Sam when they aren’t actually in bed together. It’s laughable to think that last could be possible, though—every time Victor
has seen them, they’ve been all over each other, and it isn’t any different now. Even hampered by the chains as they are, the Winchesters are pressed up against each other, and Sam is hanging onto the hem of Dean’s coat like a little kid.

It’d be cute if it weren’t so sick.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Dean says tersely. “But I think you better shut your fucking mouth.”

“Oh come on, Dean. We’re all friends here. You can tell me. Do you make Sammy catch, or are you the one getting on your knees for baby brother like you used to for Daddy?”

It’s Sam who loses it, lunging forward only to be yanked back by one of the local yokels. Good thing too; Victor’s pretty sure that even chained the guy could do some serious damage.

“Dude, chill,” Dean says, turning his body toward his brother and trying to herd him back with one shoulder while glaring back at Victor in disgust.

Like Victor’s the sick one here.

*He’ll probably play for insanity,* Victor thinks sourly, and jerks his head over his shoulder in clear command to get the cruiser loaded. He thinks about separating the two on their way over to the station, but in the end he can’t justify having either of them out of his sight that long. One of them manages to get loose, it’s a sure bet that Victor’ll lose the other before the night is over.

Still, when he glances in his rearview mirror and catches Dean nuzzling the side of his brother’s throat before stealing a kiss, he wishes he’d felt able to chance it.
DEAN: Daggett brought the remains home from the morgue ... to play.

ED and HARRY look at each other in confusion for a moment before they realize ... 

ED and HARRY: Eeww.

SPRUCE: That’s nasty, dude.

HARRY: Yeah, that’s almost as gross as you two a**holes getting it on.

ED, DEAN and SAM speak at the same moment.

ED: Almost? | DEAN: Excuse me? | SAM: Getting it on?

HARRY: Oh, please. Like we don’t have tons of footage of you two gorillas going at it like horny monkeys.

SPRUCE: We do? Uh, I didn’t sign on to make that kind of movie, guys.

DEAN: Give me that!

The camera jostles as DEAN and SPRUCE wrestle for possession.

HARRY: Hey! Hey, hands off the equipment!

ED: Yeah, it’s not even on that one anyway.

DEAN: So then where’s ...

DEAN looks around and notices something.

DEAN: Wait a minute.

SAM: What?

DEAN: I don’t f***ing believe this.

SAM: Dean, what?

DEAN: We got a Code Amber again.
Flout (Long Distance Call)

When the phone rings, it’s the middle of the night and Sam is sleeping. Dean has to squirm out from the circle of his brother’s arms to answer, and Sam’s sleepy, protesting moans make him feel wretchedly guilty about what he’s about to do. So does looking back and seeing his brother unconsciously searching for him in the bed, reaching out into the empty space and coming up with air.

Not guilty enough to stop, though.

Going into the bathroom, Dean closes the door behind him and opens his phone.

“Dad?” he breathes, barely daring to hope.

“Dean.”

Dean’s hand tightens on the phone. Oh, fuck, he’s never going to get used to the sound of that voice, hitting like a bullet to the gut.

“Is that really you?”

“It’s me.”

Fuck, Dean wants to believe. He already mostly does, it’s just ... Sam seemed so sure earlier that it can’t be, that it isn’t anything but Dean’s wishful thinking, and he hears himself whispering, “How can I be sure?”

“You can’t,” Dad’s voice returns, just as blunt and hard as ever, and Dean shuts his eyes against the wave of belief that washes through him.

If it weren’t Dad, the thing on the other end of the phone would have tried to convince Dean, assure him. Only Dad would ever be that frank and forthright.

Before Dean can recover from the shock of certainty, Dad continues, “Dean, what are you doing?”

“I—now?” Dean asks, face scrunching in confusion. “I’m, uh, in the bathroom.”

“I mean with your brother,” Dad says, and Dean goes still.

“I don’t understand.”

“You can’t go around flouting the rules of society, Dean. Outsiders wouldn’t understand. They’re not family, do you hear me? What you and Sam have, that’s private.”

Dean’s chest gives a particularly painful twist and his eyes start to water. He means to just mutter a ‘yessir’ and have done with it, but instead he chokes out, “Oh God, Dad, I—I don’t know what’s going on anymore. Everything’s all fucked up, and I—I used to know where we were, but I—we—Things got so damn complicated.”

“Is that why you did it?” Dad asks mournfully, and before Dean can ask what his father is talking about, Dad elaborates, “Is that why you sold your soul, son?”

Dad’s voice has gone hurt and disapproving, and Dean flinches. “I was looking after Sammy. You said, Dad—you told me to.”
“I never wanted this,” Dad contradicts firmly. “Never. You’re my boy and I love you. I can’t watch you go to Hell, Dean. It’s why I called.”

Dean is actually crying now, and he’s pathetically grateful that Sam is sleeping in the next room as he chokes out, “I can’t stop it. She said he’d die. If I try to stop it, he’ll—”

He can’t say it again. The very idea of it sticks in his mouth and stops his breath. It infects his chest and leaves him riddled with cancerous, black pain.

“Shh, son. Shh, I know. But I found another way—a way out for both of you.”

Dean hardly dares to hope there’s a solution, but this is Dad. If anyone can find an out, it’s him.

“How?” he demands, fighting to get himself back under control so that Dad isn’t embarrassed by his behavior.


Fuck.

Palms sweating, Dean rasps, “Where?”

Silence answers him.

“Dad? Where is it? What am I supposed to do?”

But he might as well be talking to a shadow, because the phone is quiet and the line empty. When Dean looks down at his cell, the screen is blinking at him—dropped call.

He takes a couple minutes (okay, half an hour) to compose himself and then goes back out into the bedroom. Sam is a restless figure in their bed, unhappy and groaning as he turns from side to side and reaches out blindly for a warm body that isn’t there. A warm body that won’t ever be there again, after a few more weeks. Unless this lifeline Dean is clinging to turns out to be the real deal. Finally.

As though he can sense Dean standing just out of reach, Sam’s searching becomes more agitated and Dean stirs himself, putting his cell phone back on the nightstand and hurriedly getting back into bed.

Sam wraps around him almost immediately, pulling him close and draping one leg over Dean’s hip. He nuzzles sleepily at Dean’s cheek, mouth open and pressing sloppy kisses against the corner of Dean’s jaw. His hands roam over Dean’s back, feeling the solid bulk of him, and then, finally some of the anxiety bleeds out of him.

When Dean tilts his head up, he finds tear tracks streaking his brother’s face and winces at a fresh surge of guilt.

“I’m staying,” he whispers as he brings a hand up to wipe his brother’s tears away. “Dad’s coming through for us, man. I’m gonna get to stay.”

But there’s an ache inside of him that won’t go away, and no matter how tightly Sam holds him, Dean gets no sleep that night.
Benton understands, even before the sedative has finished wearing off and he has opened his slowly decaying eyes, where he went wrong. He doesn’t have to look up and see the impetuous young man who dashed in and interrupted his latest operation fussing with the tall, strapping boy with the lovely hazel eyes. He doesn’t have to hear their words (*hold still, sammy, jesus; i’m fine, dean*).

In the end, Benton's cardinal sin was carelessness. He was careless letting that older hunter walk away with so much knowledge. He was careless in not choosing a more suitable, isolated place to operate. Most of all, though, he was careless in choosing Sammy Winchester without first checking to ensure he was unattached to any avenging angels or knights in shining armor.

Benton is usually meticulous about that sort of thing, but he was so vexed about being run over, and he hadn’t seen anyone with the young man. Two beds in his motel room, but only one slept in. Only one bag.

This second one came out of nowhere, seemingly, only there must have been some trace of him Benton could have picked up on. The sort of soul-crushing, endless love that he’s listening to right now is a slow weed. It grows gradually, devouring all in its path. Sickening. Corrupting. Causing pain.

When the Winchesters put him in the ground later, Benton can’t help but laugh through his screams. He may have an eternity of decaying in the dark to look forward to—lifetimes of an existence narrowed to a wooden box and the wet scent of earth—but the two shoveling dirt down on top of him (*those young, healthy men with that virulent disease in their chests*), they’re the ones who are damned.
“Sam.”

Dean kissed him.

“Sam, come on.”

Dean kissed him only a few minutes ago, to the chiming of the clock.

“Jesus, Sam, please.”

Dean kissed him with a hand in his hair and one on his face—gentle hands, to contrast the fire in Dean’s mouth.

“Damn it, boy! Don’t you do this to me.”

Dean kissed him and Dean tasted like tears and desperation; Dean smelled of sweat and fear.

“Sam, they’re coming. If you don’t get up right now, they’ll come in here and take him—is that what you want? You want them to defile his body?”

Dean kissed him, and it was heat, and it was passion, and it was life.

“That’s it, Sam. Come on, just bring him out this way, okay, son?”

Dean kissed him and it was goodbye.
That first night back, when Dean climbs into the other bed, Sam thinks it’s a mistake. He thinks that maybe Dean has forgotten that they always take the bed furthest from the door—safer that way, is what Dad taught them.

But Sam is strong enough now that he can take care of them both no matter where they are, so he doesn’t protest as he moves around brushing his teeth and getting changed. There’s a nervous, exhilarated hum running just below his skin—Dean back, and in their bed, and Sam is just minutes away from curling around him and breathing in that familiar, heady scent.

And he wants—he didn’t kiss Dean hello, is what he realized after the moment had passed. The instinct was there, almost realized before he remembered Bobby—and, more importantly, Ruby—looking on. He managed to curb his desire, meaning to come back to it when they were alone, but it seemed too late then. It would have made the kiss into a thing, when Sam only means it as a welcome home: an affirmation that they’re both still here and drawing air.

But now that he’s moments away from lying down at Dean’s side, Sam is overwhelmed with a barrage of memories from that distant, final night before the hellhounds came. There was desperation in the way Sam held Dean close. Resignation in the tremors that shook Dean’s fingers as he stroked Sam’s hair. Sam’s lips were bruised and sore the next morning, and when he saw Bobby looking he stared back expressionlessly until Bobby turned away.

The adrenaline flooding his system now is completely different—joyous rather than terrified—but Sam can’t wait to find some release. He can’t wait to remind himself how Dean’s body feels pressed against his own; can’t wait to remember the exact shape and softness of his brother’s mouth.

His heart is pounding when he turns off the lights and goes over to sit down on the edge of the bed. His mouth is dry.

Behind him, Dean shifts, sitting up. When Sam glances back, he can just barely make out the strange, hand-shaped scar on his brother’s shoulder in the gloom.

“What are you doing?” Dean asks. His voice is still rough, like his throat has been pressed through a grater, but there’s unyielding strength there, and unmistakable warning.

Sam’s stomach twists as he tenses. “I—I thought…” he stammers, and then stops.

He thought what? That they could just pick up where they left off like the last four months never happened?

He remembers the way Dean’s face looked when he took back his amulet from Sam’s hands. Remembers how Dean’s shoulders had sagged a little as the cord settled back around his neck. At the time, Sam thought that was relief—port found in a storm, the welcoming embrace of a loved one lost. Now he thinks perhaps it wasn’t a lightening of his spirit that Dean felt at all, but the leaden weight of an unwanted anchor, hung round his throat like an albatross.

From his place on the far side of the bed, Dean is still watching Sam. His face is unreadable in the darkness. Foreign and unfamiliar.

“I missed you,” Sam offers finally. Twisting around more, he reaches out only to freeze when Dean jerks back out of range. There’s a long, silent moment between them then, as Sam wars with the sudden pain in his chest and the threatening burn in his eyes.
“I just want to get some sleep,” Dean says eventually. “And I spent—I spent all morning in a goddamned wooden box. Little space’d be appreciated.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam agrees. He gets up, moving over to lie down in the other bed instead. “Sorry.”

After another pause, Dean says, “It’s not forever. I just… Long day, you know?”

“Yeah,” Sam replies, gamely clinging to the face-saving lie. Rolling onto his side, he watches the shadow of his brother moving in the other bed. Watches Dean lie down again, one hand thrust underneath the pillow in a rustle of cloth—to wrap around the handle of the knife he put there several hours ago, probably.

Sam’s chest shouldn’t feel like this with Dean so close. He shouldn’t feel so empty and wounded, like someone scooped out everything important and left him hollow. It shouldn’t hurt so much to breathe, when his air and Dean’s are the same.

But it does.
Waiting to speak with his charge is an unpleasant necessity. In the waking world, the abomination always seems to be there, hovering at Dean’s shoulder. Castiel has no orders to remain hidden from Hell’s Chosen, but he isn’t eager to sully himself by speaking with him either. And he doesn’t know that he could curb his instinctive dislike well enough to avoid smiting Samuel Winchester on principle—if for nothing else, then for the unnecessary, additional pain he is causing to Castiel’s charge.

Castiel has been watching over Dean—it’s his duty, after all, given by God. He watched over Dean steadily for the first few days of his salvation, and has only recently begun to take up his other duties as well, and so he has seen enough of Dean’s behavior to understand that the abomination is a thing that both soothes and burns. But he has also noticed that the burn comes more frequently, making Dean flinch back or turn away. Waking memories that Castiel fervently wishes his charge might be spared.

In the night, he watches over Dean’s uneasy sleep while the abomination leaves to visit his whore—wasted time when Dean’s wounded, ravaged spirit clearly needs tender handling. The moments Dean comes close to waking are the worst of all. Castiel knows how the abomination’s absence would strike him, and he knows that Dean is too weak yet to bear that burden, and so he is forced to deepen his charge’s slumber with a brush of his fingertips, trapping Dean beneath layers of red memory and the brittle, snapping bones of regret.

Forcing him to relive his defilement in the Pit.

Castiel could hate the abomination for that alone. He could wipe Samuel Winchester from the face of the earth for the crime of making Castiel harm his charge in such cruel ways. But he has orders not to harm Dean’s brother, and so his obedience necessitates these waiting games, standing concealed and incorporeal in Robert Singer’s living room while his charge and the abomination prepare for sleep.

It has been a long day for Dean, fighting against the Witnesses—a long day for Castiel as well. He has seen such sights this day. He has lost such sisters and brothers as he will never find again. Karael, and Rahmiel, and Yehudiah.

Others.

What he wants now is to bury himself in the comforting embrace of the faithful. Or at the very least to sit and share with his charge. Perhaps he can reawaken Dean Winchester’s Wonder, and thereby rejuvenate his own.

But Dean is dulled as he places a folded up blanket on the floor and retrieves his jacket from the back of a chair.

The abomination pauses where he has been busy arranging pillows on a musty couch. “Dean,” he says, watching Castiel’s charge with sad eyes. “You don’t have to—”

“There isn’t room on that thing for both of us,” Dean interrupts without even glancing up. He lies down on the floor, draping his coat over his body, and then grimaces, shifting. He’s hurt, Castiel can tell. He shouldn’t be down there on the hard surface.

“Then you can have the couch.” Sam steps forward, leaning down and gripping Dean’s arm. “Come on—”
Dean jerks away as though Sam’s touch is fire, as though his skin has turned black and blistered beneath the abomination’s hand, and for an instant Castiel feels nothing but pity for Samuel Winchester. The abomination’s face is as lost and alone as Dean’s soul feels, and Castiel understands that this should be happening differently. Sam’s touch should be healing Dean, not hurting him.

But Sam doesn’t push the way he should. He doesn’t press the issue, or lie down with Dean the way Castiel has seen him do in his charge’s dreams. There are no reassuring kisses or gentle, tender touches.

Instead, he moves away. He doesn’t look back to see the unshed moisture shining in Dean’s eyes.

And Castiel, waiting to speak with Dean in his dreams, finds a new reason to scorn the abomination Hell has made.
“So, who is she?”

“Sorry?” Dean says, looking up from the last few bites of his steak.

Mary’s mom and dad are in the kitchen fixing up the coffee, and she isn’t going to have a better chance, so she leans in and repeats, “This girl who’s got you so wrapped around her finger.”

From the blank look on his face, she’s left suddenly uncertain, although she gamely continues, “I don’t mean to blow my own horn or anything, but usually boys are a little more… appreciative… when they talk to me.”

“Oh,” Dean says then, coloring. He looks down at his plate, shaking his head and briefly pressing his eyes shut, and mutters, “Please let me not be having a Marty McFly moment here.”

“Marty who?”

“Nothing,” Dean says more loudly, looking back up. “It’s not important. And, uh. I’m taken. Very, very taken.”

Mary could tell him it’s just idle curiosity (and a little bit of wounded pride), but the panicked, stricken expression on his face is far too much fun. “What’s her name?” she asks, tipping her head to the side and trying to look wistful.

“Uh.” Dean blinks a couple of times and then, as he glances through the kitchen door at Mary’s parents, his expression clears and he blurts, “Samantha.”

“Really?” Mary replies skeptically. “Samantha and Dean? That’s what you’re going with? Seems a little thin to me.”

Even the tips of Dean’s ears are red now as he hunches his shoulders and ducks his head down, poking his fork at his steak with sharp, vicious stabs like he’s worried the cow might be magically revived at any moment and gore him to death. His mouth is pressed into a tight line.

Mary can’t resist stretching her foot underneath the table and nudging his calf, which makes him jump all the way up to his feet, knocking his plate over on the way. He’s sweating, she realizes, and there’s more white than green to his eyes, which is more than she expected from just a little friendly ribbing, and she realizes in a rush that she’s been off the mark.

“Oh my God,” she whispers, leaning forward over the table with wide-eyed fascination. “Are you gay?”

Dean stares at her for a long moment, expression twitching with mingled exasperation and disbelief, and then his face twists into frustrated annoyance. Looking up toward the ceiling, he balls his hands into fists and calls, “Oh, come on! He’s not even here!”

For once, Mary manages to hold her tongue—mostly because she’s busy patting herself on the back for her fantastic observational skills. Although it is sort of fun watching Dean try to explain to her frowning father why his steak ended all over the floor.
It’s a hard life, hunting. A lonely life. Worse if you’re born to it, and Travis hasn’t met anyone more hard-up for a little human connection than Winchester’s boys. Had himself an opportunity to observe the two of them on three separate occasions, and Dean twice more on his own on top of that.

Travis hasn’t seen Sam for ten years at least, time enough for any man to grow and change, but the missing span doesn’t sit easy on Winchester’s youngest. This man is a far cry from the over-studious, sullen kid Travis remembers—the one who wouldn’t ever stop giving John a stink-eye that would’ve landed anyone else in the hospital. That child only ever played at rebellion; grown, there are hard edges to him—rough scars and scales that the Life has left in its wake.

Travis didn’t expect to find much change in Dean, though; not in the three years since their paths last crossed. After all, if ever there was a man meant for hunting, Travis would’ve named Winchester’s eldest. As a boy, Dean lived and breathed the Life. He chased after it like he didn’t know anything else existed—like some fool teenager head over heels in love with his first fuck.

And maybe that assessment isn’t all that far off the mark. Maybe it was love, or something like it. Maybe John didn’t do as good a job shielding his older boy from the wanderlust inspired by lonely back roads and by-ways as he did his younger.

But born to this life or not, Dean has gone and changed on Travis too. He has all of Sam’s edges, but none of his hardness: a blade, not a rock. He’s too finely honed these days—liable to cut the wielder as soon as his target.

This new Dean has the eyes of a nomad—far ranging, ever restless. He’s got the look of someone who’s seen things that can’t be put back into the box again. Someone who’s crossed lines that can’t be uncrossed, in this life or the next.

Travis read Hamlet in high school just like everyone else. He knows that line, the one about the lady protesting too much. He sees it now in Dean, when he talks about morality and caution in handling the rugarug. He senses that the man wants—needs—Travis to take this situation out of his hands before he does something himself.

They’re dark places, the roads walked by hunters. Winding, uninhabited ways that’ll change you when you’re not looking. Lonely passes that teach you to regret a mercy offered to a helpless babe.

There aren’t any true innocents in this world, is what Travis has learned, and when he looks at Winchester’s boys, he thinks that they know that truth as well. They’ve suspected for a long while, maybe, but the knowing—that came recent and it came hard. He sees that much in the new, uncomfortable separateness between them.

There used to be rumors about Winchester’s boys. Things spoken low under men’s breaths when John wasn’t around, because if John heard he might not take too kindly to the speaker. No need to tell him anyway, of course, because it was clear he already knew. Clear in the way he’d turn his face away when his boys sat a little too close, or in the stiff, unhappy frown he wore whenever Dean ran a casual hand through his brother’s hair.

There’s none of that strangeness in them now, though. They’re two, not one, and the only emotion Travis senses running between them is mistrust. Maybe a hint of betrayal.

When Travis decides to take matters into his own hands (one of them still working perfectly well,
thanks), it’s a little in reply to Dean’s unspoken request, but mostly because of that rift. He doesn’t want to be within a hundred miles of that breach. Not when it’s so fresh and raw. Best to get this sorry mess done with and move on his way—leave Winchester’s boys to sort things out on their own.

Leave them to sort it out or die in the trying, anyway.

From what Travis has heard—from what he’s seen in Dean’s eyes—it wouldn’t be the first time.
Offense (Monster Movie)

The image of Dean kissing Jamie won’t leave Sam’s mind. It’s been hours—hours of mindless, idle conversation; of pavement rolling out behind them; of feeling like things are finally getting back on track—and that moment (whole damn bundle of moments, really) is still stuck on slow-mo replay. It’d be enough to give a guy a complex, if Sam didn’t already know why he’s so fixated.

It doesn’t have anything to do with Dean’s distracting mouth, or with the hurtful insinuation that a stranger’s touch is more welcome than his own brother’s. No, it’s the fact that Dean’s been re-hymenated. And yeah, okay, not the best of terms, but Dean’s the one who put it out there—vocalized one of the things that’s been getting underneath Sam’s skin since he got his brother back.

Because Dean is right: no scars means that Dean’s body is new—that every experience is new for him again. Every emotion.

Even if Dean remembers things from before, nothing is the same any longer. Nothing feels the same to him—Sam can tell from the way his brother always takes half a beat too long to respond to things. Like he has to work out how to react in his head.

And if that’s the case, then Sam and Dean are treading untouched territory as well, and Sam’s beginning to think there are some things he isn’t ever going to get back.

He doesn’t ask anymore about their sleeping arrangements—hasn’t since Dean’s excuses for avoiding him at night became painfully transparent. He’s stopped trying to touch Dean during the day as well, which is more difficult than he thought it would be. He keeps finding his hand resting on Dean’s thigh, or squeezing the back of his neck, and Dean keeps…

God, the way he looks when he shrugs the touch away hurts almost as much as having him gone did.

Sam can’t take the ache much longer without folding, and it’s already hard as hell to stop himself from answering Ruby’s calls, or actively seeking her out for a night of numbing distraction. It’s becoming less and less clear why he stopped, why he isn’t still doing everything he can to get Lilith’s head on a platter for what she did to Dean.

And he’s really, really unclear on why he shouldn’t be doing everything within his power to make sure the bitch doesn’t get her hands on his brother again. The best defense, after all, is a strong offense, and he can’t think of anything stronger than splattering Lilith’s insides all over the ground.

“Dude, you know what else I need to do?” Dean says suddenly over the blaring of the radio. “Now that I’m a new man and all?”

Dean needs to get back into their bed, damn it. He needs to let Sam touch him the way he used to. He needs to look at Sam without so many concealing masks in his eyes.

But Sam can’t say any of that, so instead he grunts and continues to stare out the passenger window, remembering the way Dean tilted his head to fit his mouth more fully against Jamie’s. The way he didn’t seem to want to step away from her, or to stop gripping her hips with his hands.

“I gotta have a nice, juicy steak,” Dean says, making the word into some obscene, forbidden fruit.

Sam glances over then, looking at his brother’s lips and remembering the girl they left back in Canonsburg, and thinks that, sooner or later, something has got to give.
Sam wakes instantly, coming half out of the bed with a weird choking sound like he’s trying to breathe and yell at the same time.

“Dude, it’s me,” Dean hisses, even though his own pulse is thrumming and he’s fucking terrified of what he’s doing. Of how Sam’s going to respond.

He’s more scared of the memories that swarm in on him when he’s alone in the dark, though, so he’s all about choosing the lesser of two evils here. Exigent circumstances and all, what with how damn dark it is in here and how fucking loud the screaming in his head is tonight.

Before Sam can say anything douchey, Dean makes himself move, sliding under the covers and then flipping over on his side, back to his brother so that Sam can’t read the panic in his eyes. He can feel Sam watching him, though, and it’s making him really uncomfortable—making him rethink this whole bed-shift thing, actually—except then a hand tentatively brushes his hip.

Somehow, Dean manages to go even stiffer, jaw clenched and hand clutching the edge of the mattress to keep from jumping up and away.

As though Sam can sense the sudden surge of adrenaline (hell, he can probably see it in the tensed muscles of Dean’s body), he moves slowly, easing forward and gradually sliding his hand around Dean’s hip to rest on his lower stomach. Dean’s breathing has shallowed and sped, and he’s sweating. He grows faint and light-headed as the barely-there pressure of Sam’s hand becomes a solid touch and then a push, urging him to scootch backwards.

When he remains stone still, it’s Sam who comes to him, and Dean flinches when his brother’s chest hits his back.

Sam’s voice is in his ear immediately, low and familiar and soothing. “Shh, Dean. It’s just me.”

“Well it sure as shit ain’t Lucy Liu with that breath,” Dean mutters, clinging to the pretense of disdain through the thick, choking waves of fear, and feels Sam’s lips brush his shoulder blade.

It helps.

Not that he’s ever going to admit it.

“Go to sleep,” Sam suggests, winding himself more firmly around Dean’s body like he suspects Dean of plotting escape.

Not a bad read on this situation, all in all.

After all, this is just a one time thing—just because Dean feels feverish tonight, and it’s so dark, and he can’t breathe on his own—and there’s a part of him that knows he’s only making it harder on himself. When he feels better tomorrow, after this weird, uncomfortable feeling has passed, he’s going to have to deal with Sam pushing again—and with Sam’s wounded, hangdog face when they go back to their new sleeping arrangements.

Because no matter how much Dean might be craving otherwise, he knows damn well that he doesn't belong here. Not anymore.

But he's too exhausted from staying on red alert all day to be smart, and Sam is really freaking warm,
and anyway this is the safest he’s felt in… Fuck, longer than he can count. Didn't really remember it was possible to feel this safe, until now.

A lump of painful emotion rises in his throat, and Dean has to swallow it before he can mutter, “You go to sleep.”

His voice sounds as cross and prickly as he wants it to, and Sam lets out a half surprised, half exasperated chuckle that relaxes Dean further.

Things go quiet then, with nothing but the sound of Sam's breathing and the rhythm of his heart to keep Dean company, but those are soothing sensations, and Dean allows his mind to drift. He allows his brother's proximity to tip him off the edge of wakefulness and into the folds of sleep. Into dreams.

For the first time, Dean can feel Sam even here in the red, wet glare. He can still feel Sam's arms, solid and close around him. He can hear Sam's soft, contented sighs in his ear.

It's almost enough to drown out the screams.
Uriel can smell it on them. The pathetic, needy reek isn’t all that different from a canine bitch in heat, as far as he can tell. The mud monkeys can layer it with all of the sweet, perfumed words they want—they can call it love and affection and devotion—but in the end, shit still smells like shit, and rutting is rutting. Nothing more, nothing less.

Even if he can tell that Dean Winchester, at least, hasn’t indulged since his return from the Pit. The other, Sam Winchester, is too difficult to read past the corruption seething in his soul, but Uriel suspects he has been less circumspect than his brother.

Hell’s Chosen have never been those to control their carnal appetites.

Dean Winchester, of course, isn’t pristine himself, but Uriel is pleased to watch him reject Sam Winchester’s clumsy advances without so much as a pause and get into bed alone. Beside Uriel, Castiel watches more pensively, and Uriel frowns to himself. He’s growing concerned over the changes he has noticed in his brother since he began following the chosen mud monkey. Worries that, soon, corrective measures must be taken.

But Castiel’s new weakness makes it easy to send him running to Dean Winchester’s side once Samhain has been destroyed, and that Uriel is thankful for. He has business with Hell’s Chosen.

Uriel delivers his warning with the same, swift efficiency with which he accomplishes all of his tasks—means to leave afterward, collect Castiel and return to the garrison. But Sam Winchester has his hands full of his brother’s clothes when Uriel arrives—he was sitting on Dean’s bed, contemplating things that make Uriel’s lips curl—and Uriel can’t resist one final, parting sally.

“It still counts, you know,” he announces, fixing Sam Winchester with a stern gaze.

“What still counts?” The words are sharp, carrying a rumble of warning—as though this mud monkey, puffed up and bloated with Hell’s venom, actually believes he can defeat Uriel in a battle.

Uriel takes pleasure in answering, “A sin in thought is just as damning as a sin in deed.” Hell’s Chosen still looks confused, though, and Uriel is forced to explain, “You stink of rutting when you think of him. As though he would sully himself by touching such a perversion.”

In truth, Uriel worries that Dean Winchester might, but he thinks that they are safe for a time yet. And Castiel is not so far changed from his true self to allow his charge to stray so very far.

The words serve their purpose, though. Sam Winchester’s face goes tight and furious. His mouth thins.

“You know?” he says, “My brother was right about you. You are dicks. Insane dicks.”

Uriel favors him with a benevolent smile. “The only reason you’re still alive, Sam Winchester, is because you’ve been useful. But the moment that ceases to be true, the second you’re more trouble than you’re worth—the very instant you stretch out a corrupting hand toward our property—I will turn you to dust.”

Sam takes that for the truth it is. Uriel sees the mud monkey’s jaw and throat working, but no sounds come out. He backs away, toward the edge of the room where the air is fresher, free from that longing, sluttish stench, and Sam’s eyes track him resentfully.
“As for your brother,” Uriel finishes. “Tell him that maybe he should climb off that high horse of his.”

There’s confusion on the mud monkey’s face at that, of course, but Uriel is happy to aim him in the right direction.

“Ask Dean what he remembers from Hell,” he advises, and watches Sam Winchester’s eyes widen.

He may not ask today, and he may not ask tomorrow, but ask he will, and soon. And when he hears his answer, Uriel thinks that Sam Winchester will grow less interested in mounting things that do not belong to him.
Wes should know better, but as he watches Hope make her confused, meandering way down the road, he hangs onto the coin just for a few moments longer. The tall guy—Sam, Wes remembers—looks a little frazzled himself, which Wes supposes is only natural after whatever happened out here to leave black soot plastered to the sidewalk and Sam’s clothes smoking.

“You’re positive it can’t be, y’know, uncursed? To make good wishes?”

“That’s not the way this stuff works,” Sam answers, brushing at his shirt with one hand.

Licking his lips, Wes glances wistfully after Hope. “We could try to find something. I know it’d take time, but there must—isn’t there something you want that’d be worth the effort?”

Sam isn’t looking at him, though. He’s staring off across the road to where Sam’s… Sam’s something (Wes is confused on the details)… is jogging into sight. The guy slows to a moderately fast walk as soon as he spots them, and when Wes looks back at Sam, the look on the guy’s face tells him everything he needs to know.

Sam might have the know-how to figure out how to fix the coin (if it can be done), but he won’t, no matter how much Wes begs. No matter how deeply Sam himself might want. Wes understands that even before Sam opens his mouth and murmurs, "It doesn't count if you have to force them into it with magic."

Wes considers arguing the point anyway, except then Sam steps forward off the curb to meet the other guy, where he allows himself to be briefly touched and prodded with such an intense expression of longing on his face that Wes has to look away, embarrassed for him. He isn't sure if it makes things worse or better that Sam's Hope doesn't seem to have noticed a thing.

"What the fuck happened to you?" the guy demands. "You look like you stuck your finger in an electrical socket."

Sam laughs, which draws Wes’ eyes back to him, and Wes sees with a twinge of relief that Sam's expression is schooled again. "Something like that. I, uh. I think I got struck by lightning."

"Can't leave you alone for a goddamned minute," the other guy mutters, and he sounds annoyed but there’s something in his voice—or maybe in the way that Sam stands a little straighter, losing the hurt, hunched over slouch—that tells Wes he was wrong in thinking he ever had a chance of convincing Sam to help him.

After all, whether he knows it or not, the guy already has everything he wants.
Thirsty (I Know What You Did Last Summer)

Sam almost edits it out of the story. Almost. But just considering the omission makes him feel twitchy and strange inside, and as his stomach quivers with a whole host of butterflies, he tells himself that it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Especially considering his other, more damning confessions—the ones rolling right off his tongue and leaving his chest lighter than it has been since Dean turned him away from their bed his first night back.

He still has trouble meeting Dean’s eyes, during. The words slip and stumble on their way out of his mouth, leaving behind a shivery, coppery taste similar to the heated flood that comes after catching a stray elbow to the face. In the end, Sam plows through every last sordid detail only because he can’t take the confession back, and then has to bite his cheek bloody to keep nonsensical accusations from following.

Cassie. Tara. Lisa. All those nameless bimbos in rundown bars over the years—how many was that, a hundred? At least?

But none of that is what he really wants to say, none of it explains what went so wrong, or encapsulates the molten, burning emotion scalding his throat as he watches his brother’s eyes darken and shutter.

_You weren’t here, Dean, _he wants to yell. _You sold yourself and you left me—you left me. What the fuck else was I supposed to do?_

For a long, drawn out moment, it’s silent. Sam slants an oblique, flinching glance at his brother—Dean’s generous mouth, the line of his jaw, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose—and remembers how she felt against him. He remembers what she whispered in his ear as he pushed inside—words that made no sense and yet left him panting and thrusting with mindless, wounded need.

_You can pretend, Sam, if it makes you feel better. I don’t mind._

Across the room, Dean gets up abruptly. “I need a drink,” he says—rasps, really; his voice sounds like sandpaper scraping over dry coals.

Sam blinks and, just like that, his eyes are watering. His chest throbs with an empty, guilty ache. He gets to his own feet, obeying an aimless impulse that abandons him as soon as he’s standing.

“Dean,” he says anyway, even though he isn’t sure what words are supposed to follow. An apology, maybe? A better explanation?

“Christ, I’m thirsty,” Dean says, making his careful, painful way over and leaning down to search in the cabinets under the motel sink.

He must be hoping for an abandoned bottle of something or other—because the contents of the pocket flask he always seems to be sipping from and the bottle at his elbow weren’t enough after their run-in with this Alistair character. Or maybe (probably) it’s Sam’s confession he needs the extra alcohol for. Either way, it reminds Sam that his brother is drinking too much these days. Hell, Dean’s been a goddamned fish ever since he got back.

“What the hell does a man have to do for a drink around here?” Dean mutters after a moment, slamming the cabinet doors again as he straightens.
“Don’t you think you’ve had enou—”

Dean turns, and he doesn’t look disinterested at all now, or distant. The emotions are all too present on his bruised and cut face—betrayed fury blazing out and scorching Sam’s throat dry.

“Don’t,” Dean bites out. “Don’t you fucking talk to me about ‘enough’ when you and that bitch were—”

He stops abruptly, swallowing the rest of his words. His expression fluctuates strangely—confusion, followed by fear, and then that rage and boundless hurt again. Swallowing, he turns his face to the side, staring off into space in the general direction of the wall.

Finally, after a long pause and in a tightly controlled voice, he says, “I’m going out to the package store. You want anything?”

Sam really, really wants to let his brother take the space he clearly needs, but that isn’t going to fix anything so instead he makes himself say, “Dean, we have to talk about this.”

Dean doesn’t look at him. He doesn’t respond. Instead, he gets moving, lifting the Impala’s keys from the table and heading for the door. He’s still walking stiffly, but he’s moving swifter now—like he didn’t just take a running leap out of a second story window. Like his bones and muscles don’t feel as battered as Sam’s.

But it isn’t Sam’s bones that are bothering him now. It isn’t his muscles that hold that diffuse, breath-stealing ache. No, that would be Sam’s heart, which feels stretched out and emptied where it throbs in his chest.

Dean pulls the motel door open and pauses, one hand gripping the doorframe. “Last chance,” he says without turning around.

But Sam can tell that the real last chance came and went when he wasn’t looking. He understands that the truths unveiled in this room just broke something inside of Dean—maybe irreparably. The wound is too fresh for Sam to tell.

“I’m not thirsty.”

It’s the only reply Sam can offer, and God, he wishes it had been true then. He wishes he’d pushed Ruby off his lap the way he meant to. He wishes he’d been stronger.

Dean fucked Jaime like one month ago, Sam’s mind proclaims, making one last-ditch attempt to stomp out the cancerous guilt spreading through his chest, but it’s not the same and he knows it. He can’t compare a single night’s fling to the twisted, ongoing relationship he let himself fall into.

“I wasn’t—Dean, I wasn’t trying to replace you,” he says before he can stop himself. The words leave him breathless, half-stunned by his own daring to face the diffuse, unacknowledged tension in the room.

“Just tell me one thing, Sam,” Dean responds.

He still hasn’t turned; is still standing half in and half out of the room, the sliver of face Sam can see bathed in electric blue light from the motel sign outside. As Sam waits, his brother takes a deep, shaky breath and then slowly exhales again.

When the question comes, there’s nothing tentative about it, nothing soft or uncertain. Just those blunt, unforgiving words.
“Did you fuck her in our bed?”

Sam can’t answer. Not truthfully. Not and get it right.

Dean nods once, silently, and then steps out onto the sidewalk. He doesn’t bother to slam the door behind him, and somehow that hurts worst of all.
Fantasy (Heaven and Hell)

When Anna touches him, Dean’s first impulse is to push her away. His entire body rebels, stomach twisting the same way it did in Canonsburg, when he took Jaime home and she asked him to come inside.

He’d been chasing her, was angling for just such an invite, but in the moment he followed his gut and stepped back. Said something—some bullshit story he can’t remember anymore, but which had to have been pretty fucking awesome for her to let him sleep on her couch. For her to drive him into town to meet Sam in the early hours of the morning, to kiss him there and gift him with the fantasy that everything was right and fine as ever in the world of Dean Winchester. He remembers being terrified for weeks afterwards that Sam would find out it was only a sham—that Sam would look at him one morning and know—but it never happened.

And now there’s another chick in his arms—used to be an angel, sure, but the warm body pressed up against him is all woman now—and Dean’s instincts are crying out just as loudly as they did before. He stiffens, ready to grip Anna’s arms and gently but firmly disengage—Christ, the novelty of being able to say no to anything after Hell still hasn’t worn off—but something stops him. He’s thinking in some weird, abstract way about Ruby, and the fact that Sam sure as shit hasn’t been a monk, and his chest twists with some hot, unpleasant emotion.

Envy, maybe, that despite the blood drinking thing, Sam is still so much more put together than him. Or resentment that Sam could get his jollies on while Dean was stretched out and screaming on the rack. Or maybe just good, old fashioned competitive spirit.

Sam’s got his demon, Dean’s damn well going to bag himself an angel.

He kisses back, cupping Anna’s cheek and tilting her face up, and it turns out that he does remember how to do this, because he has her naked and in the backseat of his baby before he can second guess himself. It’s good, too, overlaying those memories of Hell with this experience. Anna’s beautiful body instead of some of the “gifts” Alistair brought with him—the ones Dean knew better than to refuse.

It’s the first time he’s been with a naked woman and not left her screaming in over ten years, so Dean’s confused when he feels sick and small afterwards. Anna watches him hurriedly dress just outside the car, and her eyes are sad and knowing, despite the pleasured lassitude currently weighing down her limbs.

As he hops on one foot to get back into his shoe, and then switches the operation around for the other, she sits up, heedless of her nudity, and tilts her head at him. She's waiting for the question that will unlock all of the secrets she’s holding inside. Secrets Dean knows will squirm inside of him in turn, and change the way he thinks, and nothing after that will ever be the same.

Terrifying to even contemplate.

“I gotta get back,” he says gruffly, pulling his shirt over his head and leaning down to pick up his jacket. “Thanks for, uh… Thanks.”

He flees before she can say whatever she’s thinking—before she can utter aloud the reasons for the knowing sorrow in her eyes and change everything—and runs into Sam on his way back to the barn. The collision knocks him back a step, but he’s left speechless more by the unexpected meeting than anything else.
“Dean,” Sam says. “Hey, man, have you seen Anna?”

Dean looks away at that, unwillingly, and knows from the sudden hitch of his brother's breath that Sam has read his shame in the avoidance. Waves of conflicting emotion run through him—cringing guilt and vicious satisfaction alternating over and over.

“Oh,” Sam says awkwardly. “Sorry, I—I guess I’ll just, uh—”

He’s backing away, and part of Dean wants to let him go. Part of him is glad to let whatever wound he just inflicted fester.

The rest of him, though, is remembering holding Sam after Jess died. Remembering the wide, toothy way Sam used to grin before Dean made his deal; the way Sam held him, like he was made of glass or something, after he accidentally electrocuted himself like the goddamned idiot he is and they both thought he was on his way out.

The memories cascade from there—years of companionship and tenderness that Dean hasn't been able to remember clearly past Hell's howling in his ears. Those moments are sharp and clear now, though—sharp as the pain twisting Sam's face—and Dean can’t do it.

It's selfish as fuck, but he can't lose Sam again.

“Sammy,” he blarts, reaching out and grabbing his brother’s wrist.

Sam looks down in surprise, which is a painful reminder that they just don’t do this anymore. They haven’t touched more than in passing since that night Dean was under the influence of that ghost fever, and Dean realizes that he misses it. He misses Sam.

“We’re even,” Dean says. “And I—God, Sam, I’m so sorry. She didn’t. She didn’t mean anything.”

He doesn’t quite understand the apology himself—just has a vague, ill-defined awareness that he means it, that he’s sorrier about what he just did than he can ever say—but Sam perks up a little. He still looks hurt, but there’s some relief there, too. And a kind of cringing hope that makes Dean want to step in close and drag him in for a hug. He doesn’t—Sam deserves better than to be comforted by someone like him—but he can’t stop himself from rubbing his thumb against the inside of his brother’s wrist.

It's a slippery slope, he knows: a damning precedent. If he lets himself have this small caress, then it's going to be that much easier to reach out the next time he's aching. It's going to be that much harder to resist the urge to fold himself into Sam's arms and let his brother sooth the last forty years away.

But when they walk back into the barn and Sam's shoulder brushes against his, Dean doesn't shift away.

Brian, as usual, is too timid to stand up one way or the other. The dude changes sides in an argument fast as the wind blows, always backing up whoever’s telling him what’s what in the moment.

Still, the little shit (*not good enough for Suzie, never was*) can’t help checking, “You sure?”

“Hell yes,” Ted answers. “I’ve built enough homes to know that. No gas leak, either.”

Of course, it’s less the fact that he’s built over a hundred homes with his own two hands making him sure that those two assholes were lying through their teeth, and more the obvious fact of what they were doing in the house that convinced Ted. He isn’t going to say anything out loud—not when his sis has to live in this place—but one glance at the two of them walking down the steps and he knew. He just knew it.

He doesn’t know which corner of the house ‘Mr. Barbar’ was kneeling in, but the guy’s cocksucking lips were proof enough of what he’d been doing for ‘Mr. Stanwick’. Well, that and the way Mr. Stanwick couldn’t keep his hands to himself during their little pow wow in the front yard.

Ted’s seen enough teenagers fresh off their first tour around home base to recognize that kind of obsessive touching when he comes across it. Even if these two are a little old to be acting so damned giddy.

He’d call up the sheriff and file charges, except that’d bring Suzie into it, and anyway he has no idea what their real names are. So the assholes got off lucky this time.

They show their faces around here again, though, and Ted’s going to teach them to treat his sis’ new house like some dirtbag, rent-by-the-hour motel.
“Hey, Dean, can I borrow a shirt?”

And of course, by ‘borrow’, Sam means ‘stretch the fuck out so Dean can’t wear it again without looking like a five year old kid in his older brother’s hand-me-down’. But Sam sounds sort of desperate, so Dean’s willing to take one for the team.

He pauses to spit his mouthful of toothpaste out in the sink and then calls, “Grey one in my duffle!” Sam’s ‘thanks’ gets lost in the rush of water as Dean rinses, and as soon as his mouth is free to do so, he reiterates, “The grey one. I come out there and catch you in my Zeppelin tee, and we’re gonna have words.”

“Like I’d be caught dead in that,” Sam calls back. He sounds a little distracted, though, and Dean can tell he’s already rooting around for the agreed upon shirt. “I don’t know why you’re still hanging onto it.”

Dean thinks about pointing out that Sam’s the one who clung to the worn and faded shirt while Dean was doing his Frank Cotton impression down under. Then he thinks about the way that would make Sam’s face fall—maybe prompt another Conversation—and instead goes with, “Fuck you, man; that shirt’s a classic!”

Sam doesn’t immediately respond with some smart Alec comeback, which makes Dean pause in uncapping his mouthwash. Things are still a little strained between them these days, but not so strained Sam would let an opening like that shoot past—not unless his attention is fully engaged elsewhere.

Dean thinks about his duffle, wondering what Sam could have found in there that could possibl—

Oh crap.

Hastily putting the mouthwash back down on the counter, he darts back into the main room. “On second thought, how about you let me find it for you?” he offers, praying that he’s wrong and there’s still time to avoid this particular train wreck.

Of course, Sam already has a piece of paper in his hands and is squinting down at it like it’s written in Swahili. Maybe he can’t read Dean’s writing.

Hastening his steps even more, Dean moves over to his brother’s side and reaches for the paper.

Sam steps back, staying out of reach and not lifting his eyes from the paper. “What is this?” he says.

“Nothing,” Dean tries, making another, equally unsuccessful grab. “Grocery list. C’mon, man, I thought you said you wanted a shirt.”

“Since when is ‘Sam cries at the end of Milo and Otis’ available to buy at Walmart?”

“Okay, it’s not a grocery list. Now gimme the damn paper.”

This time, when Dean snatches at the list, Sam lifts it up above his head. Freakish giant.

“Not until you tell me what it is,” Sam maintains, finally looking down at Dean with an infuriatingly stubborn expression.
Dean jabs his pointer finger against his brother’s chest and hisses, “That’s it, no shirt for you, you—you—paper thief!”

“Wow. That was a pretty inventive insult, Dean. I’m impressed. Really.”

Oh, for fucking… Dean snorts and gives up on making any sort of peaceable reconciliation. Tackling Sam onto the nearby bed, he claws and gropes for the list and, after a brief struggle, ends up with his face smushed into the mattress with Sam basically sitting on top of him.

“Okay, okay!” he grunts, trying to get air into his lungs. “Let me up and I’ll tell you.”

“Promise?” Sam asks, and somehow seems to put on about twenty pounds.

Dean groans and then manages, “Get the fuck off me, bitch!”

Chuckling, Sam does, moving away from the bed and studying the paper again. Dean takes a few moments to compose himself, sitting up and adjusting his shirt as he resigns himself to the inevitable.

“I’m waiting,” Sam prods finally.

Grudgingly—Dean’s a man of his word, but that doesn’t mean he has to be gracious about it—Dean mumbles, “It’s a list.”

“Yeah, I can see that, Dean. A list of what?”

“Title’s on the first page.”

The look Sam tosses him seems to indicate he’s thinking about forcing Dean to say it, but after only a brief hesitation, Sam goes back to the duffle and starts searching through it again, keeping a wary eye on Dean as he does so. But Dean has given up putting this particular mess back in the box—actually, the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes that he doesn’t have anything to worry about.

He isn’t the one who comes out the bitch in this equation. Fucking finally.

By the time Sam comes up with the first page, Dean’s leaning back on his elbows and smirking. He watches Sam flip the paper in his hands over, then turn it right side up. Watches his brother’s face carefully as Sam reads the underlined title at the top.

He doesn’t look amused when he lifts his head and looks over at Dean.

“Reasons why Sam is the girl?” he cites.

“You forgot the part in the parentheses,” Dean points out helpfully, and when Sam just looks at him flatly, he corrects, “Reasons why Samanth—”

“You wrote a list of reasons why I’d be the bottom in our non-existent, gay, incestuous relationship?”

The answer to that seems perfectly self-explanatory, so Dean waits and doesn’t say anything.

After a beat, though, Sam snaps, “Dean!”

He has his bitch face on now, and he’s practically snorting fire, so Dean feels it’s prudent to reply, “Yeah, looks like.”

“This is two pages long, Dean.”
Three, actually, but the third page is in the glove compartment of the Impala where he can work on it during Sam’s frequent rest stops (reason number 38).

“Why the hell would you—”

“Cause I’m fucking sick of people sending me to big bad leather daddies, okay?”

Sam blinks at him, nonplussed, which is really annoying because it was only two weeks ago. Dean was fucking scarred for life, and his little brother can’t even be bothered to remember half a month. Beautiful.

But Sam’s eyes do clear, even if it’s belated, and he says in a disbelieving, prissy voice, “You’re talking about that prank those two magicians pulled on you in Sioux City. One prank. One. This,” he shakes the papers—“is a little bit of an overreaction, don’t you think?”

“You’re not the one everyone keeps on thinking takes it up the ass.”

“Maybe because I’m not the one insecure enough he needs to make lists why he’s supposed to be the top,” Sam replies, but Dean doesn’t have his full attention anymore because he’s scanning his way through the first page. Before Dean can make any response, Sam lifts his head and huffs, “Just because I wanted a kitten when we were kids instead of a puppy doesn’t make me the girl.”

“Okay, so how about number sixteen?”

Sam glances down, checking, and reads aloud, “Sam plays with Barbies.” There’s a pause before he glares at Dean and snaps, “You gave me those, Dean. You said they were G.I. Chicks.”

“Dude, you’re the one who bought that pathetic lie. Seriously, who ever heard of a soldier in five inch high heels and a poodle skirt?”

Sam’s lips thin, but clearly Dean won that round because instead of responding his brother goes back to scanning. And then points out, “Okay, my hair can’t be both reasons 8 and 42.”

“It’s a rough draft,” Dean points out defensively. “And dude, you’ve gotta admit that your hair—”

“Isn’t styled with fifty dollars worth of product every morning like someone else’s I could name,” Sam grits through his teeth. His nostrils are starting to flare again, and even though Dean could totally take him if he needed to, he senses that it’s prudent to get out of the line of fire for a while. Couple hours, maybe. Just until Sam cools down.

Carefully, he slides off the bed and starts making his way toward the door. And then freezes in front of the table when Sam demands, “What’s wrong with my shirts?”

“I’ll make you another list when I’m done with this one,” Dean answers, noting the way his brother has started shifting from foot to foot. He’s gonna blow his top any second now, and—wait, crap. What number was the shirt thing, anyway? Sixty-three? That means Dean has just around a minute before he gets to number eighty-eight. Sweating lightly, he moves faster, getting the door open and stepping outside just as—

The squawk of mingled mortification and rage that follows him outside would be amusing if it didn’t mean Dean’s half a minute away from getting his ass kicked.

Yeah, that’s totally number eighty-eight. Otherwise known as ‘Sam Winchester wears woman’s underwear. And a garter belt.’
“That was one time, Dean! For a dare!”

By the time Dean hits the sidewalk, he’s running.
Frank Wyatt usually loves when a former student comes back to visit—especially one with as much potential as Sam Winchester. But when he asks Sam if he’s happy, expecting it to be a throwaway, easy question, all he gets in return is a grave expression and haunted eyes. And when he tries to push, tries to get the young man to open up, Sam stutters out something about having to go and turns tail.

Frank almost lets it be, but more things about those few months—about the boy Sam used to be—are coming back, and he ends up hurrying after Sam’s retreating figure instead. He gives chase because he remembers having failed Sam—didn’t do enough when the boy was here; didn’t try hard enough to locate him after he disappeared, seemingly off the face of the earth—and he can’t go home tonight with that bitter taste of defeat in his mouth again.

When he bursts through the school’s front doors, the main drive is empty except for a black muscle car, and it’s easy enough to locate Sam, who is hurrying toward that car and the man leaning against it. The man stiffens, looking past Sam at Frank, and then pushes off the car and tugs his hands out of his pockets. His face looks familiar, even from this distance, but it isn’t until Sam practically collides with him, one hand immediately wrapping in the man’s coat collar, that Frank places him.

The older brother. The one he heard was so much trouble for his teachers, for the administration, for classroom discipline. The one he used to see Sam clinging to after school, and even then it made Frank uncomfortable—too much touching, too close, and if Sam had been here longer he probably would have said something to someone about it.

Looking at the way the brother puts his arms around Sam now, pulling Sam in even closer and nuzzling their noses together, turns Frank’s stomach. Their mouths are an inch apart, if that, and Sam’s brother is moving his hands over Sam’s back in slow, caressing sweeps—the motion easy and casual, as though he has a right to that kind of intimacy and has been indulging himself for years.

Frank should have done something about it when he had the chance. He shouldn’t have waited for certainty, shouldn’t have been so heedless with a budding life.

Good lord, what did his silence sentence that small, unhappy boy to?

Well, Frank sure as hell isn’t going to let this go on any longer, anyway, and he steels himself and starts to move forward. At the movement, the brother’s head jerks toward him. Between one instant and another, his expression has undergone a season shift: the hard, unforgiving planes of winter tightening his jaw and leaving his lips a thin, pale line. Frank stops again immediately, struck breathless by the threat he sees in the man’s gaze.

Those are a killer’s eyes.

Still, Frank has a duty, and he manages to call through numb lips, “I can call the police, Sam. If you want.”

Sam startles at the sound of his voice, like he didn’t realize Frank followed him out, and looks back. There are tear lines on his cheeks, but he doesn’t look frightened the way Frank expected him to. Only confused.

Frank watches as Sam’s brother brushes his fingers over the tracks on Sam’s cheeks while murmuring in his ear (those unsettling eyes on Frank the entire time, tracking him) and knows, with
a saddened, pitying ache, that it’s too late. If Frank pulls them apart now, Sam is only going to resent him for it.

In truth, it was probably too late even years before, during Sam’s first visit to Truman High.

But just in case he’s wrong, Frank waits as Sam murmurs something back and detaches himself from his brother’s side to move back toward the school, wiping his cheeks as he comes. The brother crosses his arms, leaning back against the car in a deceptively lazy posture that Frank doesn’t believe for a second. There’s too much of the predator in the man’s steady, unflinching gaze.

“Sam,” Frank tries as soon as the young man is close enough. “There are people who can help you get out. If he’s doing anything to you, that’s a crime. You can press charges, you—”

Sam laughs, interrupting him, and it actually sounds genuine. “What, Dean? Dean’s not—He wouldn’t ever hurt me.”

“I know you think that, but—”

“He gave his life for me,” Sam says, which is so nonsensical that Frank can’t keep his disbelieving confusion off his face. Then Sam adds, “The, uh, paramedics brought him back. But he—it isn’t like that. What you think. I don’t want you to think it is, okay?”

“I don’t mean to be indelicate, Sam, but that’s difficult to believe when you’re crying.”

“It isn’t—” Sam starts, and then laughs again, pinching the bridge of his nose with two fingers. He takes a deep breath, seeming to steady himself, and then continues, “You asked if I was happy, and I—I’m not. There’s stuff I’m dealing with that I can’t—that you wouldn’t understand. But Dean—having him back, being with him, it. He makes me happy. He’s the best part of me, and the only thing that’s actually worth a damn in my life, so I—thanks for caring, but you need to back off.”

There’s so much earnest steel in Sam’s eyes that Frank is forced to believe him. Or, at least, he believes that Sam believes.

But it still hurts to stand back and let him go. It makes Frank sick to let the young man get into that black car with his dangerous, cold-eyed brother and drive away.

He’s helped so many children over the years, but somehow it’s always the ones he fails—his lost, sorrowful lambs—that stick with him.
When Nick (as it calls itself in this moment), decides to take out the hunters who have come here to track it, it’s surprised to find itself in a male body. Of course, that surprise only lasts until it has spoken with the pair for a minute, and then it becomes abundantly clear that there’s an undeniable, solid attraction between them. An attraction that was severed by a thick, raw wound and has only recently begun to knit together.

There should still be plenty of room for Nick to slip in between and work its magic, though, and it quickly fastens on the shorter of the two as the best initial target. The human is so obviously needy, Nick is surprised that he hasn’t been jumped by some of its more demonic brethren. It knows an incubus from Glendale, Iowa in particular who would love to glut himself on such a rich feast.

Then again, it is possible that any hungry incubi who chanced across Dean were simply bored to death by the unending stream of self-pity that pours out of the human’s mouth when he’s under the influence.

“It isn’t like he actually comes right out and says anything, you know?” Dean says, slumping sorrowfully against the passenger door of his car (Nick insisted they switch places the second time Dean almost wrapped them around a telephone pole because he was too busy staring at Nick to pay attention to the road).

Nick makes a noncommittal noise and thinks about suggesting that Dean shut up. But the human might have something valuable to say in between all the moaning he’s been doing ever since Nick’s venom (followed by a not-so-subtle suggestion) loosened up his inhibitions, so Nick stares stolidly ahead and says nothing.

“But I can tell anyway,” Dean continues. “He thinks I’m a burden. Like I’m some kind of—of onerous duty or something. And I know I said I was fine with it, but I keep thinking about her.”

This is new. “Who is ‘she’, Dean?”

“Ruby,” Dean mutters obligingly. “She’s a goddamned whore. I know he hasn't seen her since I banged that angel chick—"

One of Nick's eyebrows raises.

”—but I just. Sometimes he gets up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night and when he comes back to bed I can smell her on him. Fuck, I know he wouldn't do that, but I just—for a demon skank she's really hot.”

A hand lands on Nick’s thigh and it glances over to find Dean staring at it earnestly.

“You’ll help, though, won’t you? You’ll talk to Sam for me? Straighten things out?”

Nick frowns. This isn’t the way this is supposed to be going at all. It isn’t going to be able to get these two to kill each other if Dean is busy trying to belly crawl his way back into his brother’s good graces. Maybe it should have started with Sam first after all.

“You don’t want Sam anymore, Dean,” Nick reminds the hunter. “Remember? You can’t trust him. You need to get rid of him so that we can be together instead.”

And then, because they’re stopped at a traffic light, it takes a moment to reach over into Dean’s lap
and give him a quick, promising squeeze that Dean very definitely likes, given the way he widens his legs and drops his head back against the seat, eyes going unfocused.

Then the human pants, “Sammy,” and Nick jerks its hand back with a muttered curse.

It’s so much easier to tempt its victims when they aren’t already in love.
“Trust your instincts, Dean. There’s no such thing as miracles.”

Dean frowns, peering at Tessa more intently. “What are you saying?”

Instead of an answer, he gets a solemn look followed by the brief, cold brush of her palm against his cheek. “I’m glad you and Sam are back together, though. You may not believe me, but I was pulling for you two.”

She could just be talking about the fact that Dean got stuffed back into his meat suit after his seemingly endless vacation in Hell, but something about her expression gives him pause. And then, a beat later, he gets it.

“You do know he’s my brother,” he checks, watching for some shift in her expression. “And that we’re not fucking.”

“Oh, Dean,” Tessa says, smiling at him sweetly. “That’s what I always liked most about you: your sense of humor.”

Dean opens his mouth to protest, but she vanishes before he can get another word in edgewise. Like she’s been taking lessons from Mr. Personality and his feathery brethren or something.

Dean really, really hates it when they do that.
“You know, I miss having you down in the Pit,” Alistair comments as pain sings through his stolen body.

It’s lovely, really. Like foreplay between two lovers who have been cruelly separated and are only now finding each other again. When he gets Dean back down below, Alistair will be sure to return the attentions. He’ll make his darling protégé scream an entire fucking aria. It should be child’s play to ensure that Dean hits all the right notes.

After all, he knows his boy inside and out—the best fathers always do.

Words come out from Dean's mouth in response to Alistair's sweet nothing, but Alistair doesn't pay them any mind. They don't belong to Dean, aren't worth the breath he wastes to exhale them.

Dean used to say such lovely things, he used to know just the right words to set Alistair's pulse racing. Now he's nothing more than a broken recording of demands—nothing but a mouthpiece for those unimaginative winged eunuchs—and, frankly, that's a little disappointing.

*His* Dean is still in there, though—Alistair catches a glimpse of him when Dean tires of his borrowed words and speaks from his heart instead, sliding a knife into Alistair's side while wearing a tiny, sharp smile.

Hot, blissful pain spills through Alistair and he tips his head back on a moan. A moment later, he hisses as Dean twists the blade—holy water soaked into the metal, it burns so beautifully—and then whispers, “Oooo, yes. Do it again, Dean. Reach right inside that hole you're cutting for yourself and feel what you do to me.”

Dean’s eyes flick to his and Alistair can see that his boy wants to. Alistair had forty years to mould Dean into the perfect pupil, and for the last ten of those years Dean was so obliging. He was so very, very lovely at his work.

Alistair’s masterpiece.

His hard work is hidden behind a mask of humanity now, but Dean is peeling the mask away for him, for his master. He’s tearing it from his skin slice by loving slice, body trembling already with the things he’s remembering to want.

The things Alistair taught him to love.

When the overhead pipe starts to drip, Alistair understands that it’s a sign. Dean is meant to be his, was always meant for him. And once Alistair steps free from this trap and rips his boy's meat suit apart, he’s going to take a break from doing Lilith’s bidding Above and reacclimatize Dean to his destiny Below.

Dean deserves Alistair’s personal touch, after all. He's too precious and delicate a creation to waste on an unskilled assistant.

Alistair is moments from reclaiming his prize, too. He has his hand wrapped around Dean’s throat, fingertips digging into that fragile windpipe, and he can see from the dull lack of panic in Dean’s eyes that his boy wants this too, he wants to come home.

And then the angel comes, interrupting their moment, and Alistair is forced to deal with the
unwanted interloper while Dean coughs weakly on the floor. The boy is unconscious within moments—which is another disappointment; he had so much more stamina in Hell—and Alistair focuses more of his attention on beating the angel to a bloody pulp. This particular eunuch doesn't mean much to him, but taking it apart bit by bit is at least a way to pass the time.

And there is time to pass now, because Alistair needs his boy to be awake and aware for those final, intimate moments. He needs Dean’s lovely eyes staring into his as he stops the meat suit's heart—one last memory of green before Alistair reawakens the white in his boy.

It shouldn’t take long, once he has Dean back where he belongs, back on his rack—Alistair has been keeping it reserved for just such an occasion. Burnt strips of the boy’s skin still cling to the shackles from their last time together. The flow of blood that used to drip constantly from the sides may have long since dried up, but a few hours work should moisten the channels.

And Dean's instruments—Alistair has kept those as well. He's kept them gleaming and well-honed, ready for Dean to take them up again with those skilled, artistic hands of his.

The boy's a natural. Gifted. Given enough encouragement and a suitably nurturing environment, he might one day surpass even Alistair.

The daydream of how he and his boy will pass the time before that day is sweetly addicting, and Alistair loses himself in it while the angel's face bloodies beneath him.

One moment, he’s beating the shit out of Dean’s temporary keeper, the next he’s pinned to a wall. He watches as Sam Winchester strides into the wan basement light, gaze fixed on his brother’s unconscious body. Watches him drop hastily to a crouch beside Dean, checking briefly for a pulse before gripping Dean's shoulder—as though his touch can bring Dean back from wherever Alistair put him.

“Stupid pet tricks,” Alistair observes from his place against the wall, “Won’t bring him back.”

That gets him Sam’s eyes, furious and burning, and Alistair grins.

“Haven’t you noticed that Dean-o isn’t all there anymore, Sammy?” he prods. “That’s because he carved himself apart in the Pit. Gave me the very best parts as a gift. Sweetmeats, Sam. So very tender and tasty.”

Sam looks even angrier as he rises and advances on Alistair, which is amusing as Hell. Alistair might be finished here (or he might not; he’s been in worse situations), but if these are his final moments, then he’s going out laughing.

“Who’s murdering the angels?” Sam demands, as though Alistair’s words aren’t reaching him at all. “How are they doing it?”

He's close enough now for Alistair to catch a whiff of him, and he's surprised enough by the scent to say, "My, my. Someone's been drinking his Wheaties."

Sam flushes, and the guilty twitch of his eyes back toward Dean tell Alistair that his boy has had words with Sam on the subject.

"I don't think Dean would approve," Alistair adds.

Sam's jaw firms as he refocuses, and he stiffly says, "I think he'll make an exception if it means spreading your insides over the wall. Now, tell me who's killing the angels."
There’s a cracking, wrenching pain in Alistair’s chest as Sam extends his hand and spreads his fingers, but he chuckles through his groans and manages to say, “Dunno, but I can tell you what Dean looks like when he comes.”

White flares everywhere, shredding into him, and when his vision clears he can see Sam’s face—no more rationality there, only wrath. And the possessive, hungry jealousy that he knew he’d find if he prodded the right pressure point.

He knows every inch of his boy, after all. He knows what Sam is to Dean. It only served to reason that the blood flows both ways down the knife blade.


He’s being so obliging about letting Alistair goad him that Alistair decides to toss him a bone. “I’ll tell you one thing, boy; Lilith isn’t behind this. She wouldn’t kill seven angels. She’d kill a hundred, a thousand.”

It’s the truth and Sam knows it. Alistair sees him pause with the knowledge, watches some small sliver of rationality filter back into his eyes. He should probably let the matter drop there, make good his escape, but he’s never been one to slip a knife between someone’s ribs without giving it a single twist.

Licking his lips, he breathes, “You know what I miss most about your brother? The way he used to curl up against me in our bed—got blood everywhere, of course, but he’s just so sweet when he sleeps, isn’t—”

This time, the world flares gold, and it doesn’t come back.
Errant (A Terrible Life)

Dean is just doing up his pants when Mr. Adler walks into his office. He freezes where he is, both appalled by the interruption and relieved it didn't come sooner. Like, say, three minutes ago, when he had Wesson in his mouth and a couple of enormous tech-boy fingers up his back door. He clenches up absently at the thought, and has to work to conceal a wince as the deep throb flares to a burn.

“Uh,” Dean says quickly as he lurches into motion again, fumbling into his shirt. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“Really,” Mr. Adler drawls. “Because to me it looks like you two were engaged in a serious breech of company policy.”

“You guys have company policy on this kind of thing?” That’s Wesson, and Dean’s skin prickles anxiously at the sneering arrogance in the guy’s voice—all well and good for him, since he’s no longer technically a Sandover employee, but Dean’s still gainfully employed, and—oh good grief, Wesson is just standing there with his hands on his hips and his—his business hanging out in front for everyone to see.

“Clothes!” Dean blurts, lunging for the desk and tossing the first piece of clothing he gets his hand on at Wesson’s… um. Package.

Wesson gives him a slow, condescending look (it’s amazing how a mouth that feels so good can be twisted into an expression that makes the man look like so much of a jerk), and dangles the clothing—shirt, looks like—from one finger. Nowhere near the area it’s supposed to be covering.

Oh god, that’s it. Dean’s going to be fired. Mr. Adler is going to kick him right out on his aching rear end.

At the thought of his boss, Dean realizes that he’s still standing there with his shirt unbuttoned and his suspenders dangling limply at either side and his next breath gets stuck in his throat. He hasn’t felt this frantic and lightheaded since Francie over in Drafts lost the paperwork on the Haverdash account.

“Honestly,” Mr. Adler sighs, shaking his head and closing the door behind him. “Can’t you two keep it in your pants for a single week?”

He glances over at Wesson, one eyebrow raised in an expression that indicates he isn’t impressed by the equipment, and then refocuses on Dean with a thin, insincere smile.

“Dean, Dean, Dean,” he muses. “What are we going to do with you? I mean, just look at you. My boys gave you the most frigid, anal-retentive monkey-mind they could find, and Sam still managed to pry that tight ass open. You, my friend, have a serious impulse control problem.”

None of which sounds even remotely like the pink slip speech Dean was expecting. Not that it makes any sort of sense either.

He could sit down and think it over, give his weak knees a few moments to recover, but instead he makes an executive decision and decides to ignore the conundrum in favor of groveling for his livelihood.

“Look, Mr. Adler, I can explain.”
“Ah, useless lies. I’m sure none of us want to waste our time on those, now do we?” Mr. Adler says pleasantly, and then pokes Dean in the forehead.

Dean blinks and—

“Jesus Christ!” That’s Sam’s voice, and the sudden flurry of motion over to Dean’s right is Sam diving behind the desk.

Dean’s still working his way through almost seventy years’ worth of memory—fuck, Hell hurts just as much the second time around—but he still thinks that he’s missing something here. That something happened and—

And his mouth tastes like cock.

“What the fuck?” he spits, resisting the urge to touch his lips. When he steps away from Mr. Adler—or whatever nasty son of a bitch is pretending to be Mr. Adler—his ass gives a deep twinge and holy shit Sam had his fingers up there. Sam had his cock in Dean’s goddamned mouth.

And vice versa, now that Dean’s thinking about it, although Sam needs some lessons on keeping his goddamned teeth to himself. Seriously, how did such a little bitch end up getting so far in life without acquiring any skills in that department whatsoever?

Focus, Dean reminds himself, and growls, “What the hell did you do to us?”

“I gave you a new perspective on your life, Dean,” the smarmy son of a bitch replies calmly. “We put you down here with someone else’s memories, someone else’s personality, and you still managed to fumble your way into hunting. And into your brother’s bed, apparently, but I suppose it was too much to hope that wouldn’t be happening.”

From the floor on the other side of the desk, where Dean can hear Sam hurriedly struggling into his clothes, there’s a steady, low stream of, “Oh god, oh god, oh god.”

“Any time you want to join the conversation instead of hiding behind my—the desk, I’d really appreciate it,” Dean calls, leaning over and banging his hand on the wood while keeping a wary eye on Smarmy. No telling what the bastard is, after all. Aside from really fucking powerful and a complete and utter dick.

Although the dude at least doesn’t seem to intend any bodily harm, which is a nice change of pace.

“I’m a little busy, Dean!” Sam shoots back.

Fine, if he won’t deal with this, Dean will.

Stepping forward, he pokes Smarmy in the chest and snarls, “I don’t know what you are, chuckles, but if this is how you get your jollies, then you are one sick puppy. And I’m gonna put you down.”

Smarmy’s smile widens. “Well, aren’t you just the knight errant all of a sudden.”

“You damn well bet I am! Getting mind-whammed into sucking your brother’s dick—” From behind the desk, Sam makes a choked, appalled sound, which is a little insulting—Dean didn’t think he was all that bad at it. “—deserves a little ass kicking.”

“Oh please,” Smarmy scoffs. “Like you two aren’t making the beast with two backs on a regular basis—and don’t try to deny it.” Smarmy points at himself with a mocking smile. “Angel here. I do know a thing or two about human interactions.”
Again. Again with the motherfucking assumptions. It was cute the first fifty times it happened, but it’s been a while since the shiny has rubbed off of that particular joke, and Dean’s annoyance cuts straight through the rest of his indignation as he lets out an inarticulate growl of frustration before yelling, “I’m not fucking my goddamn brother!”

Smarmy just looks at him, smug and superior and knowing, like Dean’s the one being obtuse here, and for some reason (because God hates him) Dean’s brain chooses that moment to present him with the technicolor highlight of the last ten minutes, which involves hanging onto the edge of his desk for dear life while Wesson (Sammy) sucked at his cock like it was going out of style. He wasn’t at all good at it, but a blowjob is a blowjob and even the memory of wet lips and suction is enough to make Dean’s cock ache.

Dean flushes unwillingly—it's not his fault he’s biologically required to enjoy that sort of thing—and then, turning away from Smarmy’s irritating superiority, snaps, “Sam!”

Seriously, he has to look at the bastard—angel, really? this asshole and that prick Uriel are who Cas hangs out with?—any longer and he really is going to haul off and knock him one. Whether it’s a good idea or not.

“I—I can’t find my—”

“I don’t care. Get up. We’re leaving.”

“But—”

“Dude. I spent the last week eating fucking rabbit food and driving a yuppiemobil. I need to check into a motel, wash my mouth out with alcohol, and get some real grub. Oh, and my ass is fucking killing me, which is really putting a damper on my goddamned day, so if you don’t get the fuck up now, I’m gonna punch Michael Landon here in his fucking face.”

Smarmy tsks. “Language, Dean. And the name is Zachariah.”

“Oh, fuck you, Mikey,” Dean mutters without looking over.

“I take it this means you’re getting up off the bench and back into the game? Because another demonstration could be—”

“We’re good,” Dean growls.

“Yes.”

It takes three minutes to coax Sam out of his hiding place (even with Zach flapped off to wherever the fuck), another four to find his brother’s pants (Dean does not remember tossing them all the way over onto his—Smith’s—file cabinet), and then (finally) they’re on their way out of this crazy, fucked up nightmare.

The walk down the hallway outside Smith’s office is fine, but as soon as the elevator doors close behind them, things get a little awkward. Dean guesses that’s because they’re both remembering all those other elevator rides, when he wasn’t himself and Sam was Wesson and there’d been awkward flirting and, once, Wesson’s tongue in Dean’s mouth.

Christ, he misses kissing Sam.
Dean misses kissing Sam with a yearning, crippling ache, and this whole fucked up Smith-Wesson experience hasn't done a thing to fix that, because it isn't the same. Those shared moments in the elevator this past week, the drunken make-out session at Smith's apartment, the lapse in judgment that just happened upstairs... that wasn't them. There was a kind of draw there, sure—more noticeable when Sam's mouth was on his—but it was vague and diffuse, and nothing at all like it was before Dean took his trip Down South.

What he and Sam had then, that was intense, and irresistible, and had nothing whatsoever to do with sex. That was affection. Solidarity.

Them against the motherfucking world.

“So,” Sam says, miserably and awkwardly, as they crawl past the twelfth floor.

Dean hates hearing his brother sound like that—especially about something that doesn’t even mean anything.

It was just a hookup, after all; no different from a one night stand with any small town bar floozie. That angel dude even said it—different histories, different personalities. Different people.

Wasn’t them.

And Dean doesn't know about Sam's alter-ego, but he's positive that Smith was so damn repressed and sex-starved he would've humped a sheep, given half the chance.

He steels himself and then sidles over, crossing the artificial, stiff distance between them and knocking his brother’s shoulder with his own. When Sam glances nervously over, Dean offers him what he hopes is a reassuring smile.

“Well, I say. ‘We don’t have to talk about this, right? I mean, just because Dickariah waved his gay wand over us or whatever…”

The bloom of anxious relief in Sam’s eyes loosens a knot deep in Dean’s chest. “You, uh. You think that’s all it was?”

“What else could it have been, dude?”

Sam nods, rubbing at the back of his neck with one hand. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

As the elevator doors open and Sam shifts closer again, hand coming down to slip into Dean’s back pocket where it belongs, Dean allows himself a private smile of victory.

First thing on the To-Do list is getting Sam back to a motel room and into their bed for a little one-on-one time. Maybe they aren't quite up to kissing yet (and they aren't, or at least Dean isn't, which means he's going to have to wait to ease that particular ache), but Dean's sure as hell going to burrow in as close as he can to his brother. He's going to hold on tight until he gets the sense of being someone else out of his head and Sam's familiar warmth back in.

Christ, Dean can’t wait to get back to normal.
Sam isn't thrilled with Chuck's novels himself, but Dean is damn near nuclear. Even now, when they're sure Chuck isn't anything but a patsy for a higher power, Dean hasn't stopped glowering. Chuck's sitting on the edge of his couch watching them move around, eyes wide and body tense. Sam keeps offering the guy what he hopes is a sympathetic smile whenever Chuck looks his way, but the cloud of self-righteous fury surrounding Dean is more than strong enough to make any attempt to soothe him futile.

Eventually, Sam manages to send his brother out of the room to look for further clues, and that seems to help a little (Sam actually gets a tentative question out of Chuck, now that Dean isn't there to glare him down). Of course, it can't last. Not with Dean's temper up and no opportunities for Sam to plunk him down and relax him with a slow massage.

It's less than ten minutes before Dean storms back into the room, a fistful of papers clenched in one hand and a murderous look on his face.

Chuck scrambles up from the couch immediately, looking like a startled rabbit, but before he can run (and before Sam can run interference by throwing himself in the way), Dean has Chuck by the lapels of his ratty bathrobe and is hauling the man over his coffee table so that he can slam him heavily into the wall.

"Ow!" Chuck shouts, flinching, although Sam can tell Dean is—barely—restraining himself.

"What the fuck is this?" Dean yells, letting go of Chuck with one hand so he can brandish the papers in the guy's face.

"I don't—what? What did I do? I'm sorry!"

"Dean!" Sam calls, making his own way over. "Dude, let him go. It's not his fau—"

Without taking his eyes off of Chuck, Dean thrusts his hand toward Sam. He's clearly offering the papers, and Sam takes them, sneaking wary glances at his brother as he reads.

Although, the more he looks, the less he feels Dean is overreacting.

"This is private," he says after a moment, looking up and pinning Chuck with his eyes.

And yeah, okay. A lot of the stuff that Chuck has written about was private, but this—this is the night Dean finally broke down and told Sam why he couldn't bear to sleep with him anymore, the night he confessed that he didn't feel worthy of being touched, that he felt unclean. This is the night when Sam coaxed his brother back into their bed, feeling at once irreparably broken and like an old, infected wound deep in his chest was finally healing back up. This is the night when Dean let Sam brush his tears from his face, and cradle him close. This is the night that drew out—first into morning and then into afternoon because neither of them wanted to be the first to pull away.

This isn't just private; it's sacred. It's theirs.

Sam wants to break Chuck's fingers for daring to put this down on paper. He wants to punch the man—repeatedly—for bearing witness. However unwittingly.

"I didn't know!" Chuck protests, looking wildly back and forth between them. "C'mon, guys! I thought—I thought you weren't real."
He has a point, but that doesn’t take the fluttering, exposed feeling out of Sam’s chest, or his protective rage on Dean’s behalf. And it takes him almost half an hour to get Dean to back down and settle for burning the offending pages in the sink while Chuck looks on nervously.

“Should be burning everything,” Dean mutters as he watches the flames. He’s playing with his lighter in his right hand, snapping it open and then flicking it closed again.

That seems to sting Chuck in a way that Dean’s other comments haven’t, because he draws himself up slightly and says, “Hey! They may not be Pulitzer Prize winners, but they aren’t that bad.”

Dean slants a disgusted glance back at him. “Dude, they’re like… trashy romance novels. No wonder everyone thinks we’re fucking. Hell, if all I’d done was read those pieces of shit, I’d think we’re fucking.”

Dean has a point. Sam felt… strange… reading some parts of the novels. Sweaty palms, uncertain stomach, fluttery chest. Surreal and unsettling.

“Are you kidding me?” Chuck blurts. “You’re kidding me, right?”

The incredulous tone of his voice gets Dean to turn around, and piques Sam’s interest, too. It’s the most spine the guy has shown since they appeared on his doorstep.

“I worked for hours toning you two down, and even then—Do you know the shit I had to go through with my publishers on my first drafts?” Chuck continues. “I mean, come on! The—the massages, and the kissing, and sleeping in the same bed. You two are like the poster boys for Incest Anonymous!”

There’s a moment of shocked, still silence, and then Dean’s eyes meet Sam’s across the kitchen. Dean gives a slight tilt of his head with an eye roll—which is Dean-speak for ‘wow, he’s completely nuts’—and Sam can’t help returning it.

As though there’s anything wrong with two brothers being affectionate with each other.

“Oh, Jesus,” Chuck exclaims, throwing his hands up. “You guys are as thick as a couple blocks of wood, you know that?” Turning sharply, he angles for the far right side of the cabinets and complains, “I need a drink.”

As far as Sam’s concerned, Chuck’s been hitting the bottle a little too hard, if that’s the sort of conclusion he’s drawing about them, but he doesn’t say anything as Chuck gets his tequila and meanders back into the other room, where he flops down on the couch in full view of the kitchen and starts drinking directly out of the bottle.

“Fucker.”

The sound of his brother’s voice reclaims Sam’s attention and he finds Dean has gone back to staring at the burning pages. He has a stony expression on his face, which means he’s still feeling exposed and vulnerable and is defensive about it, and Sam moves without thinking. He steps close and slides his arms around his brother’s waist. Rests his chin on his brother’s shoulder.

Dean tenses minutely and then relaxes again, dropping his head back and letting out a sigh.

“It’s okay,” Sam breathes, keeping his voice low and for his brother’s ears only as he rubs small circles into Dean’s stomach. “No one’s going to read it.”

“I just—he has no goddamned right.”
“I know,” Sam agrees. He wishes he could tell Dean it won’t happen again, or that they’ll find some way to wipe Chuck’s memory clean, and can’t. All he can do is nuzzle the side of his brother’s neck and press a single, tentative kiss to the curve of his throat.

“That!” Chuck shouts from the other room. “That’s just what I’m talking about!”

He already sounds drunk, though, and Dean is practically melting against Sam’s front, so Sam feels justified in ignoring the comment. When Dean ignores it as well, resting so quietly and unprotesting of the kiss, Sam offers another one while sliding his hand up underneath his brother’s shirt so he can feel the soft, smooth skin of Dean’s stomach.

Dean makes a noise that sounds almost like a moan—contented, happy, safe—and somehow it lights Sam up inside and sets him aching at the same time. He wants to get Dean alone somewhere, wants to pull all of the bulky, unwanted clothes out of his way and touch and kiss and soothe his brother’s skin—skin that bears no physical marks from his time in Hell. He wants to find a way to keep Dean always like this—always in the present, and here with Sam, where his memories of the Pit can’t touch him.

But there’s still Lilith. And if she gets her hands on Dean, then she’s going to stuff him into the deepest, darkest hole she can find and break him apart until there’s nothing left but oily black eyes and a ravenous hunger for other people’s pain.

Sam’s grip tightens unconsciously at the thought of the threat, but he’s kissing the underside of Dean’s jaw and his brother doesn’t seem to notice the desperation pouring out of him in waves. It always takes him like this—a quiet moment and then, suddenly, Sam will be sweating and short of breath. His skin will prickle with anxious fear.

It hasn’t ever been quite this bad before, though—possibly because Dean hasn’t ever seemed this healed. It’s probably just an illusion (Sam knows that forty years of torment can’t be erased so easily), but it’s an illusion that Sam wants to nurture. That he’s going to protect, just like he’s going to protect Dean.

In order to do that, he’s going to have to kill Lilith. Which means he’s going to have to go back to Ruby, and not just for a single shot of burning power, like he did for Alistair.

If he’s going to protect his brother—if he’s going to keep Dean in his arms, the lazy smile on those curving lips—he has to be stronger. He has to drink, and train, and he can’t… He can’t let Dean know about it because Dean wouldn’t understand. He’s never been able to grasp that he might be worth that sort of sacrifice. Can’t seem to comprehend that he’s everything, that he isn’t just Sam’s brother but his heart. His soul.

If Sam has to destroy his own soul to save his brother’s, he’ll do it in a heartbeat.

*I’ll keep you safe,* he promises silently, sliding one hand up to cup his brother’s cheek and urging Dean’s head to the side so that he can get at those plush, soft lips. *I’ll keep you.*

It’s their first real kiss since Dean’s been back, and Dean smiles into it, but Sam’s chest only tightens with determination.

However their meeting will end, he has to find Lilith. And soon.
Marie finds him standing in the middle of the break room, and she almost calls security on him. He’s huge—over six feet tall, and broad-shouldered, with an obvious bunch of muscles that only come from either hours of hard work in the gym or a job doing something physically taxing, like construction. Worse, he’s covered in blood. It’s smeared on his hands and shirt. On his jeans.

She opens her mouth to scream, and then the glassy expression in his eyes registers and she shuts it again, swallowing her heart. She’s been working in the ER long enough to recognize shock when she sees it.

There’s no guarantee he isn’t still dangerous, of course, but the longer she looks the more she’s struck with the impression that this man is terribly lost. That he’s in dire straits. In pain.

“Sir?” she calls cautiously, easing forward. “Are you okay? Do you need me to call a doctor?”

He blinks—slowly, like his brain isn’t working so well—and then looks down at himself and frowns. “It’s not mine,” he says, his voice low and rough. “I was. I was looking for the bathroom. To clean up.” He looks around, confusion clouding his features. “I got lost?”

“It happens,” she assures him with a smile. “Hospitals can be tricky like that.”

“Not for me,” the man replies, still looking around dreamily. “Seen one, seen ‘em all.”

There are only questions in Marie’s head off that comment—the largest of which is, “why?” and has her wondering again whether she’s safe in here alone with him. Maybe he’s the reason for the blood he’s wearing. She’s certainly seen enough wife beaters who seem genuinely remorseful afterwards… until the next time.

But she doesn’t think that’s the case.

“I can show you the way,” she offers, and after a brief, slightly awkward pause, he nods.

On gut instinct (and because something about his dazed expression is bringing out her maternal instincts) she brings him to the staff bathroom, complete with shower, and puts a spare set of scrubs down on the sink. Then she steps outside to wait.

When the man emerges twenty minutes later, he looks more alert. And now that there’s someone home behind his eyes, Marie’s heart pounds and her loins tighten.

Wow, she thinks, and pretty. Underneath the blood, Mystery Man cleans up really nicely.

The sheepish, but still tense smile he offers her only improves him. “Thanks for this,” he says, plucking at the scrubs. He’s gripping a garbage bag in his right hand—must have dug around under the sink for some way to transport his clothes—and when he sees her looking, he switches the bag to his left and holds out his hand.

“I’m Dean.”

“Marie,” she replies—he has a nice grip; strong, calloused hands that hint she was right about the construction guess. “You brought someone in?”
“My, uh. My brother. Sam.”

“How about we go find him, then?” Marie suggests, and hopes that the offer isn’t going to backfire on her.

It would really suck to end up inadvertently letting Dean know that his brother is dead. And there's an awful lot of blood on the clothes stuffed into the garbage bag. There was an awful lot on his hands and face before he showered—in his hair, even; probably just from running his hands through it, but still.

When Marie reads the board, though, she finds Dean’s brother listed as in stable condition—bed three. Not that the man she finds lying in said bed looks more than two staggering steps away from death’s door. He's even bigger than Dean, which is surprising, and too pale against the white sheets—dark circles under his eyes and bandages from his wrists up to his elbows.

Suicide attempt, then.

Marie steps back out of the way, her chest aching as Dean makes his way into the small, curtained-off area. She does her best to be unobtrusive, although from the way Dean’s eyes are focused on the bed, she could be jumping around over here and he still wouldn’t notice. She could have evaporated off the earth, for all he's aware.

Dean must have some vague comprehension of his surroundings, though, because without looking behind him, he reaches out, pulls the chair that's waiting there closer to the side of his brother’s bed, and sits down. Or maybe he was telling the truth before—maybe he's been in enough emergency rooms to know where things will be without having to search for them.

Marie sincerely hopes not, but Dean lacks the hesitancy she sees in most visitors—people are leery of so much as brushing the bedrail with a fingertip, normally. Too afraid of mucking something up to do more than sit stiffly and stare.

Dean, though—he reaches his right hand through the metal bars of the rail without any sign of discomfort. Repositioning the IV line that runs into the back of his brother's hand, he threads his fingers with his brother's limp ones. With his left hand, he stretches up over the rail to stroke his brother’s hair.

“Gotta stop doing this to me, Sammy,” he murmurs, and then briefly gets up to press a gentle kiss on his brother’s pale, cracked lips.

Oh.

Oh.

Marie blushes, looking away, and then moves onto the other side of the curtain and slides it closed behind her, offering the two some privacy.

It’s hospital policy that only family members are allowed back here. Only family members are allowed to know how patients are progressing, what their current condition is.

And, as long as hospital policy dictates it’s necessary, Marie is willing to let Dean and his Sam have their little lie.
Jimmy waits until his insane captors are both sound asleep before slowly getting out of his own bed. He’s careful—keeps glancing over at them at every creak of the bedsprings—but they’re both snoring, clearly dead to the world. They haven’t moved much at all for the past hour, actually—not since Sam first laid down and pulled Dean close to his front before pressing a lingering kiss to the back of Dean’s neck.

Apparently, Dean’s murmured protests that Sam wouldn’t stay awake if he were lying down were right. Not that he protested all that long or hard—not with Sam lazily stroking his arms and stomach.

Once he’s off the edge of the other bed, Jimmy moves more swiftly, freezing only once in a heart-pounding moment of alarm just after he pulls his right shoe on—when he catches a sudden rustle of motion from his captors’ direction. He jerks his head around, and sees that it’s just Dean twisting around to burrow closer against Sam. Dean’s eyes are still shut, his movements heavy and uncoordinated with sleep. Sam lifts his arm a little to accommodate the change of position, then strokes his hand down Dean’s back once before letting it rest just above the curve of Dean’s ass. Maybe a little lower than that—Jimmy isn’t looking close enough to tell.

One breath of air, then two, and by the third it becomes obvious that they’re both still asleep. Relief floods Jimmy, making his head spin with a natural adrenaline high, and he gets moving again.

Two minutes later, he’s stepping out of the door while shrugging into his coat. He shakes his head as he pulls the door shut behind him, cutting off his view of the bed and the two men in it.

Sam and Dean are either crazy or lying, but either way Jimmy isn’t sticking around to find out. Oh, he knows they’re telling the truth about the angels and demons—he remembers what it was like, being worn like a suit. It’s the rest of their story that he just can’t bring himself to swallow.

“Brothers,” he mutters to himself as he hurries away from the motel room. “Yeah, right.”
“I’m sorry,” Dean breathes. He’s kneeling on the concrete floor of Bobby’s safe room, where it’s so cold he’s shivering underneath his coat, but Sam is sweating where he’s tied down to the cot. Sweating and moaning and shaking like a junkie going through withdrawal.

Going through it hard.

Dean knows he should feel betrayed by the revelation that Sam went back to polluting himself with demon’s blood—after he promised, too. He looked Dean right in the eyes, and he goddamned swore up and down that it was over. So yeah, Dean’s feeling pretty fucking betrayed. But he also understands why Sam is doing this—he saw the terror behind Sam’s pleading, tearful explanation when Dean caught him at it in that factory.

‘I can’t let her take you again,’ Sam whispered, trying to pull Dean close, and Dean let himself be pulled. He fought down his gorge and let Sam kiss his cheek, smearing someone else's blood on his skin. Then he brought Sam here for a betrayal of his own.

Dean felt shamed and sick to his stomach as he maneuvered Sam into the panic room. His head was light and his hands were trembling with heavy, nauseating guilt as he shoved the door shut and turned the lock. It took Bobby's hand on his arm to stop him from opening it right back up at his brother's first, plaintive, "Dean?"

He feels even worse now, sick like he's never been in his life—heartsore like he's only ever been in the Pit, beneath Alistair's hand. He’s going to see it through, though. He’s going to sit right here with his brother, just as long as it takes.

He's going to be here, waiting, when Sam comes out the other side of his own private hell.

“Dean,” Sam pants, thrashing more violently against the straps. He’s digging welts into his arms and legs, chafing his skin red, and it makes Dean’s wrists and ankles ache in sympathy. But this is still better than watching Sam's powers throw him around the room, so he resists the urge to release his brother.

When Sam sobs wordlessly, Dean grips his brother's hand in his own.

"I'm here, Sammy," he says, ignoring the rough scrape of his voice against his throat. He isn't exactly sure how long it's been since he last drank anything, but he isn't about to leave Sammy's side to toss back a cold one.

No matter how much he could use the numbing buzz of alcohol right about now.

This is Dean's fault, after all. Sam did this for Dean, he wandered off the reservation and hasn't been able to figure out how to get back. And then, of course, there's another reason to stay.

Sometimes, even in the depths of his pain and delirium, Sam seems to hear Dean. There was an hour or so a while back where he calmed right on down at the sound of Dean's voice. Dean talked himself stupid about the dumbest shit—keeping Sam calm, soothing him—until Sam drifted deeper again, beyond his reach.

How can he leave, even for a second, when there's even the slightest chance of a repeat performance?
This time, of course, Dean gets nothing but the same, shallow breaths and tightly restrained jerks he was getting moments before. The sight sticks in his throat—Christ, what the fuck good is he when he can't fucking do anything—and he shuts his eyes against it, bending forward and resting his own cool forehead against his brother’s.

Christ, Sam’s burning up.

“Dean,” Sam groans.

Helpless to do anything but respond to that plea, Dean looks again and finds his brother staring back. Except that isn’t quite accurate—Sam’s eyes may be open, but there’s clearly no one home. There’s just pain and confusion and a haze of need that Dean responds to the only way he can, by pressing his lips to his brother’s.

It’s like kissing dry parchment, like kissing desert, and Dean pulls back with a wince.

Thirty years on the rack, another ten off it, and he’d still barter another hundred Below if it would spare Sam one second of this suffering. He’d do it and call the price cheap for the asking. At least then he wouldn’t have to watch this.

How much fucking longer is this going to take?

“Dean.”

Hearing his name isn't at all startling—it's the only thing Sam ever says—but that isn't Sam’s voice, and Dean looks over to see Castiel standing in the doorway to the safe room.

Help.

Salvation.

If anything can get Sam detoxed quicker, it'll be an angel.

“Cas,” Dean says, lurching to his feet.

The room swims around him alarmingly, and he almost pitches forward over his brother’s body before catching himself on the edge of the cot. After a few moments, when he’s able, he pushes himself upright and staggers over toward the doorway. When he shuffles to a halt just inside the room, he nearly falls again under a second, stronger wave of disorientation, and only just manages to hold himself upright by shooting out a hand to cling to the doorframe.

“Help him,” he demands, swaying drunkenly on his feet.

Castiel looks past him, looks at Sam, and then shifts his gaze back to Dean. He still isn't coming inside—isn't providing the help he's supposed to be—but Dean's brain is slowly starting to register the fact that the room is now angel- as well as demon-proof. Means he'll have to carry Sam out to Castiel, which... is problematic. Especially since the whole room seems to have filled up with sludgy, wavering water, as far as Dean's eyes are concerned.

He supposes he could have Castiel go get Bobby to help, but he doesn't like the idea of anyone else touching Sam when he's like this. Which means that, somehow, Dean will just have to find the reserves to manage.

“How long has it been since you slept?” Castiel asks abruptly, breaking in on Dean's bleary thoughts.
“’Bout a day.” Dean doesn’t remember, actually. It might have been a couple. Might have been three 
or four. Not that it matters. “I'll bring him out. You can—if I get him out there, you can help him, 
right?”

“If you don’t rest, your body will break down. You’ll be no use to anyone.”

Castiel has a valid point, but Dean can’t sleep. Not yet. Not when Sam is in such rough shape.

“Can’t,” he mumbles with a shake of his head. He starts to turn back—to fetch Sam or pass out 
trying—and then loses his balance and falls sideways, right through the open doorway and into Cas. 
“Oops,” he comments, trying to haul himself up using the angel’s lapel as a handle.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel says in return, and a hand brushes Dean’s hair.

Dean knows guilty apologies when he hears them, no matter how exhausted he is—he’s the king of 
apologizing for stupid shit he’s about to do, after all—and his eyes snap open on a surge of 
befuddled alarm.

"I'll keep you safe," Castiel announces, holding him more tightly as he weakly starts to struggle. 
"And someday... someday, you'll understand that it had to be like this." He pauses while Dean 
concentrates—can't win in a battle of strength, especially now, but he might get somewhere by 
gouging one of Cas' eyes with his thumb—and then adds, "You can hate me, if you need to. And 
remember that you don't come from Sam's side willingly."

Dean still has no goddamned clue what's going on, but he understands that much—understands that 
Cas intends to take him Away From Sam—enough to grunt, "No. Fuck you, don't—"

And then Castiel's fingertips touch his forehead and send him tumbling down into the dark.
The kid’s a little taken aback by the whole prizefight plan, but Zachariah didn’t really expect any differently. Anyway, he’s safely contained here—squirreled away by Castiel, who has been much more tolerable since his reeducation—with no way to reach his brother and put the brakes on this particular showdown, so it doesn’t matter how upset he is by the sudden turn of events.

Unsurprisingly enough, Sam didn’t take the news of Dean’s capture and subsequent death very well at all. That particular white lie was one of Zachariah’s more brilliant ideas, with the bloodied jacket and amulet that he sent back to Sam care of Castiel providing that extra special touch to make the entire experience as authentic as possible.

Zachariah didn’t actually get to see Sam’s reaction—he was busy pacifying Dean’s temper tantrum at having woken to find himself removed from his brother’s side—but from Castiel’s report, he’s sure that Sam is well on his way to leaving a Lilith-shaped smear on the floor of a certain church. It isn’t difficult to imagine how Sam’s conversation with Lucifer is going to go once the Morning Star has been freed, either. Not after Lucifer lets Sam in on the practical joke and tells him where his brother really is.

Something along the lines of, ‘yes, I’ll do anything to get him out of there’ will do nicely.

Zachariah will be climbing up the ladder from mid to upper management after this one for sure.

There’s still Dean’s end of the match, though, which requires at least some small measure of cooperation. That’s why Zachariah is wasting his time trying to romance the mortal now—or, at the very least, to convince him to be a team player.

“Look,” he explains, taking a chance and putting a companionable arm around Dean’s shoulders. “When it’s over… when you’ve destroyed the Devil… Your rewards will be unimaginable. Peace, happiness—two virgins and seventy sluts. Trust me, one day we’ll look back on this and laugh.”

“You know what, bub?” Dean spits, jerking out from under Zachariah’s arm. “You can take your virgins and shove ‘em where the sun don’t shine.”

“It’s the gender, isn’t it?” Zachariah guesses. “We have boys, too. Nothing against that. And I know just your type—tall and shaggy haired, right? I can get that for you. Tell you what, I’ll even throw in some dimples.”

Dean gives Zachariah a dark, murderous look that reminds him of what it was like watching Dean in Hell those last few years, whenever he checked in to see how his pet project was marinating, and then growls, “Show me to the damn door or so help me, I’ll make one.”

“Sorry, Dean. It’s like I already explained—too dangerous out there. I mean, you’re just itching to throw yourself headfirst into every nasty, inadvisable situation you can find, and that whole Lazarus thing gets old fast. Trust me, you don’t want to get into the habit. All sorts of unpleasant things could start happening.”

If Dean understands the vague threat implicit in the words, he doesn’t indicate it. He doesn’t look cowed at all—is, in fact, more hostile than ever, and staring at Zachariah like he’s imagining what his head would look like detached from his body. Good thing there aren’t any sharp, pointy objects in here.

“Look,” Zachariah continues in a more conciliatory tone. “You aren’t going anywhere, so you might
as well try to settle in and take advantage of the amenities. So you’re not looking for sex right now, I can respect that. After all, you’re in the middle of a bad break up. But there’s no reason to deny yourself the simpler pleasures—some chocolates, perhaps? A drink? One of those hot rod magazines you like so much? I’m a veritable yellow pages of comfort here. Anything you like, Dean—all you have to do is name it, and it’s yours.”

Jaw clenching, Dean pulls himself straighter and looks Zachariah in the eyes. His own eyes are fierce and burning—and yes, that’s just the dark, warrior spirit that Zachariah was hoping Hell would instill in him.

“What I want is for you kidnapping sons of bitches to bring me back to my brother,” Dean spits, practically vibrating with the promise of violence.

“How about I just pop back in when you’re feeling better?” Zachariah counter-offers, and then dematerializes before Dean’s sudden, furious swing can touch him.

Sweet-talking Heaven’s champion around is maybe going to take more work than he thought.
Flaunt (Sympathy for the Devil)

It’s annoying, how long it takes Dean to place her. Meg likes to think she made an impression, considering the sort of hijinks she got up to with his brother. Screw Ruby for actually going the extra mile and taking the fucking around all the way past go and through literal fucking and thereby blowing everyone else out of the water.

Bitch is dead, and she's still managing to get in Meg's way.

But Meg isn’t without resources, and she’s going to make Dean squirm before she sends him screaming back down to Dis, where she’s really going to have fun taking him apart. She never got a taste the first time around, what with Alistair being so greedy, but of course that isn’t going to be a problem now.

Stepping close to the meatsuit that houses Bobby Singer’s stinking soul, Meg trails one finger up his arm to tap a finger against the back of his neck. Her smile, though, is all for Dean.

“So let’s catch up, baby,” she purrs. “I mean, now that we have so much in common.”

“I’m nothing like you,” Dean spits, struggling against the hold Meg’s pet Bobby-suit has on him.

“Oh really? See, that’s not what I heard. I heard—and it really, really kills me to admit it—that you out-demoned all but the worst of us. You know they’re keeping Alistair’s old job open for you? There are thousands of souls just sitting down there on their racks waiting for Gehenna’s Butcher to come back home.”

That hits where she wants it to; she can tell by the way his eyes flinch.

“They’re still talking about how you handled that Fleischer kid,” Meg pursues, and then goes in for the kill. “And you think you can put your hands all over Sam without dirtying him up for us?” She laughs. “Oh, Dean. You did more for our team than Ruby ever did.”

Yes! That’s the ripping agony she wanted to see in his eyes, strong enough to slice through the cornered, burning hate. Against the wall, Dean goes limp.

Meg tilts her head to one side as she presses her knife (used to belong to that bitch Ruby, but finders-keepers) into her Bobby-puppet’s free hand. His neck muscles cord underneath her other fingers, a sure sign of struggle from within, but she’s too busy enjoying Dean’s expression to take much note.

“And to think,” she muses. “You’re so far gone you’ve even been flaunting it. Touching him…kissing him…” As though it’s just occurred to her, she stops and blinks. “Did you tell Bobby here about your little adventure in the world of corporate intrigue?”

Dean glares at her. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. That wasn’t—”

“That was exactly. You think I haven’t heard the talk around the water cooler? How the great Dean Winchester is so perverted he can’t even keep his hands off his kid brother when he’s wearing someone else’s mind? Face it, baby. Inside, you’re just as black-eyed as I am, and you’ve been oozing that depravity all over precious Sammy.”

There’s self-doubt warring with anger in Dean’s eyes, and Meg figures that this is as good as she’s going to be able to do with such a limited amount of time. Later, she promises herself, and then nods to her Bobby-puppet and takes a step away, giving him room to work.
“You’re a mad dog, Dean. Someone has to put you down, and I’m going to let your surrogate father here do what he’s been dying to ever since he first caught you with your filthy hands in the cookie jar.”

“Bobby,” Dean says, talking quickly as he struggles against the demon’s hold. “It isn’t—it wasn’t like that. You don’t want to do this. Bobby. Bobby—no!”

And that’s the moment where everything somehow slips sideways on Meg—her Bobby-puppet malfunctioning and stabbing itself instead of Dean, Sam Winchester showing up, Dean getting his hands on the goddamned knife. She sees Gehenna’s Butcher in his eyes as he advances on her, sees it for the first time in him.

Despite her taunts, she never believed the stories—not of the Dean she knew from before Hell. She never thought she’d look into Dean’s eyes and feel the same clutching, cold fist in her insides that she felt in Alistair’s presence.

But Hell changes a person, and as Dean comes toward her now, moving with the deadly grace Alistair used to crow about, Meg realizes that she’s missed the mark yet again.

There’s a demon in there all right, but it isn’t the black-eyed soldier she was expecting. It’s something worse, white-eyed and snarling, and she doesn’t understand how Dean hasn’t been taking everything apart up here. He should be. With that much Hell in him, he should be leaving a path of bloodied carnage behind him wherever he goes.

She glances back as she flees, confusion briefly edging out terror and forcing her to take a second look. She looks at the Butcher, wearing his white-eyed self so close to the surface where she dragged it. She sees him ignore Singer’s prone body in favor of getting his hands on his brother, sees the darkness drain out of him with a rush as Sam meets his eyes and grips his arms back.

Love, then.

It’s disgusting how powerful that weakest of emotions sometimes manages to be.
Lobby (Good God Y'all)

It’s beautiful here. They’re sitting by the side of the road, forested mountains spread out behind them and the sky clear and bright and blue. They’re both alive, battle won. They took down a horseman of the apocalypse, for crying out loud.

But Sam’s chest is heavy and leaden, and he can’t seem to make himself meet Dean’s eyes.

“So,” Dean says into the silence. “Pit stop at Mount Doom?” He’s still fiddling with the ring—has been off and on since they cut the thing free—and Sam looks at the gleam of light on metal (and his brother’s familiar, competent fingers) and frowns.

“Dean,” he starts.

“Sam, let’s not.”

God, Dean sounds tired, and Sam has a fleeting thought that it would be nice to find a place for the night—something more upscale than their usual stops, something with working cable and clean-smelling linens and a continental breakfast in the lobby in the morning—and spend a few hours chasing away that exhaustion with a slow deep tissue massage.

But that would only be delaying the inevitable, and if Sam doesn’t do the right thing now, he’s never going to be strong enough to manage it.

“No, listen,” he says. “This is important. I know you don’t trust me.”

“I trust you, Sammy,” Dean protests, although the awkward hesitation to his voice gives him away.

“You love me,” Sam corrects, thankful he can still truthfully say that much. “But that isn’t the same thing, and, Dean, I’m starting to realize that I don’t trust me either.” Dean waits patiently through the silence, giving Sam time to collect his thoughts before finally lifting his eyes to his brother and continuing, “From the minute I saw that blood, the only thought in my head...”

He can’t say it. Not out loud. But from the unhappy tightening of Dean’s jaw, he doesn’t have to.

Taking a deep breath, Sam pushes on.

“And I tell myself it's for the right reasons, my intentions are good, and it—it feels true, you know? But I think, underneath... I just miss the feeling. I know how messed up that sounds, which means I know how messed up I am.”

And as hard as that was to say, the next part makes him stop again. Thinking the words is difficult enough, but pushing them out makes his chest and throat ache and his eyes water.

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“He stops again, and this time when he tries to continue, he can’t get the words out past the painful lump in his throat.
The thing is, Sam can admit in the privacy of his own mind, he caught another glimpse of what those months were like, without Dean there. A refresher course in what he became: a machine of flesh and blood, working with a single purpose—to get Dean back, and damn anyone or anything that got in the way. He would have burnt the world, then, if he'd thought it would help.

Now the knowledge of what the angels want from his brother (his, not theirs; Dean doesn't belong to any of them) is gnawing away at Sam like a cancer. They took Dean from him once, and he can't help thinking they might do it again, despite the symbols Castiel burnt into both their ribs. Sam is terrified that Zachariah and Michael will find a way around those protections—that they'll find Dean and take him.

He's terrified because he knows, with frozen certainty, that he wouldn't ever get back anything but a burnt-out shell.

Dean is beautiful and good and brave and strong, but he's just a man for all that, and he can't hope to hold off the angels when they come. But Sam... Sam can't help wondering if his powers work on angels as well as demons, and those are dangerous, dark thoughts to have.

He doesn't want Dean to ever look at him again the way he looked at him in that warehouse, when Sam's chin and lips were covered in someone else's blood. Like Sam was a stranger he didn't know at all, and maybe didn't care to.

In the silence that has stretched out between them, Dean reaches across the table to rest his hand on top of Sam’s, and Sam—that look is still fresh in his head; he's never felt so unworthy of being touched—jers out of range, putting his hands in his lap. The fleeting, hurt expression that flickers over Dean’s face all but drives the breath from Sam’s lungs.

He drops his eyes, shamed and guilty, but doesn't take it back. He doesn't deserve Dean's comfort, and he can’t do this if Dean is touching him. He isn’t strong enough for that.

“So what are you saying?” Dean asks after a moment. His tone is colder now, more distant for Sam’s rejection, but although the only thing Sam wants to do is apologize and crawl over the table into Dean’s lap, he stays where he is.

“I’m in no shape to be hunting.” Or near you, he adds privately. “I need to step back, ‘cause I’m dangerous. Maybe it’s best we just... go our separate ways.”

His throat feels shredded by the words. His skin is aching, loneliness already settling in and sinking down to his bones.

And then Dean says, “If that’s what you want.”

Sam’s head comes up at that, and he’s hurt enough by the defeated tone of his brother’s voice to confess, “I was expecting a fight.”

Dean sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose with one hand. “I can’t do this, Sam,” he exhales. “I mean, I’ve tried to be understanding, but this—I can’t help you with this, dude. And I—I spend more time worrying about you than about doing the job right. And I just, I can’t afford that, you know? Not now. So if this is what you want, then. Then okay.”

Sam’s eyes are more than watering now, but Dean isn’t looking at him, so he still has a sliver of self-respect to cling to. “I’m sorry, Dean,” he whispers.

It isn’t what he wants to say—isn’t what he needs to tell his brother. What he needs to do is tell Dean that it feels like he’s ripping himself in two right now. What he wants to do is beg Dean to stop him,
to stop this madness, to hold him close and make everything all right.

But he’s been leaning on Dean’s strength long enough. Too long, actually, when Dean is still so raw and aching himself.

“I know you are, Sam,” Dean says. His voice is a rasp, though, and doesn’t seem to indicate any such thing.

A few more minutes and Sam really is going to be crying, and he can’t—he can’t be so exposed and transparent in the face of Dean’s brusque hurt. This break (just a break, it’s just temporary) is for the best. For both of them.

He goes to stand and is halted by the sudden lift of Dean’s eyes. All of Dean’s defenses are up and running at full power, but there’s still a vulnerable kind of softness to his eyes as he offers, “Hey, do you, uh, wanna take the Impala?”

Sam’s throat closes up at the thought. To have Dean’s car but not Dean. To wrap himself in that familiar, loving smell all day and have to sleep by himself at night… God, that would be a special kind of Hell.

“It’s okay,” he says, trying to smile. The weak expression dies when Dean swiftly cuts his own eyes away, looking out over the impressive vista. Sam waits a beat, hoping for some sort of response. He waits until he realizes that what he’s really waiting for is for Dean to stop him, and then makes himself say, “Take care of yourself, Dean.”

Dean still doesn’t look at him. “Yeah,” he murmurs, slipping his shades out of his jacket pocket and onto his face. “You too, Sammy.”

It’s only ‘so long’, Sam tells himself as he makes his slow, reluctant way over to fish his belongings out of the car. It’s only a brief parting. Temporary.

But as he finds himself another ride and climbs in, casting a single glance back to find Dean still sitting where Sam left him—statue-like and gazing expressionlessly out at the mountains—it doesn’t feel like ‘so long’.

It feels like goodbye.
“Is it a gender issue?”

“Excuse me?” Castiel asks, looking over.

“The hooker thing,” Dean prods. “Chastity, remember? I mean, you’re in a dude, so I assumed… But are you, like, a chick in there?”

Castiel blinks and then, dryly, replies, “I am not, as you say, a chick in here.”

Dean takes a moment to digest that, pulling the Impala into the motel parking lot before asking, “So are you gay?”

“How is my happiness of any relevancy to the matter at hand?”

“Not…” Dean starts, and then gives up on explaining. It’s already obvious that talking about this issue isn’t the way to go. “Never mind,” he mutters, and then picks a spot, parks, and unclicks his seatbelt.

Then, before he can rethink the impulse, he slides over and pulls Castiel around into a kiss.

The angel’s mouth is dry and not at all what Dean was hoping for. Possibly because Castiel is being so damned unresponsive. Ignoring his twisting, anxious stomach, Dean scootches closer and adjusts the angle, giving the kiss all the skill and heat he can muster, and then suddenly he has his mouth on empty air and Castiel is sitting in the back seat staring at him with wide eyes.

“What was that?” Castiel demands.

Dean doesn’t think he’s ever heard the angel sound so shocked or shaken, which is an insult if Dean ever heard one. Somehow. Even if Dean can’t exactly figure out how with his mind reeling like it is.

He licks his lips, giving himself a moment to pull it together—because, insult aside, he isn’t sure what the hell that was himself. After all, he’s never kissed a dude before (Sam’s his brother; he doesn’t count), and it isn’t like he’s been entertaining even the most fleeting of curious thoughts about what Castiel might look like underneath his trench coat. Tonight’s failed experiment proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the dude’s about as asexual as they come.

Might as well fantasize about fucking a Ken doll.

And yeah, the fact that Dean’s stomach just feels worse the more he thinks about it, is leaving him really confused as to why he took the plunge in the first place.

Left with no answers to Castiel’s question, Dean finally settles for saying, “That was a kiss,” as he puts his arm up on the back of the seat and swivels around to face him more fully.

“I am aware of human sexual customs, Dean,” Castiel replies. “What I meant is that I’m uncertain why you would choose to initiate this form of contact with someone other than your—”

And then he stops, tilting his head to the side with a sudden, pinched expression of understanding compassion.

Dean already knows he isn’t going to like whatever comes out of Cas’ mouth.
“I can’t replace Sam,” Castiel says, which is... It’s so far out of left field, Dean’s pretty sure that Cas’ ballgame is happening somewhere over in the Eastern Hemisphere.

“You think I’m—" 

“I think that you are lonely, and missing your brother.”

Dean’s gut burns and his chest tightens.

“Sam’s a big boy,” he grunts, turning back around and sliding out of the car. “He can take care of himself.”

He stands, shuts the door behind him, and then jumps when he turns around to find Castiel less than an inch away, peering intently into his face.

“Jesus Christ!” Dean swears. “I fucking hate it when you do that.”

Ignoring the complaint, Castiel says, “I didn’t say that Sam couldn’t take care of himself. I said that you were missing him.” He tilts his head slightly to one side and then adds, “You could call him. He would answer.”

As if Dean would give a shit if he didn’t.

“Yeah, well, maybe I don’t want to talk to him. Fuck him if he wants to cut and run. I don’t fucking need him!” He’s gone from placid to pissed off in a couple of seconds, though, and he can’t lie to himself about what that means.

So maybe he’s still a little upset about Sam ditching his ass up in the mountains to go get in touch with his inner Gandhi or whatever. Bitch wouldn’t even take the motherfucking car—too good for Dean’s hand-me-downs as well as his sullying, dirtying company. And yeah, Dean knows exactly how Sam feels about him. Sam made his feelings on the matter clear as hell when he jerked his hand back out of reach.

Not that Dean hasn't half been waiting for something like this ever since Meg reminded him of his place—of the contamination he's carrying around inside of him. He's a pollutant; of course Sam doesn't want to be around him anymore.

But knowing all of that doesn’t mean that Dean wants to talk about it—especially not with Cas, of all people. Dude doesn't even understand what he's supposed to do with his dick, for fuck's sake. Dean is sure as shit not going to him for relationship advice.

“What you and Sam have is very special,” Castiel says, following Dean around the car and up onto the sidewalk and ignoring the very clear signals he’s sending out to shut up and go away. “I didn’t understand that at first, but I’ve come to be envious of your bond. I know you two will work things out.”

Oh thank god, the motel room. Dean gets his key out, inserts it into the slot, and then jerks the door open before glaring back over his shoulder with his teeth bared in the most insincere smile he’s capable of making.

“This has been real fun, Cas. Let’s do it again sometime. Don’t call me, I’ll call you.”

Castiel frowns at him. “Is this what’s known as a ‘brush-off’?”

“Got it in one,” Dean tells him, and then shuts the door in the angel’s face.
He does his best to calm himself as he runs through his nightly routine—rinse, floss, check to see if anyone has called, brush, mouthwash, check the phone again, find mostly clean clothes for tomorrow, glance at his cell—and is feeling mostly better when he goes over to his (coldemptytoofuckingbig) bed and pulls back the covers.

There’s an oversized teddy bear staring up at him. Brown fur, button eyes, and a red bow around its neck. A gift tag dangles from the bow, with fancy script all over the tag’s surface. Dean reaches for it despite himself, and reads,

I know this isn’t an acceptable replacement either, but I hope it will help until Sam returns. Be strong, and take comfort in the knowledge of your bond.

Sorry again about the den of iniquity.

For several long minutes, Dean contemplates salting and burning the damn thing. That’d make a mess out of the bed, though, and he really doesn’t want to have to move all the weapons off the other queen. It isn’t worth the effort.

He goes to bed angry that night, which is actually a welcome distraction from the hollow, lonely ache that usually throbs in his chest. He wakes the same way, left even grouchier by a fitful night with almost no sleep.

Dean is going to kill Cas the next time he sees him, but as he jerks his jeans up and begins to button them, he has to admit that the angel is right about one thing.

The bear wasn’t an adequate substitute at all.
Dean’s stomach is tying itself in knots as he watches Sam get out of his car—stolen, probably, which really brings home just how much he’s changed since Dean dragged him away from Stanford. Most of that is Dean’s doing, but the thought doesn’t bring the twinge of guilty shame that Dean has grown accustomed to feeling since Cas tore him away from Alistair.

It’s a little difficult to feel guilty or shamed when he’s just had it straight from the Devil’s mouth that he’s the only thing standing between his brother and the darkness of Hell. Dean’s pretty sure that isn’t the message Lucifer was trying to get across, but it wasn’t difficult to read between the smug looks and leers. He guesses that anyone else would have panicked at the weight of that responsibility, but he hasn’t actually felt anything but giddy relief.

For the first time since Dean clawed his way out of his grave, he’s certain that this is where he belongs. Finally, he knows that he can touch Sam with impunity, without worrying that any of the filth from the Pit will rub off. Dean can handle being dirtied up just fine, so long as he isn’t in any danger of dragging Sam down with him.

Not that Dean’s new epiphany makes watching Sam’s approach any easier—Dean’s too aware of The Conversation hurtling toward him with each of his brother’s awkward, hesitant steps.

Fuck, he wishes they could just skip this part and go back to being themselves again.

Still, he guesses that he should feel thankful Sam agreed to this meet at all, what with the way he reacted to his brother’s phone call. Although, in Dean’s defense, that was before he got shoved into the Twilight Zone to get pawed at by Lucifer’s Sammy suit. And before he had a little face time with his dickish, future self. His jaw is still sore where that bitter, humorless asshole (still good-looking, though, so Dean guesses he’s got that going for him) punched him.

Not that he blames his future self, considering that it was his own stubborn pride and willful stupidity that pushed Sam away.

“Sammy,” Dean says as soon as his brother gets close enough.

Sam glances at him with wary hope from underneath his shaggy hair. He looks like a damn dog that’s been kicked a couple hundred times, and Dean remembers Lucifer thanking him in the garden. Thanking him for pushing Sam away, for leaving him alone, for putting him into a position where he’d agree to anything if it would get him Dean back. Dean still isn’t sure what Lucifer was planning on doing with his unconscious future self, but Lucifer’s wandering eyes and hands during their conversation had given Dean a pretty good indication that whatever Sam requested when he signed his body away got skewed but good somewhere along the way.

“You, uh. You wanted to meet?” Sam says into the silence, sticking his hands in his pockets.

Dean wonders if his brother is doing that for the same reason he is—if Sam is keeping himself from reaching out and grabbing hold and never letting go again.

“I did,” he agrees, nodding. Then, before he can chicken out, he looks Sam squarely in the eyes and says, “Look, I know I should’ve said something back when you, when you said it wasn't the same, and you’re probably not going to buy that I was just—I was pissed, okay? Mostly at myself, for fucking up in Colorado.”
“You?” Sam blurs. “I was the one who nearly—”

He shuts up before he can finish, dropping his eyes in the face of Dean’s no-nonsense stare and fidgeting like someone dropped itching powder into his boxers again. If Dean weren’t so annoyed about having to say this shit out loud, he’d be having a few chuckles at his brother’s expense right now.

Instead, he says, “I’m supposed to have your back. That was supposed to be me out there with you, not Ellen. And not because of the damn blood thing. I don’t give a fuck about the blood thing.”

Sam’s expression twists—mingled disbelief and pain—and Dean hesitates, clearing his throat.

“Oh, so I kind of care a little,” he amends, and then presses on, “But that doesn’t mean I don’t trust you. And I know you don’t believe me right now, but I do trust you, Sammy.”

Sam swallows, the movement of his throat muscles clearly visible, but he doesn’t say anything. Fucking figures that when Dean finally forces himself to say all of that Lifetime movie crap out loud, Sam’d clam right up.

“I don’t think I know how to stop trusting you,” Dean adds, “So you—Man, you gotta hold up on your end, okay?” When Sam still doesn’t respond, Dean lets out a harsh sigh and says, “Jesus Christ, dude, say something.”

Sam straightens slightly at that, and his head lifts as he checks, “You mean it?”

Dean gives another, stronger nod, and pulls out Ruby’s old knife. He studies it for a few seconds, then flips it around and catches the blade, offering it to his brother hilt first.

“If you’re serious and you want back in, you should hang onto this. I’m sure you’re rusty.”

It’s meant as a joke, but the way Sam avoids Dean’s eyes as he takes the knife makes the attempt at humor fall flat. Great.

Sighing internally, Dean takes a step forward and reaches up to grip the back of his brother’s neck. He expects the gesture to feel a little weird after Lucifer just used his Sam-suit to do pretty much the same thing to him, and it does—for about the fraction of a second it takes Sam to shiver. Then Dean’s brain catches up to the fact that his brother’s eyes have widened. Sam’s breath hitches before smoothing out again, running a little faster and shallower now.

His poker face has never been quite this bad.

Dean can’t remember ever being as terrified and desperate and hungry as Sam looks now, except for maybe once or twice when he figured Sam was done dealing with his shit. It feels really, really good to be needed so badly, but the upswelling of warmth in his chest isn’t enough to distract him from the unpleasantries at hand.

Much as he loathes having to spell everything out, though, sometimes it’s necessary. Like when Dean is trying to avert a future in which his guardian angel spends all of his free time stoned and making whoopee with his doomsday groupies. Seriously, if there’s one thing Dean could bleach from his brain...

Okay, he’d still pick Hell, but now he’s pretty sure he’d hesitate first.

For the present, though, he pushes all of that out of his head and focuses on lowering his defenses, letting Sam see right into him as he says, “I should’ve stopped you when you left. I should’ve tied
you up in the backseat of the Impala and sat on you until you listened to reason.”

Dropping his eyes, Sam starts to shake his head, but Dean rubs his thumb against the sensitive nape of his brother’s neck and stills him again.

“It’s okay,” Sam whispers, although clearly it isn’t. Not when his downturned eyes are watering. “I was—I know it’s tough to hunt when you have to worry about me going on a binge.”

If Lucifer hadn’t already filled Dean in on this particular misconception, he’d be wincing right now. As it is, he only smiles gently as he says, “You know, for such a smart guy, you can be a real dumbass.”

When Sam looks at him, startled and suspicious, Dean lets his smile widen and grow warmer.

“When I said I was worried about you when we were hunting, I didn’t mean I was, like, worried about you. Just that—Christ, Sammy. The amount of times I’ve almost had to bury you, I just—I can’t do that. And that isn’t—that’s not getting better anytime soon. I mean, Lucifer’s out of the cage and running around looking for his prom tux, and I—when I think about that, it gets so bad I can’t breathe. If anything ever happened to you, I don’t—I don’t know what I’d do.”

Not now that the demons have no more use for a righteous man’s soul, that is.

Sam’s eyes have a whole lot more hope now, but there are still shadowed doubts swirling in those brown depths, so Dean repeats, more firmly, “I should’ve stopped you.”

And then, slowly and carefully so that Sam can see he knows what he’s doing, he pulls his brother down a few inches for a lingering, doubt-destroying kiss. Dean puts all of his conviction into his lips and tongue, makes his declaration of faith and devotion loud enough for even Sam to catch it. He knows he’s done his job when Sam’s hands land tentatively on his hips, but lets the kiss continue anyway.

Christ, he missed this.

When Dean finally pulls away, there are tears on Sam’s cheeks. Dean doesn’t call him on it. He’s pretty awesome like that.

“Don’t you ever think that you don’t have me,” he orders, brushing his brother’s hair back out of his face with his left hand. “I don’t give a shit if we are each other’s Achilles heel. You’re my brother. Nothing’s gonna change that.”

“Thank you,” Sam whispers. “God, Dean, thank—”

The rest of his stupid, unnecessary gratitude gets lost between their mouths, and although Dean has the best intentions of putting this discussion of their Feelings behind them, he ends up letting Sam back him against the Impala instead. Sam has a fistful of Dean’s jacket, but more importantly he won’t release Dean’s mouth—Dean’s lips are gonna be swollen for sure after Sam finally gets through with him.

Not that he’s complaining.

When Sam does eventually back up, looking a little unsure of himself, Dean stays where he is, leaning against the car and smirking.

“Uh, sorry,” Sam says.
“Hey,” Dean answers, finally moving enough to straighten his shirt and coat. “I’m thinking you should throw a hissy fit and storm off more often, if that’s gonna be the type of hello I get.”

It’s meant as another joke, but the words sound… well, a little off, if Dean wants to be honest. They make his stomach twist in a warm, awkward way and his pulse speed. Frankly, though, he’s had enough of examining his innermost thoughts for one day, and anyway, he sort of does mean what he says.

Whatever the reason Sam fails at picking up chicks who aren’t skank demons, it sure as hell isn’t his kissing technique.

Besides, the joke is more than worth a little inner confusion for the flush that blossoms over Sam’s face as he knocks his knuckles against Dean’s stomach (hard enough that Dean’s breath pushes out in a grunt) before heading around the car for the passenger door.

Dean grins to himself for a moment, enjoying the rightening of every last toppled piece of his world, and then frowns briefly as he spots Ruby’s knife on the ground. Sam must have dropped it when he decided that what he’d really like to be doing was mauling Dean’s mouth.

“Hey,” he points out, bending to retrieve the blade. “If Dad were here, he’d kick your ass for treating a weapon like that. I mean, I know I’m distracting, but you don’t just drop a piece of hardware like this and forget about it.”

He straightens to find Sam leaning over the roof of the car, watching him. Sam’s gaze is heavy; his mouth serious. Dean’s stomach gives a funny little flip.

“I didn’t forget it.”

Dean can be a little slow about some things, but he understands what Sam is really saying right off the bat—maybe because he’s been waiting for it for so long. He drops his eyes, using the excuse of examining the knife in his hands to avoid meeting his brother’s gaze and giving too much away. Not that Sam doesn’t already know what’s going on inside his chest.

“We, uh,” he says after a moment, and then has to clear his throat before he can finish, “We can’t just leave it here. Demon-killing knife’s a pretty powerful weapon, no matter how we got it.”

“So toss it in the trunk with everything else,” Sam replies instantly, in an off-handed tone of voice that Dean doesn’t buy for a second. There’s a beat of silence between them, and then Sam adds, “It’s just a knife.”

It isn’t, though. It isn’t and Sam damn well knows it. Trust him to go one-upping Dean’s sweeping gesture of reconciliation, the little shit.

Clenching his jaw, Dean nods and turns his face away under the pretext of scanning for unwelcome company. When he has himself more under control, he walks around to the back and finds Ruby’s knife a spot amongst the rest of their arsenal.

Shutting the trunk again has never felt quite this satisfying.

Sam is already in the car when Dean comes back around to the front, posture relaxed enough that Dean isn’t really expecting it when he slides behind the driver’s seat and is promptly hauled over—almost into Sam’s lap, the handsy yeti.

“Missed you,” Sam murmurs, and kisses him again.
Dean’s right leg is twisted funny and his left hip is crushed against the wheel, but it never even occurs to him to protest.
Panic (Fallen Idols)

It isn’t panic that grips Sam when he realizes that he’s once again facing the prospect of watching Dean get taken apart by something that looks like Dad. Horror, maybe, or sickening despair.

It isn’t panic he feels when Dean comes out of the bathroom that night and mentions that they should probably head to the hospital for a check-up, which Sam knows is shorthand for blood in the urine or stool and neither one is a great sign—fuck, he knew he should have dragged Dean in after they took care of Leshi. That’s terror, with a side helping of dread.

True panic doesn’t hit him until later, once Dean has checked out okay and they’re standing by the Impala.

Sam stares down at the key Dean just passed him, avoiding his brother’s gaze and struggling to bring his squirming stomach back under control. He’s been trying to get Dean to look at him like an equal for years, and to have it happen now, so suddenly—when Sam isn’t even sure of himself. It’s sort of taking his legs out from underneath him.

Change is a scary thing. Petrifying as he realizes that there’s no telling when it will stop.

It isn’t beyond the realm of possibilities to imagine that Dean might pull away again in an attempt to give Sam room to stand on his own. Hell, Dean might even remember that summer Dad spent trying to argue them into separate beds—said Sam needed his independence, that he needed the space to grow. Convincing Dean that he didn’t need anything of the kind was easy when Sam was clinging as close as he could to his brother’s footsteps, but he can suddenly see how his recent requests might be misinterpreted.

And while Sam does want to be viewed as a partner instead of a protectee, he can’t bear the thought of losing what he has with Dean to achieve his goal. His skin is turning clammy and cold at the prospect of Dean abruptly drawing back when all Sam’s craving is Closer and More.

As panic clogs his chest and closes his throat, Sam searches desperately for the words that will allow him to beg for the things he needs. He has to find a way to make Dean understand that this isn’t in any way a rejection or an attempt to hold him at arm’s length.

Sam isn’t looking for independence. His campaigning has always been, at its core, an attempt to align them more perfectly together.

Sam has to—

There are things that he and Dean can’t—

If Dean doesn’t see him as an equal, how are they ever—

As Sam’s thoughts tumble to yet another incomprehensible halt, his stomach sinks. If he can’t articulate his desires in his own mind, then he has no hope at all of getting through to Dean, who would prefer to spend a pleasant afternoon swallowing nails to talking about his feelings. Sam’s hand shakes where he’s holding the car key, and while his vision may not be blurring yet, the telltale burn in his eyes tells him it will soon. He blinks them, and trying to forestall the crisis, and somehow manages to swallow the blockage in his throat.

Then, in a voice that doesn’t sound half as shaky as he feels, Sam asks, “Really? Just like that?”
“Hell no,” Dean answers. “This is a trial run, and I’m gonna have my eye on you, so you better treat
her right. She’s a lady; no playing it fast and loose on the turns.”

His voice holds none of the cool reserve Sam was dreading. The words aren’t at all stilted or distant.
Dean sounds… He sounds exactly like he always has when Sam has convinced him to hand over the
key for a few, precious minutes.

Just like that, Sam realizes that he’s being unbearably stupid. Dean isn’t going to back away from
what they have—he’d cut off his hands before he stops touching Sam. Christ, Sam doesn’t know
how he could have forgotten, even momentarily, that this thing between them runs just as deeply on
Dean’s end as it does on his.

He knows that, just like he knows that’s the earth beneath his feet and the moon overhead. He’s
known it for years, because it’s the one soft thread running through Dean that Dean has never made
a secret of.

Sam thinks that the emotion building in his chest might be relief, but he’s still too close to the blind,
numbing panic to be sure. Answering Dean is instinct, though, requiring no conscious thought. As
warmth spreads through his body, he says, “Because you’re always the soul of caution behind the
wheel.”

“I can always take the keys back.”

Although Sam can tell that the annoyed warning in Dean’s voice is feigned, he doesn’t waste any
time in shaking his head. “No. No, I’m good,” he says, and then glances up at his brother.

Dean is leaning against the Impala, trying to look casual and failing. There’s a degree of nervousness
in his eyes—the need to get this right, to communicate his faith in Sam—that leaves Sam feeling
even more foolish for having doubted. Dean might not like talking about how he feels, but then again
he doesn’t really need to when his emotions are etched across his face as clearly as they are right
now.

A moment later, he makes his position even clearer when he reaches out and hooks a couple of
fingers into the waistband of Sam’s jeans. “C’mere,” he invites with a tug.

It’s an invitation Sam has no problems accepting, especially when Dean lets him lean his weight
against Dean’s chest. As Sam settles himself, Dean’s arms wrap low around his back in a
comfortable hug. The knots that Sam always seems to be carrying around in his chest these days
(—what if Lucifer finds him; what if he can’t get through to Dean the next time Dean has a
flashback to Hell; what if the next hospital does find something serious; what if one of the monsters
finally gets a claw or a tooth inside one of the half-healed fissures in Dean’s defenses and rips him
wide open; what if the angels take Dean again and lock him away somewhere Sam can’t get at him;
what if—) loosen the same way they always do when Dean holds him, and Sam lets out a slow
breath as he rests his forehead against his brother’s temple.

Dean’s breath ghosts across Sam’s cheek; his jaw is scant centimeters away from Sam’s mouth. Sam
would hardly have to move to taste him, to feel the rough scratch of stubble against his lips. Dean
would let him, too; he’d turn his head to the side and meet Sam’s mouth with his own, and they
could… He and Dean, they could…

Sam’s skin heats with the thoughts trailing those coulds—kisses, reassuring hands on skin, breath
and love and life. He can’t think of any better way to affirm Dean’s rebirth than that. He can’t
imagine a better way to keep Hell at bay than by taking refuge in an act of pure affection and
fraternal devotion.
He wants to indulge, wants to remind Dean how much he’s valued, but between one heartbeat and the next, the heat has built into a weird, tumultuous shifting in his stomach. It’s a little wild, a little electric, a little unsettling—and a lot exciting, if he’s honest with himself.

Sam doesn’t close the distance. Neither does Dean, and Sam realizes that he can feel his brother’s heart beating against his chest—a little too fast and erratic for the nothing that’s going on.

Only a couple breaths of stillness pass between them, but suddenly they’re standing too close to something Sam can’t look at. Whatever it is will burn them, he’s sure of it. That brilliant, unseen thing really will change everything—it’s momentous enough to lift them both up to new, dizzying heights. Or possibly to break everything beyond repair.

Sam isn’t ready to take that chance.

Dean licks his lips, like he’s going to say something—maybe do something—and Sam tastes the resurgence of panic at the back of his throat as he scrambles for the words that will keep them on steadier, safer ground.

What he comes up with is, “Thanks.”

It’s partially the strangeness of the moment that lends the word more gravity than Sam intends, but a good deal of its weight comes from the fact that Sam does mean it. This—the sort of casual confidence Dean is showing in him—this is huge.

Dean is silent for a moment—reorienting himself away from the edge of the cliff they almost fell over, Sam thinks—and then he says, “You know what’d be an awesome thank you present?”

Sam can’t help from huffing out a laugh—partly out of relief that the crisis has been averted, partly in fond amusement. “Dean, you’re letting me drive the car from the hospital to the motel. I’m not getting you a present for eight blocks of radio control.”

That isn’t what this is about, of course, and they both know it. If it were, Sam wouldn’t have had his momentary panic attack when Dean passed him the keys. But acknowledging the magnitude of the gesture isn’t what either of them needs right now.

“Nine blocks,” Dean corrects, and rests his chin on Sam’s shoulder while tightening his arms and pulling Sam more snuggly against him.

“Oh, sorry. Nine blocks. Well then, that makes all the difference. What exactly am I supposed to get you?”

“Your hands, my back. Could be a wonderful thing, Sammy.”

Sam’s pulse beats a little faster—more of that heady relief, that’s all it is—and he has to resist the urge to hustle Dean into the car right now. Then again, that sort of action would require moving away from his brother, however briefly, and Dean’s chest is a really nice place to lean against. Dean’s arms are warmer and more comfortable than pretty much anything else in the world.

“Plus,” Dean adds thoughtfully, “you still owe me for saving your ass from Gandhi, so that’s two massages. Or one really long, awesome deep tissue rub.”

“So that’s how you see it?” Sam says, tucking his nose down just below Dean’s jaw and inhaling as surreptitiously as possible.

God, Dean smells good.
“Hey, you want to be treated like an adult, Sammy, you better start paying your debts like one.”

Somehow, Sam has absolutely no problem with that.
Crave (I Believe the Children Are Our Future)

Jesse may only be ten years old, but that’s old enough to understand the difference between need and desire. There are things you need in order to live—things like air, and food, and water. And then there are things you desire—candy, an awesome game system like the new Nintendo Wii, the ability to make dunk shots like Chris Gattler’s older brother Eric.

It isn’t until he meets Sam and Dean that he understands there’s a middle ground between the two extremes. Something called craving.

A craving, he thinks as he stands next to his parents’ bed, looking down at them in the dark, is something that you need to live, but it isn’t good for you at all. It’s a desire that’s gotten so big and monstrous that it eats through your body and hollows you out—like those slugs on that horror movie Jesse saw when he slept over Chris’ house last month.

Jesse knows what craving looks like because he saw it in the men waiting downstairs—the ones he came so close to mistaking for bad men and punishing. The ones who want to take him away from here and bring him somewhere safe. They’re both hollowed out with it—Jesse could tell from the way they moved around each other, and spoke together, and touched each other.

Like Jesse’s Mom and Dad act, only times about a billion.

And now, now that Jesse is standing in the dark with unshed tears burning in his eyes, he knows what a craving feels like, too, because he craves. He craves the life he’s being forced to leave behind—his parents, his friends, everything normal—and maybe he isn’t hollowed out by it yet, but he thinks this isn’t something you get to call do-over on.

Those men downstairs are cursed, and maybe it’s catching—maybe that’s why Jesse’s chest suddenly aches so fiercely. They mean well, he knows that, but… But suddenly he isn’t so sure he wants to go with them.

And he doesn’t have to, does he? Not when he’s a freak.

Anywhere, he thinks. He may not be able to have what he craves, but at least he has a world of second bests to choose from.

It’s something, anyway.
Celebrating in the very bar where all of their troubles started feels a little strange, but Bobby needs a damn drink, so he isn’t going to argue. The beer is cool, the music’s quiet enough for him to hear himself think, and the incessant pain at the small of his back isn’t much more than a dull throb.

He’s actually enjoying himself for a change—or he would be, if the company weren’t so god-awful cloying. Speaking of the company…

Oh, for crying out loud.

“Do you two mind?” he demands. Christ, he wishes his legs were still working so he could kick them apart underneath the table.

“What?” Sam asks, casting a quick glance toward Bobby before returning his eyes to his other half. The boy hasn’t stopped staring since Dean showed up looking shiny and new again. He doesn’t, of course, take his left hand off the back of Dean’s neck. Or his right hand off of Dean’s where it’s resting on the table.

And now Sam has clearly forgotten Bobby said anything at all, because he’s already gone back to nuzzling at the corner of Dean’s jaw.

Dean’s mouth might not be involved at present, but he’s even worse than his brother—like Bobby can’t see the way he’s got his foot hooked around Sam’s ankle underneath the table. Or his other hand on Sam’s thigh.

Or like he’s not damn near purring as he tilts his head to give Sam as much access as he wants.

“Look, you’re happy,” Bobby says, rubbing at his eyes with one hand. “I get that. Hell, I’m happy too. Dean’s a hell of a lot more palatable when he ain’t bellyaching all the time.”

“Hey!” Dean protests, straightening. The movement dislodges Sam’s mouth and earns Bobby a petulant glare that he pointedly ignores.

“But you two’re worse than a couple of newlyweds,” Bobby finishes, undeterred.

And gets two blank, uncomprehending stares in return.

No. They can’t. They can’t possibly not know.

Only the ‘humor him, he’s old’ glance they exchange seems to indicate they can.

“Oh, for the love of Pete,” Bobby complains, dumbfounded by the magnitude of his realization. “It ain’t an act, is it? This whole wide-eyed, dewy innocence thing. You boys really are that stupid.”

Sam gives an uncomfortable, confused laugh and exchanges a second glance with his brother before saying, “Uh, what’re you talking about, Bobby?”

Bobby considers enlightening them for all of a second. Then he remembers that these are Winchesters he’s dealing with, and they’re denser than a ton of bricks and prone to pull out shotguns when you try and turn their mulish, stubborn heads toward something they don’t want to see. Bobby’d sooner stick his hand in a hornet’s nest than try explaining to these two knuckleheads.

“Forget it,” he mutters, digging a fistful of change and crumpled dollar bills out from his pocket and
dumping it onto the table in a jingle of coins. That should be enough to cover his end of things, and if it isn’t, then they damn well owe him the extra for putting up with them.

Unlocking the wheels on his chair, Bobby rolls himself back from the table.

“Have a lovely night, ladies. I’m going to bed.” And then, under his breath once he’s far enough away that they won’t be able to hear, he adds, “Alone. Unlike some morons I could mention.”

How those unobservant, obtuse idjits have managed to make it this far without walking off a cliff or into oncoming traffic is beyond him.
Gabriel waits for them to freak out for almost thirty minutes before finally tossing in the towel and pulling the plug. They do startle apart when he appears and the lights go on, but they don’t exactly spring out of bed. Although that might have something to do with the fact that they’re both in nothing more concealing than their birthday suits.

“You!” Dean accuses eloquently as Gabriel sits down on the edge of the bed. And then, scrunching his face up, he adds, ‘Dude, we’ve been playing along. What’s it gonna take to get you to let us out of here already?”

Ignoring the question, Gabriel puts on his most sincere expression and says, “Look, I like you, Dean. I do. Really. But don’t you think there’s something else you should be a little more concerned with right now?” He cranes his neck, looking down towards the tenting on Sam’s side, and adds, “Sorry, that’s more than a little.”

Dean stiffens and Sam, flailing around next to him in the bed a bit before getting his hands over his groin, makes an inarticulate sound.

“You put us here!” Dean protests, flushing. “We’re just—”

“Doing the exact same thing you do every night.” As Sam opens his mouth to protest, Gabriel nods and waves a casual hand while correcting, “Okay, okay. So there are more clothes involved and not quite so much heavy petting. But come on, boys. Wake up and smell the incest already! I’ve seen some denial in my days—I mean, Disco alone, please; no one looks good in bell-bottom polyester—but that pales in comparison to you two chuckleheads.”

“You’re completely bent, you know that?” Dean says, blank-faced.

And Sam adds, “We’re brothers.”

Gabriel is about to point out that that fact didn’t stop them from sucking face and grinding against each other for half an hour—with nary a sign of a freak out on the horizon—but of course that’s when Castiel decides to rejoin the party, staggering into the room with wild eyes and blood on his mouth. Looks like he enjoyed Gabriel’s funhouse just as much as Gabriel hoped he would.

He’s easy enough to deal with, of course, but by then the moment has been ruined and Gabriel sighs heavily before fixing a smile back on his face and saying, “Okay, so you’re not ready to step up to the incest thing. I can respect that. But you’d better start figuring out the real lesson soon. There are fates worse than Dante’s Cove reruns, you know.”
Georgia (Georgie, to her friends) corners him on his way out of the bathroom. He stops, startled to find her blocking the doorway, and wow. Freckles. She totally didn’t see those from across the room. Up close, he’s even hotter than she expected.

“Hi there,” she drawls, leaning forward in order to show off the low cut of her dress.

The guy—one of about thirty Deans at the convention, and by far the best of the bunch, as far as Georgie is concerned, is stuck on her eyes, though. Staring and statue-still. Painfully shy, then, despite his looks. Which means there’s a chance he doesn’t have a girlfriend.

Oh please God, let him not have a girlfriend.

“I’m Georgia,” she offers, putting a hand on his shoulder and then trailing her fingers down over his bicep. Beneath the leather—his jacket’s the real thing, not imitation, she can tell—the guy is solid muscle.

Definitely the best Dean in the house.

He still hasn’t said anything, is staring at her with wide eyes like a deer caught in the headlights—the lashes on him, fuck—but Georgie isn’t deterred. Smiling more broadly, she tilts her head and announces, “I got them online.”

“Huh?” Finally, a response. And his voice is just as perfect as the rest of him.

“My contacts?” she prods, batting her eyelashes at him. “Pretty neat, huh?”

“They’re, uh—” he stammers. “You’re. You dressed up like a, uh.”

“Crossroads demon,” she supplies with an excited nod. She knew the outfit would be a hit! Following up on her advantage, she continues, “And you’re Dean Winchester.”

He is dressed for the part, after all, and maybe pretending he’s someone else will give him the courage to take her up on her offer. They can always exchange real names and numbers later.

Stepping forward, Georgie presses herself against her Dean’s chest and purrs, “Want to make a deal?”

His pupils contract and his breath shallows. She can feel his heart racing, pounding against her breasts.

She’s so in there.

“Dean!” That’s another voice, an unwelcome intrusion. The dude playing the other half of her Dean’s pair, likely, and no way is he going to be coming along on a threesome because he can’t possibly be as hot as…

And then Georgie’s brain stops dead, because she’s gotten her head turned around and wow. He is. Oh God, how are these two for real?

Of course, her Dean’s Sam is made slightly less attractive by the way he all but shoves her into the far wall and plasters himself to her Dean’s side. His face is scrunched up in concern, and he reaches up without hesitation to cup her Dean’s face, thumbs swiping over his counterpart’s cheekbones.
“Oh,” she says as her chest falls in disappointed realization. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—I thought you were straight.”

That gets her Dean’s eyes again (no, not hers, more’s the pity), widened with disbelief, although he shuts his mouth when Sam accidentally elbows him in the side as he turns and slings his arm around Dean’s shoulders.

“Sorry, he’s taken,” the shaggy-haired Sam says. “Aren’t you, honey?”

Pretty Dean’s grin is sugary-sweet, if strangely stiff, as he looks up at his partner. “Oh, you bet, peaches,” he says in a wry drawl that Georgie has only ever heard before in her more vivid fantasies.

“Wow,” Georgie breathes, impressed. “You guys are spot-on in character.”

Dean’s gaze snaps back to her, one eyebrow raised. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” she says. “The outfits… the bickering… the smoky hot sexual tension.”

But she’s reading it wrong again, apparently, because Dean’s face scrunches in immediate annoyance.

“Jesus Christ,” he complains. “I’m gonna kill Chuck.” Turning toward his partner, he continues, “This is his fault, you know. That son of a bitch wrote us like some soft core porno, and now everyone—”

Georgie knows she shouldn’t—this Dean sounds like he’s one of the Nonbelievers—but she can’t help offering, “It’s not just the bedroom scenes.”

And then wishes she hadn’t said anything, because she’s suddenly pinned in place by two very intense stares.

Neither of the men are saying anything, which should be her cue to excuse herself and go die of mortification somewhere quiet, but clearly she can’t control her brain when she’s dealing with two really, really attractive men because her mouth opens and she says, “I mean, the whole two hot guys together thing is a huge plus, don’t get me wrong, but… it isn’t about the sex. That’s what people don’t seem to get.”

“So then what is it about, huh?” Dean demands with a funny twist to his lips. “How about you enlighten us.”

Georgie feels like she’s being mocked, and it’s that sting more than anything else that prompts her to answer as simply and as honestly as she knows how.

“Love,” she says. And when the pair of them keep looking at her incomprehensibly, she adds, “Look, Dean sold his soul for Sam. He went to Hell for him. That’s pretty much beyond devotion. And Sam went nuts when Dean was gone—like, a looooong way off the deep end. And then there’s all the little things.”

“The little things?” Sam says.

Encouraged by the fact that he seems a shade less hostile, Georgie explains, “You know, the way they’re always touching, and how Sam always puts an extra sugar in Dean’s coffee when Dean’s having a bad day.”

Dean glances up at his partner at that, but Sam chooses just that moment to glance away. Sam is
biting his lip with an embarrassed expression—probably feels like an idiot for having missed those little signs when it’s clear from his costume that he’s been meticulous with everything else.

Now, if she can only get Dean to open his eyes…

“Or, like, how Dean always puts the radio on Sam’s stations after Sam falls asleep, just to see him smile,” she adds hopefully.

Dean does jump, looking startled, and looks to the other side moments before Sam turns his head back for a glance of his own. Dean is flushing, looking awkward (Georgie knows how he feels; she was totally thrown for a loop the first time she noticed it, too), but Sam is grinning and at ease in his own skin again.

“I mean, isn’t it obvious they’re in love?” Georgie finishes triumphantly.

“Yeah,” Sam says, although his smile and the tone of his voice tells her that he isn’t—quite—buying into it. Grinning, he nudges his partner in the side with an elbow and adds, “Obvious, right, sugarbear?”

Dean licks his lips quickly, darts a glance Georgie’s way—strange, he looks almost spooked—and then clears his throat with apparent difficulty.

“Yeah,” he says hoarsely. “Obvious.”
When Jo turns around and finds Dean practically caging her in against the counter, she blinks, startled. He offers her a smile, leaning both hands on the counter on either side of her hips, and her heart rate skyrockets. Lord, he smells good this close up. And there are almost golden flecks in the green of his green eyes, which she never had the opportunity to notice before.

But she’s learned her lesson, and he isn’t quite pretty enough for her to miss the unhappiness Sam is radiating from his seat at the table across the room.

“What are you doing?” she asks, leaning back to keep her mouth out of range.

“Dangerous mission tomorrow,” he replies with what she knows damn well is supposed to be a seductive grin. “Looks like it’s time to eat, drink, and, you know, make merry.”

Jo stares at him. “Are you giving me the last-night-on-earth speech?”

“What?” he says, clearly caught out and left off balance by it.

“What?” she mimics, just a few seconds before he recovers enough to lie, “No.”

She can’t help but laugh at that, and he joins in, taking it for a positive sign and edging closer. The front of his body isn’t quite making contact with hers yet, but it’s a near thing.

“If I was, would, uh. Would that work?” He licks his lips, eyes gleaming with way too much anxiety for the easygoing façade he’s trying for, and the contrast drains whatever humor Jo just found in this situation.

“Dean,” she says more seriously, keeping her voice lowered so that she won’t be overheard. “What are you doing?”

And then she looks past him with a deliberate half-nod in Sam’s direction.

Dean doesn’t turn around, and he doesn’t move away either, but he flushes in a way that makes her think he knows what she means.

“I don’t know what happened between you two, but you’re not using me to drive him away, Dean. I’m sorry.”

When she puts her hand on his chest and pushes, he goes, shamefaced and red-eared. He looks almost as hangdog and hurt as Sam is trying not to be at the table they were sharing just a few minutes ago, and she pauses long enough to add, “Maybe I’m not the one you should be giving that speech to.”

Dean’s expression flickers from confused to terrified and then back to unhappy again, and Jo sighs as she leaves him standing there awkwardly and rejoins her mother and Castiel.

Sometimes, boys can be so damn stupid.
Sam gets most of the pertinent information out—he thinks, anyway. The room is swimming and it’s
difficult to focus on anything except his brother’s green, green eyes. He doesn’t think he’s ever
complimented Dean on them before, though, which is a serious oversight. Heh. Sight.

“Your eyes are pretty.”

Those mesmerizing, green eyes widen with a sweep of lashes and Sam’s body flushes with warmth.

“Dude,” Dean’s voice breathes after a moment. “Are you high?”

“Docs gave me something,” Sam agrees, and then holds up a hand. “Two—three pills.”

“Great. Just great. We’re locked up with a brain-sucking wraith and here you are tripping the light
fantastic.”

“Your lips are pretty, too,” Sam says, and then adds, “I think about them all the time. Kiss me? Please?”

“Christ,” Dean mutters, and then there’s the far too fleeting brush of his lips against Sam’s. “There,
happy?”

Sam frowns, not quite satisfied. Working out why is difficult, but he finally manages it and then
demands, “Not there. Kiss me—here.” He flops his hands down, trying to push his loose pants
down, and finds his wrists caught in a tight hold.

“Gonna have to wait for your girlfriend down the hall on that one, dude.”

“But I—I remember—” He does, too. He remembers how good Dean’s mouth feels there. And then
he also remembers being annoyed by that fact, and accuses, “You did it before!”

“I what? And keep your voice down, dude.”

“In. San’erson. You totally sucked cock before that.”

Dean makes a choking noise—completely unlike the noises he made when he was on his knees for
Sam—and then says, “Aaaaand, that’s my cue to hit the road. Have fun coming down from your
jungle gym, Sammy.”

“Wait!” Sam protests, sitting up and clinging to his brother’s body. “S’posed to sleep with me. Can’t
—can’t sleep without you here, I.”

“Shh,” Dean murmurs in a softer, more comforting voice, and Sam allows himself to be laid back in
the bed. He smiles, pushing his head up against the soothing hand that runs through his hair. Dean
has about forever to stop doing that. “Dude, I can’t sit here and pet your hair. I’m gonna get caught.”

Oops. He said that out loud, didn’t he?

“Yeah, you did. And I’m leaving now, before you say something we’re both gonna regret later.”

Mostly what gets through to Sam’s muddled brain is the fact that Dean is Leaving, that he’s Going
Away, and he panics. There are so many things he has to say, things he hasn’t ever been able to
articulate, but they all crowd together when he opens his mouth and what comes out is, “I love you.”
Yeah, that’s sort of what he was going for.

And Dean isn’t going anymore. Dean is frozen next to his bed, looking like a startled doe. God, he’s beautiful. Prettier than a woman, really.

Sam really, really hopes that part didn’t come out his mouth.

And apparently it didn’t, because instead of freaking out completely, Dean smiles stiffly and pats Sam’s head. “Yeah, love you too,” he mutters, but he doesn’t—that isn’t what Sam means, damn it.

“No,” he protests, grabbing his brother’s hand as Dean moves to go again. “No, Dean, I mean it. I love you.”

Dean’s expression is too complex for Sam’s brain to follow, but he’s happy enough with the slower, deeper kiss he gets.

“Sleep it off, okay, Sammy?” Dean whispers afterwards, nuzzling his nose against Sam’s, and Sam, message delivered as far as he can tell, smiles and sinks back more deeply into his pillows.

He had his doubts, but so far this insane asylum thing is awesome.
The demon told Gary that the Winchesters had an... abnormal relationship, which is one of the reasons he’s here instead of Trevor, but he didn’t really believe until now, when Dean is stripping down to his boxers and getting into the bed next to him. Wow. And then—holy shit—the dude is rolling over and moving back so that his ass is right—

“Hello!”

Dean moves forward a little and twists around, face scrunched up in confusion. “What?”

“Nothing, uh. Just... happy to see you.”

Dean looks at him for a moment longer, frowning, and then sighs and flops down on the bed, leaving a little more space between them. “I’m too tired for this tonight,” he mutters into the pillow. “Can we just go to sleep already and save the touchy feely stuff for tomorrow?”

So, they’re morning risers. Excellent, if a little disappointing for the immediate present. Gary might have to off the stud lying next to him soon, but he’s excited about the opportunity to take him (and Gary’s own studly body, of course) for a test drive first. See what it’s like.

In the morning, though, he’s woken by an overly hearty, “Rise and shine, Sammy!” and Dean smacking his foot. Dean, who is already dressed and clearly not in the mood for sex.

Clearly, God hates Gary.

Moments like this are exactly why he became a Satan worshipper in the first place.
“So, uh. You and Dean are together.”

Sam’s blood runs cold and his spine snaps straight. “Excuse me?” he breathes, forcing the words from a parched throat and fear-coated mouth.

His dad—younger and softer around the edges, but still clearly John Winchester—gives him a shy smile and says, “It’s all right. I had a friend back in the Corps—he was the same way, and the toughest guy in the unit. You won’t get any trouble from me.”

Sam is still too much in shock from having his own father accuse him of having sex with his brother to protest the charge, although he does manage a faint, “Oh. That’s … good.”

John nods, clearly satisfied by the response, and claps Sam on the shoulder. “And don’t let the ignorant jerks out there get you down. I mean, true love, right? It’s worth the price.”

He’s clearly thinking about himself and Mary—Sam’s mother, who is just in the other room. Sam could go in there and haul her into a hug if he dared—as he says it. He’s thinking about the craziness of tonight, and the uncertainty of the future ahead of them.

But Sam pauses as well, caught by the unexpected surge of recognition in his chest. That’s… that’s sort of the way he feels about Dean, isn’t it? Something so deep and encompassing that he still hasn’t been able to come to terms with it, even though it’s been a month since they left Glenwood Springs. Not that Dean’s refusal to talk about it is helping matters.

But…

But.

Looking through the doorway into the kitchen, where Dean has his head bent next to their mother’s, the two of them heatedly discussing strategy, Sam feels his chest expand—a sensation that’s almost painful. His lungs fill with air.

As though Dean can feel his eyes, he pauses and glances back over his shoulder. For a long, world-stopping moment, he regards Sam with a steady, serious expression. Then, finally, his mouth lifts in a weary but genuine half-smile, and time starts up again.

For once, Sam can’t do anything but believe—with every fiber of his being—that his dad got it right.
“Yeah, the union of John and Mary Winchester? Very big deal upstairs. Top priority arrangement, mm.” Cupid nods, looking inordinately proud for a guy prancing around with all his junk hanging out.

Carefully keeping his eyes above chest level (a guy could go blind, Christ) Dean checks, “Are you saying you fixed up our parents?”

“Well, not me, but... yeah!” Cupid agrees, and nods, laughing. “Oh, it wasn’t easy, either. Ooo, they couldn’t stand each other at first, but when we were done with them? Perfect couple!”

“Perfect,” Dean echoes.

His chest is tight and wrathful, and the feeling has something to do with the way his mother looked kneeling next to John’s body in the light of the car with Azazel smirking at her side. It has something to do with the trapped, terrified look he saw in her eyes on his second, more recent trip into the past. Mostly, though, it has to do with the way he’s feeling more and more trapped himself these days—sinking down in a mire of emotions he doesn’t want to deal with, but which Sam refuses to leave alone.

Fuck Gabriel for shoving them in that weird gay porno. Fuck that bitch at the convention for messing with Dean’s head—trying to make him see shit that isn’t there. Fuck those doctors for shooting Sam up with that hallucinogenic happy juice. Fuck Sam for letting them. Fuck him to Hell and back for not picking up on the fact that Dean is Not Discussing Their Feelings.

But Cupid doesn’t seem to have noticed the warning in Dean’s voice or the hostility on his face (seriously; you can’t feign this depth of stupidity) because he’s still beaming as he agrees, “Yeah!”

“They’re dead,” Dean snaps.

That wipes the smile off Cupid’s face at least, although he doesn’t sound too apologetic as he says, “I’m sorry, but the orders were very clear. You and Sam needed to be born.” He breaks into another smile then, this one even wider than the first as he looks back and forth between them. “And whoo boy, do I see why! I haven’t ever seen a couple more perfectly matched. I mean, your mom and dad—that was a match made in Heaven, but you two? You’re so tightly wound up in each other I can’t even make heads or tails of who’s who anymore! Soul mates!”

And he giggles.

Dean shoots a glare in Cas’ direction—a little support handling this asshole would be nice—and finds the angel very purposefully not looking at him, which means he knows about this soul thing and he damn well should have said something.

“We’re what?” Sam asks, perking up like a dog at the ring of the dinner bell.

Fantastic.

The cupid opens his mouth to say it again—or maybe to elaborate, Dean isn’t sure which is worse—and Dean does the only thing he can think of.

Stepping forward, he clenches his right hand into a fist and lets the chubby, naked dick have it.
“You think we did the right thing?” Sam asks softly.

They’re in bed, and Dean was almost asleep, damn it, but he’s gotten used to Sam choosing just that moment to start in on him. So instead of bitching, he just hauls in a breath and blinks, trying to refocus his exhausted mind.

“You mean with Bobby?” he checks after a moment.

“Yeah. And leaving. He just buried his wife—again. Maybe we should have stayed.”

“No,” Dean answers, and then shuts his eyes and tries to go back to sleep.

Sam gives him all of three silent minutes before saying, “But—”

“Sam. She was his wife. Let him handle it how he wants, okay?”

This time, when the silence falls, Dean’s smart enough not to trust it. So when the mattress shifts as Sam pushes up onto one elbow, he’s still alert and staring at the opposite wall.

“Dean?” Sam whispers. “You still awake?”

“No.”

Breath tickles his ear, Sam’s hand lightly grips his hip, and okay, yeah, Dean’s wide-awake now. The backflips his stomach is doing have seen to that.

“Can I try something? Dean?”

Christ, Dean doesn’t know what Sam’s after here. He doesn’t think Sam knows either, and he—he—he should get up and go into the bathroom, or play dead, or. Or something.

He opens his mouth. Licks his lips. Rasps, “Yeah.”

Sam’s hand slides up his side to his shoulder, pushing until Dean rolls onto his back. He’s looking up at the ceiling now, trying not to focus on Sam’s face hanging over his because there’s too much emotion in Sam’s eyes and Dean can’t stop thinking about that stupid, naked dick of a cupid from a few weeks ago.

What he said about them.

But he can’t not look at his brother as Sam leans in, slowly, and kisses him. Letting his eyes fall shut, Dean kisses back.

This is old and familiar, at least—welcome, genuine affection. This is—this is good. This is better than good.

Sam’s hand ghosts over the side of Dean’s face, fingers sliding along his jaw and tilting his mouth just so and then shifting around to play with the fringe of hair at the nape of his neck. Dean can’t help reciprocating, and Sam’s hair feels just as soft as it always does—sends an electric tingle through his body and he opens his mouth in a muted gasp.

Sam’s tongue dips inside—not unfamiliar either, although it’s been a while since it has stolen Dean’s
breath like this and left his head spinning. He’s terrified of his body’s violent responses, but he’s pretty much helpless to stop. He doesn’t want to stop, frightening as it is. He wants to breathe Sam in, wants to drink him down and hold him inside forever, where he won’t ever get lost or wander away.

Where he won’t ever have to bury him the way Bobby had to bury his wife.

The kiss turns into kisses, slowly gaining momentum and heat and this—Dean’s not exactly sure this is okay anymore, except it feels right, so he’s willing to go with it. He arches up as his brother’s hand slides down his chest and onto his stomach, where it pauses, resting lightly and building up heat beneath his skin.

Stopping and not moving any lower.

Dean squirms, hungry for something he can’t define, and then gasps in surprise as Sam rolls on top of him, one hard thigh slipping between Dean’s like it belongs there. He’s fucking heavy, and the weight of him is stealing Dean’s breath, but somehow Dean isn’t shoving him off. Somehow, Dean is inching his legs wider, and moaning into Sam’s mouth, and fucked if he knows what’s happening to him.

It isn’t like he hasn’t felt more of Sam than this, with fewer bits of clothing between them (although Dean’s boxers aren’t feeling all that substantial right now), but that was different. That wasn’t them, it wasn’t in a dark room, alone, with nothing pushing them to it. It wasn’t Sam reaching for him, asking for this, and Dean didn’t realize how much he was relying on the buffer of being able to blame Zach or Gabe to avoid completely freaking the fuck out.

But Sam has stilled on top of him, giving him time to panic if he’s going to, and Dean is… Christ, he’s on edge, but pushing Sam away is the last thing on his mind.

Sam has stopped kissing him, but he hasn’t moved back an inch, lips just brushing Dean’s as they breathe into each other’s mouths. There’s a terrible tension building in Dean’s chest, a throb between his legs, and he’s going to scream with the effort of holding himself completely still.

Then, carefully, Sam’s mouth moves against his. Sam’s hand slips around the side of Dean’s body and then pushes down between Dean and the bed—and whoa, that’s Dean’s ass Sam has hold of, holding him still while Sam rocks against him with tentative little jerks of his hips. Dean still isn’t moving—he can’t, if he moves this is going to be something other than it is—but his breath is coming faster, and his heart is just about coming out of his chest, and—

—and Sam breaks the kiss, rolling off of Dean and back over to his own side of the bed.

Dean lies where he is, breathing shallowly and staring at the ceiling. His entire body is flushed, and he can feel Sam radiating heat as well. The air in the room is chilly after all of that friction; leaves Dean shivering in reaction.

Christ, is it the room spinning or just his head?

After several torturous minutes, as Dean’s heart finally starts to calm, he clears his throat and says, “So. How’d that go for you?”

“Good,” Sam says, instantly enough that Dean knows it’s the truth. “But, uh. Confusing. I’m not sure what I was. Uh.”

“Experimenting,” Dean offers.
It’s a good word. A logical word.

“Experimenting,” Sam repeats. “I. Yeah, that sounds… right.”

Dean hauls in a deep breath and then rolls over onto his side away from his brother. It isn’t enough to calm him, so he draws his left leg up slightly and cants his hips in toward the bed protectively. If no one can see it, his erection isn’t there.

“It’d be okay,” he says after a couple of minutes. “If you, uh. Wanted to experiment some more.”

“Oh.” There’s a moment of silence where Dean thinks he just made a huge fucking mistake and then Sam says, “Okay,” in this husky, low voice.

Dean shivers, eyes fluttering shut.

Room’s really fucking cold.
Dean is straddling Sam’s waist when it happens. He’s bent down low, one hand cupping his brother’s jaw as he rocks against Sam with rhythmic, easy motions, and it doesn’t mean anything, it’s just fucking around—*experimenting*—and everyone does it, but his heart jumps up into his throat when he feels the gun barrel against the back of his skull, and it isn’t because he’s afraid of getting shot.

Chirst, he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing here.

“Move off him, Dean.” That’s Walt’s voice, and even without looking back over his shoulder, Dean knows he doesn’t intend anything good. Someone else with him, by the sound, and Dean’s going to guess Roy. Those two are like the Laurel and Hardy of the hunting world.

“No,” he says, dropping his body down more firmly onto his brother’s and ignoring Sam’s attempts to push him off.

“Dean,” Sam hisses. “Dean, they have guns. *Move.*”

Dean forces his arms more tightly around Sam and holds him still. “You want to shoot my brother, you’re going through me first. And I swear to God, Walt, I will claw my way back from wherever you send me and the first thing I’m gonna do is nail your ass to the wall.”

“What, like you’ve been nailing your brother’s ass?” Walt replies, not bothering to deny his identity. The barrel digging into the back of Dean’s head prods him—almost a knock.

Dean doesn’t say anything—what he and Sam were doing was innocent, just experimenting, and they’re still wearing their pants, but he… He knows how this looks.

Clenching his jaw, he wishes he weren’t too absorbed in Sam’s mouth when they stumbled in here to stash his knife under the pillow. Couple of guns, maybe.

“Okay, we can play it this way,” Walt says, not sounding disappointed at all. “Happy trails, Dean.”

Dean never even hears the shot.
Afterwards, Gideon feels gutted. He knows it wasn’t Leah—he saw the Whore’s true face as she struck out at the man who turned out to be a truer servant of God that he ever has been himself—but his heart keeps on blindly insisting that it’s his baby girl beneath the sheet in the other room. Just this morning, she was by his side. He thought she was, anyway.

Yet she was rotten through even then, like a gleaming red apple with worms coiled through its wholesome flesh.

“Pastor?”

It’s him, the Hand of God.

Gideon lifts his gaze from his own shaking hands to look at the man coming toward him. Dean Winchester glances over his shoulder as he enters Gideon’s office, and closes the door quickly behind himself—a furtive, almost guilty act. On the run from his shadow, Gideon supposes; Sam has been watching him with close, nervous eyes ever since Dean lifted the stake from the ground and did what Gideon could not.

What Sam dreads and hopes to prevent through his own vigilance, Gideon can’t guess. He can’t limit the possibilities when it comes to the man before him. There are hidden depths to Dean’s green eyes. There is more to him than the sum of his torn, stained jeans and baggy coat.

“Hey,” Dean says, wiping his hands on that coat now as he comes closer and eases into the chair next to Gideon’s. “Can I ask you something? As, like, a man of God or whatever.”

Gideon can’t quite fathom Dean’s callousness for a moment. He has just lost his daughter. His angel. His shining light. Any decent soul would ask after his well being, or attempt to offer some rudimentary form of comfort—no matter how clumsily.

Yet this is God’s chosen champion—this man, who fidgets in his chair like a child who knows he does wrong and persists in his error anyway. This wanderer with no hearth to name his own, with no true reverence or piety about him, who keeps looking over his shoulder at the closed door, on watch for the only being—man or angel or devil or God—to whom he owes his allegiance.

In Sam’s name, Gideon knows, does Dean trust. In Sam’s name does Dean do his works, and in no other’s.

Yet this is God’s soldier—God’s first picked lamb of the springtime. This man, who doesn’t seem to care that, less than an hour ago, he drove a piece of wood through the only good thing Gideon had left in the world.

But Dean saved the rest of Gideon’s flock with that blow—he’ll save them all, if any of Leah’s words were true—and so Gideon gathers himself, setting aside his resentment and pain, and says, “I’m not at my best, but I’ll try to answer.”

Licking his lips, Dean leans forward with his elbows on his knees and fixes Gideon with an intent, earnest look.

“So you and God, you’re tight,” he says, and waits for Gideon to digest that statement and nod in agreement before asking, “Would you say that He’s the kind of guy who keeps His word? I mean, if I—if someone made an arrangement, sort of like a work contract. He’d honor it, right?”
It’s an incomprehensible question, and Gideon falls back on the early lessons of the catechism for his answer. “God’s Word is Truth.”

But Dean’s eyes flash with sudden steel. They darken with the same hard, inner fire that Gideon glimpsed in the moment that Dean’s hand closed on the wooden stake. In the second before Dean drove that length of wood through his Leah’s chest, Gideon looked between their faces and could not see a difference.

Darkness snarling at darkness.

“Don’t just spout the party line on me,” Dean insists in a low, vehement voice. “I want your honest opinion. If I go to God, and I—if there are things I want—people who have to be protected—will He do it?”

“Yes,” Gideon says simply.

“And angels are God’s voice on earth, right?” Dean presses. “They can deal for Him?”

Gideon nods, wordlessly this time, and Dean’s tight expression eases into something terribly, unsettlingly peaceful. The dark, compelling aura eases from him, and he sits back in his chair seconds before the door to Gideon’s study slams open and Sam stumbles into the room. Sam looks back and forth between them wildly, and for an instant Gideon feels unspeakably guilty.

He has answered questions he should not have, Sam’s expression tells him. He has allowed Dean to make him a conspirator in an act he wants no part in.

What God has bound, Gideon thinks with a chill tightness in his chest, let no man part asunder.

Dean stands, calm in the face of the desperate fury tensing Sam’s muscles, and holds out a hand in Gideon’s direction. “Thanks, man,” he says.

Slowly, Gideon lifts his own hand in return. They shake, and Dean’s hand—the strong, sure hand that guided the stake into Leah’s chest—feels cold. Gideon is left with the illusion that he’s shaking hands with a dead man—or one as good as dead.

Be careful, he wants to warn. Make sure it isn’t truly the Devil you’re bargaining with.

What do you need so badly? he wants to ask. What could be worth the gravity that was in your eyes? What is it that has your shadow so fearful?

But he has had ample time to observe the way that these two men move around each other, and he knows, at least, on whose behalf Dean intends to barter himself. And he knows just as surely that Sam won’t appreciate that sale.

When Dean tries to take his hand back, Gideon tightens his grip.

“Dean, the road to Hell—”

“—is pretty damn close lately,” Dean finishes for him. His grip is suddenly crushing. A warning flashes in his eyes, telling Gideon that Gideon should keep his mouth shut about their conversation if he knows what’s good for him.

It isn’t anything holy that Gideon sees there, but rather fire and brimstone and hollow, cruel things. Dean’s eyes look, for a moment, much the same as do the eyes of the men in the old black and white photographs that Gideon keeps in his attic. Men long dead now, photographed in their uniforms
upon their return from the trenches of the first world war. Men who have seen the Abyss—who have
crawled from its depths and have no more left of their souls to lose.

Dean Winchester might be Heaven’s Hand on Earth, but that doesn’t change the fact that there’s Hell
in his eyes.

Gideon’s flesh crawls as Dean finally lets him go. He resists the urge to wipe his hand on his pants,
or to make the sign of the cross that he desperately wants to place between them. He’s silent and still
as Sam takes hold of Dean, one hand gripping his bicep, and all but yanks him from the room. Dean
glances over his shoulder as he’s pulled along, with a crooked smile on his face and a new, even
more upsetting expression in his eyes.

Three years past, a man with a similar look about him came to sit with Gideon. The man’s name was
Frankie Parker, and his wife was sick with cancer—the disease rampant in her body, just eating her
up inside. Gideon talked to Frankie for hours about the Kingdom, and sin, and God’s Grace, and
Gabby Parker’s increasingly strident pleas for release, and Lord knows Gideon tried to talk him out
of it, but that look had been upon Frankie, like the heavy hand of a fell horseman, and the
horseman’s name was not Death or Pestilence, but Resolve.

When Frankie left the church that afternoon, he went home and he put a bullet in his wife’s brain.
Then, for good measure, he put another in his own.

Don’t, Gideon thinks, meeting Dean’s eyes for what he knows, deep in his churning stomach, will
be the last time.

But Dean turns his face away without giving any sign that he heard and, a moment later, Sam’s
broad back hides him from view. The door closes behind them, leaving Gideon alone.

In their absence—in Dean’s absence—he breathes a little easier. Yet he knows, even as he sits back
down and rests his bowed head against hands clasped in prayer, that it won’t be Leah’s face in his
nightmares tonight.

“God save us,” he whispers, “from the good we try to do.”

But as hard as he listens in the silence afterwards, he can’t be sure that anyone is listening.
“You guys are seriously bent, you know that?” Adam mutters.

Dean snorts in agreement as he shrugs Sam’s hands off of his shoulders for what has to be the tenth time in two minutes, but Sam just shoots Adam a frustrated glance and goes right back to massaging the guy. Not that it’s been doing any good, from what Adam can tell. Dean’s just as tense and glowering as he was when Adam first woke up and found everyone staring at him.

“Dude, cut it out already,” Dean complains. He moves to stand, pushing off the back of the chair he’s straddling, and Sam shoves him right back down.

“You aren’t going anywhere.”

“What the fuck are you, my mother?”

“I’m your brother,” Sam says, annoyance threading his voice. “And I love you, and I’m not letting you throw yourself away. Again.”

Dean mutters something under his breath, but he subsides and drops his head forward, giving Sam more room to work. And after ten, awkward minutes of letting Sam touch him in ways Adam is pretty sure are anything but brotherly, he’s been reduced to making these obscene moaning noises that sour Adam’s mouth and turn his stomach.

The tension in his gut builds and builds until he can’t take it anymore and blurts, “Are you two really screwing?”

Neither of them so much as flinches.

“Once,” Dean says without lifting his head. “But Zach mindfucked us, so it doesn’t count.”

“And you expect me to believe that,” Adam says dryly.

Sam’s forehead wrinkles disapprovingly as Dean lifts his head again to peer at Adam. His hands pause mid-caress to push Dean’s head back down, then linger briefly in his hair.

“'S the truth,” Dean says, the words mumbled in the direction of the floor, but still mostly comprehensible.

Adam looks back and forth between the two of them. Sam with his anxious fretting and his hands that have already gone back to rubbing the nape of Dean’s neck. Dean with his legs spread in a sprawl that does absolutely nothing to hide the effect the massage is having on him.

Snorting, Adam rolls his eyes. “Yeah,” he exhales, lying back down on the couch. “If you say so.”
Dean expects Sam to mount an immediate and unrelenting offensive as soon as they’re back in the car. But Sam is quiet on the drive—although where they’re driving to, Dean isn’t sure. He’s just driving as fast and as far as he can get from that white room, from Cas’ possible sacrifice (no knowing what activating a banishing sigil carved into his own chest might have done to him), from the terror on Adam’s face as the light in the room swelled into an unknowable, blinding brilliance.

Even from where he stood on the edge of the threshold, Dean could feel that light trickling into him—recognizing him and coming faster, because you apparently don’t get take backs when it comes to archangels. There was a part of him that recognized Michael in turn, a part that longed for the purifying wash of oblivion that would take him along with the angel’s touch: longed for an end, finally, to the red, pestilential places inside of him. An end to the dreams of fire and corruption, and to the seething hate and violence that sometimes cloud his judgment.

Dean knew, as he hovered in the doorway, that losing those places would burn. Michael’s grace would pour over them like acid on sugar, bubbling and smoking until they were completely seared away. He sensed the possibility that the corruption runs through him deeply enough that he wouldn’t survive the experience. And he faced the crawling suspicion that, in the aftermath of his cleansing, he might very well be left with nothing but the shell of his body.

No thoughts. No memories. The perfect, empty vessel.

Peace and oblivion, twin sides of the coin of his salvation.

And, with Michael’s Grace burning at the edges of his soul, Dean couldn’t find it in him to care.

He might have thrown himself forward then—at the mercy of Michael’s call, or in a desperate Hail Mary to save the brother he failed on the first run out—but Sam’s hand closed around his wrist, and Sam yanked him back and out and the door slammed shut on its own and that was that.

Dean doesn’t like remembering how he felt in the first few seconds of silence afterward. When his thoughts circle back to it, the choking, bitter aftertaste of despairing panic burns his throat. He feels a skin-prickling echo of the relief that shocked through him, strong enough to crest above the darker, roiling tide of emotion gripping his body and locking his muscles. And then the panic surged again, fueled by the fluttering of his thoughts and his dirty, mangled soul as they struggled to escape from the agony of revelation—like a thousand dark crows’ wings, snapping violently against the inside of his ribcage in a whirlwind of feather and bone.

Worse than those ghostly echoes of sensation, though, is the undeniable understanding that he had a third incentive to embrace the oblivion Michael offered. It makes Dean sick to his stomach to consider that maybe the strongest impulse that kept him rooted to the doorway wasn’t Michael’s allure, or the need to save another innocent. Maybe, it was this third thing: a driving need to flee from the terror of discovery, from the reeling shock that gripped him only moments before, when protective blinders he didn’t even know he had were stripped from his mind with ruthless, breath-stealing suddenness.

The revelation was too big, too much, too damn intense, and Dean’s goddamned chest was going to explode if he couldn’t get away.

Michael’s light offered an easy out—the only path providing possible escape from the smothering pressure of awareness. Dean is still trying to evade acceptance now (it’s true, it’s the goddamned
He’s driving with the pedal pressed flush with the floorboards and willfully ignoring the fact that he’s carrying the naked, blistering realization along with him as he goes. All of that excruciating awareness is screaming in his head, unmuzzled and unrestrained now that it’s burst forth from its place of concealment beneath his ribcage.

More importantly, it’s sitting beside him in the form of his brother, who is a quiet, unavoidable presence to Dean’s right. Sam hasn’t stopped watching Dean since they got into the car, and he isn’t making any attempt to modulate the intensity of his gaze.

So driving isn’t actually getting Dean anywhere, but he doesn’t know what else to do, and it’s at least providing him with the illusion of decisive action. The barest illusion, maybe, but it’s just about the only thing keeping him inside his skin instead of exploding all over the goddamned car. He isn’t sure he could survive the words that want to come out of his mouth.

Even if he could, he damn well knows that he wouldn’t last longer than Sam’s inevitable reply.

It’s been two hours of silence between them in the night—in the wee hours of the morning, really, by Dean’s watch. For two unbearable hours, Dean has grappled with terrifying things that he can’t know, but which refuse to be ignored any longer—and whether they’re in Sam’s head as well, Dean doesn’t want to find out.

As long as he doesn’t meet Sam’s eyes, there’s still a chance that Sam might not have realized anything even happened back there. As long as they don’t talk about it, there’s still the possibility that Sam is blissfully unaware that Dean is going fucking nuts here. Dean hasn’t ever been that lucky before, but there’s a first time for everything.

So he keeps his trap shut and his eyes on the road. If he can just keep things unspoken for long enough, he can keep them that way—even if Sam does know. There’s a window of opportunity for these things, and the more minutes that Dean can stack up on his side, the better. Couple days, he’ll feel safer. Couple of weeks, and it’ll be smooth sailing again.

But somehow, he isn’t at all surprised when Sam breaks his silence to say, “Pull over.”

The firm, unyielding timbre of his voice tells Dean that Sam doesn’t mean to the side of the road. He understands, with a twist of mingled resignation and terror (and relief? fuck you optimism), that this is it, this is the goddamned firing squad, and that Sam knows, and Sam is going to rip the ground right out from underneath them whether Dean wants him to or not.

Dean’s heart kicks in his chest, but he doesn’t protest or pretend he hasn’t heard. He takes the next exit, following blue highway signs that point the way, and finally ends up in front of the Sleep E-Z Inn. He isn’t sure what state they’re in, let alone which town—not that Dean’s ever needed lines on a map to tell him where he is when Sam is with him.

**Home,** his heart beats out even now, as panicked as he is with the magnitude of his revelation. *This is home.*

How long has this intensity been between them? For how many miles and rest stops and ‘dude, if you get your hair cut maybe people will stop mistaking you for a girl’ have they both been circling ever closer to this moment? How many fond smiles have there been, how many casual touches that left heat beneath Dean’s skin and an itch at the back of his brain?

They’re questions Dean could answer if he tries, but he doesn’t want to—ignorance is bliss—so he parks and gets out of the Impala and books them a room, moving under auto-pilot as Sam gathers
their bags from the trunk and stands waiting on the sidewalk. Dean continues to avoid looking at his brother’s face as he comes back out of the office, but he does cautiously take in the lines of Sam’s body (Sam isn’t a gawky teenager anymore, hasn’t been for years; he’s a man now, all muscle and strength, and Dean has never been so aware of that fact). He assesses Sam’s stance, how he’s holding himself, and Sam doesn’t seem at all anxious.

There’s actually a steady, calming patience about the way he’s standing there, just like he has so many times before, and Dean’s own pulse slows in automatic response. He breathes a little easier as Sam falls into step beside him, both of them moving for the room furthest from the office without a word—the same room they always take if it’s free, away from the prying eyes of civilians.

Once inside, Sam gives Dean his space, a ceasefire that Dean takes full advantage of. He unpacks his bag, lays down some salt lines, and then heads into the bathroom and splashes his face with cool, refreshing water. He takes his time, with the door shut, and tries unsuccessfully to wrap his mind around what he’s doing here, what they’re doing here, and oh god, he’s a fucking moron. They both are.

When he comes back out again fifteen minutes later, Sam is sitting at the table with his cell phone out in front of him, one hand resting lightly on the plastic casing.

“I called Bobby,” Sam says.

Oh good, casual bullshitting. Dean can totally do this. Dropping down on the edge of their (‘their’, Christ) bed, he asks, “On a scale of one to ten, how pissed was he?”

“What a seven. Mostly, he wanted to know why it took us so long to call him.”

Dean searches for a way to respond to that, keep the banal conversation going, and can’t find one. Mostly because he’s in the process of getting gobsmacked all over again by just how fucking gorgeous his brother looks.

Sam’s wearing old, worn jeans and a brown plaid shirt. The chair he’s sitting in is too small for him—the chairs in these places usually are—and one of his legs slants up at an awkward angle. The other, he has stretched out in front of him, with his foot propped up on the seat of another chair. There’s a hole in the heel of his sock, and a discoloration in the fabric stretched out over ball of his foot that tells Dean another one is on the way.

His hair is as stupidly floppy as ever, needs a trim even if he refuses to cut it. Heavy lines of exhaustion mar his face and smudged shadows underline his eyes—Dean’s fault, the way he’s been behaving over the last week or so, when Sam was running himself ragged to keep Dean from doing the sensible thing and saving them all.

In short, Sam looks like shit, actually, but Dean keeps on thinking that he’s fucking beautiful anyway. The sight of him makes Dean’s heart beat a little faster—excitement and not panic, the same warm rush as Dean always feels when he looks at Sam. And maybe that right there is the answer to the questions he was asking himself earlier.

This has always been between them. They have been circling toward this moment since the day they drew their first breaths. There have been countless smiles, infinite touches.

Dean can try to resist, but he’ll have just as much luck backing them up onto solid ground as a mangy coyote that just sprinted through some deep brush and found himself hurtling through midair off the edge of a cliff. Backpedal as quickly and as violently as he can, gravity already has hold of him, and he’s gonna fall. Hard.
Dean is keenly and unpleasantly aware that he’s been lying in his very own Wile E.-shaped crater for a while now.

“So,” Sam says without warning. Dean’s still holding out hope that his brother is going to follow that up with ‘how ‘bout them Rangers’, but instead Sam goes with, “You know what I’m going to ask.”

Dean does, but Sam can’t make him admit to it. This is coming at him quickly enough already without him helping it along, damn it.

Sam clearly understands that he isn’t going to get an assist, because he almost immediately continues, “What made you change your mind?”

Yeah, that’s the question Dean has been dreading since that first breath of silence after Sam pulled him out of the white room.

Being asked is somehow still a jolt, though, and Dean is suddenly back in that moment again—Zach’s voice dimmed to an unimportant, muffled mumble in the background as he chanted the words that would call Michael down. It was drowned out completely in the next instant, as Dean met Sam’s eyes for what he was certain was the last time. His pulse broke out into a thundering stampede of blood rushing through his head. There was an unbearable pressure in his chest, swelling larger and more painful with alarming speed until something snapped and all of Dean’s long ignored and spurned emotions spilled out in glowing, shivery shocks of realization.

Sam’s eyes. Sam’s faith and trust and desperation.

Fuck, Sam.

Dean shakes free from the memory of that earth-shattering moment and drops his eyes, feeling oddly exposed and vulnerable. This is… Christ, this is everything. Sam could break him in this moment, if he wants to. Not that his vulnerability where Sam is concerned is a revelation, but Dean hasn’t ever been so acutely aware of just how deeply Sam can wound him with nothing more than a casual, absent word.

Sam is waiting for a word from Dean now, with a lack of expression that’s making his take on the situation impossible to read, and Dean has to clear his throat before he can rasp, “You know what.”

“Maybe I want to hear you say it,” Sam answers, which is so fucking typical that Dean’s teeth ache.

The day Sam doesn’t try forcing Dean to say shit that doesn’t actually need saying is the day Dean will sell the Impala for parts. Dean feels his face tighten with resistance—he doesn’t want to be having this conversation at all right now; it sure as fuck isn’t going to go the way Sam wants it to.

Before he can snap at Sam, though, Sam adds, “I mean, I already did.”

For a few seconds, Dean doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Then he understands what Sam is referring to—Glenview, Sammy’s time tripping the light fantastic—and is left breathless all over again by the relieved confirmation that the electric emotions thrumming through him aren’t one-sided. He’s left lost and reeling for several heartbeats, shamefully grateful for the reassurance he isn’t alone in this, and then stiffens with the belated understanding that Sam is trying to weasel his way out of manning up to his emotions based on a motherfucking technicality.

“That doesn’t count! You were high as a kite,” he blurts, jerking his head up as he comes to his feet.

Of course, that must have been Sam’s plan all along because now that Dean has been tricked into looking, he can’t tear his eyes away. He’s stuck staring at Sam’s tight, satisfied smile as Sam nods
“Okay,” he says. “I’ll say it again.”

No, don’t, Dean thinks, and Yes. Yes, fucking finally.

Sam holds Dean’s eyes with his own as he moves away from the table. The weaker, cowardly parts of Dean are screaming at him to run for cover, but he can’t seem to move. Sam’s face is as serious as Dean has ever seen it, and the naked emotion—the depth of longing, of need—in his eyes is mesmerizing. Dean’s skin aches with how much he wants there not to be half a room between them right now.

“I love you,” Sam says, and then immediately elaborates, “I’m in love with you, Dean.”

The world doesn’t shatter. Dean’s chest doesn’t crack open; that damage has already been done. There’s just a deeper, more insistent pulse of aching warmth from inside him—contentment, and relief, and yeah, okay, love.

He’s in love with Sam.

Sam’s waiting for a response, just threw everything out there in the open where Dean can’t ignore it, turned it into a challenge, the little bitch, and Dean has to say something. He has to come up with some sort of answer.

“We’re brothers,” is what he says, although it doesn’t actually come out sounding like much of a protest. Hell, once the words are out, he finds that he doesn’t really care.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, looking just as put off by the reminder as Dean feels. If anything, his smile broadens as he comes closer. “We are.”

Dean’s eyes widen when Sam doesn’t stop coming, when he moves across the room until he’s standing in Dean’s space and is impossible to ignore. Not that Dean was doing such a great job with that before. Then Sam stands there, breath wafting warm over Dean’s mouth while he holds Dean’s eyes with his own. The air between them feels electrified.

“What’re you doing?” Dean asks, barely daring to move his lips around the words.

“Thought I’d kiss you,” Sam answers just as softly. “If that’s okay.”

Dean’s stomach flips on him, although he’s had Sam’s tongue in his mouth hundreds of times, and he hides his nerves by joking, “Little late to be asking for permission, dude.”

“Maybe,” Sam says, reaching out and setting a hand on Dean’s waist. It’s a deliberate, burning weight on his side, and his pulse jumps when he feels Sam’s thumb slip up beneath his shirt to rub against bare skin. “But I haven’t ever kissed you like this before, so I’m asking.”

Christ, it feels hot in here all of a sudden. “Kissed me like what?”

“With intent,” Sam answers, pushing more of his hand beneath Dean’s shirt and lightly dragging his fingertips over Dean’s side and across his stomach. “Might have to get you out of these clothes.”

“You’ve done that before, too,” Dean points out, feeling like ten different kinds of stupid as he realizes just how much ground they’ve already covered.

One side of Sam’s mouth quirks up and he hooks his fingers in the waistband of Dean’s jeans, giving
a sharp tug. “Might have to fuck you.”

Dean never knew Sam could sound so damn dirty—and he really never suspected that hearing those words out of his little brother’s mouth would send him from lazily aroused to rock hard in less than a second. Here they are, though, and Dean is already tilting his head for his brother as Sam’s lips graze along his jaw and throat. He’s reaching up and getting hold of Sam’s bicep, hanging on as Sam unbuckles his belt and opens his jeans for him.

“That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think?” he manages as Sam pauses to open his own pants. “I mean, who says you get to be on top?”

“Rock paper scissors,” Sam offers, and this time, there’s pressure behind his kisses—open-mouthed and hungry, with just a graze of teeth against Dean’s upturned throat.

Because that game always goes so well for Dean.

“Rock, paper…How stupid do I look?” Dean grunts, fighting with the buttons on his brother’s flannel shirt. “Get this—fuck, get this off, man.”

Sam makes a frustrated sound, but he also stops touching Dean long enough to just haul the whole thing off over his head, and fuck, he’s ripped. It’s…it’s really nice, objectively speaking. Makes Dean want to do things with his mouth that he’s pretty sure Sam won’t have any problems with.

Sam is back on him in a second, with a little lunge that drives Dean back a step. He runs into the edge of the bed, overbalances, and falls backwards with a startled yelp. Sam comes down on top of him, the oversized lumberjack, momentarily driving Dean’s breath from him. When Dean recovers, Sam is already manhandling him higher onto the bed and rucking his shirt up so that he can bite at Dean’s stomach and lower chest.


Sam comes at his insistence, spreading himself out on top of Dean so that they’re rubbing against each other in all the right places. His gaze is heated but questioning as he looks in Dean’s eyes, and Dean is just not patient enough to deal with that shit tonight, so he gets a hand on the back of Sam’s neck and hauls him into a kiss.

It isn’t actually all that different from the ones that came before. Thank god for small favors on that score, too, because Dean really enjoyed the way those were going. There’s just a little shift in the flavor now that they’ve put a name to the emotion Sam’s mouth is rousing in Dean’s chest—and a few degrees more heat now that he isn’t fighting against his body’s instinctive responses.

Dean kisses Sam until he’s too impatient for more and then, turning his head to one side, insists, “Off,” while pushing at Sam’s jeans.

Sam laughs, shifting up to help him. “I’m starting to think you don’t like my clothes,” he jokes.

“Nothing personal,” Dean answers. “They’re just in my way.”

They don’t say much at all after that, too busy with other things, and somehow Dean’s clothes end up on the floor alongside Sam’s, and Christ, Dean hasn’t felt like this since he was a teenager feeling up his first girl. He can’t get enough of Sam’s skin, like it’s an addiction, and Sam clearly feels the same way, if his roving hands are any indication.

“Jesus Christ, Dean,” he says finally in a strained, wondering voice. “You’re so beautiful.”
It probably isn’t meant as an insult—Dean doubts Sam’s brain is working that well—and anyway, Dean’s sort of flattered, so he only grunts, “Shut up,” and somehow manages to grip his own cock and Sam’s together in one fist. This isn’t quite what he wants to be doing with his brother, but it’ll do in a pinch. Anyway, there’s plenty of time for more later, once they’ve figured out a fair way to decide about the whole top and bottom thing. Sam apparently agrees because he catches Dean’s mouth beneath his own again and rocks his cock through Dean’s mouth beneath his own again and rocks his cock through Dean’s fist.

Several jerks with his hand and Dean spills, riding an intense way of pleasure and making everything slicker down there, which seems to do it for Sam if the way he suddenly shakes and cries out is any indication. He’s a biter, too; damn near takes Dean’s bottom lip off as he comes.

Dean sags down against the bed while Sam is still shuddering out the tail end of his climax, limp with contentment. His chest glows warmly when Sam collapses on top of him a moment later and there are several peaceful, perfect moments while they catch their breaths.

Then Sam starts moving around, restless shifts that turn into more purposeful rolls of his hips. Dean isn’t going to let Sam, of all people, out-perform him, so they’re off again—parting long enough to secure some lube, this time, which helps after they engage in an impromptu wrestling match to settle the upstairs-downstairs question.

Sam’s arms are freakishly long, okay? It’s totally not Dean’s fault that he ends up with Sam’s cock pushing into him while he hangs onto his brother’s shoulders and hooks one leg around Sam’s waist in an effort to get him inside faster. Anyway, it feels—fuck, it feels awesome; feels even better when he’s managed to convince Sam that he isn’t going to break and Sam really starts giving it to him, dick sliding in and out past Dean’s sensitive rim with a rough speed bordering on desperation.

By the time they’re both sated, Dean’s ass is open and slick. His cheeks and upper thighs feel wet, and his muscles burn. Sweat coats his skin.

But as Sam gets out of bed and comes back with a wet facecloth and a towel for Dean to clean up with, and climbs onto the mattress to lie pressed up close along Dean’s back—like normal, right where he belongs—Dean feels nothing but contentment. He closes his eyes, smiling, and leans back into his brother. Sam idly trails fingertips over Dean’s chest, making him sink lower and lower in his lethargy.

Dean’s on the edge of sleep when it occurs to him. He really wants to push the thought away and deal with it in the morning, but it’s too horrible to ignore, swelling and looming in his mind until he can’t bear staring at it any longer.

“Oh God,” he groans, stirring restlessly.

“What?” Sam’s hand stills on Dean’s chest.

Heaving a sigh, Dean mutters, “Bobby’s never going to shut up about this.”

He can practically hear the gears turning in Sam’s head as he takes that little nugget in, and then, slowly, Sam offers, “Well, there’s no reason to tell him, is there? I mean, it isn’t like he wasn’t already making assumptions.”

Dean blinks up at the darkened ceiling with a slight, thoughtful frown. “You really think that’ll work?”

“No, but he isn’t going to say anything if we don’t. And I don’t know about you, but when it comes to this?” His hand slides down Dean’s chest to loosely curl around his spent cock. “I’m gonna have
to say it’s none of his damn business.”

Dean’s a little taken aback by the vehemence in his brother’s voice, but Sam’s hand is making some pretty compelling arguments. And damned if Dean is going to suggest pulling Bobby aside for a little heart-to-heart about anything that isn’t related to cutting Lucifer into bite-sized bits.

“Sammy,” he breathes after a moment, rocking his hips lazily forward and then pushing his ass back against his brother’s body. “I like the way you think.”

Sam, the annoying bastard, lifts his hand and puts it back on Dean’s chest—just when things were getting interesting again, too. Not that Dean can find it in himself to be all that upset about it, considering the gentle, cherishing kisses Sam is pressing against his shoulder.

“Just the way I think?” Sam prods, lips brushing Dean’s skin and hand stroking his chest.

Dean hmms to himself, pretending to consider the question, and then laughs when Sam bites his shoulder in retaliation.

“You’ll say it eventually,” Sam mutters when they’ve both quieted again. He doesn’t sound too put out by Dean’s reluctance, though; sounds more amused and fond than anything. It means that Dean doesn’t actually have to respond; Sam knows how he works, what he feels.

Then again, anything Sam can do, he can do better.

“Hey, Sammy,” he says, covering his brother’s hand with his own and interlacing their fingers.

“Mmm,” Sam hums, pressing his nose against the back of Dean’s neck.

“Gonna make an honest woman out of you.”

Sam snorts a laugh and shoves Dean’s back, then immediately hauls him close again. One of his feet pushes into place between Dean’s, and he buries his face against Dean’s shoulder blades, breathing in deeply.

“Do I get a ring?” he asks.

Dean opens his mouth to tell Sam that that depends on whether his position on onions has changed and then shuts it again, shifting the fingers on his right hand. His ring is an ever-present weight, won after a night spent trading lies back and forth with a fir darrig over a campfire.

Sam probably would’ve nagged at him to get rid of it if he knew how Dean got it (even after all these years, Dean can hear his brother’s shouts—so stupid, how could you have done that, do you even know how dangerous that was, could have been killed), but someone had to convince the elf to move along and it had been too canny to go near Dad. Besides, a night spent playing ‘who’s the best liar’ was a walk in the park, compared to some other jobs Dean’s been on.

The ring has been a mark of pride since then, a trophy the fir darrig took off of one of its victims and grudgingly passed to Dean with the coming dawn. It’s worn a little smooth from the passage of the years, and from Dean’s own restless fingers. Sam might still not know where Dean got it, doesn’t suspect the ring’s true value and wouldn’t understand if he did, but he knows it means something. Right now, Dean figures that’s all that matters.

It takes a moment to work the ring off. Slipping it into place on Sam’s finger is a whole lot easier.

Behind him, Sam has gone still and quiet.
Dean licks his lips, surprised at how full his own chest feels right now, and a sudden, reckless need to break the moment apart swells inside him. He could do it, too; tell Sam that he gets this is the moment his girlish heart has been yearning for, but not to get snot on Dean’s back when he bursts into tears. That’d get a laugh from Sam, or a disgusted knee to the back of his thigh. It’d be safer.

Then again, nothing about tonight has been safe in the least, and Dean… Dean’s surprised to discover that he sort of likes it.

Silently, he takes hold of Sam’s hand, using his thumb to turn the ring on Sam’s finger.

“I love you, Sammy,” he confesses. “Scares me shitless how much.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. His hand turns in Dean’s, holding him back and twining their fingers together.

“You think we can really do this?” Dean asks. “You think we can tell Lucifer and Michael to fuck off and take their apocalypse with them?”

It isn’t quite a tangent. Dean’s awareness of this thing between them might be new, but the bond itself is familiar and old, and he knows, somehow, that it matters.

They matter.

Between his shoulder blades, Dean feels his brother smile.

“I know we can,” Sam answers. “We’re going to be okay, Dean.”

Dean lets out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding, relaxing back against the warm weight of his brother’s chest. It might just be the afterglow talking, but somehow—somehow—he knows that Sam is right.

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