Let This Remain

by VioletHaze

Summary

Dean Winchester dropped his little brother Sam off for his freshman year of college, then dropped out of his life completely. Now, nearly a year later, Dean's gotten himself together and is back in Lawrence to make things right with his brother. As he works to build his life in Kansas, Dean finds himself repeatedly crossing paths with Castiel Milton. Maybe the universe is trying to tell him something at a time when he's actually ready to listen.

Notes

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Teen rated version of this story available here
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See the end of the work for more notes.
It’s two hundred more miles to Lawrence. Gauging by the position of the sun, still fairly high in the hot August sky, Dean could be there before it’s fully dark. Instead, with the traffic of St. Louis behind him, he pulls off the interstate somewhere between Warrenton and Columbia to find a motel.

Early that morning he’d left Pittsburgh in a flurry of eager anticipation, the Impala filled with his negligible possessions. That confidence had buoyed him as the rolling hills of Pennsylvania gave way to the hypnotically flat landscape of Ohio. Maybe the mindlessness of the drive, mile after mile stretching west on I-70, had given him too much time to think because somewhere in the middle of Illinois, he found his resolve replaced by antsy doubt.

It’s been nearly a year since Dean had any contact with his brother. Not a visit, not a phone call, not a text. Suddenly this plan—if you can even call “go back” a plan—seems to come up lacking in almost every way. He pushes that thought aside and focuses on the reason he’s followed the sun west for six hundred miles already today. He needs to see Sam.

Disappearing on Sam had been a major dick move. He knows that now. He’d taken off just hours after settling Sam in his dorm room as a freshman at the University of Kansas, convinced that his absence was the only way to shield his little brother. It’s taken his sessions with Victor to understand the damage he’s done and the hurt he’s caused.

Now, sitting in a dingy motel room in central Missouri, Dean tries to ignore the glaring flaws in his plan. (Hell, he doesn’t even have a place to live, although he’s pretty sure Bobby will let him crash with him until things get sorted out.) He focuses instead on his readiness to take responsibility for his actions and to reconnect with his brother. This is something Dean needs to do for himself. He’s ready.

Only at this particular moment “ready” is quickly being re-defined as “best put off for another day”. It’s not that he’s stalling, he tells himself as the fan rattles the still-hot air around the room, he’s being considerate. The least he can do is give his brother a heads up, right? Turning up out of the blue is almost as unfair as disappearing was.

He holds his phone in his hand, dialing then deleting the digits over and over. Dean knows Sam might be less than enthusiastic about his return. He and Victor had talked about that. However Sam responds is valid, he reminds himself. If Sam’s pissed, Dean has it coming. If he doesn’t want to see or speak to Dean, well, he has that coming too.

Dean closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, counting to eight as he holds it, before releasing it
slowly. He dials the number once more and presses call, his mouth going dry as he listens to it ring. The cowardly relief that washes over him when the call transfers to voicemail is quickly cut with guilt at hearing Sam’s voice on the outgoing message.

By the time the beep sounds, Dean’s pacing around the small room.

“Uh, hey, Sammy, it’s me. I just wanted to let you know that I’m heading back to Lawrence. I’ll be back tomorrow, actually. I’m going to head to Bobby’s. So, um, that’s where I’ll be. You can call if you want or I’ll just see you later. Or whatever you want.” He pauses and tries to rein in his rambling. “I’ll give you my number…oh wait, I guess it’s in your phone now, so never mind.” Dean covers his eyes with his free hand. This is going swimmingly. “So, ok. Bye.”

He throws the phone down on the bed then throws himself face down next to it.

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It’s well before noon the next day when he pulls the Impala into the salvage yard. Turning off the engine, Dean ducks his head over the steering wheel and takes in the familiar lines of Bobby’s house. Other than the house where his mother died, this is the place he’s most consistently called home. Over the years, their father had dumped Sam and Dean here for weeks—sometimes months—at a time and after John died, Bobby had brought them here to live. Sam had been halfway through his freshman year of high school and Dean had just gotten his GED.

Dean is convinced that the stability of an actual home base for the rest of Sam’s high school years was responsible for Sam’s excellent grades and the generous offer he got from KU.

Bobby’s house is cluttered in some places and tattered in others, and feels completely right in all of them. Bobby was never the type to offer them service with a smile, but like the hulking house itself, he was a comforting constant: always there, always taking them in. Growing up, Dean felt like he could let his guard down and drop some of the weight of the world from his shoulders the minute he walked through the front door. Bobby’s shoulders were broad enough to carry the burden with him.

Dean thinks back to the times Bobby had criticized his father for being too hard on the boys and dragging them down into his own personal hell. Had anybody else badmouthed his father, Dean would have pounced on them with words and fists, but he’d simply sat in uncomfortable silence whenever Bobby said those things. It had been confusing to hear someone else give voice to the thoughts in the back of his mind. He sees now that it was Bobby’s way of telling him that none of this was his fault.
He couldn’t hear it then.

At the time, Dean’s job was to keep the fraying ends of his sad excuse for a family together. Sam couldn’t care for himself and John wouldn’t, so that left Dean. There was no room for blame in Dean’s tenuous grip on the world so he’d pushed away Bobby’s implications. Now he adds Bobby’s attempts to ease his guilt and give him some semblance of a childhood to the pile of things for which he’ll never be able to repay the old man.

He’s still sitting in the car, the sun magnified by the windshield, when Bobby comes out the front door to stand in the shade of the small, covered front porch before stepping into the sun, his ever present trucker cap shielding his eyes.

“You gonna sit out there all day or man up and come inside?”

Dean climbs out of the Impala and walks towards him not stopping until he’s pulled Bobby into a bear hug.

“Oh, so you’re a hugger now,” Bobby says as he straightens his cap. “What else have I missed? And how long are you here for?”

“I think I’m back for good,” Dean says.

“Does your brother know?”

“I left him a message yesterday.” Dean looks down at the ground. “Haven’t heard anything from him yet.”

“So, you’re back, huh?” Bobby crosses his arms over his chest and raises an eyebrow at Dean. “What’s your plan?”

“Oh,” is Dean’s clever response. “I was hoping…”
Bobby huffs out a knowing laugh and rolls his eyes. “Go get your shit out of the car. Of course you can stay here. And I’ve got plenty of work, if you need that, too.”

Dean grins and turns to open the trunk.

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It doesn’t take long for Dean to get what little he owns unloaded and unpacked in his old room. At dinner time, he slices garlic bread while Bobby drains pasta and catches him up on what’s new with the salvage yard. Along with the ongoing mechanic work, he’s recently signed a contract with the city, using the wrecker to tow damaged vehicles from accident scenes. The calls come through a central dispatch, which means they can take or leave as many jobs as they want. With Dean on hand, they could definitely respond to an increased number of calls, Bobby points out. They’re eating and discussing the logistics of this when the phone rings. Bobby heaves himself out of his chair to answer it.

“Yeah, he’s here.” Bobby thrusts the cordless handset towards Dean, talking loudly into the air, “and I’m giving him the phone.”

Dean can hear Sam protesting on the other end before he even gets the phone to his ear.

“Hey,” he says lamely.

There’s a long pause before Sam finally responds with a clipped Hey of his own.

Better just to push forward, thinks Dean, heartened by the fact that Sam hasn’t hung up on him. He stands up from the table, the phone held between his ear and shoulder as he nervously tugs on the hem of his shirt and paces his way into the living room. “So, do you want to get together? I don’t really want to do this over the phone.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Sam replies carefully.

“Did you want to come over to Bobby’s?”
“Why don’t you come over here.” It isn’t so much a question as a statement of condition. Dean realizes he doesn’t even know where here is.

“Yeah, okay. Are you still in the dorms or…?”

“I’m renting a house just off campus.”

After Sam gives him the address and they agree on a time, Dean comes back into the kitchen and flops into his chair. He folds his arms on the table and lays his head on top of them.

“You two got a date?”

Dean nods without lifting his head.

“Good.” Bobby sounds pleased.

Dean sits up. He knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but he’s already sweating just from their brief phone call. He hangs his head and takes a couple of practiced deep breaths and that’s enough for Bobby to take pity on him.

“You boys will be fine. “

Dean straightens up and looks at him, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

“How many times did I put Sam to bed in his own room only to check later and find him tucked in with you?” Bobby looks at Dean fondly, as if he’s seeing him as a ten-year-old again.

Dean smiles a little at the memory. He’d rolled his eyes at his little brother, but mostly he hadn’t minded having him there. Knowing his brother was safe was enough for him to overlook the cover-hogging and pillow-drooling.

“You’re brothers, you two’ll figure this out.”
The address Sam gave him turns out to be about six blocks east of campus in a section of town affectionately known as the “student ghetto”. It’s conveniently located midway between campus and downtown Lawrence and although it’s primarily occupied by students, the area maintains a bit of a neighborhood feel. The house itself is a small two-story that looks solid enough, but like most of the student housing in these blocks, it has a worn down appearance. Some of the window screens are torn or missing all together, weeds grow up through cracks in the driveway, and the wrought iron railing leading up the three steps to the front door leans at a precarious angle.

Dean parks and gets out, suddenly feeling like he should’ve brought some sort of peace offering. The old Dean would’ve stopped for a six pack along the way, but his days of providing alcohol for minors, even those who will be legal in less than a year, are long gone. Acutely aware of his empty hands, he makes his way up the front walk. He presses the doorbell, but doesn’t hear it ring inside the house, so now he’s doing that thing where he doesn’t want to ring it again in case Sam’s on his way, but he doesn’t want to stand here like an idiot if it didn’t actually ring.

He waits what he deems an appropriate amount of time before knocking on the door and this time he hears footsteps. The door opens and there’s Sam and what the hell? His not-so-little brother’s apparently had another growth spurt. When Dean left, they’d been just about the same height, but now Dean has to actually look up to meet his eyes. His hair is long and shaggy, bangs falling into his eyes, but he looks good, like he’s finally grown into his lanky limbs.

They nod at each other awkwardly before Sam finally steps back, making room for Dean to come in. From the small entryway, Dean can see down a short hall into what appears to be a living/dining room. The furniture is worn and ugly, but the place is neat and tidy, which comes as no surprise to anyone who’s ever known Sam Winchester.

“So, no more dorm life?” Dean says, breaking the lingering silence.

“Yeah, it’s fine for freshmen, but I was ready for a little more space.” Sam leads him down the hall and to the left into the kitchen. Opening the fridge he says, “It’s not cheap, but I got a work-study job and I’m sharing it with a friend.”

There’s a slight edge of defiance to Sam’s words. A tone of look what I can do when you’re not here.
“Kevin?” Dean remembers the nerdy Asian kid who had brought his cello to school with him.

“No, Kevin’s mom is making him stay in the dorms another year. I’m sharing with a guy named Brady.” Sam pulls out a couple of sodas and offers one to Dean. They stand in strained silence, taking small sips.

“I can’t believe you grew again.” Dean says.

Sam gives the first hint of a smile. “Yeah, I was kind of surprised myself. I literally had to buy all new clothes.” Sam stops and the smile is gone, his face closed off. He looks pointedly at Dean. “You miss a lot when you’re gone for that long.”

Dean swallows hard as he follows Sam out the back door and onto the small porch which is really just a wooden platform pretending to be a deck. Two chrome and vinyl chairs that look like they came from an old dinette set take up most of the space. Sam bypasses the chairs and sits on the edge of the deck, his feet on the steps that lead to the grass. The yard is small, but it’s surrounded by thick hedges giving it some privacy.

Dean stands by the door for a minute before going to sit next to his brother. As the inky blue sky bleeds to black around the edges, crickets chirp in the warm evening air and a few bats begin to circle the streetlights. The air is heavy with humidity and expectation when Dean starts to talk.

“I… I fucked up, he starts to say because that’s what he always says, but he stops himself because this is about not saying what he always says, not being who he’s always been. “I’m sorry for taking off like I did. At the time, I thought it was the best thing for both of us, but I realize now that it was just me running away from my problems and it was a shitty thing to do to you.”

Sam glances up from where he’s fidgeting with the metal tab on the top of the soda can, but doesn’t say anything.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me,” Dean continues. “I know it will take time and effort on my part to earn back your trust, but I did want you to know how sorry I am.”

There’s a long silence but Dean forces himself to sit quietly and give Sam time to respond.

“I was kind of thinking I’d get to hit you,” Sam says finally. “But you disarmed all my righteous
indignation by owning all the blame like that.”

“You can still hit me if you want.” Dean chances a smile. Can he even still take Sam in a fight? He seems to have lost quite a few advantages in the past year. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“I don’t want to hit you.” Sam stops and considers, “At least not right now. But you’re right. I’m not ready to forgive you, either.” Sam draws in a breath and his fingers tighten around the aluminum can. “Dean, you have no idea how hard it was for me when you were gone. Bobby assured me that you were fine. He stops and looks to Dean for confirmation. “Bobby knew where you were, right?”

Dean gives him a small nod.

When Sam continues, his voice is harsher and Dean can see tears shining in his eyes. “But it was wrong to cut me out like that.”

Dean swallows around the lump in his throat. He wants to say that it was hard for him too, but he knows that might put Sam back into a punching frame of mind. So instead he apologizes again. “I really am sorry.”

Sam exhales and stretches his long legs in front of him. “I’m willing to work on this, but don’t expect miracles. And only if you’re willing to promise me one thing.” He looks at Dean, gravely serious. “No more disappearing like that. I mean it. That’s a fucking deal breaker.”

“I promise,” says Dean, his voice rough with emotion.

They sit there in silence as the sky darkens and heat lightning flashes in the distance.
Chapter 2

Dean had chosen Pittsburgh on a whim, mostly because it fit his criteria of being a place they’d never lived with John and being farther than an easy day’s drive from Kansas. He needed to know that it would take a planned effort for him to go back, that he wouldn’t find himself drifting home when things got rough. He found a dump of a place in Oakland, where the Pitt and Carnegie Mellon campuses converged and worked tending bar or in restaurants. Finding a new job whenever he got fired from the previous one was easy since these places were used to the inconstancy of student employment. Everyone was close to his age, making it easy for Dean to blend in. He stayed purposefully vague about his situation letting people assume he was enrolled at one of the universities.

Dean in Pittsburgh was a lot like Dean in Kansas: drinking, fucking, and fighting, but without the added stress of pulling it together for his little brother’s sake. He was free to do whatever the hell he wanted. It was easy to convince himself that this was an upgraded lifestyle when he was invited to a never-ending stream of campus parties and had his pick of any number of willing co-eds. He even had his own place. Sure, it was dark and the floors slanted and it always smelled like grease from the restaurant on the ground floor, but it was the very first time he’d ever lived alone.

Sometimes, before he’d start a dinner shift, he’d wander over to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and walk through the exhibits of dinosaur bones. He’d see families there, the children staring in awe at the reconstructed dinosaurs towering over them. Some would go silent, with their fingers in their mouths, while others would run and shriek, their excited voices echoing in the large exhibit hall.

One cold, blustery day in April, eight months after he’d left Kansas, he found himself warm and dry inside the museum. As he stood beneath the outstretched neck of a Diplodocus, he caught sight of a boy, maybe ten years old, standing in the doorway to the exhibit. The boy held his little brother’s hand and talked softly to him. When the younger one shook his head, the older one crouched down to meet his brother’s eyes. Dean watched as the younger boy, clutching his brother’s hand, worked up the nerve to enter the room.

That night Dean drank until he woke up in a holding cell charged with assault and disorderly conduct from a bar fight he couldn’t even remember.

That’s how Dean ended up therapy. Not because he suddenly reached some rock-bottom epiphany, but because it was the only option he had left. It was either go to jail or agree to probation plus court ordered sessions with a therapist.

He fully intended to show up to these sessions and sit there, closed-mouthed, simply putting in the time to complete his requirements. He had no use for this crap. He knew exactly what his problems
were: dead mother, distant—and then dead—father, too much responsibility dumped on him at too young an age. Knowing what got him to this state didn’t help a damn thing. No mousy professor of psychology could change his past. There was no need to talk about it.

Dean walked into his first session five minutes late. He kept his winter coat on as he slumped in the chair offered to him. He crossed his arms over his chest and prepared to wait out the hour.

The therapist assigned to him was no mousy professor, he’d give him that much. A powerfully built black man with a gleaming bald head, he introduced himself as Victor Henriksen and began the session by talking about himself. He’d been a cop, but after years on the police force he’d come to the conclusion that arresting people wasn’t solving the problem. Again and again he’d seen a shared, recurrent background in many of the people he arrested. Common denominators like mental illness, parental loss and rejection, and abusive childhoods. Victor decided he’d rather try to get through to these people first than arrest them later.

*Hero complex*, thought Dean. *Save the broken souls.* He rolled his eyes at Victor. “And how’s that working for you?”

“It’s not about how it’s working for me,” Victor answered crisply. “It’s about whether you’re willing to put in the effort to make it work for you.”

Dean snorted. *Not fucking likely.*

After that, he set his gaze somewhere over Victor’s left shoulder and sat there in silence as the minutes ticked away. Every now and then, Victor would ask him a question—an open-ended question, Dean noted—but Dean could think of fewer things easier than sitting there in silence, completely unresponsive. Was it childish? Petulant? Probably, but Dean didn’t care. Good luck to Victor if he thought he could manipulate him into holding hands and singing Kumbaya.

At the end of the session, Victor picked up his file and tapped it on the edge of the desk to straighten the papers. “Just so you know, you don’t have to say anything. But, as I’m sure your court appointed counsel informed you, I am required to send a progress report to the judge. Sitting here isn’t the same as participating. You could still get your jail time when these sessions are over.”

Dean shifted in his seat. He vaguely remembered his lawyer, a rumpled looking balding man, saying something about that.
Victor shrugged. “I get paid either way.”

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Dean fretted on his way to the next session. He thought maybe he was willing to participate. At least a little. At least enough to keep him out of jail. He just wished it didn’t feel like Victor had won. And how was he supposed to indicate that to Victor without actually saying it? Because he didn’t think he could stomach sitting in that chair and saying Okay, fix me.

In the office, he took off his jacket this time, hanging it over the back of the chair. When his arms automatically started to pull into his chest, he stopped himself and forced them down, rubbing his sweaty palms on his jeans. He stared at his lap for a few moments before lifting his head to make eye contact with Victor. He was waiting to see a smirk on Victor’s face, something to indicate that he’d outlasted Dean, but instead he saw a neutral expression and a kind look in his eyes.

What the hell was Dean supposed to say?

Before he could say anything, Victor gestured to the window where the Impala was parked in the lot. “That your car?”

That was enough to break the ice. Talk of the Impala led to talk of it having been his dad’s, which led to talk about his father and shit. Somehow they were talking about relationships and family. At first, Dean spent a lot of time downplaying his father’s actions. He was quick to deflect Victor’s questions with He was just doing the best he could and My dad had a lot of demons and I was happy to take care of Sam. But Victor was a clever, tricky bastard who began to ask hypothetical questions.

“What if Sam had been the older brother?”

Dean tried, but he couldn’t even picture it. Couldn’t formulate a mental image of four-year-old Sam carrying baby Dean out of the burning house. Or nine-year-old Sam hurrying to make breakfast for a whining, leg-tugging kindergarten-aged Dean. He laughed and shook his head at the thought.

Victor pressed on. “What if he hadn’t been allowed to go to college because he had to take care of you?”

“It’s not the same,” Dean argued. “Sam’s the smart one. He would’ve figured out a way to go. I was never meant for college or anything like that.”
“You don’t think you’re smart?”


“But what if Sam had been the older brother and had done for you what you did for him? What if he had spent his time making sure you had breakfast before school and had your homework done and studied for tests? What makes you think you wouldn’t have been smart like that?”

“It’s not the same.” Dean said again. But he couldn’t deny that the thought had occurred to him. If he’d had a parent who actually knew how to fucking 

“parent, maybe he would’ve had a shot at college, too.

“What if your dad had punished Sam the way he’d punished you?” Victor asked, quietly steering the conversation in an unexpected direction.

Dean was on his feet so fast his chair toppled over behind him. He clenched his hands into fists and stood frighteningly still as his vision began to tunnel. Then he turned, carefully righting the chair before sitting back down. His jaw ached from gritting his teeth while he tried to compose himself.

“You seem angry,” said Victor mildly.

“Sam wouldn’t have fucked up like I did. And I wouldn’t have let anybody put their hands on Sam like that.” His voice was a knife’s edge.

Victor nodded, like Dean had answered correctly. What the hell did that even mean?

“Okay, we’ll talk about whether or not you think you got what you deserved at the hands of your father later,” Victor said gently. “But first let’s work on some ways to deal with anger. Ways that won’t end up with you arrested for bar fights.”

Dean didn’t trust his voice, so he nodded.
Victor taught him about the adrenaline rush that came with anger, taught him deep breathing techniques to combat it. He gave him worksheets to do (Really? Fucking therapy homework?) where he tracked his mood and identified triggers. Dean knew that his drinking was a way to block out these feelings, but instead of lecturing him about it, Victor gave him other things to try, like exercising to burn it off. So, Dean became a runner because it was accessible and cheap and it left him calm and centered in a way that nothing else seemed to.

As the weeks passed, Dean discovered something about therapy: it’s really freaking hard.

Dean had spent years and years building up this protective layer, a shell to keep the hurt at arm’s length. He’d covered it up with tough guy swagger and violence-provoking bravado and recklessness that bordered on self-destruction. Turns out knowing what caused it and actually dealing with it were two very different things. Dealing with it involved peeling away the layers slowly but methodically until he was left bared and vulnerable.

Victor was with him every step of the way; they’d built up a trust between them that made his office feel almost like hallowed ground. Even with the trust and the support in place, dealing with his issues still fucking hurt. It was like being scraped raw, like rust being scrubbed off a chrome bumper with a wire brush, and it left every part of him exposed. But, he had to replace his anger with understanding and even a sort of forgiveness towards his father before he could start again.

With Victor’s help, he poured out the hurt he’d internalized since he was a child. It was draining work; often he’d leave his session and have to nap for a few hours. But damn if it hadn’t started to help. He hadn’t realized how much effort it took to keep his protective shell intact or how time consuming and exhausting it was. With it gone, he was able to start filling the time—and the head space—with other things.

Dean was able to focus better than ever. He found himself reading books instead of aimlessly flipping through the channels. He started to take comfort in his daily routine of getting up, going for a run, going to work, coming home and cooking himself dinner. He still went out, still enjoyed a couple of drinks and shooting pool, but he was just as happy at home, too. Being alone became restful, not something he had to run from or dull with alcohol and sex.

He even had an attempt at a relationship, with a girl he’d met at the grocery store. They’d dated for about six weeks before it had mutually fizzled out, leaving Dean feeling relieved instead of responsible for it ending. He talked about that with Victor, who helped him realize that for once he was putting himself first. It felt strange and selfish and there was a current of guilt running through it, but he told himself that he deserved this.

Literally.
It started out as an assignment Victor gave him, a \textit{fake it til you make it} kind of thing where he was supposed to look in the mirror each morning and say “I deserve to be happy.”

A fucking mantra.

Dean Winchester doing his best Stuart Smiley imitation.

The first day he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, after having showered and shaved, and saw himself smirking back. He stood there way too long but the only thing he said out loud was \textit{This is stupid}.

It was so stupid that he didn’t even try for the next three days. But no way was he going to report to Victor that he couldn’t complete this ridiculous assignment, so he found himself in front of the mirror again on day five. This time he got as far as \textit{I} before turning away.

Finally, on day six, he was able to whisper it. And Jesus, why was his lip quivering? He scrubbed away the wetness from his eyes and glared at himself in the mirror.

The next day in Victor’s office, Dean didn’t greet him or or take a seat in his familiar chair by the window. Instead, he paced back and forth in the small space before demanding, “Why couldn’t I do that? It was five fucking words.”

Victor smiled at him fondly and used words like \textit{breakthrough} and \textit{progress}.

When the court ordered sessions were done, Victor wrote a glowing letter to the judge. Technically Dean was free, but he requested to continue the sessions. Two months later, when Dean felt ready to go back to Kansas, they discussed what he could expect. Victor helped Dean see that he couldn’t control Sam’s reaction to his reappearance. Sam might be angry or distant or refuse to see him at all. Dean knew this would be his biggest challenge yet.

On his last session, Dean thanked Victor both for the hours he’d spent working with him and for the unwavering faith he’d shown in him.

“You’ve still got work to do, but you’ve come a long way,” Victor said. “You make sure to find
somebody to work with in Lawrence. If you can’t find a counselor on your own, call me and I’ll get some recommendations for you.”

There’d been hugs and stern reminders that Dean could call Victor any time. With the heel of his hand, Dean wiped away a few tears he wasn’t ashamed to cry and left the office to pack his car for the drive back to Kansas.
Dean’s done this to himself.

That’s the worst part about it. He has nobody else to blame.

Bobby hadn’t asked him to monitor the radio at ungodly hours. That was all Dean’s idea in an attempt to help pull his weight.

Which explains why, ten days into his employment at the salvage yard, he’s out of bed to tow a car at 5:15 a.m. without even a cup of coffee to sustain him. It’s not even the save somebody stranded on the side of the road good kind of towing. No, this is a case of irresponsible automobile ownership perpetrated by a jackass of a customer acting like his time is more important than anybody else’s. It takes all of Dean’s self-control to stay professional, and he bites his tongue to keep from snarking at the irate Dodge owner that getting the oil changed is more than a mere suggestion.

At 7 a.m., with that call blessedly behind him, he’s driving south towards Bobby’s thinking longingly of coffee and breakfast when he notices a car pulled off to the side of the road. There’s a middle-aged man standing and peering into the open hood.

Dean sighs. Noting the empty stretch of road, he reluctantly pulls to a stop on the shoulder in front of the disabled car. It’s an eye-searingly bright blue Nissan Leaf, he realizes with something akin to horror.

“Having some trouble?” he calls, as he climbs out of the truck.

The man swivels his head to look at Dean, and then at the tow truck as if he’s surprised to see them there, even though there’s no possible way this guy missed the hulking piece of metal approach.

Up close, Dean realizes that the man isn’t middle-aged after all, it’s just the tan trench coat he’s wearing giving him a frumpy Columbo vibe. He’s looks to be in his early twenties, maybe somewhere between Sam’s age and Dean’s. Under the tax accountant outerwear, he’s dressed normally in jeans and a button down shirt.

Between the weird fashion sense and the fact that he still hasn’t said anything, Dean’s starting to wonder if he’s maybe an international student who doesn’t speak English. He looks a little… ethnic…with his dark hair and angular bone structure. Dean’s lack of caffeine is starting to announce itself and he sends up a silent prayer that this isn’t going to turn into a troublesome game of charades.

“According to what I’ve read, this shouldn’t be happening.”

Okay, so he can speak English. (And with a surprisingly deep voice at that.) Nonetheless, Dean stifles an eye roll because, seriously? There’s nothing he loves more than a customer who thinks reading the manual qualifies him as an expert. This must be how doctors feel when patients come in with a stack of printouts from ItsCancerandYouWillDieImmediately.com

“Well, apparently something happened or you wouldn’t be standing here in the middle of nowhere.” Personally, Dean thinks the guy’s problem started with the decision to purchase a freaking electric car. He’s glad his Baby isn’t here to witness this four-wheeled abomination.

“It just…stopped.” The man looks completely betrayed, as if the car has intentionally let him down.

“Did you, uh, plug it in last night?” Dean knows next to nothing about electric cars, but he peers into
the open hood anyway and has to suppress a shudder. Dear God, abomination is right. There are no hoses or fuel lines, no intake manifold. The damn thing looks like a bomb with wires running from a compact electric engine to a series of rechargeable batteries. It looks clean and featureless, like the difference between a store mannequin and a living, breathing human being. Dean is quite sure he’s used lawnmowers with more powerful engines than this.

“Of course I did. And the light indicated that it was fully charged. I’ve made the drive to and from St. Joseph’s many times and it’s well within range. Then this,” the man scowls and flutters his hand in disgust, “happened.”

“Well, I won’t pretend I know the first thing about it, but I’d be happy to tow you to someplace that does.” Dean offers.

The man blinks at him and Dean understands right then and there that the guy chose the vibrant blue car because it matches his eyes. Jesus, he really needs some coffee.

“Thank you, but I have roadside assistance. I will call them.”

“Okay, but—“

“It was kind of you to stop, but I won’t trouble you any longer.” The man is already leafing through his wallet, effectively dismissing Dean who nods and walks back towards the tow truck.

The sun is well on its way up and, despite the early morning chill, Dean can tell it’s going to be a scorcher. He leans against the tow truck’s back bumper and watches as the man pulls out his cell phone to make the call. Almost as soon as he hangs up, the radio clipped to Dean’s waistband crackles to life.

“I need a tow for a Nissan Leaf located at—” comes the staticky voice from dispatch.

The man snaps his head up to look at Dean, who gives him a little smirk before unclipping the radio and claiming the job.

Dean walks back over and holds out his hand with an exaggerated flourish. “Hello, I’m Dean Winchester and I’ll be your tow truck driver today.”

At least the guy has the decency to look embarrassed as he takes Dean’s hand and sheepishly introduces himself. “Castiel Milton.”

“I’ll get your car hooked up to the truck. If you need anything out of it, this would be a good time.” Castiel opens the passenger door and pulls out a leather messenger bag and a bulging backpack. “You can wait in the front of the truck, if you want. This will take a couple of minutes.”

Dean maneuvers the hook and the sling into position to attach to the front of the Leaf. As he begins to work the winch, he realizes that Castiel hasn’t taken up his offer to wait in the truck; instead he stands and stares at Dean while he works. It’s more than a little disconcerting. When Dean darts a glance over at him, Castiel is frowning at the tow mechanism.

“I do actually know what I’m doing,” Dean says because the guy looks like he’s just waiting to find something to complain about.

“I’m sure you do,” Castiel says in an even tone that makes Dean feels bad about his pissy response. But, really. Who the hell buys an electric car?

When the Leaf is secured, Castiel follows Dean to the front of the truck and gets into the passenger
seat. Dean calls in to dispatch that he’s leaving the scene and hands Castiel a clipboard with the necessary paperwork. He digs around in the cluttered console for a pen, but before he can find one, Castiel has taken a pen from his front shirt pocket. They ride for awhile in silence as Dean heads towards the Nissan dealership. Castiel focuses on the towing paperwork with the same intensity Dean’d expect to see on someone filling out a job application or a final exam.

“You’re out early this morning,” Dean says just to make conversation.

“I was visiting my parents this weekend and I wanted to be back on campus for my 8:30 class.”

“You’ve got family nearby? That’s nice.”

Castiel makes a noncommittal noise without looking up from the clipboard.

Dean searches for another subject. “You mentioned campus?”

“I’m a student.”

“My brother is, too. He’s a sophomore. He wants to go to law school.” Dean knows he sounds like a dorky, gloating parent whenever he says that, but he can’t help it. “What are you studying?”

“English Literature. I’m currently a junior, but I’m taking extra classes so that I can graduate by the end of next summer.”

“That’s impressive,” Dean says, meaning it. “What will you do after that?”

It’s an innocent enough question, but Castiel suddenly turns to Dean and says, almost defiantly, “Get the hell out of here.”

It’s such an unexpected response that Dean finds himself staring longer than he should and he has to quickly correct the steering away from the center line when he returns his eyes to the road.

Castiel sighs and lets his shoulders slump forward, as if that question cracked his carefully composed facade.

Jesus. So much for trying to make conversation. Time to change the subject. Again.

“Uh, what made you buy an electric car, anyhow?” Dean asks in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Apparently this was the right tactic because when Castiel lifts his eyes again, he’s back to that inscrutable, even look.

“I like to limit my impact on the Earth and I found electric cars to be the most environmentally friendly in terms of pollutant emissions and renewable energy sources.”

Oh Lord, a holier than thou environmentalist. This guy probably collects rain water in a barrel for washing his hair. Which might explain the way it’s sticking up in a way that’s more windblown hobo than artfully tousled bedhead.

“Have you thought about just driving a lawn mower around? You could cut the grass and have a more powerful ride.” Dean’s trying for a little lighthearted teasing, but Castiel turns to look at him, tilting his head and squinting like he can’t decide if Dean is the stupidest person on earth or merely in the top three.

Dean pulls into the service drive of the Nissan dealership convinced there’s zero chance this isn’t ending with a one-star review of Singer’s Autobody and Salvage on Yelp.
Despite that, Castiel has enough manners to thank him before climbing down from the truck cab and walking into the service department without a backwards glance.

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It’s comfortable and familiar to be back at Bobby’s. There’s enough work between repair jobs and calls with the wrecker to fill his days and when he’s not elbow deep in an engine, he does his best to make things easy on the old man. Dean takes over a share of the grocery shopping and helps with the cooking. He’s changed half a dozen light bulbs around the house and fixed the dripping faucet in the upstairs bathroom.

Bobby might never admit it, Dean thinks as he polishes the Impala with a chamois one Sunday afternoon three weeks after his return, but if the sudden appearance of Dean’s favorite foods - even a store bought apple pie the first week he was back - is any indication, he seems glad for the company.

It’s so easy and natural that sometimes, like when Bobby grumbles back at the television newscaster, he turns to share a fond eye-rolling with his brother and is jolted to find an empty spot on the couch instead.

Dean’s walking around the gleaming black car looking for any spots he might’ve missed when his cell phone rings.

Pulling out his phone, he’s surprised to see Sam’s name on the screen. They’ve mainly been conversing by text. Dean is giving him plenty of space, trying not to initiate too many conversations, but always replying to anything Sam sends. This is the first time Sam has actually called him and Dean frowns a moment at his phone before answering.

“Hello?”

“Hey.”

“Hey. What’s up?”

“I, uh, need to ask you something.” Sam sounds hesitant, nervous even.

“Shoot.”

“I’d rather do it in person.”

Dean feels his stomach clench. He knows a serious we need to talk set-up when he hears one and he works his jaw for a moment before answering. “Okay. Um. Bobby’s planning to grill ribs for dinner and he’s actually out your way now getting groceries. Want me to have him pick you up?”

If Dean’s going to be cut out of Sam’s life, it might as well be on a full stomach.

“Yeah, okay. See you in a bit,”

Dean hangs up so he can call Bobby. The salvage yard is about twenty minutes from campus. As a freshman, Sam couldn’t have a car on campus and this year he’s opted not to have one, even though Bobby offered him a gift of a junker. It’s not worth the hassle of dealing with a car, he’d said, and he’s close enough that he can borrow one or get a ride if need be.

Dean walks around to the back of the house to start up the grill. Once it’s lit, he stands there staring at it before rousing himself and remembering there’s a watermelon in the refrigerator that he should cut up and some corn that needs to be shucked. No future tripping, he tells himself, as he works to
slow his heart rate from the lurch Sam’s words gave him, Maybe it’s nothing. But as he starts in on
the watermelon, he can’t shake the feeling that this is something big. He has so much nervous energy
that he doesn’t stop at cutting it into wedges like he usually does. He keeps the knife moving until
he’s got a mound of cubed fruit and a pile of rinds.

When Bobby’s truck crunches over the gravel to the house, Dean debates waiting (hiding?) in the
kitchen. But he squares his shoulders and moves to the front door. Might as well meet this head on.
Sam walks towards the house, carrying the plastic bags full of groceries. He’s talking easily with
Bobby and smiling and now Dean’s more confused than ever.

At the front steps. Bobby takes the bags from Sam and says, “Now go ask Cinderella to the ball.”

Dean’s head swivels between the back of Bobby as he enters the house and Sam who has stopped at
the bottom of the steps.

“Okay,” says Sam, rubbing his hands on his jeans as he gathers himself. “So, Brady called me today
and it turns out he’s not coming back to school. Something about his parents splitting up and his dad
refusing to foot the bill.” He’s not quite looking at Dean now. “So, if you wanted to, you could, um,
take his room. If you wanted to, I mean.”

Dean tries to process this unexpected turn of events. “Wouldn’t you rather have one of your school
friends?”

“It’s already August. Everybody has their living arrangement figured out. I mean, I could advertise
for a roommate but that can be tricky. Besides, I already know I can live with you.”

“That’s really what you want?” Dean hasn’t made a decision yet, but he’s smiling now.

“Yeah.” Sam ducks his head, looks at Dean shyly. “I think it could be good.”

Dean opens the front door. “Bobby!” He hears an answering grunt. “Can you live without me?”

Bobby walks into view, a kitchen towel tossed over one shoulder. “I’ll cry myself to sleep every
night, but I’ll manage.”

The next day Dean drives his things over to the little house. Sam helps him unload, before leading
him upstairs. There’s a bathroom opposite the stairs and two doors off to the left. Dean’s room is the
second door and it’s furnished with just a single bed, a dresser, and a desk with a chair, but there’s a
nice big window that overlooks the backyard.

It’s the third place Dean has lived in as many weeks. Maybe he should feel disoriented by that but
here, with his brother under the same roof, he finally feels at home.
Sam’s still on summer break so he likes to sleep in, but some mornings their schedules mesh and they’ll run together. (There was quite a bit of gaping goldfish face and questions like, “You what?” “For real?” “Since when?” as Sam came to terms with the fact that Dean is now a runner.) There’s a certain amount of unspoken compromise involved to make this work, so Sam shortens his St Bernard stride at times and Dean picks up his pace at others. They don’t talk much as they run but it’s comfortable to be together, breathing in the fresh morning air before the late August sun scalds it.

When he lived at Bobby’s, Dean had been running along rural roads, always alert for cars and trucks and the occasional cow, but here they stay on smooth sidewalks dodging dogs on leashes and babies in strollers. The landscape alters the further they get from campus, featureless apartments buildings and disheveled yards giving way to neighborhoods with mini vans in driveways and front doors flanked by the kind of decorative banners Dean knows will change with each season and holiday.

After their first run, Sam stops in the kitchen to fill a glass with ice water while Dean walks through the house and out to the back deck. He lies down on the pleasantly cool wood, knees bent with his feet on the steps below and begins his meditative breathing.

The door bangs open and shut as Sam comes outside.

“Nap time already?” Sam asks.

“Shhhh.” Dean feels a flick of cold water on his forehead and takes a deep breath. “I’m trying to find my fucking Zen, Sam.”

“Seriously?” Even with his eyes shut, Dean can picture the look of incredulity on his brother’s face.

“Yes.” Dean works on relaxing his neck and shoulders. “I’ll be done in 20 minutes.”

The door slams again as Sam goes back inside.

Twenty minutes later, Dean joins him. Sam’s eating a giant bowl something that looks an awful lot like twigs and rocks. He narrows his eyes at Dean. “So, what, you meditate now?”
Dean shrugs, then rolls his shoulders, feeling the loose give in his muscles. “I picked up some good habits in Pittsburgh.”

Sam looks at him suspiciously. “Who are you and what have you done with my brother? You gonna eat my granola now?”

Dean snorts and grabs the Count Chocula from the cabinet. “No, but do we have any soy milk?” He can practically hear Sam’s brain whirring in his head. “I’m kidding.”

Dean could tell him everything. He could tell him about getting arrested and his sessions with Victor. He could talk about breakthroughs and progress and acceptance. He knows Sam would be pleased. And that’s what stops him. He doesn’t want to see the look of relief in his little brother’s eyes that will only drive home how much shit Dean had brought down on him. He doesn’t want to see the look of pride that serves as the flip side of pity. Dean doesn’t want to throw a lot of words between them. He wants to let his actions do the talking so that Sam can see that he’s learned to cope, that his volatility has been dismantled and replaced with an understanding of how his emotions inform his behavior. Dean will continue to take care of himself mentally and physically, now that he knows how. The rest will fall into place.

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It’s on another of these runs that Sam says, “So I get why you left.”

“You do?” Dean says, because they haven’t talked about that part at all.

“Well, it was pretty obvious.” Sam says, slowing his pace a bit so Dean can talk while he runs. “I mean, you’d been stuck taking care of me for pretty much forever. You finally had a chance for your own life.”

Dean stops running. It never even occurred to him that Sam would think he’d left because he’d felt trapped by responsibility. His head buzzes and he has to put his hands on his thighs, bending over to keep his vision from going black.

Sam circles back to where he’s standing. “Dean! Are you okay?”
Dean gathers himself and manages to stand upright. He puts a hand on Sam’s shoulder, his other hand cutting through the air between them to make his point. “Sam. That is not why I left. Jesus, not even close.”

His stomach clenches at the thought of his little brother carrying that guilt around with him. “You are my proudest accomplishment. You’re the only thing I’ve ever gotten right. After what happened on your graduation night I thought I was doing us both a favor.”

Sam blinks at him, his face impassive.

Dean scrubs a hand over his face before he continues. “I thought if I stayed here, I’d end up being a distraction to you. I didn’t want to put you in the position of worrying about me.”

Sam bristles at this. “Right, because I didn’t worry about you at all when you dropped off the face of the earth.” He shakes his head in disgust. “Excellent plan.”

Dean feels his stomach twist again as he tries to make Sam understand. “Look, you had a chance for a fresh start. I wanted you to have that. With me out of the picture, you could go to school and pretend you’d had a regular childhood and be whoever you wanted to be.”

“What, like I’d go there and lie and say I came from some white picket, apple-pie life?” Sam’s agitated now, standing with his hands on his hips and refusing to look at Dean.

“You could have. It was a chance for you to go and be normal.” Without a semi-alcoholic dropout of a brother dragging you down, he adds silently.

“I’m not ashamed of how we grew up,” Sam says forcefully. “I mean, do I wish it had been different? Do I wish we’d never lost mom? Of course, but…we turned out okay. It might not have been perfect, but it’s what got us here.” His voice softens. “I know there was a lot we didn’t have.”

Dean snorts at this understatement, earning a glare from his brother before Sam speaks again. “But I never felt like I was missing out because as long as we were together, I knew things would be okay.” He runs a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. “That’s what you took away from me when you left.”
Dean doesn’t know what to say to that. He’d been so busy trying to protect Sam that he hadn’t seen
the ways he’d hurt him.

Before he can figure out a response, Sam says, “You know, I think that’s why Kevin and I got
along so well. He had this mom who wanted to know every single thing he did and I had nobody to
answer to. We kind of met in the middle. I helped him stand up to his mom a little and she kind of
took me under her wing. She’d send Kevin care packages with cookies and treats and she’d always
include some things for me. Whenever she came to town to visit Kevin, she’d take me out to dinner
with them and when she was finished grilling Kevin on his classes and his studies, she’d turn to me
and do the exact same thing. “

Sam’s smiling now and Dean remembers the tiny, fierce Asian lady lugging in boxes the day Sam
and Kevin moved into their dorm room. They’d both (well, all three of them if you counted Kevin)
been a little intimidated by Linda Tran that day but now Dean feels a grateful warmth for the way
she looked after his little brother.

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Living in the same house quickly erodes any formality between the siblings and it doesn’t take long
for them to slide right back into comfortable patterns. Now that Sam’s reserve has dissolved, Dean
feels more at ease than he has in a long time. Which may be why he’s willing to indulge his brother
in ways he hasn’t since they were kids.

“Dean. Dean! Deeeeeeaaaann!!” Sam yells from his perch on the couch. Dean peeks his head
around the corner of the kitchen, spatula in hand.

“What?”

“Are you making grilled cheese?” Sam has his puppy eyes on and Dean knows exactly where this is
going.

“Do you want one?”

“Two?”

Dean adds four more slices of bread to his workspace. In no time, the sandwiches are sizzling in the
pan, turning golden and filling the room with the scent of toasted bread and melted cheese.
How many sandwiches has Dean made over the years for his little brother? Grilled cheese, peanut butter and jelly (Sam hated the chunks of fruit in jam), cold sandwiches made with whatever he leftovers he could scrape up. Sometimes it was just mayonnaise on white bread. Sam didn’t like the heels of the loaf, so Dean took those for himself.

He flips Sam’s second sandwich onto a plate, cuts them both in triangles, and carries it out to Sam along with a napkin. His brother reaches for the plate and smiles up at him from the couch. “You’re the best!”

After lunch, Dean comes downstairs with a mostly full laundry basket. “Got any laundry? I’ve got some room.”

“Yeah, there’s a pile on the floor of my room.” Sam answers without even looking up from his laptop.

“Then get off your ass and bring it down. I’m not your fairy godmother.”

Sam huffs, but he gets up and retrieves the dirty laundry. Dean hums contentedly as he carries the now-full basket down to the basement.

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The Saturday before the semester starts, Sam spends the morning helping Kevin move back into his dorm room. Mrs. Tran takes them both out to lunch before she starts the drive back to Michigan, so Sam and Kevin don’t make it over to the house until early afternoon. A red-headed girl is with them when they burst through the door laughing and talking.

Dean’s been on his own all day, puttering around the house making a list of possible repairs and upgrades that he wants to talk about with the landlord. It’s been awfully quiet with Sam gone and he smiles at the noise that accompanies the trio.

Sam is happy and relaxed as he throws an arm around each of his friends to present them to his brother. “Dean! You remember Kevin, right? And this is Charlie Bradbury.”
Dean stands to shake hands all around. “Nice to see you again, Kevin.”

Kevin looks a lot less mousy than he did last year. It’s his hair, Dean thinks. He’s cut it short and is wearing it spiked up. Kevin greets him but only manages a brief moment of eye contact.

Charlie is a lot more effusive, tossing her red hair out of her face as she shakes Dean’s hand enthusiastically. “It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.” She turns to Kevin mischievously. “And I don’t know what you were talking about, Kevin. He seems perfectly nice.”

Dean raises both eyebrows in surprise as Kevin turns ever so slightly pink. Still avoiding Dean’s gaze, Kevin gives Charlie a tight smile. “Thanks, Charlie,” he says with a surprising amount of sarcasm.

Sam throws his head back and laughs.

Dean searches all three of their faces. “Somebody wanna fill me in?”

Just then Dean’s cell phone rings and Sam mouths I’ll tell you later. Dean pulls the phone out of his pocket as Sam moves to give Kevin and Charlie the grand tour of the house.

Dean checks the screen and sees Victor’s name. He stares at it for a long moment, listening to it ring before hitting ignore. He glances around the room guiltily, but Sam is leading the other two out to see the backyard and no one is paying Dean any attention.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to talk to Victor. He does. But he wants to be able to report that everything is fine and he’s doing what he’s supposed to.

Victor couldn’t have been clearer about it. “You’ve got the tools you need,” he’d reminded Dean before he’d left for Kansas. “Find yourself somebody to talk to and keep doing what you’re doing.”

Dean hears his brother laugh and smiles to himself as he puts his phone away. Things with Sam are better than he ever could have hoped. He knows how pleased Victor will be to hear that. Dean just needs to get a couple more pieces in place and then he’ll call Victor back.
Soon classes are in full swing and campus is bustling. The days grow shorter, but the weather is warm and dry without the oppressive humidity that marked the summer months. On a mild Friday night in mid-September, Dean maneuvers through the noisy student crowds as he walks to a café on Mass Street. Kevin, Charlie, and Sam have (lame) plans to study tonight at the house and Dean has decided to clear out for the evening.

(“Kevin finds you…intimidating,” Sam had said, explaining Charlie’s odd comment the first day Dean had met her.

“He only spent like, two hours with me that day we moved you in,” Dean argued.

Sam shrugged. “He told Charlie you were ‘scary’. “

After that, Dean has vacillated between trying to make Kevin comfortable around him and randomly glaring at him just to keep the kid on his toes.)

As luck would have it, Jo Harvelle is working tonight and she quickly waves him over to a table in her section. He’s known Jo for years. She’d gone to high school with Sam and she and Sam had even dated briefly during their junior year, managing to stay friends afterwards. Now she’s studying Psychology at KU and putting in time waitressing to help pay for school.

The place is busy tonight. Jo keeps his coffee cup filled even as she hops from table to table taking orders and expertly wielding heavy trays of food. When it’s time for her break, she slides into the booth across from him, holding a plate of lemon meringue pie and two forks.

“Hello, beautiful!” Dean says to the pie and Jo promptly kicks him under the table as she helps herself to a forkful.

“So, did Sam throw you out or what?” she asks after her first bite.

“Nope, just trying to give him some space. He had friends coming over to study and I didn’t want to give some weird ‘big brother’ vibe, you know?”

She nods as she scrapes off some of the meringue to get to the lemon underneath. “I know he’s glad
“You’re back.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. He practically chased me across the street to tell me the news.” She leans back against
the seat and gestures at him with her fork. “Honestly, I never thought I’d see the day when you sat
eating pie on a Friday night, instead of partying.” She eyes his coffee mug suspiciously. “You go to
rehab or something while you were gone?”

“Nope. I’m just the new and improved Dean Winchester.” He flashes her his most charming smile.
“Besides, I’ve got a pretty girl giving me free pie. How is that a bad thing?”

Jo rolls her eyes at him, long immune to his flirting. She checks her cell phone before standing and
brushing off her apron. “Okay, break’s over.”

“Yes, get your ass back in the kitchen where it belongs,” Dean teases.

Jo smiles sweetly at him while flipping him off. She calls over her shoulder as she walks away,
“That pie is totally going on your bill.”

Dean finishes the pie and pays, leaving her a generous tip seeing as he’s tied up one of her tables for
a couple of hours.

He’s standing just outside the cafe tugging on his jacket when a crush of people streams out of the
bar next door. He watches, his hands thrust in his pockets, wondering how many times he was part
of a crowd like that one thinking he was so smooth and charming when in reality he was tiresome
and mortifyingly obvious as he tried to secure the attention of the hottest girl there. He’s not
surprised Jo assumed he’d gone to rehab.

When he first started therapy, he was certain Victor would tell him he needed to quit drinking. But it
turned out the more progress he’d made with Victor, the less he’d needed to shove down his feelings
with alcohol and his drinking had naturally tapered off. Now, the sight of this loud, obnoxious
crowd leaves him almost cringing with second-hand embarrassment. He’s relieved when they cross
the street and disappear into another student bar down the block.

The sound of raucous laughter is still ringing in his ears when the door opens again and a single
figure steps outside. A single figure with messy dark hair and a rumpled trench coat. Dean recognizes him: the guy with the electric car and the odd name. *The Little Mermaid* pops into his head. Ariel. No, wait. Castiel.

Castiel looks up and down the block, then questioningly at Dean who nods towards the bar down the street.

“They went to Riley’s,” Dean offers.

Castiel nods and looks in that direction, but makes no move to join them.

“Did they ditch you?”

“I may have facilitated the situation by lingering in the restroom.”

It takes a moment for Dean to mentally translate this. “You wanted to be ditched?”

Castiel gives him a slight smile. “This,” he gestures to the bar behind him, “isn’t really my thing. But it was a birthday celebration for a colleague and I was invited, so I put in an appearance.”

So far, Castiel has given no indication that he recognizes Dean. And for some unknown reason, Dean finds that a little surprising. It’s not that Dean expects to make a long-lasting impression on everyone he meets, but to be honest, people *do* tend to remember him. Just not *this* guy, apparently. Even though they spent like, a half hour talking the day Dean towed his stupid electric car.

Dean could reintroduce himself but he doesn’t see the point. If Castiel didn’t remember him once, he’s scarcely bound to remember him twice.

Whatever.

Castiel starts to walk in the opposite direction without even a word of goodbye.

Dean, despite the lecture he’s just given himself, finds himself calling after him. “Hey, how’s your
car?"

Castiel turns back and gives Dean a sly smile. “Great. And my lawn has never looked better.”

_THat little shit,_ thinks Dean. He watches Castiel walk away before turning towards home, still smiling at their exchange.
“I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become,” Charlie recites out of the blue one morning in early October, as Dean finishes his meditation on the back porch.

Dean’s learned quickly that living with Sam is a package deal, meaning it’s not unusual to find Charlie and/or Kevin at the house all hours of the day. It’s a far cry from when they were kids, rarely living in one place long enough to make friends. If by chance they had, John’s erratic behavior made it too risky to have other kids over. Now, they’re the ones with the “hang-out house” and while Dean likes to give Kevin and Charlie a hard time, he finds himself picking up extra snacks and sodas at the grocery store to have on hand for when they inevitably turn up.

“Uh. Okay,” Dean says tentatively as he sits up.

“What’s yours?” she asks.

“What’s my what?” He looks at her as if she’s speaking in code.

She counts on her fingers. “You exercised, then you meditated. That’s like, two of the Mental Health Trifecta. Only thing left is your daily affirmation.”

Dean stares at her as panic flickers through him. “Uh,” he says again.

“My parents were killed in a car accident when I was twelve. I went to therapy the way other little girls went to ballet class,” she explains, her tone matter-of-fact.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Dean says with honest sympathy.

She waves him off. “It’s fine. It’s just from the little bit Sam has told me about your dad, I’m guessing you didn’t learn all this from him.”

Dean laughs bitterly. “Yeah, not a chance.” He glances through the screen door into the house to ensure that Sam is still upstairs before continuing. “I, uh, got myself together before I came back to Kansas, but I didn’t exactly tell Sam all the details.”
“Oh, of course,” Charlie says quickly. “I won’t say a word.” She looks at him kindly. “But he’d probably be glad to know it.”

Dean’s saved from taking the conversation any further when Sam comes clomping down the steps.

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Dean’s driving the truck back from call that was solved with jumper cables instead of a tow, when he finds himself making a u-turn in the middle of a rural road on the outskirts of Lawrence.

In Pittsburgh, Victor’d set him up with volunteer work (“It’s hard to feel sorry for yourself when you’re helping somebody else,” he’d said) assigning Dean to an after school program helping junior high kids with homework. Some of the math challenged Dean at first, but with the help of Google he quickly re-learned it well enough to stay one step ahead of the students. Mostly it was about encouraging the kids and keeping them focused as they worked through their assignments. The hours at the school filled his time, but even more than that, the volunteering filled him with a sense of purpose.

He saw himself in a lot of these kids, the ones who didn’t have anybody at home to make sure their work was done. If he could keep them from slipping behind or getting lost in the shuffle, then he could give them a chance. He made a practice of stopping at the store first to buy snacks - granola bars and string cheese or pudding cups - because he saw the fading light in some of their eyes and remembered how impossible it was to concentrate when all you could hear was the growl of an empty stomach.

With those kids on his mind, he pulls into a long, compacted dirt driveway, he parks in front of the large farmhouse, next to the small wooden sign that reads Sonny’s Home for Boys.

He sits for a moment in the truck, the late September sun clear and bright. How close did he come to a place like this back when he majored in cutting school and shoplifting? Only sheer dumb luck and the fear of being separated from Sammy kept him out of juvenile detention.

Before he can make the decision to climb out of the truck, a petite woman with dark curly hair is standing on the porch, her arms folded against her chest.

“You lost?” she asks curtly as Dean gets out and walks towards her.
“Uh, no. I was just wondering if you ever need help out here? With the boys?”

The woman narrows her eyes at him and her voice takes on a sarcastic drawl. “Yes, we love it when perfect strangers show up and ask to interact with the children.”

Dean feels his face flush as he realizes how his offer sounded. “Oh geez, that came out wrong.”

The woman arches one eyebrow at him as he tries again to make his case.

“I used to volunteer at an after school program for disadvantaged kids when I lived in Pittsburgh, but now that I’m back living in Lawrence I thought I might like to do something like that again.”

The woman’s face softens ever so slightly. “Let me guess. Traumatic childhood? Daddy issues up the wazoo?”

Dean presses a hand to his heart in feigned injury. “You mock my pain.”

This gets a wary smile out of her. “My name’s Meg. Come on in and I’ll let you talk to Sonny.”

She turns and he follows her into the quiet of the empty farmhouse.

“The boys are all at school now,” she explains just as footsteps sound and a lanky blond haired boy comes down the wooden staircase. “Except for Tyler.” Tyler grins at Meg, who rolls her eyes at him. “He’s suspended.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Tyler says innocently. “I swear.”

“Save your breath. Did you get your assignments done?”

“Mostly,” says Tyler in a voice that Dean knows means *not at all.*
“Mostly won’t cut it. Back upstairs and get to work.”

Dean gives the kid a sympathetic smile and Tyler obediently turns to the stairs.

Meg leads Dean to the kitchen where Sonny is sitting at the table. After introducing Dean to him and explaining why he’s here, Sonny stands to shake Dean’s hand and motions for him to sit down.

“Honestly, we don’t get a lot of people eager to help with these kids,” Sonny says after giving Dean a brief background of the home and its mission. “We have a gal who comes and gives music lessons and Meg is here full time to cook and serve as den mother.” He smiles at Meg who is filling the sink with soapy water. “But it would be nice for them to have some other people to interact with.”

Dean nods in understanding. “I was one of these kids. Well, damn close, anyhow, and I know how far a little bit of kindness and respect can go with them.” He himself had a handful of caring teachers and concerned school counselors who made a difference when he was growing up. All these years later, he still thinks of them gratefully.

“Obviously there’s paperwork and background checks and that sort of thing to deal with first, but if you think you’d like to do this, I’d be happy to give you a chance.” Sonny’s face turns serious. “But there has to be a commitment on your part. These kids don’t do well with people dropping in and out of their lives.”

Dean realizes Meg is staring at him now as well, and he knows it’s fierce protectiveness for these boys that fuels their gaze. He swallows hard. “I understand.”

Dean leaves with a stack of paperwork that he promptly fills out and returns. Sonny promises to call him as soon as everything is processed.

****

Even with Dean’s salary, Sam’s student loans, and his work-study placement (Dean had never been so gleeful as when Sam admitted that his job in the dining hall required him to wear a hairnet), they are always looking to cut corners. Dean makes a deal with their landlord who provides the materials and gives them a discount on rent in return for Dean doing repairs to the house. The house has good bones, but years of reckless student tenants have left it with more than its fair share of abuse. Most of the work is simple stuff like patching holes in drywall, repairing dry rot on the back deck and
replacing torn screens. In the few months he’s lived there, Dean’s painted nearly every square inch of the interior.

He isn’t much of a landscaper, but the landlord has given him the okay to turn one corner of the back yard into a garden. Dean doesn’t know a damn thing about plants, so he figures he’ll try a few things in containers first to get the hang of it. Maybe some lettuces or tomatoes to keep Sam from casting longing looks at the organic produce every time they go to the store.

That’s how he finds himself in the bookstore staring blankly at the Gardening section. The books are all so big, like encyclopedias, and the longer he stands there, the more intimidated he gets. He pulls one, then another off the shelf and flips through them like he knows what he’s looking at, before putting each one right back. He reaches for Gardening for Dummies because he’s learned to let go of ego and he might as well be open about his ignorance.

“Gardening is a lot like working on cars, I should think.” He hears a deep voice almost in his ear and turns to see Castiel standing next to him. “I assume with engines, there are a limited number of variables and it’s up to you to fine tune them into working together most efficiently? Plants are the same way.”

“Uh. Hello?” Dean takes a step back because this guy is definitely a close talker. Once again he feels like he’s somehow missed the beginning of their conversation. Every interaction with Castiel is like tuning into a TV show three minutes late.

“Hello.” Castiel says with a little nod as he takes the Dummies book right out of Dean’s hands. He replaces it on the shelf, then chooses two other books. “This one is about gardening techniques in general. It’s comprehensive and straightforward.” He thrusts it at Dean. “And this one is a guide to plants specific to our zone.”

“Zone?” Wow, good job, Dean. When did he lose the ability to string together more than one word? Maybe if this guy would stop appearing out of nowhere, Dean could hold an actual conversation.

“A gardening zone helps you know which plants will tolerate the local climate. We’re in Zone 5B. Zones are based on lowest average temperature, but there are other conditions to consider as well. Like humidity and soil make-up.”

“I knew there was more to it than just putting a plant in the ground, but I didn’t realize there was math involved.” It isn’t much, but hey, at least it’s a complete sentence. He holds the two books Castiel selected in the crook of his arm while he reaches again for the Dummies book. Castiel fluidly takes it out of his hand and sets it back on the shelf.
“I’m confident you’ll do fine with the books I gave you.” He digs into the pocket of his trench coat with one hand and reaches to his shirt pocket with the other, coming out with a crumpled piece of paper and a pen. He gestures at Dean to hold the books out flat so he can use the surface to smooth the paper flat before writing on it. “I have a small but efficient organic garden at my home as well as a functioning urban bee hive. If you have questions or if you’d like to come see it, you can call me.”

Castiel walks away with just a nod of goodbye, leaving Dean to stand and stare. He tips the books towards his chest, catching the slip of paper with his thumb as it slides down. He looks at it, sees that it’s just Castiel’s number and nothing else, not even his name, written on the back of a receipt from a coffee shop.

Dean’s been given plenty of phone numbers over the years, from both women and men. He’s had them added to bills by waitresses, written on his palm with ball point pen, found them scrawled in lipstick on his bathroom mirror the morning after. Each time the intent was clear. Call me. I want to see you again. This time he’s pretty sure it means Call me if you need more information about gardening. Like 90% sure. He walks to the check out and buys both books, tucking the receipt with Castiel’s phone number into the front cover of one of them.

He leaves the bookstore trying not to think about that other 10%.

****

By mid-October, the air has taken on the crisp feel of autumn. At Bobby’s, Dean takes advantage of being outdoors while he still can. Towering burr oaks surround the salvage yard and gold and crimson leaves take flight with each soft gust of wind.

He’s surveying a banged up Ford on tap for some body work when the dispatch radio crackles to life. There’s no rush on the Ford, so Dean doesn’t think twice about picking up the call. When he arrives on scene fifteen minutes later, there are still a couple of cops at the site of the two-car accident. Jody Mills is one of them. He climbs down from the truck and walks over to greet her. She’s in full sheriff mode, efficiently filling out paperwork and responding to the radio handset on her shoulder, but she smiles warmly as he approaches.

“Hey there, Dean.”

Dean bows deeply, complete with an exaggerated arm-twirling flourish. “Sheriff Mills, I’m here to do your bidding.”
She laughs before turning to the business at hand. “Two cars involved. The minivan blew through a stop sign and t-boned the car. The second tow truck should be on scene soon, so you can take your pick.”

Dean nods and walks around the crumpled front of the beige minivan. No doubt the car got the worst of it. His suspicions are confirmed when he sees the badly damaged blue car. The entire driver’s side has been dented inward and pebbled safety glass litters the ground. The airbag has been deployed and the front bumper is mostly on the ground.

Despite the damage, there’s enough of it intact for Dean to realize that the car is a Nissan Leaf. He stops short before pivoting back to talk to Jody.

“The people in this wreck? Are they okay?”

“All transported to Lawrence Memorial with injuries. But none of them seemed life-threatening.” She lifts her head from the paperwork. “Why do you ask?”

Dean shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I think I know one of the drivers.”

“Car or van?”

“Car.” Maybe there’s more than one blue Nissan Leaf in the area.

Jody flips through her paperwork. “Castiel Milton?”

“Yeah.” Dean says, releasing a long breath. “I’ll, uh, tow the car.”

“You sure?” Jody is looking at him with her mom eyes now.

“Yeah,” Dean says again, with more conviction this time.
Chapter 6

Dean’s used to wrecked cars. Hell, he and Sam used the junkyard as a playground when they were kids. He’s always seen them as dissociated parts: metal, glass, rubber, salvageable pieces, items for scrap.

So, there’s no reason that this little damaged heap of blue and silver should distract him. It’s just a pile of parts. Broken, fragile parts. Sure, the Leaf has crumple zones and airbags but compared to the Impala, Castiel was like a baby chick counting on an eggshell for protection.

He pulls his gaze from the Leaf and digs out the paperwork from the day of the tow. He needs to find out what Castiel wants done with the car. Dean dials the numbers listed, both a home phone and a cell, but gets no answer. There’s no rush, really. It can sit in the yard for a few days.

But Dean practically drives by the hospital on his way home, anyhow. He could drop by there and get the information he needs in person.

Besides, he hasn’t set foot in a hospital since his dad died. Going there today will be a healthy step for him. It'll give him a chance to take a negative association and replace it with something more pleasant. Really, he’s doing this for himself, he reasons. It has very little to do with seeing Castiel and making sure he’s all right. At least that’s what he tells himself as he pulls into the hospital’s parking garage after getting off work.

*It’s all business,* he thinks as he grabs the clipboard from the Impala’s front seat.

Inside the main entrance of the hulking red brick building, he stops at the reception desk to ask for Castiel’s room number. The woman checks her computer screen before directing him to the third floor. Exiting the elevator, he’s hit with sights and sounds that take him back to the days when his father lay dying. It was a different hospital in a different state, but the fluorescent lighting, the beeping monitors, even the sound of rubber-soled shoes squeaking on linoleum floors echo those grim days.

To bring himself back to the present, he concentrates on finding the right room. Locating the correct number, he’s momentarily confused to see an elderly man lying in the bed. The man looks at him expectantly, maybe thinking he’s there to add another delivery to the numerous vases of flowers on every flat surface surrounding his bed. Realizing it’s a shared room, Dean smiles tightly as he walks past him, stopping near the curtain that divides the room in half.
Castiel is sitting up in bed, a book in his lap. His left arm is in a sling and the left side of his face is bruised and swollen. When he finally notices Dean standing there, his eyes go wide with surprise.

“Hey,” says Dean. “Is this a bad time?”

Castiel shakes his head and motions for him to come in. Dean stands at the foot of the bed, holding up the clipboard. “I came by to see what you wanted to do about your car.”

The surprised looks fades a little.

“Plus, I thought I’d come see how you were doing.” Dean shrugs, like maybe this is a service they offer all of their towing clients.

Castiel looks at him more warmly but he still hasn’t said anything. With some difficulty, he reaches towards the bedside table with his good arm. As Dean watches, he picks up a whiteboard and steadies it on his lap. He writes something on it before holding it up for Dean to see: *Can’t talk*. He points to his swollen jaw.

Dean winces in sympathy and starts to reach for the whiteboard to write a response before remembering that Castiel can totally still *hear*. “Looks like that hurts.”

Castiel nods and points to the chair, raising his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

Dean makes his way around the foot of the bed to sit down. “I think your lawnmower is destined for that big grassy meadow in the sky.”

Castiel’s face barely changes, but his eyes crinkle and Dean can tell he’s amused. The marker squeaks on the whiteboard. *Did you give it CPR?*

Dean laughs. “It’s an electric car. I think I’d need those paddle thingies to shock it back to life.”

Castiel rolls his eyes at that as a nurse walks in.
Dean looks around the room while she asks Castiel a few questions about his pain level and takes his vitals. His side of the room is bare. There are no flowers on the bedside table, no cards tacked on the bulletin board. Something nags at the back of Dean’s brain until he remembers that Castiel had said he had family nearby. He’d been visiting them the day his car broke down. But there’s nothing in the room to show that anyone has been here.

Before he can dwell on that, the nurse finishes and asks Castiel if there’s anything else she can bring him.

*Decent coffee* he writes on the whiteboard.

She grimaces in sympathy. “I know, it’s awful here.” She turns and smiles at Dean before leaving the room.

Castiel wipes off the whiteboard and writes, *Not sure about the car.*

“That’s fine,” says Dean. “No rush. How much longer are you going to be in here?”

*Couple more days.*

“Need anything?” Because that’s the thing to say in this situation, right? That’s what polite people say to people in the hospital.

Castiel shrugs, then shakes his head, his eyes fixed on Dean. It’s clearly Dean’s turn to say something but he finds himself caught off guard by the intensity in Castiel’s stare, leaving his brain whirring aimlessly as his mouth goes dry.

Suddenly feeling awkward, Dean stands to leave. Castiel can call the salvage yard when he’s out of the hospital and let them know what to do with the car. At least that’s what he intends to say. What comes out instead is, “Okay, well, I’ll check back with you.”

****

The next morning Dean wakes early, even though it’s a Saturday. After his run and a shower, he finds the gardening book in the pile next to his bed and flips through it until he finds the receipt. It’s from Daily Grind, a coffee shop right in the middle of campus. He drives there, easily finding a
place to park on the quiet weekend morning. When he reaches the front of the line, he hands the receipt to the young blonde girl working the counter.

“Can you make me one of these?”

The barista, wearing a name tag that says *Becky*, looks at the piece of paper, then scans the group of people in line.


“I want whatever this is a receipt for,” Dean says, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “And who the hell is Guy?”

Becky reddens. “No problem. I can make it. It’s just a really specific order, you know? Kind of weird because he likes his lattes sweetened with honey, which is unusual. And he always wears a trench coat so we call him *Trench Coat Guy*…you know, *Guy*? For short? That’s what we put on his cup.” She starts to pull the shots of espresso. “So where is he, anyway?”

Dean pictures Castiel standing here and getting his cup with the name Guy written on it every day. From what little he knows of him, he’s probably too polite or too shy to correct them. For some reason, a wave of protectiveness moves through Dean and he takes great pleasure in seeing the horrified look on Becky’s face when he says, “His name is Castiel and he’s in the *hospital.*”

Becky turns three shades of red and scalds herself with the steam from the machine. She murmurs some apologies as she finishes making the latte, adding the swirl of honey on top.

“So how about you put his name on the cup this time. C-A-S,” he starts before realizing he isn’t completely sure how to spell it. Is there one L or two? Shit. “Just Cas is fine.”

Becky writes it with a Sharpie then thrusts the cup at him. “This is on the house. And tell him we hope he’s feeling better soon.”

Dean gives her a smug smile and turns to stride righteously out the door. He stops when Becky calls to him.
“Excuse me? Sir? He, uh, usually adds some cinnamon on top.”

Dean nods curtly, pivoting towards the milk and add-ons. There doesn’t seem to be a way to sprinkle cinnamon with superiority, but he figures he’s made his point. He adds the cinnamon, replaces the lid and continues on his way.

When he gets to the hospital, Castiel is sitting up in bed, reading. He sets down the book as Dean walks in. By the time Dean has arranged his chair next to the bed, he’s holding up his whiteboard. *Hello, Dean.*

Dean smiles and hands him the coffee. “The girl at the coffee shop called it a bumble bee latte?”

Castiel eyes it happily as Dean adds, “Oh, and apparently you go by Cas now.”

He turns to squint at Dean as he processes this, then shrugs slightly as he manages to take a sip using the good side of his mouth. It looks awkward and potentially dangerous, but it must work because he closes his eyes and leans back, hugging the cup to his chest.

Dean supposes there’s no need to relate the way he smacked down a teenage barista to defend Cas’s honor and just says, “Becky hopes you feel better soon.”

They sit quietly while Castiel manages a few more sips. The swelling is definitely going down on his jaw and the bruising is beginning to turn green and yellow as it fades. His arm is still in a sling, but his movements seem smoother and more comfortable today.

“Oh, hey!” Dean remembers what he meant to ask him before. “Do you like, need somebody to feed your bees or something?”

Castiel makes a choking sound, lifting the hand with the coffee cup to his face. Dean starts to get out of his chair, worried that something is wrong, before realizing that he’s *laughing.* That sharp huff of breath doesn’t do his shoulder any favors, though and Cas winces as he rests the warmth of the coffee against his jaw, but his eyes are crinkled and bright with laughter. He puts down the cup and picks up the whiteboard, all the while shaking his head. *It doesn’t work like that,* he writes.

“Guess not. Sorry for nearly killing you with my ignorance.” Dean smiles.
He wasn’t even trying to be funny, but making Cas laugh suddenly seems like one of the most gratifying things he’s ever done. Castiel is usually so serious, so focused. Dean knows he’s got a sense of humor (*My lawn has never looked better*) but it’s sly and deadpan. This is so unexpected and entertaining that Dean doesn’t even care that Cas is laughing at him.

They sit in silence for a while before Cas wipes the board clean then writes *Tell me about you.*

Dean gives him the short version, one that just touches on the narrative. He studies a spot somewhere over Cas’s shoulder and gives it in an offhand manner, like none of it’s a big deal. Dead mom, self-destructive dad, kids raising kids. He touches on his dad’s death and his brother’s achievements. He’s told this version so many times over the years that he’s bleached the color out of it, leaving just the bare bones of the events that shaped his life.

“Anyhow,” he finishes, “I spent some time living in Pennsylvania, but now I’m back here living with my brother.”

Even when he glosses over his history like this, it’s practically inevitable that he’ll get that big eyed look of pity from his audience. As if those handful of sentences are all anyone needs to know everything about him. He looks at Castiel, but the guy’s only giving him that same inscrutable stare that Dean never knows how to counter. It’s like he’s waiting for Dean to say something more, like this can’t be all there is, and just as Dean’s thinking maybe there is some more to tell, the nurse comes in.

“Good news. Provided everything continues moving in the right direction, you’re being discharged tomorrow morning.” She lays a folder on his bedside table. “Here’s your discharge packet.”

She smiles at Dean before turning back to her patient. “I won’t interrupt your visit, but look it over when you get the chance and I’ll check back in a bit to see if you have any questions.” She pulls the curtain back into place as she leaves.

Cas is starting to look a little sleepy, so Dean stands to go. Before he leaves something strikes him, the twisted remains of Castiel’s car flashing in his mind. “Do you have a way home?”

Cas writes on the whiteboard. *I’ll figure something out.*

“No way,” says Dean as he reaches for the whiteboard and writes down his number. ““I’ll give you
a ride. I can be here around nine. If something changes, just let me know.”

Cas nods and smiles up at him. Dean smiles back before turning to leave. He has to stop at the curtain partition to turn around and give Cas the whiteboard and marker that he still has clutched in his hands.

****

The next morning Dean goes for his run, but rushes a bit through his meditation to make sure he has time to stop at the coffee shop before going to the hospital. He rides the elevator to the third floor, pushing the button with his elbow since he’s got a coffee cup in each hand. He finds himself smiling at their names side by side on the white paper cups. He walks down the hall and sticks his head into Castiel’s room only to find it completely empty, both beds stripped and unoccupied. Confused, he steps back into the hall and double checks the room number. He’s still standing there when a woman speaks to him from where she’s sitting at the nurse’s station.

“Can I help you?”

Dean turns to face her. “I was looking for Castiel Milton,” he says and it comes out like a question.

“I can check that for you,” she offers, clicking her mouse a few times as she studies her computer screen. “Looks like he was discharged last night,” she says pleasantly.

“Oh,” says Dean, blinking. “I guess we got our signals crossed.”

He walks back towards the elevator, then stops and sets both coffee cups on an unoccupied work station so he can pull out his phone. No new texts. He opens the phone log and scrolls back through it like a new notification could somehow be lodged there. Just a handful of old calls from Bobby (who will apparently never learn to text), a couple from Sam, and a second unanswered and unreturned call from Victor. Surprise begins to fade into irritation and he drops Castiel’s coffee into the the trash before jabbing at the elevator button.

He spends the rest of the morning checking his phone frequently, ready to give Cas the benefit of the doubt. The guy was just in a major accident that landed him in the hospital, so maybe Dean should stop making this about himself. To refocus his attention, he drives out to Bobby’s and puts in a few hours of half-assed work.
When he gets home, there’s still been no word from Cas and Dean wants nothing more than a cold beer and some mindless TV. Sam is nowhere to be seen, but his books, papers, and laptop are spread all over the couch. It’s not much, but it’s enough to set Dean off. He stomps around the house until he finds Sam upstairs lying on his bed, listening to music. He’s got the volume up so loud he never even hears Dean coming and jumps when Dean yanks an earbud free.

“Jesus!” Sam sits up, a hand to his chest. “Don’t do that!”

“Can you get your shit picked up downstairs?” Dean says roughly. “And you’re going to ruin your hearing like that.” Which is stupid because Dean listens to music full blast all the time. He’s just looking for something to criticize.

Sam blinks at him before assuming the bitchface that makes Dean want to smack him upside the head. Gritting his teeth, Dean turns to leave the room.

“Sheesh. Sorry, mom.”

Dean’s voice is cold as he rounds on his brother. “Funny, I don’t hear you saying that when I’m doing your laundry or making you a goddamn sandwich.”

Sam looks like he wants to say something, but instead he gets up and moves past Dean, their shoulders bumping, as he goes downstairs to gather his things off the couch.

Dean stands and scrubs a hand over his face as he considers going downstairs to make peace with his brother. Instead he goes into his room and slams the door. He paces around until he starts to calm down and only then does he stop and pick apart his reaction, making a mental list: frustration at having made the trip to the hospital for nothing, embarrassment that Cas clearly hadn’t remembered or cared that he was coming, irritation at not having heard any sort of explanation from him. And now he could add guilt to that list for taking it out on Sam.

You know better than this, Dean tells himself. Don’t just react. Understand where it’s coming from and then deal with it.

Later he apologizes, blaming his temper on a bad day at work paired with a headache.

Sam actually laughs as he brushes it off. “No big deal. Actually, it reminded me of the old days.”
Dean smiles, remembering the way they used to fight like cats and dogs. More than once Bobby had threatened to turn the hose on them. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at his brother with the most menacing glare he can muster. “I can still take you, you know.”

Sam laughs again as he makes a show of standing up to his full height and working his lanky limbs like a bodybuilder. “You just keep telling yourself that.”
Chapter 7

It’s early November when he gets the call from Sonny saying his clearances are in place and they’re prepared to put him on the schedule. Thankful for his flexible hours at the salvage yard, Dean chooses Thursdays with the understanding that he’ll be there when the boys get back from school and stay through dinner.

Dean drives to his first shift at Sonny’s on a blustery Thursday. The school bus hasn’t arrived yet so Meg invites him into the kitchen and offers him a cup of coffee. Dean accepts the coffee gratefully and relaxes a little in the warmth of the kitchen. There’s a big pot of chili simmering on the stove and plates of homemade banana chocolate chip muffins on the table ready for the boys.

“Here’s your mantra for today,” Meg says, as she pulls glasses from a cupboard. “Low expectations.”

Dean takes the glasses from her and puts them on the table. “Meaning?”

“Meaning at best the kids will ignore you. At worst, they’ll be hostile.”

“Because I’m new.”

“Because you’re new. They have no reason to think you’ll stick around.”

“Low expectations,” says Dean. “I can do that in my sleep.”

Meg laughs. “You are going to fit right in.”

Their conversation is cut short by the heaving sound of the school bus braking on the street, followed by loud voices and the thundering of feet on the front steps. Dean follows Meg to the front door. The boys stream in as Meg calls out reminders for them to hang up their backpacks and wash their hands. There are maybe a dozen boys ranging in ages from eleven to sixteen. Dean recognizes Tyler from the day he first stopped at Sonny’s and sees that he looks to be one of the oldest. The noise abates only slightly while they eat, and they quickly demolish all of the muffins and nearly two gallons of milk. Meg introduces Dean to the group and a few of them side-eye him before refocusing on their snacks. Dean offers refills on milk, but they all seem to have gone deaf to the sound of his voice. Meg notices and reminds the boys to Please use your manners if you’re going to
The three kids on kitchen duty stay to help clean up, so Dean follows the rest into the main living area where they retrieve their backpacks and settle in for homework. An hour later, Dean walks into the kitchen again. He waves a hand in front of Meg’s face.

“Hello? Can you see me?”

She laughs. “Despite the reception you’re getting out there, I can confirm that you do exist.”

“Okay, just checking.” Dean breathes and rolls his shoulders. “Tough crowd.”

“You’re doing great.”

Dean rolls his eyes and turns towards the kitchen door. “Wish me luck.”

It takes a few weeks, but slowly the boys begin to acknowledge him. (He tried not to swell with pride the first time one of the younger boys held up his glass and said, “Dude, milk” to Dean. “Dude, milk please,” Meg corrected.) The homework help is still hit or miss, but there’s an hour or so between homework and dinner, and that’s where he finds his stride.

With Sonny’s permission, he tackles various maintenance projects around the property. He learns to go about his business, working quietly until one or two or a small gaggle of boys eventually wanders over to see what he’s doing. From there, Dean can casually ask one of them to pass him a screwdriver or switch out a drill bit. With a little offhand instruction and some underhanded compliments (That hardly sucked at all), he’s got them learning and involved.

After that, some of the younger kids actively seek him out when the bus drops them off on Thursday afternoons. The older ones, like Tyler, are tougher to crack, but Dean just keeps showing up.

Sometimes, living with his brainiac brother and surrounded by Sam’s college friends, it’s hard not to focus on what he lacks. Back at home, in the quiet moments before he falls asleep, he can’t keep his mind from replaying his interactions with Cas and wondering how and why things went off course. But here at Sonny’s, he doesn’t doubt himself, secure in the knowledge that his consistent presence is making a difference.
November drains away as the days grow dishearteningly short and the weather turns bitter and cold. Sam, Charlie, and Kevin seem to be slogging from one day to the next as the semester grinds on. It doesn’t help that Dean and Sam have both caught nasty colds. In the house, Sam sits as far from Charlie and Kevin as he can, books, papers, and crumpled tissues surrounding him.

“Maybe you need to stay home from classes tomorrow.” Dean says from the kitchen while he checks the simmer on the pot of chicken noodle soup he’s made for dinner. “Give yourself some time to get better.”

Charlie snorts. “Good idea, Dean. You can write his professor a note excusing him.”

Sam’s laugh turns into a cough. “I’ve got to get this project turned in. And besides, it’s just a cold.” He looks up from his work to raise an accusing eyebrow at Dean. “And it’s not like I see you taking a day off.”

Dean puts the lid back onto the soup pot. “Yeah, well, tomorrow’s Thursday and I need to be at Sonny’s.” Still holding the ladle, he walks out of the kitchen to peer appraisingly at his brother. “Are you sure you don’t have a fever?”

Kevin throws down his pen and they all turn to stare at him. He’s staring at Dean with a look of utter disbelief. “You give me a hard time about my mom but she wouldn’t let me stay home from school unless I was like, bleeding out my eyeballs. For God’s sake, you’re making soup for a grown man with a cold.” He shakes his head back and forth like he’s trying to make sense of the whole thing. “Honestly, with your need to take care of things, I’m surprised this house isn’t bursting at the seams with stray cats.”

It’s the most Kevin has ever said to Dean and the four of them share a long moment of stunned silence.

Kevin looks a little sheepish and opens his mouth again like maybe he’s reconsidered, before picking up his pen from where it’s rolled across the table and getting back to work.

Dean eyes him levelly, then says the only thing he can, pointing the ladle at him menacingly. “No soup for you.”
It’s been just over a month since Dean turned up at the hospital to find Castiel gone. In retrospect, Dean thinks he probably should’ve spent less time getting his feelings hurt and called or texted the guy to check in. Maybe that would’ve been reasonable right after he was released from the hospital, but now too much time has passed for it to seem natural.

Dean will admit to keeping an eye open on campus and maybe he’s wandered into the bookstore a few times for no good reason. That stupid blue electric car was easy to spot, but Dean has no idea what, if anything, Cas is driving now. He knows Cas frequents the Daily Grind, but some mixture of pride, apprehension, and the mental image of Cas and Becky having a good laugh at his expense stop Dean from going in there.

For a while, it seemed he couldn’t avoid Castiel if he tried. Now his disappearance nags at Dean like an itch he can’t scratch. His curiosity gets the best of him one evening the week after Thanksgiving when Sam, Charlie and Kevin are working in the living room.

“Hey, do any of you know a guy named Castiel Milton? I think he’s a junior.” Dean tries his best to sound casual, like it just occurred to him out of the blue to ask.

Sam looks at him questioningly. Kevin never lifts his eyes from his computer.


This gets Kevin’s attention and he studies Charlie with mild confusion.

She rolls her eyes at him. “I’m gay, Kevin. Not blind.”

Kevin shrugs and resumes his work.

Charlie turns back to Dean. “But yeah, I know him. Sorta. He’s at the library a lot when I work the checkout desk. That’s not a name you forget.”

Sam gets up and stretches before digging through his backpack for a notebook. “Why do you ask?”
It’s a reasonable question. One Dean should’ve anticipated, actually. He stalls for a moment, pushing in the chairs around the dinette table as he formulates a response. “Uh, he was in an accident and I had to tow his car.” He wills his face not to turn red. “Just wondering if he was okay.”

Sam nods distractedly and plops back on the couch to leaf through the notebook.

Charlie looks at Dean with narrowed eyes. “Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him around for a few weeks,” she says slowly.

Dean tries for a neutral expression and says something clever like “Oh. Huh. Okay,” before escaping to the basement to put laundry in the dryer.
Just a few days later, Dean’s walking from the cafe back to his car on a cold, dry Tuesday night. He’d overslept and missed his run this morning, but his need for pie outweighed his desire to exercise. As a compromise, he’s parked a good distance out, giving himself the chance to walk for awhile in the chilly night air.

Heading east, he leaves the bustle and noise of the student populated area behind him. The houses here are a little older and a little smaller, the neighborhood not subject to the trends of young adults making Lawrence their temporary home. It’s the kind of quiet, solid neighborhood that would catch Dean’s eye when his dad drove them from town to town. He never longed for anything fancy or elaborate, just a house where he and Sam didn’t always have to be the new kids. And maybe a little yard where they could throw a ball around.

He’s distracted from his memory by a commotion outside a seedy looking bar midway down the next block. *Not my problem* he thinks. It’s been a long day and he’s tired and all he has to do is turn right at this corner to get to the Impala, parked a block away. And this is definitely not his problem. But, just as he’s turning the corner, the yelling intensifies and he swivels around to see two guys shoving around a third guy. Dean studies the scene for a moment, but no, this isn’t the noisy revelry of happy drunks. This is on its way to being an actual fight.

Having been on the receiving end more times than he can count, Dean knows all too well how this works. Sure, he’d often ended up with the worst of it, but most of the time it’d been his own damn fault. He’d mouthed off or hit on somebody’s girlfriend, always pushing things further and refusing to back down until the situation escalated.

Truth be told, there was a part of him that had loved it. Loved the adrenaline rush and the violence, both of which cleared his mind with a sort of focused purity. The pain of being hit was a welcome replacement for whatever he’d been trying not to feel. To be completely honest, there’s still a small part of him that misses it.

Despite his initial reservations about getting involved, there are rules about these things and two against one isn’t cool. He sighs as he makes his decision. Squaring his shoulders, he crosses the street, approaching the fray that’s playing out in the shadows between two street lights.

“Hey!” he calls out.

The third guy is clearly drunk off his ass and the other two are shoving him around like a rag doll.
“Hey!” Dean says again and *fuck*.

The rag doll has a head full of messy black hair. Dean didn’t recognize him at first without the trench coat, but that is clearly Castiel getting his ass kicked.

The guy on Cas’s left is big and bald and the guy on his other side is only slightly less big and slightly less bald. This isn’t a campus hangout by any stretch of the imagination so what the hell is Castiel even doing here? Why is he wasted on a Tuesday night?

“What’s up?” Dean asks. He just wants to make his presence known so he keeps his tone calm with the hope of seeming non-confrontational. The big guy turns and glares at him while the other shakes Castiel by one arm.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Baldy says roughly before turning to grab Cas by the front of his shirt.

“Really? Because I find it concerning that it takes two of you to beat up one college kid.” Okay, that isn’t exactly a de-escalation, but at least they’re focused on him now and not Cas.

“This mouthy little shit doesn’t know when to shut up.”

Dean glances at Cas, sees that his mouth is bleeding.

“He’s quiet now. I think you’ve made your point.” Dean pulls out his phone. “Should I take pictures for you to post on Facebook? Or just call the cops?”

The big guy shoves Cas towards a street light. Cas staggers backwards, bouncing off the pole and landing hard on the curb. Standing over Cas, they exchange a vigorous high five before lumbering away.

Dean moves closer to Cas, all the while watching the men continue down the street. By the time he’s sure they aren’t coming back, Cas has managed to get himself into a sitting position on the curb. Dean kneels down next to him.
“Dude, what the fuck? Are you okay?”

Cas opens his eyes and tries to smile before wincing and putting a hand to his bleeding lip. “Hello, Dean.”

“What are you even doing here? It’s a Tuesday night, for Christ’s sake.”

Cas just shrugs and closes his eyes again.

Dean tugs on his arm. “Okay, let’s go. Time to get you home.”

Cas lets Dean pull him to his feet, then yanks his arm out of Dean’s grasp. He walks towards the entrance of the bar and, on wobbly legs, picks his trench coat up off the ground. He puts on the coat (it takes him a few tries to get his arm in the sleeve) and pulls a set of keys out of the pocket.

“I’m going home now.”

“How about I give you a ride?”

Cas takes a step towards Dean. “I did not drive here.” His tone is vehement, as if Dean had accused him of something.

“Yeah, I know. Your car is a pancake.”

“I have a new one.” Cas says airily, as if all college students replace their wrecked cars like they do their ramen stash. “But I didn’t drive it here.”

“Okay.” Dean’s not sure what brought this on, so he’ll just work on being agreeable. “So you need a ride.”

“I don’t need your help.”
“Tell you what. I’ll get you home and then you can refuse all my help, deal?” Before Cas can argue, Dean puts a hand on his shoulder and steers him across the street and down the block to the Impala. They walk in silence, Cas letting him lead the way.

Before Dean opens the car door, he stops to get Cas’s attention. “Cas.”

Cas is leaning against the car, eyes half closed.

“Cas, look at me. I need to tell you something important.”

When Cas manages to look him in the eye, Dean holds up a finger in warning. “No puking in the car. Understand? If you have to puke, you tell me and I’ll pull over.”

Cas nods and solemnly repeats, “No puking in the car.”

Dean helps him into the passenger seat, carefully making sure that his arms, legs, and coat are all tucked in before closing the door and going around to the driver’s side.

“Can you give me directions to your house?” he asks, although he has a pretty good idea where it is.

Maybe after Cas disappeared on him, he’d gone back to the towing paperwork and found his address. And maybe he’d driven near it (but not right by it because the Impala is many things but inconspicuous isn’t one of them). He’d been surprised to see that it wasn’t over in the student populated part of town, like where he and Sam lived, but on the north side of campus in a nicer area filled with quiet neighborhoods and tidy family homes.

As they drive, Dean opens the car windows and the cold air revives Cas a bit. He’s keeping his eyes open now as he directs Dean to a modern looking townhouse, an end unit, in a small development. A Prius is parked in the driveway.

When Dean parks in front of the house, Cas takes out his keys and promptly drops them in the foot well. Dean scoops them up and and gets out of the car to unlock the front door of the townhouse. When he has the door open, Cas steps inside and fumbles for the light switch. Dean hesitates for a moment on the doorstep before taking the keys out of the door and following Cas inside.
Closing the door behind him, Dean takes in his surroundings, impressed. The townhouse is small, but filled with high end touches like granite countertops and crown molding. And apparently Castiel is the kind of guy who has throw pillows and decorative vases and what looks to be a hammered metal bowl filled with wicker balls sitting on the coffee table. Shit, Dean has a blanket nailed over the window in his bedroom.

While he’s looking around, Cas falls heavily into a beat up leather armchair that’s set near an overflowing built in bookcase. Seeing him slumped there spurs Dean to action and he heads to the kitchen. He stands for a moment taking in the rooster motif that dominates it. A rooster themed dishtowel hangs by the sink, a colorful rooster trivet sits on the stovetop and a series of framed rooster prints decorate the walls of the open dining area.

He finds a roll of paper towels in a stainless steel holder on the counter and dampens one with cool water. Back in the living room, he hands it to Cas who dabs idly at his mouth. The bleeding has mostly stopped but his lip is split and swelling.

“What did you do to piss those guys off?” Dean asks.

Cas smiles behind the paper towel. “They didn’t like my jukebox selection.”

“They beat you up because of a song you played?”

“I might have played it multiple times.” He turns the paper towel in his hands. “And sung along. Loudly.”

“What song was it?”

“Achy Breaky Heart.”

“Jesus, I would’ve hit you, too.” Dean takes the paper towel, squatting down to wipe away the dried blood that Cas has missed. Cas reeks of cheap beer and cigarette smoke.

As happy as Dean is to see him, he can’t help but notice that Cas seems to be in worse shape now than he did in the hospital. He looks exhausted and pale, like he hasn’t slept in a long while. Before
Dean can ask what’s happened in the month or so since he was discharged, he realizes that Cas has put a hand on his shoulder and is leaning towards him, his mouth soft, lips parted.

Dean freezes for a second as his mind switches channels from *yes this* to *not this way*. He stands up quickly. Better to pretend he didn’t notice than to embarrass both of them. “I think you’d better get to bed.”

Cas stares at the carpet, his clasped hands dangling between his knees. So much for not embarrassing him. “You can go now. Thank you for getting me home.”

Cas sounds strangely formal. Well, even more formal than usual. His words are clipped and his expression is miserable. Dean should probably just go, let him regain his dignity and give him time to sober up, but none of this is sitting well with him. He’s starting to worry about leaving Cas on his own.

“Is there somebody I can call for you?” he asks.

Cas snorts in response. “If there were, I wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with.”

Dean sits down on the couch. It’s covered in a floral pattern and looks brand new. The cushions are stiff, as if they’ve barely been sat on. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” Cas responds without hesitation.

Dean sits and waits, like Victor used to do to him. Drove him fucking crazy the way his therapist would just let the silence grow until Dean felt compelled to fill it with something he hadn’t intended to say.

“I’m just worn out,” Cas finally says. “Haven’t been sleeping.”

“This…” He gestures towards Cas, bruised and bloody, “isn’t really the answer.”

Cas snaps his head up and glares at Dean. “Don’t you think I know that?”
Dean holds up his hands, palms out in a gesture of I’ll back off.

Cas lets his head hang down again. “I’m sorry. You’ve been nothing but kind and I’ve been nothing but rude.” He rubs the back of his hand over his face, wiping away the tears that have sprung into his eyes.

“You’re not rude,” Dean says. “Just drunk and upset and tired. Some sleep will help…and I know it sounds lame, but everything really will look better in the morning.”

Cas nods but he still won’t meet Dean’s eyes.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do?” Dean asks.

When Cas finally answers, his voice is so soft that Dean almost misses what he says. “Would you just stay here until I fall asleep?”

Whoa. That was not what Dean was expecting. He draws in a breath and tries to formulate the reasons why he can’t but they all evaporate when Cas turns his head ever so slightly to see Dean’s response. He just looks so sad. So far from the Cas who laughed about him feeding the bees, the one whose eyes shone with amusement.

“Yeah, sure,” says Dean. “I, uh, just need to let my brother know I’ll be late.”

He pulls out his phone to text Sam while Cas walks slowly up the stairs. What the hell is he going to say? Here with a drunk guy I only kind of know and staying with him til he falls asleep. Yeah, that’s not weird. A drunk guy tried to kiss me, now I’m going to watch him sleep. Or maybe If this guy weren’t drunk and vulnerable, I totally would’ve kissed him.

Shit.

He finally settles on hanging out with a friend. be home later.
By the time he gets upstairs, Cas has changed into a t-shirt and shorts and is coming out of the bathroom. The upstairs bedroom is just as nicely appointed as the downstairs. The curtains are made of what looks like silk and they coordinate with the upholstered headboard and the arm chair with matching footstool, all in rich tones of red and gold. The bed, though, is covered with a simple navy blue comforter that feels out of place, an oasis of simplicity in the otherwise overdone room.

Dean stands in the doorway, like the threshold is an electrified fence. When Cas gestures towards the arm chair, Dean walks self-consciously across the room to perch on the edge of the seat. Cas doesn’t even look at him, just climbs into bed and switches off the lamp. Dean’s own breathing seems too loud in the room and he tries to minimize it as he listens to Cas settle himself in the bed.

Cas tried to kiss him and now they’re in his bedroom. Under almost any other circumstances this would count as a successful night for Dean.

But Dean’s been where Castiel is tonight. How many times had he been drunk and desperate, trying to outrun pain and loneliness. The more it threatened to break free and overwhelm him, the more he’d search for ways to mask it. One night stands were a default setting for him in those days, a temporary fix that unfailingly left him feeling worse in the morning. Maybe that’s all Cas was trying to do.

No matter how bad he’d felt, he’d always had Sam. Not in a lets-hug-it-out or talk-about-our-feelings kind of way, but he knew that Sam was there, the one person who would always come if he called. Dean never did call, tried never to let Sam come to his rescue, but it was a comfort enough to know that there was somebody out there. Somebody he could reach out to, if things got too dark. Dean tries not to think about how he’d taken that away from both of them when he left.

The street light outside illuminates the room enough for him to see that Cas is still awake, staring at the ceiling.

“Thank you,” Cas says quietly.

Dean waits, slowly settling back in his chair, until Castiel’s breathing becomes slow and even. He’s debating how long he should stay and how he’ll know if Cas is asleep when the snoring begins. Dean waits another five minutes before creeping softly out of the room and down the stairs.

In the kitchen, he fills a glass with water and opens drawers until he finds a notepad and a pen. He holds the pen for a while, considering, before finally writing a simple note: I hope you got some rest. You can call me if you need someone to talk to.
He writes his name and cell phone number at the bottom, then takes it and the water back upstairs to set on the bedside table. He stands a little longer than necessary, watching the way Cas sleeps on his back, his hands curled into loose fists up near his ears, before quietly slipping out of the house.
There are any number of reasons why Cas won’t call him the next day. Even if he’s not filled with crippling embarrassment, he’s probably incapacitated by a hell of a hangover. But that doesn’t stop Dean from keeping his phone accessible (and checking it frequently) all morning long.

Maybe he should check in with Cas, make sure he’s okay. But he’d left his number there, putting the ball in Cas’ court. Contacting him first might come off as creepy. Besides, maybe Cas has forgotten everything that happened last night. Or maybe he remembers everything, thinks Dean rejected him, and that’ll be that.

Dean doesn’t realize how long he’s been standing, staring into middle distance with a wrench in his hand, until he hears Bobby’s voice.

“How about you get yourself back from la-la land and get some fucking work done,” the old man grouses good-naturedly.

Dean startles and nearly drops the wrench.

“And stop checking your phone. If she hasn’t called by now, she isn’t going to.”

Dean thinks about correcting him, but he can just picture the look on the old man’s face as he tries to explain. He’s gotten himself together, but he hasn’t exactly found a way to tell his brother or Bobby that his straight and narrow isn’t quite as straight as it used to be.

It’s something he and Victor had talked about. Dean had been shy about bringing up his attraction to men, but his therapist, as usual, had been unfazed. Victor had helped him to see that squelching those feelings was another way he denied himself happiness. So, yeah, Dean understood it and had come to terms with it, but that didn’t mean he was ready to put up a billboard on the highway announcing it.

As Bobby leaves, Dean shakes his head to clear his thoughts. Silencing his phone, he walks across the garage to shove it in the pocket of his jacket hanging on a peg on the far wall.

It’s late afternoon when he finishes up for the day, having been remarkably productive once he got himself focused. He cleans and replaces all of his tools before degreasing himself. Grabbing his
coat, he says his goodbyes to Bobby and gets into the Impala. He puts his key in the ignition, then glances at his coat where it lies on the passenger seat. He turns the key to start the engine, puts a hand on the gear shift and looks at his coat again.

This is ridiculous.

He shuts off the engine and reaches into the pocket to pull out his phone. One missed call and a text. Both from Cas.

*It appears I owe you quite a debt of gratitude.*

Dean checks the time of the text: 3:28 p.m. Almost two hours ago. Oh, well done. Take a guy who’s messed up, tell him to call you, then leave his message hanging out there in the wind for a couple of hours. Awesome.

Holding the phone in his hand, he tries to decide what to do. Call Cas back? Text him back? Wait until he gets home? Why is he making this into such a big deal? He takes a deep breath.

*no problem.*

Oh that was lame. He adds a second message: *and I hope you are feeling better today*

The response comes almost immediately.

*Feeling a bit hungover and a lot foolish, but yes, somewhat better.*

Dean sits back against the leather seat of the Impala as he taps out a reply.

*well, thats a start at least :-)*

Oh Christ, did he just use a smiley face? Before he can second guess that too much, a new message pops up on his screen.
Could I buy you a cup of coffee as a very small token of my thanks?

Dean feels the blood rush to his face and realizes he’s grinning at his phone. Just then a loud knocking sends the phone flying out of hands, bouncing off the dashboard and skittering under the passenger seat. Dean turns towards the sound to see Bobby standing by the driver’s side window, nearly doubled over with laughter.

“Can you take your phone sex someplace else? I need to get my truck out.”

Shit, Dean hadn’t realized he’d parked Bobby in. Once Bobby turns to walk to his truck, Dean flings himself across the front seat on his stomach, scrabbling with his left hand until he finds the phone. Talk about great timing. Cas is probably rescinding his offer at this very moment. Dean types quickly with one hand as he starts up the engine.

hang on

He pulls the Impala out of Bobby’s path and then pulls back into the driveway.

sorry had to move my car. coffee sounds great.

Does tomorrow afternoon work?

Dean sighs. His shift at Sonny’s is the one non-negotiable block of time in his week.

Thursdays aren’t good for me. Friday?

Here’s hoping this won’t become a scheduling nightmare.

I could do Friday at 9:30 at Daily Grind
i’ll see you there. He types and deletes another smiley before putting his phone in his pocket and driving home.

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Dean wakes early Friday morning, the light just beginning to filter through the blanket that serves as a curtain. He turns away from the window, pulling the covers back up to his chin before remembering that he’s meeting Cas for coffee in a few hours. That thought banishes sleep from his mind. He kicks off the covers and dresses for his run, moving quietly down the stairs so as not to wake Sam.

The grass sparkles with frost and his breath hangs in the air as winter’s grip makes itself known. He’s out earlier than usual and marvels at the way a difference of only forty-five minutes completely changes the landscape. He hadn’t really appreciated the markers he saw on his run until they weren’t there: the lady with the bouncy labradoodle, the man with the matched set of schnauzers that never fail to bark at him, and the familiar faces of the other runners, singly and in pairs. He feels a connection to these people even though the entirety of their relationship is comprised of a hand held up in greeting or a brief Morning! exchanged as he passes them. There are still dogs being walked and people running, but they aren’t his dogs or his people, he thinks, completely aware of how ridiculous that sounds.

It’s too cold to do his meditation outside, so he’s sitting in the living room when Sam comes padding down, still in pajamas and finger-combing his hair.

“You’re up early.”

“Yeah, I woke up and figured I’d just start my day,” Dean says.

Sam makes his way to the kitchen to start coffee.

“Maybe don’t make a full pot,” he calls out as Sam passes through the kitchen doorway. “I’m meeting somebody for coffee this morning.”

Sam turns to him, the water running in the sink as he rinses out the dregs of yesterday’s pot. “Somebody? Could you be more vague?”
Dean feels zen and relaxed from his morning routine, so maybe that’s why the words slip out before he has a chance to second guess them.

“You know that guy Castiel?”

Sam’s brow furrows as he shakes coffee from the bag into the filter and snaps it into place. “What, from the library? Charlie’s guy?”

“Yeah. I’m having coffee with him.” Dean stands and takes a couple of steps towards the kitchen.

Sam pours the water into the coffee maker and pivots back towards Dean, coffee pot in hand. “What for?”

That’s an excellent question, thinks Dean. Because their paths keep crossing, because Dean kind of likes the way Cas keeps him slightly off balance, because maybe the universe is trying to tell him something at a time when he’s actually ready to listen.

Before he can answer, the coffee maker begins to spit and hiss. He gestures to Sam who is still holding the empty carafe. Sam whirls around to replace it before fresh coffee splatters all over the counter, then turns his attention back to his brother.

“Because…I don’t know, exactly,” Dean answers lamely, staring down at the floor and rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

“Wait. Is it like a date?”

Dean is starting to rethink the wisdom of having this conversation pre-caffeine. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Are you into guys now?” Sam asks.

Dean has spent a lot of time dreading this moment, but Sam’s tone is purely matter-of-fact, like he’s asking Dean if it’s supposed to rain today.
“Um. Sometimes.” His words are tentative, but he looks his brother directly in the eye as he says them.

“Oh.” Sam purses his lips for a moment in thought, then shrugs slightly. “Okay,” he adds, before turning to get a mug out of the cabinet.

Dean blinks at his brother’s back. “That’s it? Okay?”

Sam gets the milk out of the fridge. “As long as you’re happy, what do I care?”

Dean opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, watching as his brother pours himself a bowl of cereal.

“We’re not going to hug or anything now, just so you know,” he warns Sam.

Sam laughs. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Dean smiles to himself as he heads upstairs to get showered.

****

Dean times his arrival at the cafe for precisely 9:30. Or rather, he wanders around the drug store across the street pretending to leaf through magazines and meandering up and down the two full aisles of Christmas decorations for eighteen minutes before entering Daily Grind at precisely 9:30.

The coffee shop feels warm and steamy after the chill of the street. Almost every table is filled and a line snakes along the front counter towards the door. The hiss of the espresso maker mixes with the clink of cups and the uneven burble of multiple conversations. There’s no sign of Cas, so Dean stands near the end of the line trying to decide if he should find a place to sit or order coffee. He's just waved the third person ahead of him when he startles at a tap on his shoulder. Pull it together, Winchester, he tells himself as he turns to see Cas standing there.
“Hi,” Dean says. “I’ve just been here for a minute.”

Why did he say that? Nobody asked.

“If you tell me what you’d like, I’ll get the coffee and you can find a table.”

“Just a regular coffee is fine.”

Cas nods.

“I’ll find a table,” Dean says unnecessarily, turning both to find the table and keep from babbling.

He scans the room, sees a man picking up his things at a corner table. A woman with a toddler has her eye on the table as well, but Dean strides purposefully towards it before she can get there. Not the most gentlemanly move on his part, but the last thing he wants is to be sitting in the middle of things with people streaming around both sides.

He takes off his coat and chooses the chair that puts his back to the wall. As he sits, he checks Cas’s progress and sees he’s almost at the front of the line. He’s wearing the trench coat, which looks a little worse for wear. Under it he’s dressed in the sort of preppy style he favors in a white and blue striped oxford button down, untucked, over jeans. Looking at him, Dean still can’t decide if his hair is intentional, the way it sticks up in some places and curls in others.

Dean pulls out his phone to give his hands something to do, but he keeps one eye on Castiel and puts it away when he sees him approaching with the drinks. “Do you take milk or sugar?”

“No, black is fine.”

Cas hands him a cup. “I’ll be right back,” he says as he detours over to the small counter with the cream and sugar. Dean smiles a little to himself when he realizes Cas is adding cinnamon to his latte.

“Thanks for this,” Dean says when Cas returns to the table.
“It seems like literally the least I could do.”

“Your mouth looks better.”

Cas puts a hand to it, absently. Setting down his own coffee, he takes off the trench coat before sitting down. There’s a long moment of silence before says, “I owe you an apology. And an explanation.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Dean assures him. “Really, I’m just glad you’re doing better,”

Cas shakes his head. “I’m just trying to figure out where to start.” He sighs. “This will most likely be way too much information, but none of the recent things will make sense otherwise, okay?”

“Okay.”

Cas has a death grip on his latte, but he’s yet to take a drink and he’s stopped meeting Dean’s eyes. Dean leans back a little in his chair so as not to give Cas the sense that he’s being crowded.

“Is this going to start with like, Pangea breaking apart?” Dean asks, just to break the tension. He’s rewarded by a small but genuine laugh from Castiel.

“Practically.” Cas takes a quick breath and dives into the story, like if he waits he’ll lose his nerve. “My parents and I are not what you’d call close.”

The bitter smirk on his face says that this is an understatement.

“In fact, we’re just this side of estranged. If it weren’t for my little sister, I wouldn’t bother with them at all, actually. They’re super religious…really active in our church. The most important thing to them is that everything seems perfect from the outside. They don’t care how anybody feels so long as we all look like the perfect family. Their solution to everything is to throw money at it. Growing up, we all had anything we wanted, but nothing we needed, if that makes any sense.”

He looks to Dean, who nods encouragingly even though he’s not sure he completely understands.
“My older brother, Gabriel, started to get into trouble when he was in high school. He was drinking and cutting school. It was typical teenage stuff, but as it went unaddressed it became more….desperate. My parents’ main concern was that it was making them look bad. So, instead of getting him help, they yelled at him for embarrassing them. When Gabriel failed out of high school they enrolled him in a private school for his senior year. They told their friends he was bored by the lack of academic challenge at the old one.”

Cas gets a faraway look in his eyes as he talks about his brother. “He was so smart. He probably was bored, but that wasn’t the issue. Not even close.”

His eyes go hard again as he continues. “This new school was in the next town over, so they bought him a car because God forbid anybody take time out of their day to make sure he actually got there and back safely. So, when he got drunk and wrecked it, instead of taking the keys away from him, they replaced it with a brand new car. Six months later, he was drunk again and took a turn too fast. He was dead at the scene.”

Dean’s trying not to give him the pitying eyes that he hates, but Jesus. “I’m really sorry,” he says even though that doesn’t even begin to cover it. But what else is there to say?

“And then they would never talk about it. Not ever.” Cas goes on like Dean hasn’t spoken, his tone more insistent now. “Other than the It was God’s will or He’s in a better place brand of bullshit. Which, fine. I knew better than to count on them for anything at that point. But my sister was only thirteen and she had a really hard time with it.”

He takes a drink of his latte. “They got rid of almost all of his things but I managed to get this.” He plucks at the sleeve of the trench coat from where it’s been carefully placed on the back of his chair. “My sister calls it my “Mood Coat” because I tend to wear it when I’m upset.”

Cas draws in a deep breath and rubs one hand over his temple as his voice turns weary. “So, anyhow. I didn’t even bother telling them when I was in the hospital. I mean, I knew they’d find out when the bills came, but at that point it would already be over with. I let my sister know, because I didn’t want her to worry and I’m determined to be honest with her.”

He looks at Dean who nods his understanding. “But I don’t know what I was thinking because another brother in another car accident? Of course she freaked out and told them. They showed up a few hours after you left, the day before I was supposed to be discharged. They were furious that they’d had to hear it from her. You know what they said?”
He’s back to bitter now. “Not We’re so glad you’re okay or We wish you would’ve told us. They said, ’What if someone had asked us how you were? How would it have looked if we didn’t even know?’ That was the focus of their concern. My dad basically harassed the hospital staff until they released me that night. Then they took me home and we had this huge fight. They threatened to stop paying my tuition and make me come home. Told me I’d better stay focused and get my grades up. My sister was crying and everyone was yelling and it was just another wonderful day with the Milton family.”

He closes his eyes for a moment at the memory. “So, I should have called you to explain but I just kind of shut down. Went to classes and came home to study. That’s what I’ve been doing. I will not move back home,” he finishes fiercely.

Dean’s been listening intently, barely aware of the rest of the coffee house. He’s still taking it all in when Cas switches gears.

“Yesterday was Gabriel’s birthday. And even though it’s been three years, these kinds of anniversaries are still difficult.”

Dean nods, thinking about his dad when he responds. “Yeah. Even though you know those days are coming and you try to prepare for them, they still catch you off guard.”

“Exactly.” Cas says. “I didn’t want to be alone, but I didn’t want to run into anybody I knew, so that’s why I was over on that side of town. I was going to have one drink. I’m not really a drinker, especially not after how my brother died, but it was just a way to honor his memory.” Cas shakes his head a little as if he’s disappointed in himself. “The whole thing was a bad idea from the start.”

Dean shrugs. “There’s not really a right or wrong when it comes to these things.”

Cas lifts an eyebrow. “Playing Achy-Breaky Heart four times in a row indisputably qualifies as ‘wrong’.”

Dean laughs outright. “Okay, what was up with that?”

“I was by myself and feeling self-conscious, so I studied the jukebox just to have something to do. When I saw that awful song on there, it reminded me of my brother. Well, it reminded me of a fun time we had, really one of the last good times we all had together. It was a silly thing, really.” Cas smiles at Dean, warmed by the recollection. “A dance party Gabe and Anna and I had one night
when our parents were out. Jumping on the furniture and singing at the top of our lungs.”

Cas stares off for a moment before taking a drink of his latte. “It took me three more beers to get the nerve up to play the song and well, you saw where things went from there.”

“Not your best night.” Dean confirms.

“No, not by a long shot.” Cas lets out a deep breath and relaxes against the back of the chair. “I apologize for dominating the conversation. I don’t usually talk this much.”

Dean smiles, genuinely pleased to hear this. “I don’t mind at all.”

“I’m not really good with people,” Cas acknowledges. “People often mistake my reticence for arrogance. It tends to make things awkward.” He tilts his head, considering. “But it’s easy to talk to you.”

Dean feels himself blush a little at the compliment.

Before he can respond, Cas adds, “I’d like to be able to call you a friend.”

A friend. Of course. Dean works to keep his face neutral. He looks down at his cup, swirls the now-cold dregs. “Yeah. Friends are good to have.” He taps the cup on the table a couple of times. “Definitely.”

He tries to keep his smile from seeming forced, glad for the buzz of chatter that fills the current silence between the two of them.

“And I was serious about helping with your gardening project.” Cas offers, changing the topic again. “Have you made any progress with that?”

“Not a bit,” Dean admits, as he tries to decide whether this is a welcome direction for the conversation to take.
“I’d be glad to come over and take a look at your yard.”

“It’s December…not exactly gardening season.”

“Many people think gardening is limited to the warmer months, but there is much planning and preparation to be done during the winter,” Castiel says seriously.

Dean just stares at him. Really, it’s no surprise he has trouble making friends when he spews that kind of shit like he’s reading it from an invisible encyclopedia. But there’s something ridiculously endearing about the earnest look in his eye as he says it. Okay, fine. This wasn’t how he’d hoped it would go, but he can be Castiel’s friend. He’ll just add him to the strays already hanging around the house.
Chapter 10

Dean calls off work after leaving the coffeehouse, telling Bobby he’s sick, and spends the rest of the day lying on the couch watching TV. Mid-afternoon Sam comes in loudly, banging doors and dropping his backpack on the table. Dean slowly rouses from his crappy-TV coma.

“Well?” Sam asks eagerly.

“Well, what?” Dean says although he knows damn well what he means.

“How did it go with Castiel? And please note the restraint I am employing in not referring to it as a date.”

Dean keeps his eyes on the screen as he sighs and puts it out there. “He just wants to be friends.”

Sam picks up the remote and turns off the television before turning to face his brother. Dean pulls a pillow over his own face.

“What? No way. Are you sure?”

“Let’s see. He said—and I quote—‘I’d like to be able to call you a friend’. End quote.”

“Oh,” says Sam. “Well, he’s an idiot. You’re an excellent catch.”

Dean uncovers one eye. Sam has his I Mean It face on. “You are. You’re smart and funny and hardworking and while it makes me throw up in my mouth a little bit to say it out loud, I see the way people look at you.”

Dean can’t decide whether to be grateful for the sentiment or freaked out. “Stop talking now, Sam.”

“Yeah, okay.” The brothers are silent for a long moment.
“But…” Dean begins.

“I’m not going to talk about your butt, Dean.”

“Seriously, shut up.” Dean pulls himself to a sitting position. “But after that… it was kind of weird. He offered to help me with the garden project. Like, he practically invited himself over. And put his number in my phone.”

“So, he tells you he wants to be friends—at”

“In no uncertain terms,” adds Dean.

“Then he asks to see you again.”

“Basically.”

Sam blinks at his brother before a solution shines in his eyes. “We need to call Charlie.”

****

Dean can’t comprehend how he’s gone from outing himself to his brother to getting dating advice from Charlie all in the span of a single day, but here they are.

Sam greets Charlie at the door with, “Dean needs relationship help.”

She stops in the act of unzipping her jacket to point two thumbs at herself. “Um, hellooo. Single.”

Sam turns to glance over his shoulder at Dean, eyebrows raised in question. After Dean gives him a go-ahead nod, he says, “It’s a same-sex relationship issue.”

Charlie looks questioningly at Dean herself. He shrugs and gives her a sheepish smile.
“Okay, unless you have a question about, uh, the mechanics of it,” and here she looks significantly at Dean who blanches and shakes his head in mortification, “then it works the same way whether you’re dealing with a guy or a girl. I mean, you have to look at the signals being sent and figure out how to interpret them. There’s not some secret gay language I can translate for you. It’s just……” she waves her hands helplessly, “people.”

“That’s why we called you,” Sam puts in quickly. “Because you understand people.”

“And we’re Winchesters which makes us mostly Neanderthals,” Dean supplies. Sam nods in agreement.

Still standing just inside the front door, Charlie looks back and forth between the two of them. After a moment, she finishes taking off her jacket and shoves it at Sam before breezing past him to face Dean.

“Okay, I assume we’re talking about Castiel?” she asks, arching one eyebrow.

Dean can’t decide whether to be horrified or impressed. “Uh. How the hell did you know that?”

“Oh, please. You ‘casually’ ask about some guy whose car you towed?”

Dean puts his head in his hands. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes. And it’s adorable.” Charlie smiles at him before settling herself in the armchair and turning serious. “Now tell me everything.”

Ten minutes later Dean has related all of his Castiel encounters to Charlie and Sam, glossing over the guy’s family issues and completely leaving out the part about watching him sleep because come on.

“Maybe he just really likes gardening,” Dean says in conclusion as he paces around the small living room.
“Maybe,” says Charlie as she considers the facts, like a judge overseeing the proceedings of _Dean Winchester vs Friendzone_.

“I mean, I saved his ass. The coffee was just a thank you for that, right?”

Charlie looks at him pointedly. “Yeah, but let’s say it was the other way around. What if he’d found you drunk and delivered you home. What would you have done the next day?”

“Pretended it never happened,” Dean says without hesitation.

“You wouldn’t have called?” Charlie asks.

“No way. Too awkward.”

Charlie points out what Dean has already confirmed. “Okay, but _he_ called.”

“Yeah, well, he’s like the Crown Prince of Awkward. Hell, he admits it. So you can’t go by what he does.” Dean plops back down on the couch next to Sam.

“Even though he gave you his number.”

“ Took my phone right out of my hand to enter it,” Dean admits.

“But he means it when he says he just wants to be friends,” Charlie presses on.

Dean doesn’t know where she’s going with this, but Sam is having trouble keeping the smile off of his face.

“He really couldn’t have been any clearer about that,” Dean reminds her.

“How is it that you believe him when he says that, but you discount the other things he does?” she
parries with a gleam in her eye.

Dean looks at her, confused.

“Dean, you can’t have it both ways,” Charlie reasons.

Sam chooses this moment to let out a loud snort. Dean chooses the next moment to elbow his brother.

“So what does that even mean?” Dean asks.

Charlie rolls her eyes and explains it slowly. “It means he’s either an evil mastermind toying with you or an awkward regular guy who isn’t sure what he wants.”

Dean flops back against the couch cushions. “So what do I do?”

Charlie gives him a fond look that says he’s an idiot. “You take him up on his offer. Worst case scenario? You get some gardening advice.”

****

Up in his room later that night, Dean tries, but can’t formulate any objections to Charlie’s plan. Now he’s stuck figuring out the next move. How soon should he invite Castiel to come over? Was there, like, an appropriate waiting period? If they were just going to be friends, none of that mattered, right? So he could ask any time. But if he asks right away, won’t he look desperate or clingy? What if Cas was just being polite?

Jesus, how do teenagers walk around like this every single day?

The beer he drank after Charlie left and Sam went upstairs to study makes the decision for him. It’s late enough that he figures he’ll use his little bit of liquid courage to write a text for Cas to get in the morning. He doesn’t even proofread it, just hits send before he loses his nerve.
thanks again for the coffee today. and i’d like to take you up on the offer abt the gardening stuff

With that done, he sets the phone on the night table and lies down. As he’s pulling up the covers, he hears it buzz and raises himself on one elbow to reach for the phone again.

I would like that as well.

Dean wasn’t expecting a response. Other than the hopeful part of him that thought there might be a chance. Problem is, he hasn’t thought past his opening text.

Sorry for the late text. hope i didn’t wake you

You didn’t. I’m in bed but I was studying.

Okay, now here are some things that aren’t fair. One, why does it take Dean minutes at a time to formulate a response when Cas seems to have a ready answer to everything? And two, is it really necessary to mention that he’s in bed? Is it just a statement of fact or some sort of flirtation? It doesn’t help that Dean has been in his bedroom, seen him with his dark hair against the pillow. Maybe Dean should text back Did you know you snore?

Maybe Dean should have his phone confiscated.

Before he can formulate a response, Cas texts him again. I thought this would be from my sister. She frequently texts me late at night.

Dean settles against the headboard, the phone screen the only source of light in the room. He relaxes a bit because he knows how to talk about younger siblings and sure enough the conversation flows smoothly.

How old is she now?

Just turned 16. She’s a junior.
my brother is 20. he’s downstairs listening to shitty music right now

*It must be nice to have him nearby.*

it is. I missed him when i was in Pittsburgh. a year was a long time to be away.

Anna often says she would lose her mind if she couldn’t text me. I don’t always know what to say to her, but at least she knows I’m listening.

Fuck. Sam would probably have felt the same way had Dean not left him to sink or swim, cutting him off without even the ability to tap out a few words of reassurance on a screen. He feels his stomach knot up at the thought of it and changes the subject.

They text for a few more minutes, settling on a day the following weekend for Cas to come over.

After they’ve said good night, Dean tosses his phone back on the table and sighs. He lies awake for a long time processing the roller coaster emotions of the day. He hears Sam moving around downstairs, closing up the house for the night, and finds he’s able to focus on the good. Things with his brother are better than they’ve been in a long time.

And Cas has agreed to see him again.

****

The following Saturday Dean wakes to two inches of fresh snow covering everything. Standing in his chilly room, he scans the mostly featureless landscape of the backyard. He lets the blanket drop back in front of the window, convinced Cas is going to cancel. For a moment he thinks about texting Cas to give him the out, but decides against it. If he wants to bail, Dean isn’t going to make it easier on him.

He takes the same *fuck it* approach to the house. Even if Dean cleans it within an inch if its life, it still pales before the luxury to which Cas is accustomed. Cas will probably take one look and scamper back to his well-appointed townhouse.
Besides, friends don’t clean for friends, right?

The snow makes it too slippery for him to run so he’s amped up and, despite his vow not to clean, he paces around wiping off the table, emptying the dish drainer, and straightening the sofa cushions.

Sam cleared out earlier, rolling his eyes when Dean argued that he didn’t need to leave, so he’s alone in the house when the doorbell rings just before three o’clock. He opens the door and is momentarily distracted by the scattering of snowflakes in Cas’s dark hair. He’s wondering if he can get away with casually brushing them off when Cas greets him.

“Hello, Dean. May I come in?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” Dean steps out of the way and closes the door behind him.

Cas stands just a few feet beyond the doorway taking in the downstairs, his eyes moving from the secondhand dinette set to the unmatched collection of furniture that makes up the living room. Dean tries to see things with Castiel’s eyes, and finds himself getting defensive as a stab of possessive pride moves through him over this home he and Sam have made for themselves.

“Not exactly what you’re used to,” Dean finally says. “We don’t exactly accessorize,” he adds, with thoughts of the knick knacks and decorative touches that fill Cas’ townhouse.

When Cas turns around to look at Dean, he’s smiling broadly. “This place is great.”

Dean raises both eyebrows because maybe this is the sort of thing people say to dogs who are so ugly they’re cute.

“I mean it,” Cas says as he bends down to take off his wet shoes before walking into the dining area.

Dean follows him and they sit at the table.
“Let me tell you a little something about my place. It was a model home,” Cas begins.

Yeah, Dean thinks, it looks magazine ready.

“The developments will often do that. They’ll bring in a decorator to stage one unit so when people come through, they’re not just viewing empty rooms. My parents bought the whole thing right down to the towels in the bathrooms and the dishes in the cabinets.” He shrugs.

Dean looks around. Even though their house came mostly furnished, he sees the blanket on the couch that came from Bobby’s and Sam’s little league trophy from 4th grade that Dean has insisted on displaying on the mantel. He sees the big KU flag he’d bought when Sam got his acceptance letter, now tacked on the wall. If he were to look in the kitchen, he’d see the pots and pans he’d bought in Pittsburgh and the nearly complete set of superhero glasses they’d collected on their many road trips, their graphics well-faded from years of washing. What Cas is talking about sounds like being a guest in his own home.

“So, none of it’s yours?”

“I brought a few things,”

Dean remembers the well-used leather arm chair next to the pristine floral couches and the worn comforter on the bed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s kind of weird.”

Castiel laughs. “I know. I mean, I’m so used to that sort of thing from my parents, but I know how it looks from the outside.”

“I was thinking about what you said at the coffee shop…about having everything you wanted and nothing you needed. My experience growing up was so different. We were always worried about money. Like, is-our-electricity-going-to-be-shut-off kind of worried,” Dean says, remembering the constant weight of wondering whether their Dad would drink away the grocery money. Dean had worn his jeans until his ankles showed and the knees wore into holes so that Sam could have new clothes or money for field trips. “I used to fantasize about finding a big bag of money, like one a bank robber dropped, with a big dollar sign painted on it.”

Dean smiles briefly at the memory. “But I guess all the money in the world wouldn’t have changed my dad. Probably would’ve just let him drink himself to death sooner.”
He tries for a casual shrug of his shoulders, but Cas is looking at him like he wants to know more. Dean blinks a few times, not sure how the conversation took such a serious turn so quickly. Dean sits back in his chair and refocuses the topic. “So, where do we start with this garden thing?”

They spend the next hour or so determining the exposure of the backyard and investigating the most favorable section for planting. Cas has brought a soil testing kit that necessitates the two of them digging away the still falling snow to get to bare ground.

“Are you sure this can’t wait ’til spring?” Dean grumbles.

Castiel answers him with a handful of snow that bounces off his back. Dean waits until Cas is crouched down, gathering dirt into the sample tube before accidentally-on-purpose shoving him over, face first into the snow. Cas scrambles back up to a sitting position, wiping his face wordlessly and Dean’s stomach drops thinking that he’s gone too far. Jesus, who face plants a guy he hardly knows into the snow?

There’s still no reaction from Cas, so Dean approaches him apologetically. “Hey, sorry, I was just messing arou—“

His apology is cut off by a handful of snow plunked unceremoniously into his face from close range.

“Oh, shots fired!” he yells, wiping his face with his sleeve before reaching down to gather more snow. It’s too soft for snowballs so that means a certain amount of finesse will be required.

Cas is back on his feet, his face pink with the cold. He’s laughing and clutching two handfuls of snow to his chest. They’re standing locked in a face off, when Sam pokes his head out the back door.

“We brought pizza if you guys are hungry.”

Dean shoots Cas a this isn’t over look before dropping the snow and brushing his hands off, watching to see that Cas disarms himself as well.
Sam waves at Castiel. “Hi, I’m Sam. You must be Cas.”

“Hello, Sam,” Cas says as they begin to walk towards the house. Cas has his hands stuffed in his pockets and stops to kick some snow off his shoes before they get to the steps.

Dean’s just put his foot on the first step when he feels Cas come up behind him, close enough that when he talks, his breath is hot in Dean’s ear. The sudden heat that comes with having him so close is quickly cancelled out by the unmistakable searing sting of snow being dropped down the back of his neck.

“Never turn your back on the enemy,” he advises before sprinting past Dean, into the safety of the house.

When Sam comes back out, Dean is standing just outside the back door, yanking on the back of his jacket to dislodge the last of the snow.

“I hope you don’t mind that we came over,” Sam says. Through the storm door Dean can see Charlie and Kevin moving around the kitchen.

He smiles at his brother. “It’s fine, Sam. You didn’t have to leave in the first place.”

“It was kind of Charlie’s idea. She thought Cas might hang around longer if there was food involved.”

“She’s devious,” Dean says, trying to wipe the idiot grin off his face as he wipes the last bit of melted snow from his neck.

“It’s why we like her.” Sam says, holding the door open for his brother.

Inside, Cas and Charlie are making their acquaintance official as Kevin pulls out plates and napkins from the kitchen cabinet. Dean watches for a brief moment, enjoying the happy buzz of activity before going to get sodas from the fridge.

“Are you saps up to your eyeballs in studying?” Dean asks, looking around the room, making sure
to include Cas before stretching exaggeratedly and adding, “God, it’s good to be a grown up. No school...no papers...no exams.”

There are now four pairs of mutinous eyes glaring back at him.

It’s Charlie who finally answers. “Yes, but my brain is full so we came here to watch Lord of the Rings. Thedirector’s cut.” She says it like it’s the only acceptable option and Dean can’t help but agree.

Kevin turns to Cas. “Have you seen it?”

Cas finishes the bite of pizza he’s been chewing and responds, in a tone that make it sound like it’s just occurred to him: *Dartho guin Berian. Rych le ad tolthathon.*

Sam looks at him, wide-eyed. “You speak Elvish?”

“I may have memorized bits and pieces,” he says modestly. Dean darts a glance at Charlie who is nodding slightly, one eyebrow raised. It’s a look of Castiel-approval that Dean doesn’t miss.

“So, you’ll stay?” Charlie asks, before Dean has worked up the nerve.

“If I’m not intruding.”

They quickly reassure him that he’s not. Dean gets up to clear the dishes and toss the pizza boxes, while Sam gets out the DVD. Cas comes into the kitchen carrying empty soda cans and Dean stops what he’s doing to lean one hip against the counter.

“Elvish, huh?” *I can dig Elvish.*

Cas just shrugs and smiles, his eyes twinkling.

By the time they get back to the living room, the movie is starting. It takes one quick look around the living room for Dean to realize that he’s going to have to take these idiots out as a thank you.
Normally, the three of them would have sprawled all over the limited seating, leaving Dean to drag in a chair from the dinette set, but today Sam has settled himself into the arm chair while Charlie and Kevin have squished themselves together on one side of the couch, leaving the other half free for Dean and Cas. It’s going to be a bit of a tight squeeze, but from the barely contained grins on their faces, he’s quite sure that was the plan. Dean sits next to Charlie so as not to completely overwhelm Cas, who sits next to him.

It’s a good thing Dean has seen this movie (multiple times) before because he’d be having a hell of a time concentrating otherwise, what with Castiel’s leg pressed against his and their shoulders bumping. The ever-subtle elbows Charlie pokes in his side aren’t helping. He casually stomps on her foot, never taking his eyes off the screen.

The longer he sits there, the more conscious he becomes of every point of contact between them. When Cas leans forward to grab his soda from the coffee table, Dean gets a whiff of something sweet. It takes him a minute to place it: green apple. It takes him another minute to realize it’s the scent of Castiel’s hair and after that, he’s pretty much done concentrating on the movie all together.

After the movie, Cas gets into a discussion about a professor he’s had that Charlie is going to have next semester. As the talk turns to the pros and cons of various classes, Dean slips out to the kitchen to finish cleaning up. If nothing else, at least he’s connected Cas with these guys and let’s face it, he’s got a lot more in common with them than he does with Dean. Cas is all logic and reason and higher education and Elvish for God’s sake and Dean is a high school dropout working as a mechanic. He needed a friend, thinks Dean. He couldn’t have been clearer about that. Listening to the animated chatting coming from the living room, Dean feels like he’s done something right by Cas, at least.

A moment later, Cas is standing in the kitchen next to him. “I’m going to give Charlie and Kevin a ride back to campus.”

“I’m glad you guys hit it off,” Dean says. “They’re great. And they’ve been good friends to Sam.”

Cas lingers another moment and the way he stares at Dean makes something flutter in his chest. Dean’s considering taking a step towards him when Kevin pokes his head into the kitchen. “We’re ready to go whenever you are.”

Dean decides then and there to cross Kevin’s goldfish crackers off his mental shopping list. (What self-respecting college student eats goldfish crackers, anyhow?)

“Thanks for having me over. I had a really nice time.” Cas says, with one last smile at Dean before
he follows Kevin out of the kitchen.

Dean and Sam usher everyone out. The snow has stopped and the moon shines brightly in the clear sky giving everything an unearthly glow. Back inside, Sam digs out his laptop while Dean sits on the couch, mentally replaying the day and trying to figure out what, if anything, it all means.
Chapter 11

After that, it’s a marathon of projects and studying as Sam and his friends push through to the end of the term. Other than a few exchanged pleasantries via text (Dean wishes Cas good luck on his exams, Cas sends Dean a happy holidays message before he leaves town), Dean doesn’t talk to Cas again before he heads back to St. Joseph for winter break.

Campus is a ghost town with the students gone. For once, Dean can’t lord his grown up status since he continues to get up and go to work each day, while Sam sleeps ridiculously long hours.

Christmas breaks the monotony and they spend the holiday at Bobby’s eating plates of food bigger than their heads. Sam and Dean pool their money to get Bobby a TiVo and he watches them set it up like it comes from God Himself. Bobby has long since given up buying them actual gifts, but the brothers’ wallets are as full as their stomachs when they drive back to their little house Christmas night.

At home they sprawl on the furniture, content and sleepy.

“Merry Christmas, Dean.” Sam says. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Dean turns to smile at him. “No getting rid of me now. I’m too fat and happy to move.”

It’s a stark contrast to the lonely Christmas he’d spent in Pittsburgh the year before, working double shifts to keep himself busy, hoping that the exhaustion from the extra work would leave him too tired to think. Now he has Sam and Bobby and an actual celebration complete with tree-trimming and eggnog. He’d spent Christmas Eve at Sonny’s, contributing a stack of pies from the cafe where Jo works to the festivities. Dean smiles thinking of how Tyler had managed to down half a pumpkin pie all on his own.

Victor would approve of how far I've come, Dean thinks and makes a mental note to call him. Probably his number is still in his missed calls, if he scrolls back far enough.

On New Year’s Eve, Dean breaks his no-purchasing-alcohol-for-minors rule and brings home a bottle of champagne to share with Sam. At midnight, he gives in to the urge he’s been resisting and shoots off a text to Cas wishing him a happy new year. By one o’clock he hasn’t heard anything back, so he tosses a blanket on his sleeping brother and climbs the stairs to bed.
The next morning he wakes to his phone buzzing and three texts from Cas. One returns his new year greetings, the second is a link, and when Dean taps on it he’s taken to a gardening site with blueprints and instructions for building planter boxes. The third is an offer from Cas to help construct them. A quick glance at the site and Dean can see it’s a simple project that he could tackle with one eye closed, but there’s no way he’s going to pass on a chance to see Cas again. He texts back to accept the offer and they set a time for when Cas is back in town.

A few days later, Dean stops at Home Depot to have some cedar cut to the specified dimensions. Standing and listening to the buzz and whine of the saw, he tries to decide if Cas is looking for way to spend time together or if he’s simply finishing the job he started. He turns it over and over in his mind, the definitive answer he gets changing with each pass. The orange-aproned employee has his safety goggles up on the top of his head and has said “Sir” to Dean at least twice before he pulls himself to the present.

On the day Cas is coming over, Charlie and Kevin are at the house, but it’s so early in the new semester that their work is unhurried and the mood is relaxed. Dean is too antsy to sit with them, so he steps out on the back deck to triple check that he has all of the tools and materials ready. He hears the doorbell ring, but he stays outside in the cold air, listening as Sam greets Cas and they all spend a few moments chatting. It’s been just over three weeks since Dean last saw Cas. Hopefully Cas can’t see on his face how often Dean’s let his mind drift back to sitting close beside him on the couch that night.

Cas doesn’t seem nervous at all. He greets Dean cheerfully, then turns his attention to the set-up on the deck. *Just finishing the job he started*, Dean thinks, and immediately feels guilty for the time he’s spent wondering what it would feel like to run his tongue along the cleft in Cas’s chin.

Dean manages a hello and stammers an apology for the limited work space. He gestures wordlessly to the muddy back yard covered with patchy snow and hopes Cas understands why he chose to set up on the deck.

Cas seems unfazed and reaches for the printout of instructions so that they can get down to work. Once they get started and Dean has his hands busy, he’s relieved to find that the awkwardness drains away and their conversation flows easily. They talk about how Castiel’s exams went and how he took Anna ice skating while he was home. He doesn’t say much about how it went with his parents, and Dean doesn’t ask. Dean, in turn, talks about Christmas at Bobby’s and the Game of Thrones DVDs that Sam got him.

If Dean were making these planter boxes on his own, he’d probably skip a few steps because, let’s face it, they’re basically glorified dirt holders. But, the link Cas sent is thorough and no doubt the finished product will be sturdy as well as functional. It will also take them an hour or so longer. Quality takes time, Dean tells himself, as they go inside to warm up and get a drink while they wait for the wood glue to dry.
Precision is important too, he tells himself once they’re back outside, so it definitely helps to have Cas right there leaning into his personal space while he steadies the pieces so Dean can hammer the junctures in preparation for adding the wood screws.

Dean’s finding it increasingly difficult to remember this is just about Cas finishing the job he started when their hands are brushing together a little more often than necessary. Plus, it’s tricky navigating the relatively small space, and at one point they’re standing so close together that Dean zones out in the middle of a sentence.

“Dean?” Cas prompts, turning those ridiculous blue eyes on him.

“Uh, sorry, Cas,” Dean says. He glances self-consciously through the storm door into the living room, but everyone inside seems completely focused on books and computer screens. “Just trying to find the best angle.” And resist the urge to press you up against the wall.

When the project’s finished, Dean has two low rectangular boxes and a taller, square one to show for their efforts. He’s also got a flushed face that has very little to do with working outside in the chilly air.

“Thanks a lot, Cas, I really appreciated your help.” Dean says when they’re back in the house afterwards. He thinks he hears Sam mutter something followed by a variety of half-suppressed snorts and giggles.

“You’re welcome, Dean. I’m glad to do it.”

Sam, Kevin, and Charlie simultaneously take swigs of their sodas followed by more giggling. Dean shoots them a dirty look, but none of them will meet his eye, all looking innocently down at their work, as he walks Cas to the door.

“See ya later.”

“Bye, Dean”

He shuts the door and walks back to the living room to find the three of them collapsed in laughter.
“Okay, what the fuck?” He glares at each of them in turn. Charlie and Kevin both look at Sam, tacitly appointing him their spokesperson.

Sam pushes back his hair with one hand. “Um, we may have started a drinking game.”

“Go on,” says Dean, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed.

Sam hesitates so Charlie jumps in to elaborate.

“Every time you and Cas say each other’s name, we drink,” she says with a grin.

“What the hell?” Dean’s brow creases. “That’s not even a … we don’t…” he sputters.

“Oh, puh-leez. Do you not hear yourselves?” Charlie says incredulously, as she stands up and pulls Kevin to his feet. “This is you guys.”

She and Kevin stand toe to toe, staring into each other’s eyes. “Cas, could you hand me that hammer?”

“Of course, Dean.” Kevin fumbles around blindly, not moving his eyes from Charlie’s face. His fingers find the TV remote and he presses it into Charlie’s hand.

“Thank you so much, Dean.”

“You’re very welcome, Cas.”

“You guys are assholes,” says Dean.

Sam laughs so hard he falls off the couch.
“I hope that hurt,” he calls over his shoulder, walking upstairs before they can see him blush.

There’s a part of his brain urging him to go back down there, to sit on the floor with them and ask, “Do you think he likes me? Like like likes me?” but he’ll eat a package of snail bait before he does that.

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Dean pushes the dolly out from under the car he’s working on to answer his cell phone. He doesn’t usually stop in the middle of a job, but it’s Cas and Dean hopes he isn’t calling to cancel the coffee they have scheduled for this afternoon.

“Can I ask you a favor?” says Cas.

“Sure. Whaddaya need?” He wedges the phone between his ear and shoulder while he wipes his greasy hands with a rag.

“Before we go for coffee, could you swing by here? My next door neighbor’s getting a new couch and she asked if I could move the old one down to her garage and, well, it’s a two person job.”

“Are you just using me for my ability to lift heavy things?” Dean asks.

“Absolutely,” Cas shoots back with no hesitation.

Dean smiles. “Fair enough. When?”

“What time works for you?”

Dean glances around the garage to gauge how much time he needs to finish and get himself cleaned up. “I can be there around 3:30.”

“Perfect. See you then.”
Cas is waiting outside when Dean pulls up and together they walk next door. A frantic yapping starts as soon as Cas rings the bell and when the door opens, a Yorkie rushes them, bouncing on its hind legs to get Cas's attention. Not having grown up with pets, Dean isn't much of a dog person. While he can see the appeal of say, a big Labrador Retriever that can catch a Frisbee, this little thing with a pink ribbon holding back the fluffy fur on top of its head scarcely qualifies as a dog in his book.

Cas introduces Dean to his neighbor, Missouri, who gives off a warm, motherly vibes that makes Dean like her immediately. When she thanks him for helping out, Dean does his best to remember his manners, even though he's distracted by the dog pawing at his jeans.

(Her name is Sugar. Of course it is.)

Cas must sense Dean’s unease because when Missouri turns her back to lead them upstairs, Cas scoops up Sugar. He holds the dog to his chest and waves her front paw as he says in a high-pitched voice, “Hello, Dean.”

Dean gives the dog and Cas each a dirty look in turn. “Get that oversized rat away from me,” he hisses.

Upstairs in the second bedroom, Missouri explains that she’s giving the couch to a friend, so they just need to store it in the garage to make room for the new one being delivered tomorrow.

Cas pulls a tape measure out of his pocket. “I figured we should measure the couch and the doorway —“

“Put that away,” Dean interrupts. “I got this.”

“Yes, but shouldn’t we make sure it will fit, first?”

Dean answers confidently. “It got up here, didn’t it? It’ll get back down.”

“Yes, but, Dean, won’t it be easier if—“
“Cas, I’ve done this a million times.”

“How long have you two boys been together?” asks Missouri mildly, from the corner of the room where she’s been watching. There’s a long beat of silence.

“Oh, we’re not—“ says Cas.

“—Just friends,“ says Dean.

“My mistake.” Missouri smiles sweetly. “You two sound like an old married couple.”

To cover his embarrassment, Dean moves to one end of the couch and jerks his head at Cas to direct him to the other end. “Lift on three.”

They make their way towards the doorway, with Dean walking backwards. The first two-thirds of the couch easily slides through but the curve of the second arm gets hung up and progress slams to a halt.

“Shut up,” mutters Dean even though Cas hasn’t said a word. The smirk and raised eyebrow are enough.

They walk the couch back into the room and rotate it ninety degrees before lifting it again. This time it goes through the door with room to spare. They manage to get it down the stairs with minimal swearing before maneuvering it out the front door. Outside, they take a breather, setting the couch in the driveway while Missouri opens the garage. Sugar jumps up on it, flopping onto her back for a belly rub as soon as Cas reaches out a hand to pet her.

“Are you sure I can’t pay you boys for your trouble?” Missouri asks when they’re through.

Cas waves her off. “That’s what neighbors do.”

“Well, how about I bake you something as a thank you. I’ve got a pecan pie recipe that’s been in my
“Really, that won’t be necesser-OW!” Cas yelps when Dean kicks his ankle.

“That would be wonderful!” Dean beams at Missouri.

As they walk back into Cas’s house, Dean lectures him. “First of all, you don’t turn down anything homemade. Second of all, you *never* say no to pie.”

“I can’t believe you kicked me.” Cas sits on the arm of the couch, pulling his ankle into his lap.

“I didn’t kick you. I just nudged you. Firmly. With my foot.”

“Well, it hurt.” Cas yanks up the cuff of his jeans to examine the site.

“I didn’t mean to kick you that hard,” Dean apologizes.

When he moves closer to Cas to check the damage, Cas grabs him by the front of his shirt and kisses him. Dean’s first thought is *I can’t believe I fell for this again.* Then he has enough presence of mind to grip Cas by his upper arms and pull him to a standing position as they kiss.

“Well played,” Dean says, grinning, when they break apart. He leans in again, but Cas ducks his head and lets go of his shirt. Dean loosens his hands, resting them on Cas’s arms, reluctant to let go completely.

“Change your mind already?” Dean tries for a joke because the mood has inexplicably shifted to something tense and awkward.

“No.” Cas lifts his chin to look Dean in the eye. “Definitely not. It’s just… I’m graduating at the end of the summer and maybe this is all really terrible timing.”

“And maybe we’ve kissed exactly once and it’s too soon to worry about any of that.” Where has *Dean Winchester, Voice of Reason* come from? “What if we just take it slow and see what
happens?”

Dean’s pretty sure he’s never uttered those words before in his life, but it feels right to say it. Whatever this is with Cas, it feels different, makes him want to be protective and careful. Besides, it’s only January and summer feels worlds away.

Cas looks at him for a long moment that has Dean holding his breath.

“I can do that,” he finally says and then he’s kissing Dean again.

It’s soft and good with Cas’s arms wrapped around him and for a long time Dean loses himself in the way their mouths fit together. Cas pulls him closer and Dean runs his hands up and over Cas’s shoulders and he almost—almost—has to stop kissing him to watch his own fingers disappear into Cas’s dark hair.

The next time they break apart, Cas says, “So, if we’re taking it slow…” He hesitates for a moment and Dean can’t take his eyes off the way he’s chewing his bottom lip while he thinks. “Can we still go up to my room?”

Dean grins. “Hell yes. But just know I’m on to all your pretty little tricks.”

Cas takes him by the hand and leads him upstairs. They lie on the bed together, and Dean can’t remember the last time he did this, sober and in daylight. It’s like being a teenager again, when making out was both the means and the end.

Cas learns how ticklish Dean is but promises not to use that to his advantage. Dean learns that as soon as he trails kisses along Cas’s jaw, Cas throws his head back to give him full access to his neck. Dean has to stop and laugh into Cas’s shoulder, because it makes him think of Sugar flopping over on the couch. Cas retaliates the only way he can, running his fingers lightly along Dean’s sides. When Dean shrieks and tries to pull away, Cas flips him onto his back.

*Jesus, this guy is stronger than he looks,* Dean thinks but he can’t think about anything else because that’s when Cas discovers that he can coax the most delightful little gasp out of Dean simply by catching his earlobe in his teeth.

It’s a weird mixture of chaste (they’re both still fully dressed, for crying out loud) and hot but Dean
is completely present, for once not thinking about more or after.

Then Cas looks down at him, his eyes somehow deeper blue in the washed-out winter light and Dean thinks with a jolt this could be something immediately followed by I will fuck this up. He quickly stops that line of thinking and works to put himself back in the moment.

“Where’d you go?” asks Cas softly, pushing up on one elbow. He’s seen this all flicker across Dean’s face.

“Nowhere.” Dean assures him as he pulls him back down. “I’m right here.”

Coffee long forgotten, they stay there until well after the sun has set. But Cas has an evening class to attend, so Dean starts to untangle them. Jesus, he needs a cold shower. But thinking about showers when he’s looking at Cas is definitely not helping things.

By the time he leaves, Dean’s both luxuriously relaxed and ragingly unsatisfied and that’s okay because it’s what taking things slow means. He sits in the car studying himself in the rear view mirror. His cheeks are flushed and there’s some definite stubble burn along his jaw and he can’t stop grinning.

“You bet your sweet ass I deserve to be happy,” he says with gusto.

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Thanks to the stupid smile that’s still on his face when he gets home, his brother figures it out almost immediately. Nodding sagely, Sam silently holds up his hand for a celebratory high-five.

So after that, they’re dating? He guesses?

They go to dinner or meet for coffee, and Dean hasn’t had a single sighting of the trench coat since they’ve gotten together. Cas’s “mood coat” has been replaced by a ridiculously flattering charcoal grey pea coat, an upgrade of which Dean highly approves.

Once, Dean even keeps Cas company in the library while he studies. Once. Because all Dean does
is stare at him, which Cas complains is all kinds of distracting. Dean apologizes and turns back to the gardening book he’s pretending to read. He flips through some pages, taking in nothing, while making himself count to 100 in his head before he’ll look at Cas again. When he does, it’s no use because Cas is already staring at him, chewing on his pen, instead of studying.

Cas sighs and starts packing up his bag. “Let’s get out of here.”

Dean drives them back to Cas’s house and parks in the driveway. They both get out of the car, but before Dean can turn towards the front steps, he hears two cars doors closing. Turning to look, he sees that Cas has gotten out of the front seat only to open the rear door and settle himself in the back. Standing in the driveway, Dean ducks his head back into the car.

“What are you doing?”

Cas gives him that level glare. “You said you wanted to take things slow. Which is fine,” he adds quickly when he sees the look of alarm on Dean’s face. “But if we go upstairs now, that will be easier said than done.”

“So, what then? You want to fool around in the back seat of my car? Right in front of your neighbors and God and everybody?”

“It’s dark. At least it would be if you got in here with me and shut the damn door.”

There is a certain logic there that can’t be ignored, so Dean climbs back in and sits primly next to Cas. Apparently that’s all the invitation Cas needs, because he climbs onto his lap and takes Dean’s face in his hands, kissing him until his head is pressed against the back of the seat.

This was an excellent idea, Dean’s thinking when he hears the barking of a dog close by and knows Missouri’s taking that damn yappy Yorkie for her nighttime walk. Dean pulls away in a panic. “Oh my God. She’s going to see us. And call the cops.”

“Then get down.” Cas yanks him down flat against the seat, banging Dean’s head on the door handle along the way. Their stealth mode maneuvers stall while Cas stops to apologize and rub the sore spot with his fingers, before covering it with kisses.

It’s awkward and awesome to be tangled up like that, with a constant knocking of knees and
elbows. At one point, Dean tries to flip them over so that he’s on top of Cas, but that results in Cas rolling off the seat all together, landing in the foot well with a frantic *mmpgghh!* as he falls. When Cas sits up in a daze, Dean gets him under the armpits and hauls him back up until Cas is lying on top of him and they’re both shaking with laughter.

“We are ridiculous,” says Dean.

“We truly are,” says Cas. “Now stop laughing. This was all your idea.”

“It most certainly was not!” Dean says, full of righteous indignation, but Cas puts a stop to that with a nip to Dean’s neck followed by a tongue along his collarbone. There’s a hand sliding under his shirt and a nearly imperceptible shift of hips and then *oh.* And also *shit.*

Maybe Sam won’t notice when he starts a load of laundry at midnight.
Chapter 12

Dean doesn’t want to be the guy who drops out of sight when he starts dating somebody. So, as tempting as it is to spend all their time together at Cas’s place, they make an effort to spend time at Dean’s house, too.

Dean’s nervous the first time he has Cas over after they’ve gotten together. It would be one thing if it were just Sam, Kevin, and Charlie, but there’s been a new addition to the group. On a day soon after classes resumed in mid-January, Dean’d come home from work to the familiar sounds of Sam and the gang chatting.

“Hey, nerds! How was school today?” Dean had called out as he made his way to the living room. “Sammy, did you stay out of the naughty corner…”

He’d stopped when he spotted someone new in the mix: a pretty blonde sitting next to Sam on the couch.

Sam turned from her to shoot Dean his best Do Not Embarrass Me face.

“Dean, this is Jess. She just transferred to Kansas and she’s in our Symbolic Logic class.”

Jess had stood and stepped forward to shake Dean’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” Dean’d said, winking conspiratorially, “and don’t worry, “I’m sure once you learn your way around, you’ll find some better friends.”

But Jess keeps coming around, quickly establishing herself as one of the group and it doesn’t take long for Dean to see that Sam is completely enamored with her. Dean has to stifle a laugh each time his brother turns puppy eyes on her, offering to help with her assignments or hopping up to refill her drink. Sam’s old spot on the armchair has been claimed by Kevin since Sam now sits next to Jess every chance he gets. From the fond look in her eyes, Jess is just as smitten.

The first time he brings Cas into this mix, Dean’s sure every eye is on them, so he keeps Cas at arm’s length, not wanting him to feel scrutinized. It’s a good plan, but one that fails miserably because Dean finds it impossible to have Cas so close without touching him. Finally, while they sit at the table, Dean stretches out his legs until he finds Cas’s and hooks one foot around Cas’s ankle. Cas,
who’s talking to Kevin at the time, responds by tucking Dean’s foot in between his own. Dean smiles down at his plate at the contact.

It’s easier after that first time, especially since Dean likes seeing the way they all include Cas so readily. And it makes something tighten in Dean’s chest to watch Sammy and Cas get to know each other.

Sometimes Dean thinks he could be completely happy here in this little house, surrounded by the people who are important to him. Then he looks at his stupid single bed and the wall he shares with his brother’s room, and he doesn’t question the fact that he and Cas spend most of their time together in the comfortable privacy of Castiel’s townhouse.

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“Dean, can you hand me that book?” Sam gestures to the floor in front of the couch.

Dean leans over from where he’s sprawled on his back scrolling through his old texts with Cas to scoop the book up off the floor, stretching to pass it to his brother.

“Oh, God, are those hickies?” Sam stares in horror, the neckline of Dean’s t-shirt having pulled to the side. “What are you guys? Fifteen?”

“You wanna see where else I’ve got ‘em?” Dean asks, leering at Sam, who visibly shudders. Satisfied, Dean yanks the neck of his shirt back into place.

Truth is, Cas likes to mark him. He’ll nip at him and suck bruises into his skin, always kissing and soothing the spot with his tongue immediately after. Cas tries to keep them where nobody else will see, leaving Dean to find them along his waist and in the soft skin of his inner thighs.

From the day Cas plunked himself in the backseat of the Impala never doubting that Dean would follow suit, he’s been pleasantly surprised to discover how unabashed Cas is. Even more surprising, Dean is totally on board with this. Dean spent so many years with an iron grip on life taking care of Sammy and trying to keep his family together. Now, with Cas, there’s a letting go that Dean revels in. They’re still taking things slowly but, ironically, that’s opened the door in a lot of ways.

Cas has a way of determining exactly what Dean likes without him having to say a word.
Sometimes, he discovers what Dean likes even before Dean knows it himself. He almost laughs, now, when he thinks about Cas’s self-proclaimed awkwardness with people. When it’s just the two of them, there’s an ease and certainty that’s quickly building into trust. Which might explain why this morning Dean took a picture of the constellation of red and purple marks on his collarbone and texted it to Cas.

Mine, Cas had responded immediately. Even though Dean knew he only meant the marks he’d left, the sheer possessiveness in the single word stirred a flame in Dean’s gut.

yours, he’d texted back agreeably.

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It’s a cold, dreary Sunday in February. Dean’s dressed for his run, but dark clouds threaten rain, so he waits a few minutes to see if the sky will clear. To pass the time, he picks up his phone to check in with Cas. Dean knows he has a crushing amount of studying to do, but the guy’s gonna need to eat at some point. Dean shoots off a quick text to see about lunch or dinner together and he’s surprised when, instead of texting back, Cas calls him.

“Can’t type. Too bright.” Cas sounds dreadful.

For a split second Dean wonders if he’s hung over, but they’d been together until nearly midnight last night drinking nothing stronger than tea. “What’s wrong?”

“Migraine.”

“What do you need? I’ll be right over.” Dean makes his way upstairs to his room to change clothes.

“Nothing. Don’t need to.”

Dean can hear the effort it’s taking him to get these words out. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Dean.”
“The sooner you stop arguing, the sooner you can get off the phone.”

There’s a long pause before Cas responds.

“Back door’s unlocked,” he says before hanging up.

Dean lets himself in, drops the grocery bag in the kitchen and climbs the stairs as quietly as he can. He finds Cas in bed, the comforter pulled over his head. He starts to sit gently on the edge of the bed, but Cas shoots out an arm to push him away.

“Chair,” he mutters, miserably.

“Sorry,” Dean whispers, pulling the armchair closer to the bed, wincing and whispering another apology when the chair scrapes against the wood floor.

They sit for a long time in silence before Cas feels well enough to burrow out from under the covers.

“Hey,” Dean smiles at him as he pushes up on one elbow.

“Think I might puke,” Cas slurs, his voice thick with nausea.

Dean grabs for the trash can next to the night stand, setting it down by the edge of the bed.

Puking is nobody’s favorite, but for awhile there it seemed like Sammy caught every stomach flu in a 500 mile radius, so Dean is pretty inured to it.

Cas manages to keep from throwing up, pressing his lips together and breathing through his nose until the nausea passes. He lays his head back on the pillow. Nearly an hour passes before he opens his eyes again. It’s too dark to read, so Dean spends time fiddling on his muted phone, and then does his meditation, nearly drifting off to sleep himself when he’s done.
When Cas wakes, he still looks awful. There are dark circles under his eyes and Dean can only find like, three endearing things about the state of his hair.

“Is it raining?”

Dean stands and walks to the window, using one finger to pull apart the curtain so he can look out without letting any light in. “A little bit, yeah.”

“I get these when the weather changes sometimes.” Cas is squinting even in the dim light of the room.

“Ah,” says Dean as he settles back into the chair. “I’ve got a wrist like that.”

“Which wrist?” he asks. Dean rotates his left hand to indicate. The wrist feels pretty good today, but sometimes he’ll get shooting pains and stiffness when the barometer drops.

“What happened to it?” Cas reaches for his hand.

“I broke it when I was fifteen.” That much of it is true.

“How?” Cas asks as he runs his thumb back and forth across the inside of his wrist.

“Wrestling with Sam. Fell off the bed. And you should go back to sleep.”

Cas doesn’t put up any argument to the suggestion and burrows back down into the covers. Dean watches Cas’s eyes drift close, but the lie burns in his stomach.

Because what’s he going to say? The truth?

Cas knows the broad strokes of Dean’s childhood, but Dean’s never gone into specific detail. He wants Cas to see him as he is today: stronger and healthier than he’s ever been. The real story behind the broken wrist would leave Cas looking at Dean with pity, like he’s damaged.
Cas doesn’t need to hear that Dean’d slipped out of the apartment one night after Sam was asleep. He’d walked a few blocks to meet a friend, Aaron, in the park. He and Aaron didn’t have any of the same classes, but they’d been walking to and from school together. Each day at lunch, Aaron made sure to find Dean and most days they sat outside in the parking lot talking.

Dean almost never left Sam alone, but Aaron had asked Dean to meet him that night, said he had something to ask him. When Dean got there, Aaron was already waiting, sitting on a picnic table. He made room for Dean and they sat side by side, their feet on the bench. Aaron never did ask him anything, but the way they’d sat so close together, knees and shoulders bumping, seemed like an answer.

He hadn’t stayed at the park long, had left Sam alone for less than an hour, but it had felt like time stood still while they sat there in the cold dark air, felt like they were the only two people alive.

When he’d had to leave, Aaron had put a hand on his arm. “See you tomorrow?” he’d asked and Dean had nodded happily, a stupid smile plastered on his face as he hurried home.

His smile faded when he turned the corner of the apartment building and saw his windows lit up. He steeled himself for the confrontation, walking up the two flights of steps with heavy limbs. The yelling had started before he was all the way in the front door. His dad was home early, drunk but not drunk enough to overlook Dean’s absence.

Dean had made the mistake of trying to defend himself, pointing out that Sam had still been asleep, at least until the yelling started. That’s when John had grabbed him, digging his hands into Dean’s upper arms hard enough to leave bruises, and shook him until his teeth rattled. With a dangerous tone to his voice, he reminded Dean that his job was to take care of Sam.

That’s all you’re good for, he’d said.

And really, all things considered it wasn’t even that bad. John hadn’t hit him this time. When he’d pushed Dean away, though, Dean had stumbled over Sam’s backpack, losing his balance and falling with his hand crumpled beneath him. He’d known right away that it was broken, but he grit his teeth and held it against his body while he guided Sam, who was watching with terrified eyes, back to their bedroom.

Sam had actually apologized to Dean for not having put his backpack away, but Dean had put his good arm around him and told him it was okay. He lay awake most of the night, his wrist throbbing
and swelling, hot tears running onto his pillow as he cried silently.

The next morning Sam had been the one to tell their dad that Dean was hurt. They’d dropped Sam at school and then gone to the hospital, where his dad had turned on the full John Winchester charm, playing the widowed father trying to do right by his boys.

“I can’t be with them as much as I’d like, and they got to rough-housing,” John said, shaking his head sadly at the unfortunate turn of events. “Dean here fell off the bed onto his arm. He tried to be brave about it, but I could see it was broken.”

Despite his dad’s tale, the doctor and nurse had taken Dean into an exam room by himself and asked all manner of pointed questions about what had really happened, the fingerprint bruises on his upper arms all but telling the truth for him. But Dean knew enough to stick to the story, knew nothing his dad could do to him was worse than being separated from Sammy. He denied everything, but there was no doubt that protective services were being alerted.

Logically, Dean knew it would take days, even weeks, for an investigation to be set in motion, but he still couldn’t manage a full breath until they’d picked up Sam early from school and his brother was right there in the car with them. They’d packed up and left town that same night. John took off the cast with a hacksaw a month later.

After that, Dean had pushed down thoughts of Aaron, in particular. and of boys, in general.

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Twenty minutes of nap time later, Cas wakes looking incrementally more present and focused.

“Can I get you something to drink? Or eat?” Dean offers, blinking as he pulls his mind back to the present.

Cas shrugs a little, not outright refusing.

“I picked up some tomato soup and ginger ale.”
Cas considers, then he nods. Dean goes downstairs, happy to have a tangible way to help. Looking for something to heat the soup in, he opens a few cabinets and realizes that the entire kitchen is completely stocked: pots, pans, knives, utensils. Once he gets the soup on the stove, he opens drawers and more cupboards, finding bakeware, measuring cups, and mixing bowls.

He locates a bowl and a spoon for the soup, a glass for the ginger ale and a tray to carry everything. Carefully he makes his way back upstairs and waits while Cas tucks a second pillow behind his back. Cas eats half the soup and takes a few sips of ginger ale before handing the tray to Dean who makes room for it on the bedside table.

He glances at the tray. “Hey, would you care if I ever used some of the stuff in the kitchen?”

“You mean, like, cook?” Cas asks, as he rearranges the pillows.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t even know what all is in there, but sure. Use whatever you’d like.” Cas says, making room for Dean on the bed.

Dean sits with his back against the headboard and pulls a pillow onto his chest for Cas to lean on. Dean holds him gingerly, not wanting to jostle him, but Cas snuggles into him and threads their fingers together.

Cas tips his head back to look up at Dean. “You must’ve been bored sitting there doing nothing. You really didn’t have to come over.”

Dean shrugs. “If I’m going to do nothing, I might as well do nothing with you.”

Cas smiles. “Dean Winchester, that’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Dean rolls his eyes but he can’t help grinning at him. The scary thing is, he means it. He can’t help Cas with his studying or with writing papers, can’t fix his problems with his parents, can’t bring back his dead brother, but he can sit quietly and watch him sleep knowing he’ll be there if Cas needs something.
Castiel’s bedroom, with its big, comfortable bed, is clearly Dean’s favorite room in the townhouse, but soon the kitchen ranks a solid second. It gleams with granite countertops and high end stainless steel appliances. The gas stove top is quick and responsive, eminently preferable to the lousy electric rings at Dean’s house. He investigates the rest of the kitchen and discovers that, along with the cookware and utensils, there are glass front cabinets filled with all sorts of serving pieces. Dean makes a mental inventory, pulling things out of drawers and cabinets. He washes the pieces that have done nothing but collect dust in the time since Cas moved in.

And then he starts to cook.

Cooking relaxes him like almost nothing else does. It gives him something to do while Cas is overrun with homework and it ensures that Cas takes the time to stop and eat dinner. Dean scours the internet for new recipes to try, keeping a long list of bookmarked sites.

At first, Cas tells him not to go to so much trouble, but with every new dish Dean puts on the table, his protests fall away. Besides, when Dean sees how much Cas enjoys eating what he’s prepared, it doesn’t feel like he’s gone to any trouble at all.

One night they sit at dinner, Dean trying to contain his glee as he watches Cas take his first bite of a warm, savory frittata. Cas’s face lights up and he actually has to close his eyes and lean back in his chair for a moment while he chews.

“I’m guessing you like it, then?” Dean asks, his tone just a little on the smug side.

“Dean, if I’d known you could cook like this, I would’ve personally escorted you into the kitchen long ago.”

Dean raises one eyebrow, smirking in consideration. It’s one of the few rooms in the house where they’ve remained fully clothed.

Cas laughs, then takes another large bite. “What all is in here?”

Dean ticks off a list. “Spinach, mushrooms, scallions, and parmesan. It called for fresh dill, but I only had dried.” He frowns a little at that.
Cas leans forward, gesturing at Dean with his fork. “We could plant some fresh herbs for you to use. That’s easy enough to do.”

“Really?” Dean contemplates the possibilities of having sprigs of rosemary to flavor roasted vegetables and fresh basil for his tomato sauce.

“Absolutely. It’s the least I could do if you’re going to have me eating like a king.”

“I thought your garden was purely ornamental,” Dean teases.

Before Dean had gotten to know Cas, he’d heard garden and beehive and assumed he was as domestic as they came. He’d pictured Cas out in the back yard harvesting fresh vegetables each night and gathering honey from a spout in a tree or something.

As it turns out, Cas’s garden is filled with flowers and a couple of blueberry and raspberry bushes. The beehive, which Dean had imagined looking like a type of birdhouse, maybe hanging from a tree, is actually a wooden box set up on concrete blocks. Inside the box is a series of honeycomb covered frames, lined up like folders in a file cabinet.

Castiel’s idea of making a meal consists of bringing home take out or pulling a package of something pre-made out of the freezer and popping it in the microwave. There’s one shelf in the kitchen lined with jars of honey that he’s had extracted from the hive, but stirring it into tea or spreading it on toast is about the most he does by way of food preparation.

“The nectar and pollen in the flowers provide nourishment for the bees,” Cas says in his matter-of-fact way. “And don’t make fun of me. You’re the one who thought I was out there every day sprinkling sugar to feed them.”

“Well, I didn’t want them to starve while you were out of commission,” Dean says.

“All the excuses you could’ve come up with to see me again in the hospital, and you went with ‘feeding the bees’?” Cas laughs as he cuts himself another large helping of frittata. “Or was that a euphemism that went right over my head?”

“Oh, shut up,” Dean grumbles, his eyes softly shining at Cas. “It worked, didn’t it?”
“Eventually,” Cas agrees, smiling at him.

“Sam must be crying into his ramen about now,” Dean says, surveying the table. To accompany the frittata, he’s made salad and garlic bread.

“There’ll be plenty left over,” Cas says. “Take some home to him.”

Even though it’s just the two of them, Dean seems incapable of cooking in small batches. He bakes large pans of lasagna, roasts whole chickens, simmers huge pots of minestrone. He’s bought a set of glass containers for the leftovers and he likes labeling them to stock Cas’s freezer. It makes him happy to know he’ll have something substantial to take for lunch or to eat on the evenings Dean isn’t there.

(He should really see if he can get Meg to give him her cornbread recipe when he’s at Sonny’s this week.)

“Or I could take some home and eat it in front of him,” Dean suggests.

“I won’t have your brother wasting away on my account,” Cas says.

After dinner, they clear the table together. Cas cuts a generous portion and puts it on a plate for Sam. When he pulls the foil out of the drawer, Dean takes it from his hands and shoos him out of the kitchen. “I’ll take care of that. You have work to do.”

Cas kisses him and returns to the couch where his books and laptop await.

In Dean’s mind, cooking for Cas helps balance the tally sheet. Most of the groceries come from Cas, whose credit card bills, like the mortgage on the townhouse and the loan on his replacement car, are all paid for by his parents each month. Cas works so hard in school and Dean has so much more free time that it only seems fair that he should contribute in this way.

Besides, he likes it. And he knows he’s good at it. Now and then he recalls Kevin’s remark about the house full of stray cats, but what’s the harm in taking care of the people who are important to him? People need to eat, Dean thinks, as he takes ground beef out of the freezer for tomorrow
night’s shepherd’s pies. They might as well eat something good.
“Cas is going home for the weekend,” Dean says one Saturday morning at the end of February as he and Sam sit down to breakfast. “You wanna do something? Battlestar Galactica marathon? I’ll let you pick the season.”

“I can’t. Jess and I are celebrating our one month anniversary and I’m taking her out.” Sam pours the milk on the twigs and gravel he calls cereal.

“One month anniversary?” Dean is incredulous. “Will you get your balls back afterwards?”

“Shut up, Dean. She likes that sort of thing.” He shrugs, bashful now. “And I like her so I don’t mind.”

“Okay, well, you crazy lovebirds have fun with that.”

****

Cas texts him late that afternoon. Kill me

Dean smiles as he types. you spelled kiss wrong

Now I’m smiling inappropriately at my phone.

mission accomplished. and that makes 2 of us.

The texts fly back and forth after that.

how’s it going?
The usual

sorry

Yeah

Hi Dean!!!!

My sister grabbed my phone

tell her hi back. but with only one!

Ur hot!!!1!

Sorry. That was Anna again.

so you don’t think I’m hot? ;-)

wait

how does she know what I look like?

Um

??

I might’ve taken a picture.

WHEN

?

The other day while you were driving. You had your sunglasses on and I couldn’t resist.
cuz im so hot?

Duh

Got to go. I'll text you later

bye

****

A couple of hours after texting Cas, Dean wanders around the grocery store trying to decide on dinner. He’s got the whole evening to himself, he can eat whatever he wants, watch whatever he wants. He walks up and down each aisle but nothing looks good. He doesn’t feel like cooking for just himself so all he picks up is a six pack of beer.

Back at the house he stands in front of their DVD selection, before crashing on the couch to flip through the channels instead. He opens a beer and tries to settle on something to watch, but he can’t seem to focus. He’s not used to an empty house and he feels stupid for missing Cas when he’s only going to be gone for two days.

He thinks about Sam off on his date with Jess. One month anniversary. Talk about lame.

He and Cas have been together for longer than a month now, going on two almost. Are they supposed to celebrate that kind of thing? Valentine’s Day came and went without either of them mentioning it, but he can totally see Cas having a romantic side. He should’ve thought to get a card or some candy at least. Had Cas been expecting something like that? It’s probably some sort of relationship test that Dean’s failing miserably.

Dean finishes his beer in a couple of long swallows and walks to the kitchen to crack open a new one.

Dean’s birthday had fallen during the first few weeks they were dating and Cas had gotten him a gift, even though things were still so new. He’d asked Dean once who his favorite author was and Dean had given his stock answer: Vonnegut. He had read some, and he did enjoy it, but it’s not like he’s an expert or anything. Cas had given him a lovely hardcover book containing a selection of Vonnegut’s novels and stories. While Dean was touched by his thoughtfulness, part of him worried that Cas would want to discuss them and then he’d find out right away how little Dean really knew.
Books were the kind of thing people gave Sam, not Dean.

It all comes so easily to Sam. He’s probably the best boyfriend Jess has ever had with his stupid, thoughtful gestures. And look how quickly they’d gotten together. Sam had simply asked Jess out instead of being wracked with indecision the way Dean had. Sam hadn’t needed to call in Charlie for back up.

Dean sighs and gets up to pull the rest of the six pack out of the fridge.

He knows Sam is happy and he’s glad for that. Really, he is. But he’s also seen the way things have changed as a result, how much less often he sees Charlie and Kevin now that Sam spends so much time with his girlfriend. Dean spends a lot of time with Cas, but that’s different. It’s casual. And temporary. Sam and Jess will probably get married and Dean will be left to find a place to live on his own again. Cas will be long gone at that point, off to graduate school where he’ll meet some hot guy who’ll recite Shakespearean sonnets to him and always remember that he hates pickles on his burgers…

****

Dean wakes to Sam standing over him, the overhead light and TV still on. Dean’s head is thick as he tries to make sense of what his brother is saying. He sits up slowly, sees the empty beer bottles scattered on the coffee table and on the floor.

“Really, Dean?” Sam shakes his head in disgust, but there’s a sadness in his eyes. “I thought you didn’t do this anymore.”

“I don’t. I mean. It’s just this one time.” He reaches forward to pick up a bottle but his hands don’t want to cooperate. All those months of barely drinking must have reset his tolerance. In the old days, a six pack would’ve barely affected him.

“Just leave it.” Sam snatches the bottle away from him. “Go to bed.”

Dean makes his way heavily up the stairs, falling asleep again on top of his covers.

His bladder wakes him a few hours later when the sky is just getting light. He uses the bathroom and stares longingly back at his bed but he can’t shake the image of Sam’s disappointed face. He hasn’t
seen that particular look since the night Sam graduated from high school.

****

The day of Sam’s graduation had been warm and sunny, clear blue skies stretching as far as the eye could see. Dean nearly burst with pride as they got ready for the ceremony, letting his brother choose first from their shared, meager collection of ties. They’d both given Bobby a hard time when he appeared downstairs in his old suit, too-wide tie knotted clumsily. His trucker cap was gone, revealing slicked-back hair.

“Bobby?” Sam asked, pretending to be overcome with emotion. “Did you trim your beard for my graduation?”

“Shut it,” Bobby growled, but his eyes twinkled like the proud Papa Bear that he was. “Just a coincidence.”

The ceremony was set for four o’clock, and an enthusiastic mass of family and friends was making its way into the high school auditorium. The crowd was noisy and in high spirits, full of back slapping and picture taking. Dean let himself be carried along in the wave of happy people until Jody took him by the arm, drawing him into a big hug. Her son was graduating today as well.

“What a day,” she said and her eyes were already wet. “I just wish your mom was here to see it.”

Dean nodded at her as he felt something inside of him slip and falter. A lump rose in his throat, but he swallowed it down and navigated the bottleneck at the doorway to the seat Bobby was saving for him.

Filled with people, the auditorium was oppressively hot. The ceremony was long and dull, except when Sam received a handful of academic honors and the classic moment when he walked across the stage, turning the tassel on his mortarboard from right to left. Dean fanned himself with his program and fidgeted in his seat until Bobby glared at him. Then he sat as still as he could, but he couldn’t stop his leg from bouncing as he tried to tamp down the anxiety building inside him.

Afterwards, glad to finally get up and move around, he managed to squeeze in one more hug and photo with Sam who handed him his cap, gown, and diploma before heading out for a night of celebrating with his friends.
Dean and Bobby went home, the quiet echoing in Dean’s ears after the constant buzz of the crowd. Dean changed into jeans and told Bobby he was going back out to pick up something special for tomorrow’s breakfast. Donuts, maybe. But instead of driving to the grocery store, he hit the liquor store and bought himself a bottle of the cheapest whiskey he could find. Then he drove to the cemetery.

He poured a little bit onto his father’s grave, but found he didn’t have much to say to his dad. Instead, he sat next to his mother’s headstone, drinking steadily.

It was the unfairness of it all that nagged at him. It wasn’t fair that he had lost his mom so early. It wasn’t fair that his dad had lost the will to carry on, that Dean had to be the one to hold the remnants of the family together. And it sure as hell wasn’t fair that his mom didn’t live to see her baby graduate. No matter Dean’s best intentions, he knew he could never replace what Sam had lost.

Slowly, year by year, his family had shrunk. First his mom, then his dad. Now Sam was leaving. The logical part of him knew Sam would only be twenty minutes away. But the whisky saturated part of his brain felt it keenly, like another death.

Dean wondered if he was having some bizarre version of empty nest syndrome at the age of 22.

He had so few memories of his family together and happy. They all centered on the little house where Sam had been born and where his mother died. Were his memories even accurate anymore? Or had the edges blurred and changed? Sometimes he wasn’t sure what he truly remembered and what he’d been told over the years.

He didn’t remember leaving the cemetery that night, but he woke to a loud voice and rough hands shaking him awake. When he opened his eyes, the flashing blue light and the crackling police radio assaulted his senses, and he quickly squeezed them shut again.

The police officer called his name and Dean slowly lifted his head to find himself lying on the grass outside his childhood home. The house itself was long gone, torn down after the fire that killed his mother. A new house and a new family had taken its place, but the ground was the same and it pulled on him like a magnetic pole.

The cop told him to take it easy and Dean gratefully lay his head back down on the cool grass.

“Your brother is coming to get you,” said the cop, not unkindly.
Dean sat up in a flash, head reeling at the sudden movement. “No. Not Sam. He’s celebrating. It’s his graduation. Let me call for a ride.”

His words were slurred to begin with and in his sudden panic to make the cop understand, he was nearly incoherent.

“He’s already on his way.”

Dean clutched at the grass as a wave of nausea swept over him. If Jody had been working, she would’ve known to call Bobby, and to be honest, she’d had to do that in the past. But, of course she was celebrating tonight as well.

He heard a car door slam as a friend dropped Sam off next to the cop car. Sam conferred for a moment with the officer while Dean sat on the ground. Sam walked over to offer Dean his arm and while his words were kind, there was a hard look in his eyes.

“I’m really sorry, Sammy.” Dean tried to apologize, but Sam waved it off. “Just drop me off and you can go back out.”

“It’s fine.” Sam’s voice was clipped and Dean knew it was anything but fine.

That was the moment Dean knew he had to leave.

****

This morning he resists the lure of his bed and gets up to prove to his brother (and himself) that last night was no big deal. He goes for a slow, plodding run and does his meditation before brewing up a pot of coffee. He finds the beer bottles by the sink and rinses them before putting them in the recycling bin. He’ll talk to Cas, he decides. They’re both adults. They can discuss the future rationally.

He’s straightened up the entire downstairs and swept the kitchen by the time Sam comes downstairs, looking wary.
“I’m surprised you’re up so early,” Sam says from the kitchen doorway.

“Yeah, about that. I’m sorry. It was a fluke, I swear. I’m not even sure how it happened.”

Sam narrows his eyes at him. “That’s not exactly reassuring.”

Dean wipes at the already clean counter as he tries to explain. “I mean, it’s because I haven’t been drinking. My tolerance is super-low, I guess.”

“I guess.” Sam’s not convinced, but he looks like he wants to believe it.

Dean pours him a cup of coffee and changes the subject. “How was your date?”

As Sam launches into a detailed account of where they went and what they ate and all the cute things Jess said, Dean knows that if he’s not exactly forgiven, his brother is at least willing to let it drop. The solace he takes from it helps ease the sting of not having had a word from Cas since yesterday afternoon.

****

It’s early Sunday evening when he gets a text from Cas. Can I come by?

Dean responds after a deep breath, gearing himself up for their conversation. sure. when?

I’m outside your house.

Dean hurries down the steps, opening the front door to see Cas climbing out of his Prius. One look at his face and Dean can see Cas won the crappy weekend contest. He curbs any plans for a relationship discussion and, after a quick hello to Sam, ushers Cas right back upstairs. In Dean’s room, Cas kicks off his shoes and clambers onto the bed, sitting sideways near the foot with his back against the wall. He pulls his knees in to his chest and plunks his head in his hands.
“That good, huh?” Dean asks as he wheels the desk chair over and sits facing Cas, his legs splayed out on the bed. Cas makes a small, miserable sound. Dean nudges Cas’s ankle with his foot. “Talk to me.”

“They’re my parents and I love them,” he says like a disclaimer. “But, I feel like they don’t even know me. And worse than that, I don’t think they even care. Like, they have this version of me in their mind and that’s good enough for them.” He lifts his head to look at Dean. “When I was texting you yesterday, we were on our way to meet friends of theirs for dinner. Turned out to be an attempt at setting me up with their daughter.”

Dean is unsuccessful in masking his escaped laugh as a cough. “That sounds awkward.”

“Actually, it worked out okay. They ‘casually’ seated us next to each other and before I could say anything, the girl leaned over and said, ‘Just so you know, I’ve had a boyfriend for almost a year, but my parents don’t know because he’s Jewish.’ So I leaned over and said, ‘What a coincidence. I have a boyfriend, too.’”

He stretches out his legs and smiles at Dean who feels the word boyfriend go through him with something like a thrill.

“So we sat there with our phones out, our parents beaming at us thinking we were exchanging numbers, but really she was showing me pictures of her boyfriend while I showed her your picture. Oh, by the way,” he adds as a casual afterthought, “she thinks you’re hot, too.”

“So it’s unanimous,” Dean confirms.

“Eh, you’re not hideous, I guess.” Cas can’t say this with a straight face, but his smile doesn’t last. “Back at home, the rest of the evening was lectures. Oh, and guilt about how I should be coming home more often—like, every weekend—to keep my sister in line.”

“Wait. Is Anna all right?”

“Yes, she’s fine. Just wanting to do normal high school things like go to dances and be out with her friends but they make everything into such a big deal. I feel bad leaving her there with them, but I’d feel worse being home all the time. I tried to reason with them but it didn’t do any good.” He sighs, pulls his knees back up, and turns his head away. “I miss my brother. He could always say
something funny to break the tension when it got bad. It didn’t always change things, but it gave everybody space to back off a little bit.”

At the mention of Gabriel, Dean moves next to him on the bed. Cas leans against his shoulder and buries his face in Dean’s neck while Dean wraps an arm around him. Dean runs his hand up and down Castiel’s arm and plants a kiss on the top of his head. Cas slides an arm around Dean’s waist and they sit there in comfortable silence for a long time. Dean’s embarrassed at having acted so self-indulgently last night; his own problems are nothing compared to what Cas is dealing with.

Eventually Cas sits back up, looking tired, but less stressed. “I should probably get home.”

“Are you sure? You can stay if you want.” Dean is more than happy to have him stay if he doesn’t want to be alone. Actually, after last night, Dean is more than happy to have him stay no matter what, but they haven’t been a spend-the-night kind of couple. Not that Dean would be against it, but it hasn’t really come up. They spend time together, they fool around, and then they sleep in their own beds. It’s just another sign that things are casual between them.

Cas looks at him for so long that Dean worries that he’s crossed a line with his offer. Maybe he’s reading too much into Cas calling him his boyfriend. Finally Cas smiles at him. “I feel better, so thank you for that. And as much as I’d like to stay, I think it’s better if I go home.”

“Is this about my crappy single bed?” Dean asks, relieved that Cas isn’t offended.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Cas says seriously, before sizing it up. “It looks bigger than the back seat of your car, though.”

Dean stands and extends a hand to pull Cas to his feet. “Out, before I try to change your mind.”
The next Friday night they’re lying together on Cas’s bed when Cas rolls onto his side and gently bites Dean’s shoulder before kissing a meandering line to his neck, then up to his jaw. He leans in as if to kiss Dean, but barely brushes his lips against his mouth. Dean moves his head towards him, but Castiel stays just on the horizon of touch, letting his mouth only graze Dean’s before pulling back and refocusing his attentions on Dean’s neck. Dean lifts his head off the pillow to look at Cas.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Dean asks, with a playful challenge to his voice.

Cas stops long enough to look at him with a hint of a shrug, before returning to the task at hand. Dean doesn’t miss the little smile that crosses his face.

This is a game they play sometimes. Cas teases Dean, refusing to kiss him, only dragging his tongue lightly across his lips or catching his bottom lip in his teeth. Each time Dean moves closer, Castiel pulls back, leaving Dean gasping at him. Cas kisses his neck, his chest, his forehead, his jaw, only pulling away when he reaches Dean’s mouth. Dean lifts his head from the pillow, arching to try and catch his lips. He could grab Cas, roll them both over and hold Cas’s head between his hands while he fits their mouths together, but that’s not how the game goes.

It’s a battle of wills to see who can hold out the longest. Dean’s hands are all over Cas, touching and stroking him desperately, Cas returning them with equal fervor. Each time Dean thinks he’s gotten Cas to the point where he’ll give in and kiss him, Cas teases him some more, darting his tongue into his mouth only to pull back again.

The constant frustration leaves Dean whimpering, driven crazy by the smug look Cas gives him as he pulls away yet again. Their touches get rougher and more determined until finally they reach a tipping point. Whether Cas relents or Dean pushes the issue, it no longer matters because he’s threading both hands in Cas’s dark hair, pulling him down until they kiss so hard their lips bruise and their teeth clash as their bodies move together, both of them in the slick grasp of Castiel’s hand.

Afterwards they lay panting, side by side.

“That is an excellent game,” Dean breathes.

“Everyone’s a winner.” Cas agrees.
Dean closes his eyes, loose and relaxed as Cas rolls on his side to face him.

“You wanna stay over?” Cas asks.

Dean opens his eyes and smiles at him.”Yeah. Yeah, I do.” He shifts a little closer to Cas, feels something cool and damp on his hip. “But I’m not sleeping on the wet spot.”

“Of course not. What kind of host do you think I am?” Cas thinks for a moment. “I’ve probably got an extra toothbrush somewhere.”

“Right. Because sharing a toothbrush would be way too intimate. That is definitely a line I’m not ready to cr—”

The rest of his sentence is muffled as Cas pounces on him, his tongue deep in Dean’s mouth until they’re both laughing.

Dean texts Sam to let him know he won’t be back tonight. (About freaking time, Sam responds.)

After Dean makes a big show of licking Cas’s toothbrush, they get into bed for the night, their feet tangling together under the covers. For several long minutes they just lie there, holding hands and looking at each other as their eyes adjust to the darkness.

“It’s nice to say good night to you in person,” Cas says.

“What if we have incompatible sleeping styles?” Dean asks, mostly as a joke, but Jesus there’s got to be something about them that doesn’t match up.

Cas smiles. “What would that even look like?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you hog the covers. Maybe I take up the whole bed.”

“Only one way to find out.” Cas leans in to kiss him one last time before pulling the covers up to his chin.
What Dean finds out is that Cas is a clingy sleeper. He snuggles in close and seems to always have one leg thrown over Dean’s or an arm flung around his waist or both. Dean doesn’t mind it, but Cas keeps inching over until Dean is clinging, too, only to the edge of the bed. When Dean gently tries to move him, Cas takes it as a cue to steal closer and Dean finally has to shake him awake.

“What?” Cas says sleepily as he nuzzles into Dean’s neck.
“Dude. You gotta move over or I’m gonna fall out of bed.”

Cas snuggles in and puts an arm around Dean. “I won’t let you fall,” he murmurs.

“Not the point.” Dean says, shoving him a little less gently this time.

Cas takes the hint and rolls back to the middle of the bed. As Dean claims his half, he sees Cas is dead asleep again, flat on his back with his fists up by his ears. Dean thinks back to the first time he watched Cas sleep, back when he’d brought him home after the bar fight.

So much has changed since then. How did a couple of chance meetings turn into sharing a bed and a toothbrush? He props himself up on one elbow to watch Cas and a warmth floods through his chest.

_I’m happy_, he realizes and it seems so simple and profound all at once. He reaches for Cas’s hand and smooths open his fingers to kiss his palm before lying down and letting sleep wash over him.

Dean doesn’t sleep over every night, but it gets easier and easier to do so on the evenings they’re already together. His morning run gets sacrificed for the warm comfort of Cas’s bed, leaving him with just enough time to zip home to shower and change his clothes before heading to work. It’s a good trade off, he thinks, with the March weather so cold, wet, and miserable. Besides, he and Cas are burning plenty of calories as it is.

****

Dean’s lying on his back with his head in Cas’s lap while Cas reads and takes notes, his laptop balanced on the arm of the couch. Dean’s generally happy to spend time with Cas like this, quiet and comfortable, but today he’s antsy. He flips through the book Cas got him for his birthday, trying to settle into _Breakfast of Champions_, but finds himself reading the same few paragraphs over and over.

He sets the book on the floor and turns onto his side, facing Cas. He lifts the edge of Cas’s shirt so he can nuzzle into him, kissing his stomach.

Cas tolerates a few moments of this before sighing and pushing his shirt back down. “Dean, I have to study.”
“Studying’s boring. And I’m bored.” Dean tries again, running his fingers along the edge of Cas’s waistband as well this time. “You should take a break.”

Cas yanks his shirt down again and Dean sighs and rolls onto his back.

“You should take a class,” Cas suggests. “Then we could study together.”

Dean makes a noncommittal sound. He hasn’t exactly told Cas that he dropped out of high school. And he might’ve made it sound like he took some classes at Pitt last year.

“I’m sure your credits would transfer over and I’d be happy to help you with the application,” Cas adds. He’s looking at Dean thoughtfully, pleased to have come up with this idea.

“Studying is not what I want to do with you,” he says, hoping to distract him from this line of discussion, but Cas just rolls his eyes and smiles fondly. Dean pushes himself up to a sitting position. “Besides, somebody has to work to keep you supplied with those fancy coffees you like so much.”

“First of all,” Cas says, his face all earnest seriousness, “Lattes are not considered fancy coffees. Second of all, I am perfectly capable of buying my own.”

“Well, you mean, your parents are.”

Cas has been open about the way his parents cover his expenses and, seeing as how Dean reaps the benefits in terms of all the groceries for his cooking endeavors and a boyfriend with an entire townhouse to himself, he’s pretty much kept his mouth shut. But, it hasn’t escaped his notice that Cas is quick to criticize the way his parents threw money at Gabriel’s problems yet he happily accepted a replacement car from them after his own accident.

Dean picks up his soda can from the coffee table and pretends to toast Cas with it. “Do tell them thank you from me.”

Cas narrows his eyes at him before returning to his book. Dean feels bad but it’s mixed with relief at having effectively short-circuited the conversation about Dean applying to school.
Dean sets the can back down before bumping Castiel’s shoulder with his own. “Sorry, that was low.”

Cas frowns at the book and gives him the smallest of shrugs.

“Cas.”

Castiel turns to look at him. “I don’t know what you expect me to do. Without their money, I can’t get through school. The sooner I get my degree and get a job, the sooner I can be independent.”

“You’re right.” Dean soothes. “Of course you’re right. And it’s none of my business.”

“It’s really not.”

Dean leans over to pick up his shoes from the floor. “I should probably go. I’ve bothered you enough for one evening.”

“I’m not mad, Dean. It’s just…complicated.”

It’s from Castiel’s good night kiss that Dean knows he’s forgiven. But he doesn’t forgive himself as easily.

****

Dean’s washing the last couple of bowls and glasses for Sam to dry and put away. It’s well after midnight and the house has emptied out. Tonight saw Charlie, Kevin, and Jess as well as Cas, of course. Even Jo stopped by for a little bit. If she was surprised to find Dean draped around another guy, she didn’t let it show. Dean introduced them, but quickly pulled Cas away by the wrist when Jo offered to share childhood stories of Dean with him.

They finish cleaning up, then Sam walks around the house turning off lights while Dean double checks that the doors are locked. Dean’s halfway up the stairs when his phone buzzes.
Gimme 5 minutes he texts back to Cas, using the time to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. He settles under the covers and picks up his phone, now plugged into the charger that sits on his night stand.

Tomorrow he’s putting in some extra time at Sonny’s. He’s promised to hit fly balls and bat grounders to prep the three kids who are going to baseball tryouts after school on Monday. He’s got to be there early, but there’s always time for the couple of minutes that he and Cas spend texting before bed.

ok here I am. hi.

Hi.

you got home ok?

Yes. And I was thinking.

aren’t you always?

Technically, our brains are always working.

nerd.

I was thinking we should have a party.

we as in you and me we?

Yes.

what for?
You and Sam always have everyone over. It might be fun to host people at my place.

hmmm

We could keep it simple. It’s just something to think about.

****

“What do you think about the party idea?” Cas asks the next day over dinner.

Dean looks around the townhouse. “What did you have in mind?”

“Just something casual. To give you and Sam a break from hosting.”

Dean raises his eyebrows. “You realize I’ll still be hosting, right?”

“We’ll be hosting.”

Dean smiles. “And what exactly will you be doing? Cooking?”

Cas thinks for a moment. “I’ll clean.”

“Will you wash dishes when I cook?”

“Of course.”

“Will you wear an apron? And nothing else?”

“Dean, that sounds both unsafe and unsanitary.”
Dean winks at him. “It was worth a try.”

Dean shoots off an email inviting people before he can change his mind, setting the party for the following Saturday night. The day of the party, Dean spends all afternoon in the kitchen while Cas vacuums, cleans the downstairs bathroom, and washes dishes as promised. When it’s time for the party to start, Dean’s made teriyaki meatballs, hot crab and artichoke dip, and a brie drizzled with Cas’s honey, sprinkled with pecans, wrapped in puff pastry and baked. A tray of mini lemon tarts joins the appetizers, a contribution from Missouri after Cas had gone next door earlier in the week to apologize in advance for any noise.

Sam, Jess, Charlie, and Kevin arrive. Kevin brings Channing, the girl he’s finally gotten the nerve up to ask out. Jo vows to make an appearance later and she promises to bring Ash since their shifts at the cafe end at the same time. Dean is pleased that Meg has agreed to come and Cas has invited Iniaias, who is a year behind him in his program.

“Cas, you live like a grown-up,” Kevin says with something akin to awe, when Cas ushers him into the townhouse.

“The house looked like this when I moved in,” Cas explains.

Charlie and Channing follow Kevin into the house and they look around, impressed. Charlie steps into the dining nook, taking note of the framed art on the walls.

“What’s with all the roosters, Cas?”

“They came with the house,” Cas says, taking an armful of coats to the closet.

“Oh, I thought it was because you really like co-“

“They came with the house!” Dean and Cas yell in unison.

When she stops laughing, Charlie peruses the appetizer-laden table. “You’ve been holding out on us, Dean.”
“Yeah, why have we been settling for chips and pretzels when you can do all this?” Kevin adds as he scoops up some crab dip with a pita chip.

“We always eat like this when you aren’t around, Kev,” Dean deadpans. “I didn’t realize Cas had invited you.”

“He’s kidding,” Kevin explains to Channing, who is looking at them wide-eyed. “I think.”

Before long, the place is buzzing. Dean keeps an eye on the food and offers drinks all around. Only he, Meg, and Cas are of legal drinking age, so they share the bottle of cabernet that Meg brought. The rest of them are relegated to the soda and sparkling water that Cas insisted on buying. Cas catches Dean’s eye from across the room where he’s chatting with Kevin and Channing. Dean smiles at him, a domestic feeling flooding his chest that leaves him equal parts delighted and terrified.

“Good news!” Meg says, popping a meatball into her mouth. “Two of the boys made the J.V. baseball team.”

“That’s great!” Dean says. “Which two?”

“Max and Robbie.”

“So Tyler didn’t?” Dean frowns at Meg. “How’s he taking it?”

She shrugs. “Nothing seems to faze that kid.”

Just then the doorbell rings. Dean steps away from Meg to let in Jo and Ash, who are armed with *Cards Against Humanity*. Kevin takes one look at that and decides it’s time to take Channing and go. Jo gets a game going and she, Ash, Sam, Jess, and Meg sit around the coffee table to play. Dean scans the food again and picks up an almost empty bowl of pita chips to refill.

Cas and Iniais are standing by the kitchen doorway and Dean hears them discussing graduate schools as he approaches. Cas smiles and goes to pluck at Dean’s sleeve as he passes, but Dean’s not prepared to be a part of that conversation, so he pretends not to notice and sidesteps him, grabbing
the bag of pita chips and moving quickly back out of the kitchen to fill the bowl at the table. Dean stands there for a moment, then pours what’s left of the wine into his glass. His attention finally refocuses thanks to the loud wave of laughter coming from the living room.

“They let you work with children?” Sam says, horrified, as Meg scores yet another winning round. Meg just smiles sweetly.

When the party breaks up, Sam and Jess linger after the rest of the guests clear out.

“We’ll help you clean up,” Sam insists.

“Get out of here,” Dean says. “The whole point is that you don’t have to host.”

“I know but it will only take a few minutes if we help.”

“Seriously, Sam. Go. You and Jess have the whole place to yourself tonight.” Dean tosses the keys to his brother. “Here, take the car.”

Sam catches the keys, but opens his mouth to argue. Jess and Cas stand to the side, watching.

“Have you ever noticed,” Jess says, “that the Winchester brothers can be awfully stubborn?”

Cas pretends to ponder the question. “Now that you mention it, it does seem vaguely familiar.”

“There’s really only one way to distract Sam when he gets like this,” Jess says. She hooks a finger into one of Sam’s belt loops and drags him towards the door. “Thank you for a lovely time, you two.”

Dean and Cas stand in the doorway until Sam pulls the Impala out of the driveway. Then Cas goes into the kitchen to put away the food while Dean gathers up plates and glasses.

“That went well,” Dean says, surveying the living room for anything he’s missed.
“It really did,” Cas calls back from the other room.

Dean carries the first armload to the kitchen. “I think everybody had a good time and they liked the food and—Jesus Christ.” He stops in the doorway at the sight of Cas wearing an apron and nothing else. Dean plunks the dishes down in a clattering heap on the counter. “These can wait.” He takes Cas by the hand and leads him up the stairs.
Chapter 15

The weeks unspool and the cold of late winter slowly dissipates. The temperatures in March whiplash between warm enough for short sleeves during the day to hovering around the freezing mark at night.

Starting from tiny seeds, Cas has sprouted a variety of herbs in small plastic trays. Eventually they’ll be big enough to transplant into pots, but right now they sit on a sunny window ledge in Cas’s living room. He’s started another batch of seedlings for Sam, a selection of leaf lettuces in a tray that he gives to Dean to take home. Dean learns to mist them gently and in a few more weeks they’ll thin the seedlings and bury their shallow roots in the planter boxes he and Cas built in January.

It’s a chilly day in late March when Dean parks the tow truck outside of Cas’s townhouse. A late afternoon tow to a service station near campus left them with an impromptu dinner opportunity. When Dean gets inside, Cas is heating up a container of chicken and dumplings that Dean made last week and stashed in the freezer.

The food is nearly ready, so Dean gets out bowls and forks. Sitting at the table, Dean stretches his legs out until he feels Cas’s bare feet between his. Cas runs the bottom of his foot lazily up and down Dean’s shin as they eat. They’re doing what Dean has mentally taken to calling their Honey-how-was-your-day thing.

He fills Cas in on the calls he’s taken today and the work he got done. He relates Bobby’s new and sudden obsession with watching Storage Wars and how he had to show him again how to set the TiVo to record the entire season. Cas, in turn, talks about his classes and the assignments he needs to finish this week. When they’re through eating, Dean takes the dishes to the kitchen while Cas verbally runs through his schedule trying to piece together when they can see each other over the next couple of days.

“Tomorrow I’m meeting Iniais for coffee. He wants to pick my brain about grad school applications. We could have dinner after that,” he says, stacking the dishes in the sink.

Dean makes a noncommittal noise as he feels something twist in his gut. They haven’t talked about Cas graduating for so long that sometimes Dean is able to push it to the back of his mind. Dean’s contemplated bringing it up, but each time something stops him and he chickens out. Besides, what is there to talk about? Literally the first time they’d met, on that stretch of road with the sun just starting to heat the summer sky, Cas had talked about wanting to move on.

Get the hell out of here, he’d said.
Dean walks out of the kitchen to where his boots are lined up by the front door. He’s tying the second one when Cas turns off the water and steps back into the living room, drying his hands on the dishtowel. He looks at Dean in surprise.

“Got a call,” Dean says.

Cas blinks at him. “I didn’t even hear the radio go off.”

“Yeah, I almost didn’t either. Had the volume down low.” The lie slips out easily.

“Are you coming back after?”

“I dunno. This one might take awhile.” He grabs his coat from the arm of the couch and gives Cas a quick kiss. “But I’ll definitely talk to you tomorrow.”

He closes the door firmly behind him and gets into the truck, driving around aimlessly until he finds himself near the old neighborhood. He drives down his old street, pulling over across from where his parents’ house stood. He remembers the rise of the front yard being so steep, remembers rolling down it into a big leaf pile on the sidewalk. In reality, it’s a gentle slope, curving easily to the pavement. How many of his memories are the same way? Built up in his mind but based on nothing.

From the very start, he and Cas had implicitly agreed to a temporary relationship. Hell, the short-term commitment probably explains why they got together in the first place. Why else would somebody like Cas, somebody with so much promise and potential, waste time with somebody like Dean? Dean is a frivolous distraction. He’s Castiel’s version of Senioritis, an ill-advised loosening of his standards before he re-focuses on the next, big chapter of his life.

Dean drives back towards Bobby’s reminding himself that he knew exactly what he was getting into. Until Cas leaves, he’ll take whatever time they have together.

****

Dean and Cas sit at the table, breakfast dishes and coffee cups cluttering the surface. Dean’s eyes never leave Cas’s face. Cas stares back at him, patient and impassive. The roosters on the wall serve as silent witnesses to their standoff. The intensity builds until there’s a flash of movement from Cas’s
Before Cas can claim victory, Dean springs into action grabbing his wrist in a motion that sends the last, contested piece of bacon flying off the plate and onto the floor. The deadlock resumes, each of them silently regarding the other, Dean’s hand still circling Cas’s wrist. Cas flexes his fingers a few times, but Dean doesn’t fall for it. He waits and watches. A beat later, Cas flicks his eyes to the floor where the perfectly crisp strip now resides. In one quick motion he pulls his wrist free and dives for it. But Dean is ready for him. He catches Cas around the waist and wrestles him to the ground, their tussle sending the bacon completely out of reach. Dean smiles and pins Cas to the floor, gathering both of his wrists in one hand. Just as he snakes the other hand down between them the doorbell rings. They both freeze.

Cas checks the clock on the microwave. “It can’t be them. It’s only eleven. Anna said they’d be here at two.”

Cas’s mother is driving Anna to Lawrence to spend the rest of the weekend with him. They scramble up from the floor, Dean tugging his t-shirt down as he gets to his feet. Cas moves to the front door.

“Shit,” he hisses and Dean knows this can’t be good.

“What should I do?”

Cas turns to look at him. Meeting his mother was nowhere on the agenda and Dean is seriously considering dashing out the back door.

“Your car is parked in the driveway,” he says evenly. Dean finds enough brain cells to register—and be impressed by—the fact that Cas continues to think logically even when his blue eyes are so panicked. “We’re doomed.”

“Don’t be dramatic. Mothers love me.” Which…sometimes they do. Especially if they’re in a group at a bar on a mom’s night out and he’s serving them umbrella-festooned drinks.

The doorbell rings again and they both flinch.

Cas takes a steadying breath, then opens the door. A teenage girl with shoulder length red hair and large, luminous hazel eyes is standing there.
“I texted you like five times to tell you we left ear—,” she says by way of greeting as she pushes past Cas in the doorway. She catches sight of Dean and stops mid-step and mid-sentence. She looks between the two of them, her expression changing from annoyance to one of concern as her mother walks through the door behind her.

“Hello, Castiel,” their mother says.

Cas still hasn’t said a word, but he steps forward and kisses his mother on the cheek she offers him. Something about Castiel’s mother makes Dean wish he had on a nicer shirt and he’s suddenly aware that he’s neglected to shave this morning. From her hair pulled back into a tight bun to her no-nonsense navy blue pantsuit and dark pumps, there’s nothing soft or personable about her. She wears no jewelry other than a plain gold wedding ring on her left hand and a small gold cross around her neck.

Dean stands in the kitchen doorway, silently willing Cas to regain the power of speech.

“Hello, mother,” he finally says. “I forgot to charge my phone, so I didn’t get the message that you’d be early.”

His mother is looking past him at Dean who has taken a few steps towards them.

“Um, this is Dean Winchester. Dean, this is my mother, Naomi Milton.”

Dean flashes her his most charming smile and holds out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Milton.”

She barely presses her hand to his as she regards him silently.

He turns to Anna. “And you must be Anna. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Same,” Anna says, squeezing his hand in solidarity.

Dean feels the back of his neck prickle as Naomi takes that in.
Naomi turns to him with the semblance of a pleasant smile. “Are you in Castiel’s program?”

“No,” says Dean simply, hoping to get out of this without a long explanation.

“What do you study?”

“I’m not actually a student.”

“What do you do, then?”

Dean hears the unspoken question: Why are you here, then? Naomi is narrowing her eyes at him now. He’s seen Cas squint like that a thousand times but it’s always been a look of thoughtful consideration. When his mother does it, her eyes are cold and prying. Dean feels his smile fade.

“Um. I’m a mechanic.” God, why does it come out sounding like a question?

“Ah. That would explain the behemoth in the driveway.” She turns to Cas. “I had to park on the street,” she finishes accusingly.

“I was just leaving,” Dean says, seeing an opening and taking it. “So, I’ll get my car out of your way.”

She nods without looking at him.

He pats his pockets and looks helplessly at Cas. “Um, my keys.”

Cas blinks, keeping his eyes closed for a fraction too long, picturing Dean’s keys, as well as his phone and his jacket upstairs on the floor next to his bed.

“I’ll, uh, go get them.”
Cas goes to the stairs and Dean can see Naomi taking in the breakfast dishes still on the table. He wonders if she can spot the bacon that went skittering half way under the refrigerator.

They stand in awkward silence until Anna says, “Castiel and I might go to a movie tonight, if you’d like to join us.”

Before Dean can respond, Naomi turns towards him, voice cool. “I’m sure you can understand that this weekend is about family time.”

Dean can only nod dumbly, thankful for the sound of Cas coming back downstairs. He shoves his feet in his shoes which are sitting by the door, and then takes his things from Cas. Cas, he realizes, is carefully avoiding letting even their fingers brush.

*I’m sorry,* Cas mouths.

Dean manages a little shrug and an even smaller smile.

“I’ll call you,” Cas whispers as he opens the door.

Dean calls a quick goodbye to Anna and Naomi over his shoulder. The door closes firmly behind him and he walks to the driveway. He runs his hand along the side of the Impala. “Don’t listen to that awful woman, baby,” he says. “You’re beautiful.”

Closed inside the car, he feels like he can finally breathe again.

Dean mulls over their brief interaction as he backs out of the driveway. Nothing Naomi said was technically rude or inappropriate, but she’d managed to leave Dean feeling like something stuck to the bottom of her (sensible) shoe.

It had taken her less than five minutes to deem him unworthy and completely dismiss him. Really, who could blame her? She saw right away that he wasn’t in the same league as her son. And no doubt she’s persuasive. How long until she sits Cas down and makes him see that Dean is nothing but a foolish waste of his time? Maybe she has already.
By the time he gets home, his head and his stomach are churning. He spends the rest of the day zoned out in front of the TV, trying not to listen as the logical part of his brain, the one that says Cas cares about him despite all their differences, is shouted down by the part that that sounds an awful lot like his father. He considers texting Cas, but he doesn’t want to come off as needy. Cas said he would call.

Evening comes and goes with no word from Cas, which isn’t completely unexpected. He tends to go into radio silence when he’s with his family, like dealing with this one particular aspect of his life requires all of his focus. It doesn’t surprise Dean, but it does nothing to help his mood. He’s worn out and Jesus, he could use a drink, but he flashes back to the image of Sam standing over him in the living room, cold and disappointed eyes taking in the empty beer bottles scattered around.

He learned his lesson that night. He won’t let Sam find him that way again.

Instead, Dean heads up to his room and carefully pulls the extra blanket out from under his bed, silently unwrapping the bottle he’s stashed there. He’s fine on the nights he spends with Cas, but sometimes on the other nights he needs a little help settling down. Sometimes he only needs a couple of swigs from the bottle, sometimes it’s enough just to know it’s there. Tonight he drinks until both parts of his brain finally shut up.

****

Other than a quick text from Cas to say he’s driving Anna home and spending Sunday night in St. Joseph, Dean doesn’t hear from him until mid-morning on Monday. When he calls, Dean steps outside Bobby’s garage to answer his phone.

“Hey,” says Cas.

“Hey,”

“So…” There’s a long pause.

“So…” says Dean.
“Can we just pretend that nightmare never happened?”

“Does this mean your mother didn’t invite me for Easter?” Dean says, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Cas makes a bitter sound halfway between a snort and a laugh. “Well, I think this was the one time her penchant for denial worked in my favor. She made a few pointed comments about my need to stay ‘focused’ but other than that she let it go. Too many realities she would’ve had to face otherwise.”

“Maybe you should’ve told her the truth,” Dean says, although he’s not sure he actually believes that. But there’s something about Cas and his mother collaborating to pretend that Dean means nothing that doesn’t sit right with him.

Cas shrugs it off. “I’m sure she figures she can get away with ignoring it since I’m graduating in a few months.”

And there it is. As much confirmation as Dean is ever going to get that this is a temporary thing for Cas. If Dean has let it become something more than that, well, that’s his own damn fault. He finds himself nodding with the phone pressed to his ear.

“Guess so,” he finally manages.

“Can I call you later? I didn’t get much work done over the weekend so I’m not sure about tonight.”

“Yeah, sure.” Dean tries for casual, brightening his voice to make up for the sinking feeling in his stomach. “Whatever’s fine with me.”
It’s Wednesday morning before he sees Cas again. He wakes to sound of his phone receiving a text.

_You up?_ Cas asks.

Dean blinks at the harsh light of the screen before responding, _i am now_

_Come by and have breakfast?_

Half an hour later, Dean is at the townhouse, leaning against the kitchen counter as Cas toasts bagels.

“They’re already bugging me to come home again next weekend,” Cas complains, digging through the refrigerator to find the cream cheese.

_Of course they are_, thinks Dean. _After meeting me, Naomi must be desperate to keep you under her thumb._

“I’m telling you, man. You’ve got to stand up to them and deal with them head on. The longer you let things go, the worse it gets,” Dean advises as he carries the plates to the table.

Cas pulls knives from a drawer and grabs a couple of napkins to set on the table. “I’m sure you’re right, but my situation is complicated.”

“Just tell them no. Tell them you have your own life.” Dean gets out mugs to fill with coffee. “Honestly, it’s that simple.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to deal with my parents.”

Dean should know better than to engage in heavy conversations with Cas pre-coffee. But, ever since the run-in with Naomi and their phone conversation the other day, he’s felt unsettled and agitated. “No, you just want to bitch about everything, but never do anything to change it.” Dean intends for
“That’s not fair,” Cas says, calling him on it.

He’s right. Dean’s not being fair and he has no business pushing this issue, but he’s taking it personally now. He can’t shake the feeling that this is about him at some level.

Dean shrugs as he brings the coffee to the table and sits down across from Cas. He holds out one mug as a peace offering, but Cas glares at him instead of reaching for it. “I’m just saying you spend an awful lot of time letting them upset you but I don’t see you doing anything about it.”

Cas looks at him without blinking. “It must be nice not to have to answer to anyone.”

Dean sets the coffee down hard enough that it sloshes over the rim of the cup. The hot liquid splashes onto his hand but he doesn’t even feel it. “Are you saying I have it easier because my parents are dead?”

Cas sighs. “No, of course not, it’s just—“

“Because that’s sure as hell what it sounded like.” Dean’s words are clipped and brittle as he feels himself closing up. Feels his jaw clench and his eyes harden as a tightness starts to spread between his shoulders.

Cas may have shitty parents, but at least he has them and while they may suck right now, there’s always a chance it could get better. All Dean has is a couple of grave markers and a lifetime of mostly-crappy memories.

He feels a hot rage begin to flow through him and for a split second he thinks about upending the table for the sheer satisfaction of hearing the dishes smash on the floor. Instead he pushes his chair back roughly, grabs his keys, and leaves before Cas can say another word. The slam of the front door is still ringing in his ears as he starts up the Impala.

Dean steers away from campus, merges onto the highway and drives until he feels the adrenaline subside to a manageable level.
He’s been so stupid. He let this get away from him. He let himself get blinded by desire and flattered by Cas’s attention. He let himself believe that Cas cared, that he understood what Dean had been through, but his mistake is glaringly obvious now. For things to have broken like this, there must have been cracks threading all through their relationship that he’d just been too infatuated to see. At least he knows where he stands now. He can extricate himself without too much damage.

He turns the car and drives towards Bobby’s. At the salvage yard, he shuts off his phone and throws it into the Impala’s glove compartment. He blasts AC/DC in the garage, letting the music form a barrier between him and his thoughts. He shuts his mind to everything but the work in front of him, an old coping mechanism that pushes thoughts of Cas down as soon as they surface. He’s productive, almost manically so, but every movement betrays his anger. Every bolt tightened, every hood slammed, every dent hammered rings with aggression.

Bobby has seen him like this before, plenty of times. Seen him coiled tight with a barely contained rage. Seen these days bleed into nights of blackout drinking, usually served up with a side of bruised and bloody. But, Bobby hasn’t seen him like this since he’s been back and maybe that’s why he comes out midday with a sandwich and a cold soda, instead of leaving Dean to stew in his own juices. He sets the food on the roof of the car Dean’s manhandling and gets right to the point.

“Something going on with you?”

“Nope.” Dean eyes him levelly, arms crossed in front of his chest, everything about his posture daring Bobby to push the issue.

“Okay, then.” He nods at the car. “Just don’t fix it so much that you wreck it.”

*Story of my fucking life,* thinks Dean.

****

By the end of the day, Dean’s jaw aches from gritting his teeth and he has two new blisters on his hands. He drives back home and climbs out of the car, casting a look of triumph at the glove compartment where his phone still sits, the temptation to check it resisted.

Sam will be gone for a few more hours and Dean lets himself in the house, weary and grateful for the time alone. Walking in, he finds the familiar red head of Charlie sitting at the table surrounded by books, papers, and her laptop. She pulls her headphones off when she catches sight of Dean and
smiles a hello at him.

“Don’t you have a home?” Dean immediately wishes he could take it back when he sees Charlie’s eyes widen and her smile disappear.

“Oh. Um, of course. Having some roommate issues and Sam said it would be ok if I hung out here, but I should’ve checked with you.” She hurries to apologize as she begins to gather up her things. Dean holds up a hand to stop her.

“No, it’s fine.”

She looks at him skeptically.

“Really, it is. I’ve just had a shitty day.” He retreats to the kitchen for a beer.

“Did you…want to talk about it?”

“Nope,” he says, taking a long drink. He paces back and forth in the living room before stopping to face her. “I think Cas and I broke up today.”

“You think?”

“Do you know what he said to me? He said I had it easier because my parents were dead.”

Charlie’s face scrunches up, like it does when she’s leafing through a textbook, pulling out the pieces she needs to formulate an answer.

“Did he use those exact words?”

“Does it matter?” Dean starts pacing again. “That’s what he meant.”
“Well, yes, actually, it *does* matter.” When Dean glares at her, she hold her hands up, palms out, and clarifies, “Hey, I’m gonna be a lawyer. Humor me. What were his exact words?”

Dean relays the conversation to her, the words tumbling out of him. “So, he’s got this messed up relationship with his parents, you know? They’re super controlling and manipulative and he’s unhappy about it all the time. So he bitches and I encourage him to stand up to them and deal with it head on, right? Because otherwise nothing will ever change. And I’m trying to get him to see that and he says, ‘It must be nice not to have to answer to anyone.’” He looks at Charlie, ready to bask in her shared outrage.

“Ouch,” she says.

“I know, right?” Dean gestures at her with the beer bottle.

“Only…” Charlie stops, wrinkles her nose again.

“Only nothing,” Dean supplies. “It was a shitty thing to say.”

“Okay, hear me out.”

“Hear you out? Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on the side of true love,” she says.

Dean feels his face redden.

“I’m on the side of you not throwing away something good because of a stupid fight. And stop pacing, it makes me nervous. Sit.” Charlie points at the chair across from her.

Dean sighs loudly and pulls out the chair, dropping into it heavily.

“When you were in therapy, did you do the whole write-letters-and-never-send-them thing?” she asks.
Dean remember the sheets of papers curling under flames in his kitchen sink, remembers the smoke detector blaring as his words turned into smoke that drifted towards the ceiling. “Yeah. So what?”

“Me too, because neither of us had anyone to send them to. Now imagine you had to say what was in those letters directly to your father.”

Dean almost snorts at that thought. No way would John Winchester have settled in for a long talk about Dean’s feelings or the hurt he’d carried for pretty much his entire life. He would’ve called Dean a pussy and stomped out. And if he had listened, let Dean lay bare all of his weaknesses and vulnerabilities, it would’ve been like handing him a box of ammunition.

A buzzing sound begins in the edges of Dean’s brain. He looks at Charlie. “Oh shit.”

“Yeah. Writing those letters worked because your dad no longer had the power to hurt you. A conversation with him, though? That’s a whole different thing. And that’s--.”

“That’s exactly what I’m pushing Cas to do.” He puts his head in his hands, his self-righteousness completely dismantled by the dawning realization of his own part in this mess. “Christ, I’m an idiot. What do I do now?”

“I think you know.” Charlie is smiling again. Dean gets up and plants a kiss on the top of her head.

“You are wise beyond your years.”

“I know. Now go.”

As he leaves, he hears her call out after him, “Have fun storming the castle!”

****

In the car, he pulls his phone out of the glove compartment, fumbling in his attempt to turn it on. He’s not sure which will be worse: no messages or missed messages. He tries to steady his breathing as the phone powers up. Three missed calls and five texts over the course of four hours.
Please answer your phone.

Dean, I want to apologize.

I can’t if you won’t talk to me.

Please

Fine

He’s not sure how no messages would have felt, but he can’t imagine it feeling worse than this. He drives to Cas’s house and parks out front. He knocks on the door, feeling a rush of ice in his veins when it goes unanswered before he remembers that it’s Wednesday and Cas has an evening lecture. Heart racing, he sits on the front step and pulls out his phone. He re-reads the texts, feeling sick.

He’s trying to keep himself calm when he hears a door open and Missouri comes out with Sugar on a leash. She carefully locks the door behind her and moves down the steps, the dog pulling across the lawn towards Dean.

Missouri stops to greet him, but her face quickly turns serious. “You have a fight with your young man?”

Dean doesn’t even begin to know how to answer that but luckily Missouri keeps talking so he doesn’t have to.

Her dark eyes soften as she shakes her head sadly. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to that boy, so you get things straightened out with him, you hear?”

Sugar looks right at Dean as she pees on the edge of Cas’s lawn.

“Yes, ma’am,” he manages.
First Charlie, now Missouri. Who else is rooting for the two of them? If they knew what Dean was really like, they’d be telling Cas to run far and fast away from him.

Missouri nods and starts down the front walk to the sidewalk. Halfway there, she turns back to him, a disbelieving look on her face, like Dean has said something preposterous when all he’s done is sit there in silence.

“Of course you deserve him,” she says matter-of-factly.
Chapter 17

Before Dean has a chance to reflect on that strange interaction, he sees Cas’s car coming down the street. and whatever calm he’s managed to gather here on the steps evaporates. Cas parks in the driveway and gets out, stopping to grab his bag from the front seat. Dean stands up but he suddenly feels aware of his hands, how stupid and useless they are just hanging at the ends of his arms. He doesn’t know what to do with them, so he shoves them in his pockets. Cas stands by the car for a moment regarding him. He doesn’t say a word as he walks past Dean and unlocks the front door. He glances back at Dean once the door is open and Dean follows him inside, heart pounding.

Cas drops his bag just inside the door, walks to the kitchen and fills the kettle with fresh water. Dean closes the front door and stands there not sure what the rules are right now. He wants to go to Cas, pull him into his arms and beg his forgiveness, but at the moment he feels like a kid called to the principal’s office.

“Do you want some tea?” Cas asks without looking at him.

“Sure.” Dean doesn’t, but at least it will give him something to do with his hands.

Cas gets out a pair of mugs, chooses from his plentiful tea selection, and sets out spoons and honey. Dean slowly closes the distance from the door to the kitchen. The sound of the kettle is shrill in his ears, adding a discordant note to the buzz that’s been there since he realized how badly he’s fucked things up. Cas pours the hot water and pushes a mug across the counter to where Dean’s fingers are shaking. The silence that stretches between them seems to press against Dean’s chest, making it hard for him to breathe.

“I messed up so many ways today, I don’t even know where to start.” Dean says, looking down at his mug.

Cas stays silent and while part of Dean desperately wishes he would say something, another part gives him credit for not making this any easier on him.

“I overreacted to what you said, and then I just left, and then I ignored your calls and...” He chances a look at Cas now, “I’m really sorry. “

Cas still hasn’t said anything and Dean is starting to flounder under his gaze.
Dean wills himself not to fidget. “Um. If you want me to go, I will. I just wanted to apologize first. Because I’m really sorry and you…you deserve better.”

Cas sets his mug down on the counter with a sigh and points to the couch. “Sit.”

Obediently, Dean does, wondering how many times today people are going to say that to him and whether he’ll keep listening when they do. Cas sits down next to him, leaving enough space between them that Dean feels his heart drop into his stomach, but just when he’s convinced himself that he’s done irreparable damage, Cas reaches for his hand. Dean feels tears spring to his eyes and he looks at the carpet as he tries to blink them away.

“I’m sorry, too. What I said this morning was wrong and it was hurtful—“

“But it was true,” Dean breaks in, miserably.

“Let me talk, please.” This request is softened by the fact that Cas has taken his hand in both of his, using his thumbs to gently rub Dean’s palm. Dean takes a breath and forces himself to meet Cas’s eyes. “If we’re going to do this, there will be times when we argue and disagree. That’s to be expected. But I can’t do this if you won’t meet me halfway. I can’t do this if I’m constantly worried that you’ll get upset and take off.” Cas lifts his chin and squares his shoulders to punctuate his next words. “I can’t do that. I won’t do that.”

Dean nods and Cas lifts Dean’s hand to his mouth, grazing his lips across the knuckles. Dean tentatively traces a finger across Cas’s mouth. When he doesn’t pull away, Dean cups his jaw and feels the warmth of his skin against his fingers. In a voice barely more than a whisper, Dean apologizes. “I’m so sorry. I freaked out and…that’s what I do when I freak out. But it’s not right and it’s not fair to you.”

They’re so close now that Dean can feel Cas’ breath when he speaks. “If you need space, then tell me. I can understand that. But don’t just go. Don’t shut me out.”

Cas takes two handfuls of his shirt, pulling him in until their foreheads are touching. Dean keeps one hand on Cas’s jaw and wraps his other arm around Cas’s back.
“I’m sorry,” Dean says again before he kisses him, long and slow and soft.

“I’m sorry, too.” Cas breathes the words against his ear as they clutch each other tightly, desperate for contact.

Dean pulls him closer, hooks Cas’ legs over his own, so he’s almost sitting in Dean’s lap and hugs him against his chest. Cas trails kisses along his neck and they’re both still whispering apologies to each other. Dean slides his hands under Cas’ shirt, sliding it up and over his head before laying him back on the couch. Cas kicks off his shoes while Dean pulls off his boots and his own shirt.

Dean straddles Cas, his knees on either sides of his hips as he kisses his way down his neck and across his shoulder. The couch is narrow but neither of them wants to pull apart for the time it would take to move upstairs. He has one palm splayed in the center of Cas’s chest and he slides it down his torso, letting his mouth follow behind it.

He stops to tongue a nipple, sucking it into his mouth, feeling it harden as he scrapes it with his teeth. He slides his hand to the waistband of Cas’ jeans, hears a small gasp escape from Cas as he
fumbles with the button. Dean sits up just enough to pull off the jeans, Cas lifting his hips off the couch to accommodate him. He stretches out on top of Cas, finding his mouth and kissing him, his hands on either side of Cas’ face, their tongues sliding together hot and wet until Cas begins to twist beneath him.

Dean pulls back, smiling at Cas, taking in his huge dark pupils and the way he’s tossed his head back. He kisses his way back down, nibbling small kisses along his collarbone, and swirling his tongue in the hollow of his throat. Dean’s hands trace the lines of his ribs while he runs his tongue down his sternum, across the flat plane of his stomach, stopping to dip his tongue into his belly button, which makes Cas squirm.

He works his way slowly, running his thumbs along Cas’s waist as he moves his mouth back up to lavish attention on one, then the other, nipple with his tongue. He palms Cas through his boxers before sitting back on his heels so he can put one hand on each of Cas’s knees, slipping his hands up and under the fabric to knead his muscular thighs. Dean runs his thumbs towards the crease of his groin as he leans forwards to kiss Cas’s stomach, and then run his tongue ever so slowly under the elastic of the waistband.

Cas pushes his hands against Dean’s shoulders, as if to stop him, and Dean freezes for a moment until he realizes that Cas is pulling in his knees and using both hands to yank off his own boxers. He looks Dean in the eye. “You’re taking too long.”

Dean is taking too long. He’s taking time to touch every part of Cas, to admire every inch of smooth skin. He wants Cas to feel the care he’s taking with him, an almost worshipful respect for his body, for him. So yes, Dean is taking his time. But he can also take a hint.

He kneels between Cas’s spread knees, his hands sliding down from his waist, running his thumbs and then his tongue over the sharp lines of his hip bones until shifting to ghost his mouth over him. Cas hisses and lifts his hips again, but Dean moves instead to lick the crease of his thigh, letting his fingers whisper over the length of Cas’s cock before stroking down his leg.

When Cas lets out a whine, Dean decides he’s been patient enough and takes Cas in his mouth, takes all of him in a sudden movement that leaves Cas gasping and thrusting up into him. Dean drags his tongue up to swirl around the head and flick over the slit then back down again. He hears Cas’s breath hitch into ragged gasps as he picks up the pace.

Dean knows Cas is close when he threads his hands into Dean’s hair, his gasps turning into soft moans and he pulls off, replacing his mouth with his hand. He wants to hold Cas through this, to have his mouth on Cas’s when he tips over the edge. He slides back up to kiss Cas, moving his other hand to the nape of his neck, pressing his fingers into the cords of muscle there. Cas is close now, thrusting into his fist erratically. He goes stiff, his mouth slack, and he comes in Dean’s hand, comes
in waves onto his stomach, as he moans into Dean’s mouth.

They lie there while Cas catches his breath and Dean presses small kisses to his temple and cheek and jaw.

Cas looks at him, eyes the jeans that he’s still wearing and says seriously, “There is a clothing disparity here that needs to be remedied.”

Dean just laughs, the relief bubbling out of him, because it’s such a Cas thing to say.

Cas reaches for Dean’s belt, then stops. “Why the hell am I still wearing socks?” he asks.

“Because I got a little distracted on my way to take them off,” Dean answers with a grin.

Dean sits up and reaches down to pull Cas’s socks off. He uses one to wipe his hand, tossing the other to Cas so he can clean himself off before things get too sticky.

Cas sits up next to Dean, putting an arm around him and pulling him in for a kiss. He runs his hand down Dean’s bare chest then reaches again for his belt. “Take these off.”

Dean stands to comply.

“You’re bossy tonight,” he says as he pulls off the rest of his clothes, stepping out of them and kicking them towards the pile already on the floor.

“Sit,” is the reply he gets. When he’s settled back beside him, Cas takes Dean in his arms. They kiss for a long time, Cas running his hands up and down Dean’s back, smoothing the skin before using his fingertips to massage the tension out of his shoulders.

Dean feels himself begin to relax, the misery of the day diminishing under Cas’s ministrations. He can count on one hand the number of experiences he could classify as ‘relationships’ and most of those never made it past the first real fight. When they had, though, the requisite make-up sex had always been frantic and rough, with a desperate edge to it that felt more like a continuation of the fight than a resolution. But this, with Cas, feels completely different. Every touch brings a current of
reconciliation and comfort. It feels like a promise being fulfilled.

Dean wraps his arms around him, pulling him closer as Cas kisses his way along Dean’s jaw. He feels the mood begin to shift as Cas’s hands grow more insistent, his mouth a little rougher on Dean’s neck. Dean feels a shiver go through him and his cock twitches to full attention.

Cas stops kissing him to look him in the eye. “Do you know what I did when you left? I punched the wall.” He holds up his right hand, lightly flexing the fingers. “It hurt like a bitch.”

Dean takes his hand and puts it to his mouth to kiss each knuckle. He kisses the underside of Cas’s wrist before sucking each finger into his mouth, one at a time, noting the way Cas hums with pleasure when he licks between them. When his hand is good and wet, Cas reaches down to grip Dean’s cock. He runs his other hand through the hair at the back of Dean’s neck and drags his mouth to Dean’s ear.

“Today was awful,” he says.

Dean’s heart jumps in his chest but whether it’s from the feel of Cas’s hand or the memory of the fight, he’s not sure.

“I missed you so much.” Cas’s words are quiet and measured as he works his hand up and down, thumb skimming across the top to spread the beading pre-come. “I don’t want to be without you,” he says.

The disconnect between the soft voice in his ear and the escalating pace of his hand has Dean panting.

“I just want you like this…falling apart under my touch.”

Dean thrusts up into him now as every nerve in his body reaches overload.

“Is this what you want?” Cas breathes it into his ear.

Dean can barely form words to respond. “God, yes…yes, Cas.”
“Okay.” Cas darts his tongue into Dean’s ear, then drags his teeth along his earlobe.

Dean comes with a jerk and a shudder, toes curled, head thrown back and a gasp that is mostly Cas’s name.

****

Later they relocate upstairs and lie facing each other, sleepy and sated and loose-limbed. Cas has his arm thrown protectively around Dean’s waist and his feet tucked between Dean’s shins. Dean runs his thumb along Cas’s cheekbone and drags his fingers along his temple, before carding them into his hair. Over and over he repeats this small motion until Cas presses closer, his head burrowed into Dean’s shoulder and his breath slowing until Dean knows he’s asleep.

Warm and comfortable, Dean pulls him even closer knowing that he’ll sink easily into sleep soon, the way he always does when they’re together. But just as he feels himself drifting off, a cold fear flares in his belly wrenching him awake.

*It was just a fight,* he tells himself. Couples do that. They fight and then they work it out. Everything’s okay now. They talked about it and they made up. Only…

What if they hadn’t? What if Dean had been too stubborn and stayed away? What if Charlie hadn’t been there? What if Dean hadn’t talked to her and realized his part of the blame? What if Cas had refused to see him?

His brain whirrs with all the ways this could have played out differently, a flowchart where every decision leads to losing Cas. He knows it’s foolish to feel this panicked when Cas is literally in his arms with his heart beating against Dean’s chest. But he can’t seem to stop his thoughts from spitting out worst case scenarios.

*I almost lost you today,* he thinks.

There are so many ways Dean could’ve pushed Cas away for good. Left to his own devices, Dean’s pride would’ve kept him from going to Cas. He would’ve closed up like he always does and kept him at arm’s length. Cas probably thinks Dean handled this well, but it wasn’t his doing, not really. It’s all thanks to Charlie. If she hadn’t been there today…
Because Dean is the one who leaves destruction in his wake, poisoning everything he touches even when he’s trying to do the right thing. Just ask Sam.

Even with Cas pressed close against him, Dean can’t shake the aching emptiness he felt all day, can’t shake the hollow feeling that had taken hold and refused to let go no matter how he’d tried to push it down and ignore it.

They’d been apart for less than a day. Less than one freaking day. How bad is it going to hurt when Cas graduates? When he packs up his things and leaves?

At the thought, Dean’s heart begins to race. He disentangles himself from Cas as gently as he can and rolls onto his back, pushing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

Cas stirs at the movement, says Dean’s name sleepily as he reaches a hand towards him.

From the very first time they kissed, Cas held no illusions regarding the expiration date on their time together. Dean was the one who’d taken the let’s see what happens attitude. Cas was clear about what he had to offer, and by going forward with the relationship, Dean had accepted those terms as well.

Dean could wake Cas up and tell him how hard he’s trying not to freak out. They could talk about it. Cas would understand. Dean knows he would. Only…

Maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe he would stare at Dean, confused, and wonder why he’s making such a big deal out of nothing. You knew what you were getting into, he’d say. It was your idea to proceed. You went in with your eyes wide open.

Dean turns back to face Cas. He tries to calm his breathing, tries to match it to Cas’s slow, even breaths to ground himself. But, the icy fear creeps a path up his spine and now there’s no way he can wake up Cas. There’s no way he can let Cas see him like this.

I love you, Dean thinks.

The words feel like they’re trying to claw their way out of his chest.
Cas thinks Dean has it all together, but Cas thinks a lot of things that aren’t true. He thinks Dean got into college. He thinks Dean is the kind of person you give books to. He thinks Dean is a responsible brother, not one who ran and hid. He thinks Dean is handling this situation, not coming apart at the seams and falling in love.

Dean tries another deep breath and thinks *I deserve to be happy.* The words echo in his rattled mind, mocking him with empty sentiment.

Finally he takes one of Cas’s hands in both of his and presses it to his chest. The hammering of his heart gradually slows until at last he falls asleep.
Chapter 18

In the morning Cas slaps at the alarm until he hits the snooze button. He rolls back towards Dean. “I want to blow off my classes and stay here with you all day.”

Dean’s eyes flutter open. Cas is right there, his head on Dean’s pillow, his eyes sleepy and blue in the early morning light.

Dean stops to take stock of himself, and finds that his fears have evaporated with the night. He takes a deep, grateful breath and considers his day as he reaches towards Cas, trying unsuccessfully to flatten a particularly virulent bit of bedhead.

Yesterday Bobby had rather forcefully "suggested" he take the day off to get himself together. So that means all he’d really have to do is text Meg and let her know he won’t be in. He’s due a day off having been there faithfully every Thursday for months.

He smiles at Cas. “I could do that.”

Dean reaches over the edge of the bed to the pile of clothes he carried upstairs last night, rummaging through it until he finds his phone in his jeans pocket. Meg responds to his text with a quick No worries. See you next week.

He rolls over to gather Cas in his arms and they go back to sleep.

****

The sun is high in the sky when he wakes again to a warmth against his belly. A warmth and a wetness as Castiel runs his tongue down from his navel, his fingers teasing under the waistband of Dean’s boxers. The covers are still pulled up to Dean’s chest as Cas embarks on his stealth mission. Even though he’s half-asleep, Dean lifts his hips so Cas can ease off his underwear, freeing his already hard, leaking cock. Cas strokes him slowly, nibbling at the soft skin of his inner thighs. Dean feels a flush spread across his chest and suddenly he’s burning up. He tosses the covers back just in time to see Cas lick his lips before taking him into the wet heat of his mouth.

Dean reaches down to lay an easy hand on Castiel’s head, not to guide him, but to connect them. It doesn’t take long before the heat coils in his belly and he’s arching up, and groaning. He swears he
can feel Cas—the bastard—smiling around him. He’s still catching his breath when Cas slithers back up to kiss him. Dean tastes himself, salty and bitter, on Cas’s tongue.

“Good morning,” Cas says, as if he’s just tapped him on the shoulder to wake him.

Dean rolls him onto his back, pressing against him, feeling sweat and come smear between them.

“Shower,” he says.

Cas’s eyes widen and he practically jumps out of bed.

In the bathroom, the water warms quickly. Cas takes Dean’s hand as he climbs over the edge of the tub, pulling the shower curtain closed behind them. They stand in the running water, both of them half in the water and half out.

Dean positions Cas until he’s under the shower head. With a hand under his chin, Dean tips Cas’s head back to wet his hair. He finds the shampoo and squirts some in his hand. It’s definitely the source of the green apple scent that always lingers on Cas, but it smells different on him than it does in the bottle. He angles Cas out of the spray before reaching for the dark hair that he can never seem to keep his hands out of. He massages along Cas’s temples, gently scratches his scalp, and kneads lightly at the base of his skull. Cas closes his eyes and makes a noise of contentment as the foam runs down his back.

Dean smiles and works his hands back through Cas’s hair, thinking this has got to be the most thorough shampooing anyone has ever gotten. Finally, Dean deftly pivots him back under the spray, again tipping his chin up. He’s careful to use his thumb to wipe away any shampoo that might get into his eyes before running his hands again and again through Cas’s hair, this time to rinse away the suds.

There’s no resisting Cas with his eyes closed and his head back so Dean kisses him, then sucks at his exposed neck for a bit before moving back up to his mouth. From there, Dean works down his body, kissing his shoulders and licking at the rivulets of water that run down his arms. He grazes his mouth across Castiel’s chest, brushing his nipples with the rough stubble on his jaw before lapping at each one with his tongue.

He follows the water downwards, swirling his tongue in Cas’ navel, hearing him gasp over the sound of the running water. On his knees now, he sucks on the sharp points of his hipbones and
drinks from the stream of water that angles along the crease of his thigh. The tub floor is hard beneath his knees and the water is splashing in his face but none of it matters, not as long as he can take care of Cas like this.

He wraps his hand around Cas’s cock and sucks and licks at the tip before flattening his tongue and working along the underside of the shaft in long strokes. When he stops to kiss the head, Cas has to press one palm against the shower wall to keep his balance.

Dean reaches a hand behind Cas, trails his fingers along the cleft of his ass, letting the warm water make everything slick and slippery as he makes small teasing circles around his hole. Cas can’t decide whether to push back against Dean’s finger or thrust into his mouth so Dean make the decision for him by sliding one finger in then tugging his hips forward. Dean bobs his head in time with Castiel’s movements, two fingers now gliding in and out.

Dean’s other hand grips Cas’s hip, his thumb digging a bruise under the jutting bone as his hand kneads his ass. By the frantic pace of Cas’s hips and the string of incoherent curses, Dean knows he’s getting close. When Cas pulls out of his mouth, Dean tips his head up in surprise and Cas locks eyes with him, mouth softly open as he pants and reaches down to jack himself two, three times before he’s coming onto Dean’s chest, the heat of it even hotter than the steaming shower.

Slowly Dean gets back onto his feet, stopping to bite at a nipple on his, delighting in the way Cas shudders, everything too sensitive now. Cas wraps his arms around Dean’s shoulders and sags into him. Dean nuzzles into his neck and steadies him.

****

Dressed in a pair of Castiel’s pajama pants and a soft navy blue t-shirt, Dean cooks breakfast, whisking eggs in a bowl to scramble while Cas makes coffee. In the light of day, the what if part of his brain is blessedly silent and last night’s freak out feels like a distant bad dream.

“What else can I do?” Cas asks once the pot is brewing.

“Just sit there and look pretty.”

Cas rolls his eyes. “Toast?”

“Sure.”
Cas is buttering the toast when he pushes his hair out of his eyes and mutters, “I need a haircut.”

“You wouldn’t,” Dean says without meaning to and realizes he’s clasped the spatula against his chest at the thought. He goes back to scrambling, glad Cas hasn’t caught him performing the culinary equivalent of clutching his pearls.

“Of course I would,” Cas says reasonably as he walks over to the stove, a plate in each hand. “Wait. What are you saying?”

Dean turns back to the pan on the stove and engages in some unnecessary stirring. He wonders why he can suck Cas off on every piece of furniture in the house, can sprawl naked and moaning under him without a shred of shame, but is struggling to get out a single sentence while standing fully clothed in the kitchen. It doesn’t help that Cas is staring at him while he gathers his words.

“I, uh, like your hair. Like, um, a lot.” Good Lord, now he’s blushing.

“How have you not noticed that?” His embarrassment is replaced with exasperation. “I washed it for like an hour this morning.”

“You’ll forgive me if it wasn’t the most memorable part of my shower.” Cas leans in to kiss him.

Dean runs his free hand through his hair. “Really? None of this rings a bell?”

They kiss until the eggs begin to burn.

With breakfast plated and mugs in hand, they make their way to the couch. Dean tries to make room for their dishes on the knick-knack covered coffee table before asking, “Can we move some of this stuff?”

“Sure, just put it on the floor.”
Dean maneuvers his plate into an empty spot and picks up the bowl of wicker balls. “Do you even like this?”

Cas shrugs. “It came with the house.”

Dean walks across the room to the built in bookshelf. He opens the cabinet beneath it and finds that it’s empty. He shoves the bowl in the cabinet. “Ta da!”

Cas picks up the set of wrought iron candlesticks and brings them over, snagging a ceramic vase from an end table along the way. He stashes them in the cabinet and turns back around. Dean is holding the crystal figurine of a unicorn, reared up on its back legs, pawing at the air.

“That…,” Cas begins.

“Is hideous,” Dean finishes.

“And yet, I’ve grown accustomed to it,” says Cas.

“Then it stays.” Dean sets it down in the middle of the coffee table.

They spend the rest of the day lounging and watching movies or in various states of undress. It seems a part of them is touching all day long, whether Cas’s feet are in Dean’s lap on the couch or Dean is standing behind Cas with his arms around his waist and his chin hooked over his shoulder as Cas heats a container of potato leek soup from the freezer for their lunch.

They’ve built a cocoon for themselves here in Cas’s townhouse, a barrier between them and the outside world where they can cling to each other and recover from the sudden sharp fear that was their fight. Whenever Dean feels the prickling panic of last night start to push to the surface, he pulls Cas closer and finds a way to bring Cas’s hand to his chest until he’s back in the moment.

It’s just after dinner when Dean notices Cas getting antsy, feeling the pull of his schoolwork. He moves to the stairs to go retrieve his own clothes from the pile next to the bed. “Time to do the walk of shame.”
Cas follows him up, watching silently while he changes back into jeans. “Keep my shirt on. I like seeing you in my clothes.”

“I promise I’ll return it.” Dean says at the front door when he gives him one last kiss goodbye. “I know where you live.”

“I’m not too worried,” Cas says as he smooths the fabric over Dean’s chest.

They stand and grin at each other for another beat before Dean turns away.

****

He’s almost home when his phone chimes. He smiles as he pulls it out because he’d been tempted to text Cas before he even pulled out of the driveway.

It’s not from Cas, though, it’s from Meg. *Any chance you heard from Tyler today?*

He pulls into his own driveway before he responds. *no. why?*

Now Meg is calling him which can’t be a good sign. He jabs the answer button. “What’s up? What’s going on with Tyler?”

“We don’t know for sure. He didn’t come back on the bus after school. Sonny thinks he might have taken off,” Meg says.

Dean thinks she sounds awfully nonchalant, considering she’s calling about a missing child.

“I’ll be right there,” he says, balancing the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he fits the key back into the ignition.

“You don’t need to do that,” Meg argues.
“Give me 20 minutes.”

He drives the familiar roads to Sonny’s barely conscious of doing so.

He doesn’t know what he’ll see when he gets there, maybe a bunch of police cars with flashing lights? When he pulls into the driveway, the outside lights are on but the house is quiet. He sees light coming from the kitchen window and walks around the side of the house to rap on the back door.

Meg lets him in. “You didn’t need to come out here.”

In the kitchen Sonny is sitting at the table, a mug in front of him. He gestures for Dean to sit, but Dean can’t.

“Why aren’t you out looking for him? Did you call the cops?”

“We’ve searched the grounds, of course and I called the bus station,” Sonny says, calmly.

Meg brings another mug to the table, catching Dean’s eye, and pointing to the empty chair. Dean sighs and sits down.

Sonny looks at him kindly. “Look, son, this happens. Pretty often, actually. We’re not a jail. We do all we can to help these kids, but sometimes they aren’t ready.”

“So, nobody goes after them because they’re fuck ups?” Dean’s trying to be calm but his leg is bouncing under the table.

Sonny regards him for a long moment. “If he stays missing for 72 hours, we can file a police report then. Nobody is writing Tyler—or any of these kids—off.”

Dean puts his hands around the cup of tea, but the warmth feels too intense and he pulls his hands back. “I have a contact at the sheriff’s department. I can call her,” he offers.
“If it would make you feel better.”

Dean doesn’t appreciate Sonny’s placating tone.

“Fuck.” Dean looks down at the table. “I should’ve been here.”

“You have a life outside of this place.” Meg says sharply. “And if you don’t, you won’t last long with these kids. It’s thankless and it’s difficult and you have to be able to step back now and then.”

Dean reaches for his mug again.

“Besides,” she continues, flicking her eyes to where Cas’s t-shirt has pulled away from his collarbone. “Looks like you had yourself a nice day off.” She smiles, obviously trying to soften the mood.

Dean feels his stomach clench, but before he can respond, Sonny turns to him.

“Dean,” he says, his tone gentle. “Tyler’s not your responsibility.”

“Of course he is!” Dean pounds his fist on the table then scrapes his chair back. “Let me know if you hear anything.”

He walks outside and stands by the Impala, searching for Jody’s number in his phone. He sees notifications of two texts from Castiel, but he deletes both without reading them. When Jody answers, he gives her a rundown of what’s happened before asking, “Can you do something?”

He hears her sigh on the other end of the phone. “I appreciate the heads up but there’s a reason we have the 72-hour policy. And that’s because most of these kids turn up a day or two later. Sit tight and I promise I’ll keep my ears and eyes open.”

Her voice changes from cop to friend. “I know you’re worried, Dean, but Sonny’s dealt with this sort of thing plenty of times. He knows what he’s doing.”
Dean mumbles his thanks as she promises to keep in touch.

Dean leaves Sonny’s and drives in loose, meandering circles looking everywhere and finding nothing. Sonny hasn’t been able to get a straight answer from the school about whether he was there at all today. Because none of these idiots can keep track of the children in their care, Dean has no idea if Tyler has a four-hour head start or eight. Did he take off the minute Meg announced Dean wasn’t coming?

*Well done, Dean,* he thinks bitterly. *Blow off a kid with rejection issues so you can get your dick sucked.*

He knew it. He fucking *knew* it.

No wonder he was freaking out last night. This is what happens when he lets down his guard. This is what happens when he lets himself have something good. He should know better by now.

He drives through empty parking lots and down alleys. He pulls the Impala over to walk through parks and playgrounds. He runs into homeless people settling in for the night and teenagers making out in the darkness. He asks everyone he encounters, but no one has seen Tyler. He curses himself for not having a picture on his phone to show people. Just another way he’s let the kid down.

*That’s all you’re good for.*

How many times had he heard that from his father? Bad things happen when Dean forgets his place in the world. People get lost, or hurt, or worse. He almost laughs. How could he think his happiness would go unpunished? There is always a price. This is what his brain was trying to tell him last night. As Dean drives back towards home, the leather seat is comfortable beneath him, the steering wheel sturdy and familiar in his hands. He feels lighter now that he understands what he must do.

It’s after midnight when he pulls the Impala into his own driveway. He sits for a long time in the dark, his forehead resting on the steering wheel.

Pulling out his phone he sees another missed text from Cas. He taps to open it.

*Did you go right to bed? I guess I wore you out. ;)*
The text is already nearly two hours old. Hopefully Cas has given up trying to reach him tonight and has gone to bed himself. Dean squeezes the phone in his hand as if he could obliterate it completely. He’s taking the pussy way out, he knows, but he might as well get this over with. He closes his eyes and clenches his jaw as he gathers his nerve.

i need some space

Any hope that this will go unseen until morning is dashed with an instant reply.

dean whats wrong

Castiel’s texts are always grammatically perfect, rarely ever a typo. He takes in the lack of capitalization and punctuation and can feel Cas’s panic.

“Shit,” he whispers. What’s wrong is that I fuck up everything I touch. What’s wrong is that I’m not what you think I am. I deserve this, he thinks grimly as the phone lights up again, this time with a call from Cas. He hits the silence button and returns to the text screen.

you said to tell you if i needed space so im telling you.

He hits send and shuts off the phone.

Sam and Jess are cuddled in the armchair and they pull apart guiltily as Dean comes in, but he turns right up the stairs without a word of greeting.

“Uh, hello,” Sam calls after him.

He strips out of Cas’s shirt and tosses it into the back of his closet.
Chapter 19

Dean manages a couple of hours of sleep. When he wakes on the morning, he decides he needs to get himself refocused. Cas, he realizes, has been the worst kind of distraction. When he got to Kansas, Dean was the best he’d been in a long time. Maybe ever. He’d rebuilt things with Sam. Hell, they’d become roommates, which was more than he could’ve hoped for. It had all gone to shit when Cas came into the picture. He sees that now.

He gets up and calls Meg, but there’s no news.

He needs to clear his head, get back on track. He needs his old routine. He pulls on running clothes, laces up his shoes. It only takes a few blocks for Dean to feel his rhythm return. He focuses on the fall of his feet against the pavement, following his old familiar route. He sees the bouncy Labradoodle and smiles. That dog is going to act like a puppy forever.

Further down the block he spots the man with the schnauzers. Right on time. He’s actually looking forward to being barked at. Only this time one of the dogs lunges at him and Dean veers out of the way, his foot coming down awkwardly on the edge of the curb. Pain begins to blossom in his left ankle as he pulls up limping. The man and the dogs continue to walk.

Dean feels a rage swell inside him. He doesn’t need to stop and pick it apart to analyze what it is. It’s the feeling of the universe roughly shoving him back in his place. He balls his hands into fists and turns to limp slowly home.

He spends much of the weekend at Bobby’s, to throw himself into the mindlessness of work, but also because Bobby’s computer is faster than his crappy laptop. By Sunday morning a missing person report has been filed and Dean scours the internet, posting descriptions on every missing/endangered child website he can find.

On the plus side, he’s managed to avoid Sam and there have been no new messages from Cas.

Late Monday afternoon Sam pounds on his bedroom door, not waiting to be acknowledged before throwing it open.

“What the hell, Sam?” Dean asks from where he’s sitting on the bed.
“What did you do to Cas?” Sam demands.

“I am not talking about this with you.”

“I saw him today and he’s a wreck but he won’t tell me anything.” Sam looks pained as well as pissed.

A small flicker of warmth rises in Dean’s chest at Cas’s loyalty, but he quickly tamps it down. “That’s because it’s none of your fucking business.”

“Oh, there it is. There’s the Dean I remember.” Sam’s voice drips with sarcasm. “The one who closes himself off until he explodes. What’s it gonna be this time? Drunk and passed out on our old front yard again? Oh, I know. Maybe go pick up a meaningless lay because you’re too scared to have anything good in your life?”

Dean’s on his feet now, advancing towards his brother.

Sam’s eyes and voice go cold as he stands his ground. “Of course. How predictable. You gonna hit me?”

There’s a long moment when they’re both tensed and coiled. The air between them nearly crackles before Dean takes a step back and rolls his shoulders.

“This is just how it has to be.” He looks at Sam, silently begging him not to push this any further. “Okay?”

Sam sighs and pushes his hair back, his anger replaced by resignation. “Look, Dean. You can lie to me if you have to. And God knows you’ll lie to yourself.” His voice takes on a gentleness that’s nearly more than Dean can bear. “But don’t lie to Cas. He deserves better than that.”

Dean drops down on the edge of the bed. “I know that, Sammy.” He scrubs a hand over his eyes. “Don’t you think I fucking know that?”

****
Tyler’s been gone a week when Dean pulls into his driveway at home to find Cas sitting on the front stoop. His first thought is to back the car out again and go, to avoid this interaction completely. Maybe, he thinks absurdly, if he’d noticed Cas sooner he could’ve bypassed his own house and kept driving down the street.

Like Cas wouldn’t recognize the Impala.

He parks the car, gets out, and leans against the passenger side door. He tries for an air of ease, of whatever, but really he’s stopped there because he can’t bring himself to walk up to Cas. Dean’s the guy who will break up with you in a text without giving you a reason, then make you come to him when you get up the nerve to reach out.

As Cas gets up to approach him, Dean wants to grab him and shake him and point all of this out. Look at what an asshole I am, he’d say. Why the fuck would you even come here? Why would you let me do this to you?

Up close, Dean can see how bad Castiel looks. He’s back in the goddamned trench coat and it stabs like an ice pick in Dean’s chest. There are dark circles beneath his eyes and he hasn’t shaved anytime recently. His hair is an absolute wreck. Dean has to shove his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to smooth it down.

Cas is looking at him so openly, with such unambiguous longing, that Dean feels his blood pressure rise. Jesus, why is Cas so bad at this? Dean has his features under control, working on an air of indifference. Cas can’t just show up here with the saddest eyes Dean has ever seen. He should know better than to stare at Dean like he’s the answer to all his prayers. Cas stands there staring until Dean has to look down at the ground.

“Will you at least talk to me?” Cas finally says.

“There’s nothing to say.”

“How can you say that?” Cas shakes his head slowly in disbelief. The betrayed look on his face makes Dean’s stomach turn over.

“It’s just…” Dean sighs. “You shouldn’t have come here.”
They stand in silence for a long while.

It’s taking everything Dean has not to reach out to him, to take his hand, and pull him close. He remembers how good it felt when they cocooned themselves away on that last day, hidden from the world. Even if Dean had known it was going to be their last day together, he wouldn’t have done a single thing differently. He’d have taken every bit of affection given to him and lavished it right back on Cas. Maybe that’s what makes all of this worse. He’d bought the version of himself that Cas saw, been seduced by the happiness. It only made the fall back to reality more jarring.

“I just don’t understand what I did,” Cas says in a hoarse whisper.

Dean takes his hands out of his pockets, letting one drift towards Cas before pulling it back and crossing his arms over his chest.

“You didn’t do anything.” Dean’s trying for reassuring, but it comes out gruff and on the edge of impatience. He sighs again. “It’s just better this way.”

He sidesteps Cas to walk towards the house.

“It’s not better for me.” Cas says it so softly that Dean isn’t even sure he was meant to hear it.

Dean hesitates ever so slightly before walking into the house and closing the door behind him. In the living room, he stands for a moment, working his jaw. He catches sight of the black plastic trays on the window sill, the seedlings starting to make leaves. He’s completely neglected them the past week, so Sam must still be watering them. He crosses the living room in a few short steps and grabs them. Standing on the back porch, he flings them into the back yard, watching as the dirt arcs into the grass.

****

He shouldn’t have called Cas.

It’s been eleven days since they broke up, four days since Cas showed up at his house.
Dean’s been drinking steadily for the past two hours and the alcohol is doing its job. It smooths the jagged edges of his life and helps keep everything safely pushed down. He’s missed this, he realizes, embracing the feeling like an old friend. Missed how easy it is to feel loose and good and have some fun.

But he shouldn’t have called Cas.

He’s not even sure why he did. Between the haziness of the alcohol and the pretty blonde girl who’s materialized at his side, things have been going well. When she excuses herself to go to the bathroom, Dean pulls out his phone, idly scrolling through it.

At first he thinks he imagined the whole thing. Or maybe he hit end before the call went through. But then he feels his phone vibrate and squints his blurred eyes to make out Cas’s name on the screen.

And if he shouldn’t have called, he definitely shouldn’t have answered.

“Did I call you?” is how he answers, his voice loud to be heard over the noise inside the bar.

“Yes.” There’s a long pause. “Where are you?”

“Riley’s. Well, I was. Now I’m outside.” The cool air feels good and it’s quiet enough that he doesn’t have to yell.

“Where’s your car?” Cas asks and Dean can hear the tension in his voice.

“At home. Jesus. Give me some credit.”

Cas’s voice softens in approval. “Okay, good.” There’s a pause before Cas speaks again, his tone wary. “Why did you call me?”

“Funny story,” Dean says with a laugh. “I didn’t think I did, then I thought maybe I did, and then
when you called me back, I realized I really did! Crazy, huh?"

Cas lets out a long breath. “How drunk are you?”

“Plenty,” Dean says proudly.

There’s a cold silence on the other end that lasts long enough to break through Dean’s hazy mind.

“I’m, uh, gonna go now.” Dean says.

“You should go home.”

Dean resists the urge to roll his eyes. “I am.”

“Okay.”

“Cas.”

There’s a beat before Cas responds. “What?”

A thousand things flit through Dean’s brain but all he says is, “Bye.”

He makes his way towards home, weaving along the sidewalk. The phone call has taken the wind out of his sails, leaving him feeling drunk, sick, and angry.

He shouldn’t have called. What did he even think would happen? That Cas would invite him over? Tell him to forget about the past eleven days? Instead he’s given Cas yet another reason to be glad Dean is out of his life.

“You’re welcome,” he says out loud, his voice bitter.
He’s so out of it, he almost doesn’t see Cas’s car parked across the street from his house. Almost. Cas leans against the passenger side door as Dean makes his way over to him. He stands in the street facing him, trying not to sway too much.

“I wanted to be sure you got home safely.” Cas says.

“I think you just wanted to see the train wreck up close and personal,” Dean says smugly.

Cas narrows his eyes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means now you see the real me.” Dean spreads his arms wide. “And you know what? I’m glad. Because it was fucking exhausting keeping this side of myself hidden from you.”

“What side is that, exactly?”

“The side that fucks up everything. The side that gets drunk and pisses people off. The side makes you glad to be done with me.”

“Dean.”

“This is the real me, Cas. I’m not what you thought I was.”

Cas squints again and Dean wishes he would knock that shit off. “This is the real you?”

“Yes.”

“Bullshit.” Cas sounds angry for the first time. “This is you, but it’s only part of you.” His tone softens. “This is you shutting me out. But this isn’t all of you.”

“You don’t know me, Cas.” Dean knows how pathetic he sounds, but he needs Cas to understand this.
“Maybe I could if you didn’t keep pushing me away.” Cas takes a step towards Dean. He moves into the halo of the streetlight and now Dean can see him clearly.

“Oh,” Dean says, without meaning to. “Of course.”

Cas has cut his hair. It’s short all over, so short that it doesn’t even curl. Dean knows without being told that it’s directed at him.

Cas reaches out a hand. “Let’s get you in the house.”

Dean takes a jerky step backwards. “No! Don’t be nice to me. Just don’t.”

“Dean.” Cas says it gently. More gently than Dean deserves.

“And don’t say my name. Not like that.” He looks at Cas imploringly. “Can’t you just hit me or something?”

Cas answers calmly, without hesitation. “I’m not going to hit you.”

“Why not?” Dean’s almost pleading now.

There’s a long moment, charged enough that it burns through Dean’s drunken state.

“Because I’m not.” Cas finally answers. He moves towards Dean again, “C’mon.”

Dean stares at the ground before saying softly, “Don’t be nice to me. Please.”

But he lets Cas guide him to the front door. As Dean fumbles for his keys, Cas rings the doorbell and they can hear Sam lumbering down the stairs. He opens the door and looks at the two of them, comprehension dawning on his face almost immediately. He reaches out a hand to Dean who pushes it aside as he steps into the house, scrubbing at his eyes with the cuff of his jacket sleeve.
“Did you want to come in?” Sam asks Cas.

Cas gives Dean a long look, his face impassive. “I just wanted to make sure he got home okay.”

“Thanks,” Sam says and Cas nods at him before turning to walk back to his car.

Sam follows Dean up the stairs turning off lights behind him. “Do you want to talk?”

“No.” Dean crawls into bed and waits until Sam leaves before pulling Cas’s shirt out from under his pillow.
Chapter 20

Tyler is found on the thirteenth day after he went missing. He hadn’t gotten too far, hitching to Topeka where he’d fallen in with a group of homeless kids. A cop takes him into custody without a fight and he’s back at Sonny’s the next morning.

Dean’s at work when he gets the call from Meg. He’s got the wrecker so it’s easy enough for him to drive to Sonny’s and see for himself that Tyler is safe and sound. When he gets there, he finds the kid sitting in the dining room, Meg having put together a late breakfast for him.

For a few long moments Dean watches him from the doorway. Relief floods through him and his breath comes more easily than it has in days. He’s half convinced that his vigilance is directly responsible for Tyler’s safe return, like he somehow willed the kid home.

He makes his way across the dining room and puts a gentle hand on Tyler’s shoulder as he crouches down in front of him, looking him in the eye and smiling. “Hey, man, it’s good to see you. You gave us quite a scare.”

Tyler shifts to the side, shaking Dean’s hand off before turning back to his plate.

“Look,” Dean tries again. “I’m sorry I didn’t show up that day. I wasn’t thinking about how it might affect you.”

Tyler stops chewing and looks at Dean. “You think I left because you weren’t here?” His eyes glitter coldly and his tone is mocking. “I left because when I heard you called off, I knew there would be one less jailer around this dump. Made it a lot easier for me to get the hell out of here.” He tilts his head in consideration before shrugging. “So, technically it is still your fault, I guess.”

Dean grips the table as he pushes himself back up to a standing position. The wash of relief is gone and he’s filled with a rage that tunnels his vision. He manages to nod curtly at the kid as he stumbles a few steps backwards, before turning towards the door. Meg is standing there. She takes him by the arm and leads him to the kitchen.

“That kid is a little shit,” she says without preamble. Still holding Dean by the arm, she says firmly, “Dean, look at me. He’s a little shit.”
Dean can only meet her eyes for a second.

Meg continues, “I’m not saying you were wrong to worry about him, but you have to keep a professional distance or these kids will eat you alive. They need so much, but it’s not solely up to you to give it to them. Some of them we can reach and some of them we can’t, but you’ll make yourself nuts trying to be everything to everyone.” She finally lets go of Dean and her tone becomes more encouraging. “Just because we can’t get through to this one right now doesn’t mean no one ever will. Someday he may look back and remember how much you cared and he’ll be horrified and ashamed.”

Dean nods, but he doesn’t really believe her.

“Or maybe he’s just a little fucking sociopath.” She shrugs. “Don’t beat yourself up. Your heart is in the right place.”

Dean walks out of the kitchen back towards the truck, every part of him tensed. His brain is screaming at him to get the hell out of there.

There’s no one to blame but himself. Every choice he’s made turned out to be the exact wrong one until he’s backed himself into a corner filled with quicksand. Tyler, Cas, even Sam. Everything he touches, he damages. He should know that by now.

His mind is racing, but he can’t latch on to any thought other than go. There’s no way he can stay here where everything reminds him of his stupidity. Of all the pain he’s caused. Of all the people he’s let down.

He looks at the truck with disgust. If he had the Impala he would get in it and drive away. He’d toss his phone out the window on the highway and drive until everything familiar disappeared.

Instead he climbs into the tow truck and heads back towards Bobby’s where the Impala is parked.

Halfway there he gets a call from dispatch. He thinks about ignoring it, but he tells himself he’ll finish out the day before he goes. The least he can do is not leave Bobby short-handed. Besides, he’s going to need a little good karma, even if it’s only a drop against his waterfall of sins.

The call is for a mom with two little kids and a broken down minivan. He gets the van hooked up to
the truck and stays on site until their ride shows. He’s polite and professional and his brain won’t stop screaming at him the whole time.

By the time he gets to Bobby’s, he’s formulated a plan. He promised Sam he wouldn’t disappear again so he’ll have to let his brother know he’s leaving. As long as he tells Sam he’s going first, maybe there’s a chance his absence will be understood, even if it’s not forgiven. Sam will be pissed, but eventually he’ll understand this is for the best.

Dean was wrong to come back in the first place. He’s tried to make it work, but it’s clear that he needs to drift, to be free from these connections that mess with his head. He’s been on the road since he was four years old. What made him think he’s suddenly fit to settle down?

He parks the tow truck and moves to the garage, almost blindly. He’ll finish out the day here, then go home and gather what little he plans to take with him. If Sam is home, he’ll let him know that he’s leaving. If not, well, even a note will be better than what he did last time.

The thought of a fresh start buoys him.

He’s methodically finishing an engine rebuild, his mind already a million miles down the highway, when Bobby clears his throat. Dean has no recollection of Bobby coming in, no idea how long he’s been standing there. He raises his head to see Bobby glaring at him.

“What?” Dean glances around his work area. He’s doing everything by the book.

Bobby’s approaching him now, lumbering towards him with surprising speed. Dean freezes in place as Bobby grabs him by the front of his shirt. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I will not do this with you again, do you understand me?”

“Bobby, I don’t know what you’re—“ he manages before Bobby gives him a good shake.

“I’ve known you since you were a baby. I’ve watched you grow up. Don’t you dare think you can lie to me.” Bobby’s eyes blaze with anger and frustration.

Dean stares at him wide-eyed. Bobby has always been gruff and coarse around the edges but he’s never been physical with them.
“I’ve seen you like this before,” Bobby growls. “I’ve seen that far off look in your eye and it never means anything good. The last time I saw it, you disappeared for a year, leaving me to pick up the pieces of your brother and I will not do it again.”

“Bobby—,” Dean tries again.

“Shut up. You listen to me. I’ve kept my mouth shut long enough but you’re not the only one with problems. The rest of us? We stick around and face them. And we let people help us when it gets bad.” Bobby shakes his head in disgust. “I know John did a number on you boys and that you bore the brunt of it. I’ve tried to make up for it best I could, but no matter what I do, you still can’t see that you’re worth it.”

He tightens his grip on Dean’s shirt. “You can’t see the people who love you even when they’re right in front of you and, kid, you’re breaking my heart.”

He lets go of Dean, lets his hands fall to his side, as his voice softens. “These past few months, I’ve been prouder of you than I’ve ever been. You manned up and came back to make things right with your brother. I’ll admit, I held my breath at first to see if it would last, but day after day, week after week, it did. You even formed some…relationships that were good for you.”

Bobby breaks eye contact ever-so-briefly when he says this and Dean realizes that he knows about Cas.

“All I’ve ever wanted was for you boys to be happy. You were there, Dean. I saw it. You were happy.”

“It’s not that simple, Bobby.” Dean’s so tired. There’s no way he can ever make Bobby understand.

Bobby’s eyes flare with re-kindled anger. “It’s exactly that fucking simple. You figure out what changed and you fix it. Stop turning tail every time something doesn’t go your way.”

Bobby turns and stomps out leaving Dean to stand there listening to the sound of boots crunching on gravel followed by the slam of the front door.
Cas, he thinks. Cas is what changed. That’s when things got messy. Before Cas, he was doing what he needed to do. He was focused. Cas had been the distraction, keeping him from doing all the things that kept him sane and on track.

Oh, he thinks. Shit.

A door clicks open in his mind and suddenly everything is reframed. Dean let himself go. He let himself slide. He had the tools he needed and he stopped using them. Cas, like Sam, had done nothing but be there for him and he’d shut them both out, preferring the isolated chaos of his own mind to their offers of help. He’d done all of this to himself.

****

Two hours later, three things have happened. First, he calls Victor and confesses that he’s let himself get back into the danger zone. Victor sounds genuinely glad to hear from him, which initially adds to Dean’s guilt, but he pushes that aside and listens to what Victor has to say about slip ups being temporary and not negating the progress he’s made. He blushes with embarrassment when Victor praises him for realizing he needed help and picking up the phone to do something about it.

Victor gives him the number for a local therapist and, as soon as he gets off the phone with Victor, he makes a call to schedule an appointment with her. Her name is Tessa and she can see him the day after tomorrow. Immediately Dean feels a weight lifted from him. He hasn’t undone everything. He can have help figuring this out.

Second, he goes to Bobby’s front door and knocks, even though he could probably walk right in. When Bobby answers, Dean hugs him and thanks him and promises him he’s not going anywhere. Then he hugs him again.

From there he drives home to talk to Sam. He sits his brother down and warns him that this is going to take awhile. He tells him everything from the kids in the dinosaur exhibit at the museum to the arrest to his sessions with Victor. He tells him how he wanted to prove himself to Sam when what he should’ve done was be honest with him. He tells him how he got so involved with Cas that he stopped taking care of himself. He tells him how he broke up with Cas when Tyler took off (Sam actually winces at this part). He doesn’t stop until he’s told him the mortifying incident of Tyler’s return and how close he came to running again.

When he’s finally run out of words, they sit in silence for a long time.

“So, wait,” Sam finally says. “Bobby got through to you?”
Dean nods.

Sam continues, “By talking about his feelings?”

It’s probably the relief of getting all of this out in the open, but Dean starts to giggle. Bobby, with his trucker hat and his unruly beard, swooping in like some Therapist-of-the-Lord to knock some sense into Dean. They laugh until tears stream from Dean’s eyes and Sam is clutching at his sides.

When they finally catch their breath, Dean remembers something. “Did you tell him about Cas?”

“Um,” says Sam. “He saw how happy you were and wanted to know if there was a girl involved. I didn’t mean to out you, but you know how hard it is to lie to him.” Sam tries—and fails—to look remorseful. “You know what he said?”

Dean shakes his head.

Sam hunches his shoulders and scowls in an impression of Bobby. “First he just went, ’Huh’. Then after a minute he asked, ‘Is he good enough for our Dean?’” Sam smiles at the memory. “I assured him that Cas was far too good for you.”

Dean’s stomach sinks. “He certainly was.”

“So what are you going to do about him?” Sam’s tone is gentle and his eyes are soft.

Dean sighs. “I dunno, Sammy. Do you think there’s even a chance he’ll forgive me?”

“I don’t know.” Sam admits. “But you have to try.”

****

It’s two weeks and three sessions with Tessa later before Dean feels ready to reach out to Cas.
Stepping into the warm sunshine of early May, he leaves his third session with that familiar post-therapy feeling of mental exhaustion paired with peaceful relief. Any wariness he’d felt at Victor recommending a female therapist quickly dissipated when he met Tessa. He’d liked her right away, put at ease by her straightforward, clear-eyed manner. Despite the months of backsliding, Tessa reassures him and helps guide him forward. As a result, he’s quickly able to pick up nearly where he left off. Once he’s identified how he’s let himself go, it doesn’t take long to re-establish his good habits.

And once he stops being ruled by blinding panic, he sees how close he’s come to putting all of his relationships at risk.

When he was alone in Pittsburgh, these issues of putting himself last hadn’t been so obvious. But living with Sam had thrown him right back into his caretaker role and it had carried over to Cas as well. Funny how Kevin had been the only one to call him on it.

Dean’s spent the first two sessions focusing mainly on himself, but this last one has been a lot about Cas. Dean nearly cringes with embarrassment when he looks back logically and sees how he’s contributed to the whole thing unraveling. Contributed is putting it mildly; sabotaged is probably more like it.

He has no idea whether there’s even a chance to undo the damage and hurt he’s caused, but there’s no way Dean can move forward without taking responsibility for his actions. He and Tessa talk through the reasons Dean needs to apologize as well as the ways Cas might react.

Dean decides to call him, not wanting to pressure Cas into seeing him in person.

Sitting in his room, he takes a deep breath, scrolls to Cas in his contacts and hits call. He listens to it ring wondering if Cas is holding the phone in his hand, choosing not to answer. Is he rolling his eyes at the name on the screen? Or is his heart pounding along with Dean’s?

When the call goes to voicemail, Dean can’t help but smile at the familiar voice giving the no-frills instruction. “You’ve reached Castiel’s phone. Please leave a message.”

“Hey Cas, it’s me.” Dean’s already second-guessing himself, wondering if that’s too familiar a tone to take. He takes another deep breath and continues. “I’m calling to apologize for the way I ended things and the way I treated you. You didn’t do a damn thing wrong and I’m sorry I dragged you into my mess. I just…I realize now how things went wrong with me and I’m…really sorry.”
Saying sorry seems so lame but he doesn’t know how else to convey how much he regrets throwing this away. God knows if Cas’ll even listen to the message. Probably he’ll just delete it unheard. It doesn’t matter, Dean tells himself. He needs to say this for his own peace of mind. Whatever Cas chooses to do with it is up to him.

And now he’s left a long blank space on the message.

He begins to pace around his room. “You, um, don’t have to call me back or anything. I’m, uh, gonna hang up now.”

Jesus, maybe there’s a class he can take in leaving messages because he clearly sucks at this. No doubt his inability to string words together coherently will remind Cas how lucky he is to be rid of Dean.

He’s so busy mentally replaying his train wreck of a message, it takes him a moment to realize his phone has buzzed with a text from Cas.

*What does that mean? You realize how things went wrong with you.*

Dean’s hands actually begin to sweat at seeing the message and he wipes them on his jeans. The rush of happiness from Cas contacting him is joined by a cold dread. How the hell he’s supposed to explain any of this? His first instinct is to type *It’s complicated* but Cas deserves more than that, so he types out a more detailed answer, hitting send before he can worry that it’s rambling.

*short version is when some other things started to go wrong in my life, i decided it was my punishment for being happy with you and i panicked and acted like an asshole.*

It’s the nerves of waiting for a response that cause Dean to send the next message.

*also hi*

Jesus, he’s an idiot. But a response comes back right away and his chest loosens a little.

*Hi*
He’s debating whether it’s his turn to respond when Cas texts again.

*What’s the long version?*

Fuck. Here goes nothing, Dean closes his eyes as he hits send.

**long version is im back in therapy.**

Cas’s response comes in a quick flurry of messages.

*Oh*

*Ok*

*That’s good I guess*

Dean sighs, sure he’s scared Cas off once and for all.

**it is**

This is a stupid conversation to have via text, but if that’s what Cas is comfortable with, then that’s what they’ll do. Dean will text as long as Cas is willing to, he thinks, as the phone buzzes again.

*I have to go.*

So much for that plan, Dean thinks, texting back.

**ok**

Dean perches rigidly on the edge of the bed as he tries to decide whether this was a good conversation or not. He closes his eyes and works to put names to what he’s feeling. Fear, regret, guilt. Some loss of control. And a big old dose of vulnerability. And maybe—just maybe—a tiny bit of hope.
His hands are shaking as the adrenaline courses through his body, so he puts the phone on his night stand and goes for a run.

****

Later that night, he’s lying awake in the dark when his phone buzzes. He knows it’s Cas before he even looks, but whether he’s continuing their conversation or politely asking Dean to leave him alone, he’s almost afraid to know. He picks up his phone, the light of the screen temporarily blinding him.

*When you said you were happy with me, was that part true?*

Before Dean can respond, it’s followed by another message.

*Also, hi.*

Dean smiles and types back quickly.

*hi*

Then he answers the question without hesitation.

*absolutely true.*

He should probably stop typing, but all day he’s been imagining what Cas must be thinking.

*the whole thing sounds so stupid but i freaked out and listened to my fucked up brain.*

There’s a long moment before Cas texts back.
I wish you would’ve told me.

i wish i would’ve too.

Good night, Dean

night
Chapter 21

The next few days are spent in a series of messages that stick to random, safe topics (one day they spend twenty minutes deciding what Cas should have for lunch). Dean focuses on the fact that it’s an ongoing connection between them and tries not to think about what it might mean. He never knows when the next message will come and he finds himself sleeping with his phone under his pillow.

Sometimes he thinks he could venture something more. *I’m wearing your shirt* he types and deletes at two in the morning because he doesn’t want to risk whatever fragile truce they’ve made.

The next afternoon he has a session with Tessa and he tells her about the delicate bridge he and Cas have forged. She helps him work through it and together they explore what Cas might want from him and what Dean’s willing to give. He leaves the session without any definite answers (he almost laughs at the way he used to think therapy would tell him what to do), but with a sense of calm about where things are.

****

*Can we talk in person?*

Can we talk in person? The text from Cas comes after dinner when Dean is navigating through Netflix looking for something to watch. It’s so unexpected that part of him thinks it must be a trick and he texts back warily.

*if that’s what you want*

*Can you come over here?*

Can you come over here? Dean’s there in twenty minutes. He pulls into the driveway planning to have a few moments to prepare himself for seeing Cas, but Cas is already waiting for him on the front step. Before he can turn off the engine, Cas walks towards the car.

Rain clouds have darkened the sky even though the sun isn’t due to set for another hour. Moving
across the yard quickly and gracefully, Cas is barely wet by the time he opens the Impala’s door and gets into the passenger seat.

Dean glances at him, too self-conscious and surprised by his sudden nearness to turn and face him. Cas’s hair has grown since the last time he saw him and it’s starting to curl again at the ends.

Clearing his throat, Dean asks, “Where to?”

“I don’t care,” Castiel answers. “You can just drive.”

Dean relaxes a bit because *that* he knows how to do. He drives out of Cas’s neighborhood, steering them away from campus and heads north. The car moves smoothly across the wet asphalt, a slight squeal of the wiper blades against the glass the only sound.

For someone who wanted to talk, Cas is awfully quiet, but Dean doesn’t mind. The longer they go without talking, the longer it will take for Dean to say something stupid.

They drive for twenty minutes before Cas says a word.

“That’s where we first met,” he says softly as he turns his head to look at an empty stretch of road.

“I remember,” Dean says.

“I was coming home from a weekend with my parents,” Cas says, still looking out the window. “I was going to come back Sunday night, but Anna talked me into staying until Monday morning. I think about that, sometimes. What would’ve been different if I’d come back Sunday like I’d planned.”

“I’m guessing things would’ve been a bit less complicated for you, if you had,” Dean says after a pause.

They drive another long while and Dean debates whether or not to turn on the radio just to fill the emptiness. His hand flicks toward it, but he keeps it off. He’ll wait and see where this silence takes them.
The rain is coming down harder and the sky is almost completely dark when he pulls off the road, following signs to a boat launch. He parks in the small, empty lot overlooking the river and shuts off the engine.

They sit there for a long moment. Dean grips the steering wheel to give his hands something to do. He steals a look over at Cas, who seems a million miles away with his head tipped against the window. Dean flexes his fingers and drops his hands in his lap before angling in his seat towards Cas.

“What are we even doing, Cas?” he asks softly.

“I got accepted into Michigan,” Cas says.

“That’s…that’s great.” Dean tries not to let on how blindsided he feels. He nods, like he’s trying to convince himself. “Good for you. That’s what you wanted.”

“I guess.” Cas sounds unconvinced.

Despite his initial reaction, Dean realizes he isn’t really that surprised. He turns to Cas reasonably. “We knew this was going to happen. The very first time we met you talked about ‘getting the hell out of here’.”

Cas looks at him strangely. “Things were different then.”

“Look, in the grand scheme of your entire life, this—,” he gestures vaguely between the two of them, “will be a blip on the radar. You’ve got so much going for you and you’ve worked so hard…”

Cas flings the car door open and gets out in the middle of Dean’s sentence. He slams it shut with enough force that Dean flinches. Before he can make a move to get out of the car himself, Cas gets into the back seat. Dean twists around to look at him.

“Can you come back here please?” Cas’s voice is nearly a growl. His request sounds a lot more like an order.
“Why?”

“Because I’m going to yell at you now.” Cas is giving him that level gaze. “And I’d like to hold you while I do.”

Dean’s stomach flips. He gives a little helpless shake of his head, then sighs and steps out into the rain. He breathes in a couple lungfuls of cool, damp air before opening the back door and getting in, leaning forward as he runs a hand through his rain-dampened hair.

Almost at once, Cas moves to his side and wraps his arms around Dean’s waist. Dean hangs his head, keeping his body rigid, although every part of him is aching to relax into the familiar feel of Cas’s embrace.

“You are infuriating,” Cas says close to Dean’s ear. He’s not yelling, but there’s a bitter frustration to his voice that makes Dean’s shoulders tense even more than if he were. “You’re so busy denying yourself anything good that you can’t see there are people in your life who love you and would give you anything you needed.”

Dean almost laughs because Castiel’s words are so close to Bobby’s. Who would have ever guessed the two of them had anything in common?

“All you had to do was ask,” Cas insists. “That’s all you had to do. If you’d been honest with me, this whole mess could’ve been avoided.”

Dean shakes his head, eyes still cast down. “You couldn’t have fixed me, Cas.”

“I know that,” Cas says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Dean starts to pull away because it’s clear Cas realizes what a lost cause Dean is.

Cas holds him tightly, his voice gentle now. “But at least you wouldn’t have had to go through this alone.” He sighs and rests his chin on Dean’s shoulder. “We’re all broken, Dean, in different ways. I learned a long time ago that the most you can hope for is to find someone who helps fill the cracks.”
Dean takes a long, shaky breath and lets himself relax the slightest bit. Cas straightens up, taking Dean’s shoulders in his hands and turning him until they’re facing each other. Dean meets his eyes briefly before looking down again.

“That’s what you did for me,” Cas says, one hand stroking the hair at the back of Dean’s neck. “You made me happy to wake up each day. You made me laugh.” He leans in and brushes his mouth against Dean’s ear. “You made me feel loved,” he whispers. “Don’t ask me to give that up.”

Dean’s breath hitches, a tightness growing in his chest as a heat builds behind his eyes. When he finds his voice, it comes out hoarse. “I can’t promise I won’t do this again. That I won’t freak out and hurt you again. I’m trying, but…” he trails off.

The space between them is filled only by their breathing and the sound of the rain clattering off the roof of the Impala.

To Dean’s surprise, Cas shrugs. “Or maybe I’ll be the one to mess things up next time. You’re not the only one who gets scared.”

Cas slides his hands down from Dean’s shoulders, running his thumbs over Dean’s biceps, before reaching to take both of his hands.

Dean swallows around the lump in his throat. “There’s so much you don’t know about me.”

“There’s nothing you could tell me that would change the way I feel about you.” Cas says.

It’s the way he says it—so readily, with complete certainty—that makes Dean believe it. The knowledge hits him with a nearly physical force, making him pull out of Cas’s grasp and press both hands to his face.

“Dean, look at me,” Cas says, as his fingers circle Dean’s wrists. He gently tugs at Dean’s hands until Dean lowers them from his face. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with us. Maybe we break up. Maybe we start again. Maybe we pick up where we left off.” He takes a deep breath, never taking his eyes off of Dean. “But can we please just make those decisions together?”
Dean nods and buries his face in Cas’s shoulder. Cas wraps his arms around him and Dean focuses only on their hearts beating together. The rain is falling heavily and the windows are fogged. Still and silent, Dean feels like they exist separate from the world, somewhere between reality and a dream.

After a long while, Dean lifts his head to look at Cas. “I don’t want to break up,” he says earnestly.

“Neither do I.” Cas agrees. He tilts his head and smiles at Dean. “Okay, good. One excellent decision made.”

Dean smiles back hesitantly. “What’s next on your list?”

Cas leans in and Dean is there to meet him for a slow, tentative kiss. It’s so gentle that Dean has to squeeze his eyes shut against the prickle starting there. He pulls Cas to him, tipping their foreheads together and wrapping his arms around him. Dean slips one hand up the back of Cas’s neck, letting his fingers trail lightly through his hair, tracing the curls starting to form behind his ears.

“It was totally a spite haircut,” Cas admits.

“Dude, I broke up with you with a text. I’m lucky you didn’t shave your head.”

Cas laughs and kisses him again, relief and desire running together in a tingle down Dean’s spine. With Cas pressed against him, kissing him insistently, Dean leans back against the door, trying to shift his legs up on the seat so that he can pull Cas on top of him, but Cas puts both hands on Dean’s chest and pushes himself back.

“Next decision,” Cas announces rather breathlessly. “Nothing against your car, but can we agree to have make-up sex in an actual bed?”

As they drive back to Lawrence, Cas watches him and holds his hand a little more tightly the necessary. Dean tries to keep his eyes on the road, but he can feel the weight of Cas’s gaze and he turns to smile shyly at him. Dean drives as quickly as he can without sacrificing safety, only letting go of Castiel’s hand when he needs both of his own on the wheel.

Cas unlocks the door of the townhouse and Dean follows him inside. Something is different, Dean realizes, but it takes him a moment to comprehend what it is. The walls and surfaces are bare, the
kitchen and dining area stripped of most of the adornments and all of the roosters. The townhouse feels cleaner and simpler.

When Dean turns to Cas with raised eyebrows, Cas shrugs and says, “My guest room closet looks like a chicken coop.”

At the bottom of the steps, Cas stops and kisses Dean.

“Is this okay?” he asks. “Can we go up to my room?”

Dean hasn’t entirely processed everything that has happened. It’s still sinking in that they’re back together, here in Cas’s house again. The pounding of his heart has supplanted everything else, but the feel of Cas’s hand in his helps to ground him. He nods and lets Cas lead the way.

Upstairs they lie on Cas’s bed, still fully clothed. Cas is warm and solid on top of him and Dean has both hands fisted in the back of his t-shirt. They kiss for long stretches. Dean lets Cas kiss his cheek and jaw and neck but each time Cas moves any farther away, Dean pulls him back up and finds his mouth again. Finally Cas rolls off of him, and reaches to take Dean’s face in his hands.

“What is it?” he asks, one thumb running over a cheekbone.

Dean lets go of the shirt and holds onto Cas’s wrists. “You have no idea how close I was to taking off. I’ve done it before. Just left everything behind. And everyone.”

“But you didn’t.” He kisses Dean impossibly softly. “Dean, we’re okay. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere and neither are you.”

“I came so close.” Dean says again.

“Well,” Cas says, “If you had, I would’ve found you.”

Dean stares at him and Cas shrugs, as if saying he’d drop everything and come after him is no big deal.
“I mean, it would’ve been highly inconvenient what with classes and finals and all, and I do have a terrible sense of direction, but sometimes you have to re-evaluate your priorities.”

Dean gets a mental image of the Impala roaring down the highway with Cas’s Prius whirring along in pursuit. The thought is enough to make him smile and it breaks through the tightness building in his chest.

“I would have, you know.” Cas says, serious again.

“I believe you.” Dean says, because he does.

Now he lets himself melt into Cas’s touch, craving skin on skin contact as Cas undresses them both. Cas touches and kisses Dean firmly, no ghosting fingertips or teasing caresses, knowing that Dean needs to feel anchored by his presence. He runs his hands down Dean’s arms and grips his waist, the pressure secure and reassuring. They wrap around each other, limbs twining, mouths pressed together, each touch solid and deliberate. Cas keeps them connected at all times, even splaying one palm across Dean’s chest as he reaches to the side of the bed. Dean hears the creak of the night table drawer and the click of the bottle opening.

Dean rolls onto his side to face Cas and hooks a knee up near Cas’s hip. Dean shivers as Cas reaches down, his tongue in Dean’s mouth as his fingers begin to work him open. His movements are resolute and sure, taking his time until Dean is softly moaning and rocking his hips in time with Cas’s fingers. Only then does he nudge Dean onto his back. Pulling his fingers out, Cas positions himself between Dean’s spread knees.

When Dean hears the click of the bottle again, he pushes up on his elbows. “Let me, Cas.”

Cas squirts the slippery gel into Dean’s waiting hand and scoots a little closer. Dean sits up and reaches for him, kissing his neck as he spreads the lube in slow strokes. Cas closes his eyes, letting his head fall back slightly as Dean works the length of him. When Cas is ready, Dean lowers himself back onto the pillow, inhaling sharply as Cas smooths both palms along the underside of his thighs, pressing them up and out before lining himself up and pushing in inch by inch.

Dean sighs at the welcome, familiar fullness, caught on the knife’s edge of too much and never enough, and his breath catches in his throat with a small sob.
Cas immediately stills and squeezes Dean’s hip. “Okay?” he asks.

Dean nods, not trusting his voice.

Cas starts to move again, slow and languid, like they have all the time in the world. Maybe they do, Dean thinks, but it isn’t long before he’s wrapping his legs around Cas’s waist and urging him to go faster. Cas sucks and kisses at Dean’s neck while Dean digs his fingers into Cas’s shoulders, arching up to meet each thrust. Dean feels the pressure begin to build in his belly, a heat coursing through him as his pleasure mounts. The muscles in his thighs start to tighten and twitch and as soon as Cas reaches down to curl a hand around his cock, Dean comes, his body jolting through wave after wave of release. He’s still riding the last small surges of his orgasm when Cas bites down on his shoulder, coming with a groan that gets lost against Dean’s sweat-covered skin. Dean’s absorbed in a haze of bliss and maybe that’s why it takes him a moment to realize that Cas is clinging to him and trembling. Cas slides out of him and, mess be damned, lets Dean roll him onto his side. Cas buries his face in Dean’s neck and Dean pulls him close, rubbing his back and kissing his forehead and temples.


“Will you stay here tonight?” Cas says into his shoulder. “I just…I know I said we’d take things one step at a time and I understand if this is too much too soon, but…”

“You would have to physically throw me out,” Dean says, as Cas lifts his head to look at him. “I just got you back. No way in hell am I leaving here tonight.”

Cas has stopped trembling, but there’s an uncertainty in his eyes. “Cas, look at me. I need you to understand this.” Dean takes a deep breath and says with all seriousness, “I will sleep in the wet spot.”

Cas laughs and Dean doesn’t think he’s ever heard a more beautiful sound.

They’ve got a long way to go, Dean thinks, but as they curl around each other and breathe, Dean knows that whatever comes next, they’ll figure it out together.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lying on his back on the deck, Dean clasps his hands together and stretches his arms over his head. Loose and relaxed, he pushes himself up to sit. The crisp October air bites at his skin now that he’s cooled down from his run.

In the early morning quiet, he watches a bird flit down from the garage roof to skirt the hum of the beehive and meander along the garden’s edge. The arugula and red leaf lettuce are going strong (Sam is nearly beside himself with excitement) and the sugar snap peas are thriving. The acorn squash is almost ready to pick and Dean has a handful of soup recipes bookmarked for when the time comes.

He’d started the coffee before coming outside to meditate and the aroma from the fresh, full pot beckons him back inside. He pours a large mug, stopping to take a sip so it won’t slosh over the rim as he climbs the stairs. He opens the door to his room as quietly as he can. The large mattress takes up more than its fair share of the room. And Cas takes up more than his fair share of the mattress, his arm flung over the pillow Dean relinquished nearly an hour ago.

It’s been three months since Cas moved into their house and there are still times like these when Dean has to stop and steady himself— sometimes literally, with a hand pressed against a wall— hit anew with the realization that Cas is right here.

Cas had gotten into five of the six schools he’d applied to, including the program at Kansas. After a series of discussions with Dean (along with a handful of pros and cons lists and an honest-to-God spreadsheet), Cas had decided to stay, at least for this first year. Next spring, Anna will graduate from high school and soon after that, Sam will start his senior year of college. If Dean and Cas decide to venture away, they’ll both be more comfortable knowing their younger siblings are more settled on their own.

Once Cas decided to remain in Lawrence and he and Dean had committed to staying together, it had been Sam’s idea for Cas to move into the little house with them. It was a big step— Tessa had agreed to a session with the two of them to help them navigate it—but it meant that Cas could pay for graduate school without depending on his parents for money. It involved taking on a teaching position, applying for a couple of grants, and taking out a student loan, but it worked. There was even a little bit left over for him to put towards rent and groceries.

Cas had driven to his parents’ house to tell them in person that he planned to stay in Lawrence. Their initial pleased reaction cooled considerably when he informed them that he’d be moving in
with Dean. It came as no surprise when they immediately threatened to cut him off, but Cas simply smiled, dropped his car keys on the table, kissed his mother on the cheek, and walked outside to where Dean was waiting with the Impala.

The day they’d gone to move Cas out of the townhouse in early June, they’d found his parents there. Cas’s father had served up only the bare minimum of civility while Naomi seethed silently. Only the presence of the realtor, who was putting together the listing for the sale, kept things from deteriorating.

Well, that and Bobby, who had come to help. Dean marveled as Bobby introduced himself to Cas’s parents, as warm and charming as Dean had ever seen him. Then he positioned himself in the living room, looming somewhat menacingly with his arms crossed in front of his chest, silently daring them to say a word against any of the three of his boys.

Cas seemed to stand a little taller, surrounded by reinforcements. Anna watched this unfold with large, fretful eyes, but she smiled at Sam when he gave her his cell number and an open invitation to visit them.

From the townhouse came Cas’s clothes, boxes and boxes of books, a number of perennials they’d dug up from the garden (the beehive had required a separate trip), the leather arm chair that now resided downstairs in the living room, and the soft blue comforter that currently covered Cas.

Dean had looked longingly at Cas’s big bed, mentally planning ways to fit it in Bobby’s truck, but Cas had been adamant about not taking anything with him that had come with the townhouse. They’d moved Dean’s single bed to the basement and filled the room with a king sized mattress. Eventually they’ll have the money for a box spring and a frame as well.

Dean still works at Bobby’s, he still puts in time at Sonny’s, and he still sees Tessa twice a month. With Cas’s encouragement and help, he’s applied to Kansas and been accepted as an undergrad. He’s starting off easy, with just a single psychology class this fall, but damned if Dean Winchester isn’t officially a college student.

Some days the house is filled with noise and friends, but much of the time their life is quiet and predictable, and Dean wouldn’t have it any other way.

If somebody had told Dean a year ago that he’d be sneaking I Love You post-its into Cas’s computer bag and finding them hidden in the Impala, he’d have laughed them right out of town.
Dean crosses the bedroom and kicks off his shoes, setting the coffee down on the floor as he lowers himself to the mattress. Cas rolls out of the way to make room for him as he swivels his legs onto the bed, his back resting against the wall. Before Dean can reach over to pick up the mug, Cas promptly snuggles against him, his arm across Dean’s thighs and his face pressed into Dean’s hip.

“Good morning,” Dean says softly.

Cas opens one blue eye and peers up at him. “Nobody likes perky morning people, Dean.”

“All I said was ‘Good morning,’” Dean protests.

“Yes, but you were thinking cheerful thoughts,” Cas grumbles.

Dean looks down at him, warm and sleepy. He curls his fingers through Castiel’s rumpled hair and smiles. “How could I not?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! While part two of this verse takes a turn that may not be for everyone (they decide to embark on some safe, sane, and consensual D/s stuff), if you'd like something sort of timestampy to this fic *cough* wedding *cough* you can skip ahead to chapter 13 of Further Adventures: http://archiveofourown.org/works/3210944/chapters/27810417

Thanks for all your kudos and kind words!!

End Notes

Title comes from Pearl Jam's Sirens.

My non-explicit fics can be found here

I am scones-and-texting-and-murder on tumblr.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!